



The Bhakti Movement: A Comparative Analysis of Ramanuja's Visistadvaita and Srimanta Sankar Deva's Eksarana Dharma

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ABSTRACT

Bhakti movement gained momentum in South India around 6th century CE with Tamil Alvars (devotees of Vishnu) and Nayanars (devotees of Shiva) who emphasized devotional songs to their chosen deities. It focussed on intensive love and surrender to God, rather than external rituals or temple worship. It challenged the dominance of Vedic rituals by propagating equality, social justice and spiritual liberation. It was not confined to one religious tradition and encompassed the different Hindu Gods like Vishnu, Shiva and the Goddess, as well as Sufi and Sikh. This movement spread over to other parts of India particularly in the 12th and 13th centuries with the saints like Kabir, Tulsidas, Mirabai, Guru Nanak etc. Ramanuja (1017-1137 CE) and Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568 CE) of Assam were two towering personalities among others of our land to flourish Bhakti movement. Ramanuja's philosophy of Visistadvaita (qualified non-dualism) and Sankardeva's Eksarana Dharma (the path of devotion to one God) witnessed further expansion of the movement in their respective regions. A study from philosophical perspective may be undertaken to explore and compare the philosophical thoughts of these two prominent Bhakti traditions by highlighting their views on God, soul and devotion leading to liberation. Though they came from different cultural, geographical, philosophical background both had the prime focus on personal devotion under accessibility of God to the common people regardless of their class, caste and religion.

Keywords: Bhakti Movement, Ramanuja, Srimanta Sankardeva, Eksarana Dharma

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Introduction

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A study from philosophical perspective is undertaken to explore and compare the philosophical thoughts of these two prominent Bhakti traditions by highlighting their views on God, soul, world and devotion leading to liberation. Though they came from different cultural, geographical, philosophical background both had the prime focus on personal devotion under accessibility of God to the common people regardless of their class, caste and religion. Considering these we may highlight some of the objectives of the study.

Objectives of the study:

1. To review the philosophical background of both the philosophers.
2. To compare the philosophical approaches of both the tradition in achieving the spiritual salvation.



Methodology:

A comparative philosophical analysis is used to explore the writing, teaching and practices related to Ramanuja and Srimanta Sankaradeva. The data is based on secondary sources like published books, published or unpublished manuscripts of the Buranjis, philosophical and religious works. Further it may include translations, journals, research papers, articles, Network search etc.

Background and Philosophy of both the Philosophers

Philosophy of Ramanuja:

The philosophy of Ramanuja, known as Visistadvaita (qualified non-dualism) attempts a harmonious combination of absolutism with personal theism. He recognizes three things as real. They are matter (acit), souls (cit) and God (Isvara) though all the three are real yet matter and soul are absolutely dependent on God or Brahman (Sarma, 1991). In his view God or Brahman is Satchidananda (existence, consciousness and bliss) and the world is real and integral part of creation. God is the object of worship and the goal of our spiritual endeavor. By pleasing God through devotion one can achieve liberation through His mercy. Self-surrender to God is the key to Moksha. Unlike the advaitins who emphasized on knowledge and meditation, Ramanuja focused on the importance of devotion and ritualistic practices in attaining the grace of God. He preached his disciples the devotional acts like prayer, chanting and worship through which the individual soul can feel identity with God.

His commentary on Brahma sutra is a key text of his philosophy through which he defends his position of qualified monism. His philosophy had great impact in shaping the tradition of Vaishnavism. His view on personal love with God (Vishnu) laid the foundation of Bhakti movement of his time.



Philosophy of Srimanta Sankaradeva:

The religious life in medieval Assam before the rise of the Neo-vaisnavite movement was disintegrated and diversified one. But emergence of Sankaradeva (1449-1568 AD) seemed to have mesmerized the people and created conditions for harmonious living of people of diverse caste, communities and creeds. His teachings generated a strong community feeling among his disciples, which satisfied the feudal requirement of the time. The doctrine of Vaisnavism as propounded by Sankaradeva is well known as the doctrine of Bhakti which denotes devotion to one supreme God (Neog, 1965). Since the sects derive its roots from Bhagavada Purana, it is also known as ‘Bhagavatism’.

Like Ramanuja he developed a deep personal connection with God rather than intellectual knowledge. He emphasizes on devotion to one God by rejecting ritualistic



practices and caste division and propagates the path of simplicity and love to the supreme being. He believes in a non-dualistic view where the distinction between the devotee and the God could be transcended through emotional connection with the Almighty. He synthesizes the elements of Advaita Vedanta, vaishnavism and Bhakti tradition. For him all beings are equal in the eyes of God. He believes in one God whom he identified as Lord Krishna and promoted his tradition in the practices chanting God's name (Naam) and participating in communal singing (Sankritan).

Sankaradeva learnt not only the theoretical lessons of Vaisnavism through his pilgrimages but also the technique of publicity and the way- how people can be made attractive to the philosophy of Hinduism. The Namghar became the cultural hub in the sense that all the times in Namghar some cultural activities took place such as Harikirtana and other recitation of religious verses like Borgeet. In the similar way Satra, Bhaona, different devotional songs and dances played a vital role in assimilating and integrating the diversified Assamese society.

Comparison of both the Tradition

The Bhakti movement embodies a wide range of spiritual, theological and philosophical expression unified by one essential principle- devotion (Bhakti) to a personal God as the highest means to liberation. Both thinkers stand as luminous exponent of bhakti movement, though their system evolved in different geographical, historical and cultural contexts.

Philosophical foundation

Ramanuja's Visistadvaita states that ultimate reality (Brahman) is one, but qualified by attributes - the cit and the acit constitute His body. He considers the world and individual souls are real, distinct and dependent on God, yet inseparable from him. In Sankaradeva Ekasarana Dharma central focus is on one supreme personal God--Sri Krishna. God is both immanent and transcendent and the world is created by His will. In Sankaradeva's philosophy God, Soul and the World form an inseparable triad.

Concept of God, Soul and World

Ramanuja considers God (Narayana/Vishnu) as Brahman with attributes, that is Saguna Brahman. God is omniscient, omnipotent, whose essence is love and justice. Soul is a mode of Brahman. It is distinct yet inseparable and enjoys bliss through service to God. The world is real and purposeful.



For Sankaradeva God (Krishna) is the soul object of devotion. He is the creator and the sustainer of all. The soul is Gods servant and liberation is achieved through love and surrender. The world is divine manifestation, the arena of moral and spiritual evolution.

Regarding the conception of God, Soul and the World, Ramanuja's interpretation is metaphysical and systematic and Sankaradeva's views are emotional, experimental and ethical.

Natureof Bhakti

Ramanuja defines Bhakti as a disciplined path that begins with spiritual knowledge and ends in a loving union with God. Sankaradeva sees Bhakti as complete surrender to God and it is open to everyone, regardless of birth or learning. Both philosophers emphasize that divine grace (kripa) is essential for salvation and is more important than human effort. Both Ramanuja and Sankaradeva viewed religion as a powerful means for moral and social upliftment. Ramanujaemphasized values such as compassion, humanity, and selfless service, believing these to be the true expression of devotion to God. For him, religious practice was not limited to rituals but was deeply connected to ethical living. He taught that serving others with love and respect was a way of serving the divine.

Sankaradeva carried these ethical ideas into social life by creating organized religious institutions. Through Namghars, he provided spaces for collective worship and moral instruction. This encouraged a sense of equality and community among people. They also helped spread ethical teaching in a simple and accessible way. Sankaradeva's approach reduced social divisions and strengthened moral values (Sarma, 1966).Together their teachings transformed religion into ethical conduct and social unity.

Conclusion

The comparative study shows that both Ramanuja and Sankaradeva present Bhakti as a harmonious synthesis of metaphysics, devotion, and ethics. Bhakti, in their views, is not merely an emotional or sectarian practice but a deep philosophical approach that affirms both the transcendence and immanence of God.

For Ramanuja,Bhakti combines intellectual knowledge (jñāna) withsincere devotion, leading to the soul's eternal union with God. His philosophy maintains a balanced relationship between faith and reason, devotion and understanding.

For Sankaradeva, Bhakti is the highest path of love and complete surrender to God. It emphasizes implicitness, moral purity, and ethical living. He transformed the abstract principles



of Vedanta into practical religious life grounded in community participation, equality, and moral discipline.

Philosophically, both thinkers agree that the ultimate goal of human life is communion with the Divine. This goal is achieved not through severe asceticism or mere intellectual speculation, but through loving devotion supported by moral values and divine grace. Their teachings offer a holistic vision of life, where spiritual realization and social harmony are closely connected.

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