

Culture in India and The Cultural Philosophy of Sankaradeva



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Abstract

Every individual as well as society has its own culture. It is said that a nation without a cultural heritage is like an orphan who has nothing to feed upon. Sankaradeva was a religious reformer and preached Bhakti cult of Vaishnavism, but he did not confine his activities to the field of the religion alone. He utilized the most effectively the precious moment of his life in giving new forms and richness to the Assamese language as well as laying the foundation of a organized and distinct form of culture. He had advanced a new process of consolidation and expansion of Assamese culture embracing within the fold of distinctness and contraction of diverse section of people inhabiting in Assam at that time. For this unique effort, Sankaradeva realized to establish his unique ideas of 'Satra' and 'Namghar'. His aim was mainly to establish harmony and to promote fellow-feeling on the basis of good-will, tolerance, co-operation and love. In this paper I am going to present the cultural philosophy of Sankaradeva, which is mainly concerned with the cultural and spiritual refinement of the individual and society.

Keywords: Sankaradeva, Fanaticism, Satra, Namghar, Cultural Philosophy, Ahom Culture

Introduction

Culture is used generally for material embodiments of good taste and refinement. So we often refer to the buildings, garden, paintings etc of the Mughal or Ahom period as relics of the Mughal Culture or Ahom culture in the context with India or Assam respectively. But Philosophically its meaning is different. That is why Dewey said, "Culture means at least something cultivated, something ripened, it is opposed to the raw and crude"¹ Every type of action of man is related with his social or natural environment directly or indirectly. The main cause of the action and reaction between man and his environment is the wish or eager to fulfill his own interest or needs. There are two kinds of interests- One is economic needs or material needs and other is aesthetic or Spiritual needs. Man earns wealth to fulfill his economic needs by doing cultivation or digging the earth for production of vegetables etc. To fulfill their aesthetic and spiritual urges man is busy with creative thinking, writing, singing, art & sculpture, Literature, moral and religious thinking etc. We remember here that the most popular definition of culture given by E. B. Taylor " culture is the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities acquired by men as a member of Society."²

Every individual as well as society has its own culture. It is said that a nation without a cultural heritage is like an orphan who has nothing to feed upon. Similarly there is a Sloka in Mahabharata *that*

"Yasya nasty nija prajna kevalam tu bahusrutah
Na sa janati sastratham darvi suparsaniva".

(Mahabharata, Dhytaparva, 55.1)

"He who has no creative intellect of his own, who has only listened to (collected) the views of many others (about them) does not know what these authoritative works really mean, just as a spoon does not know the taste of the soup (if so many times moves in)" (Preface-History of Science, Philosophy Culture in Indian Civilization- Vol XII part 1 Edi- D.P Chattopadhyaya)

In this context, we can say that, there is a need not only to know one's own culture but also discover the culture of others and to understand each other and one of the effective ways to achieve this is to undertake researches on different cultures. That is why S Radhakrishnan writes, "The explores of the art, literature and thought of the world, varied cultures have a more decisive voice in shaping the minds and hearts of the people than even political leaders in the spirit of scholarship which knows no frontiers, and which, if genuine, breeds humility and tolerance in the task of building new world, in ridding ourselves of every trace or hatred,

intolerance and fanaticism of every variety, in moving forward to a great meeting where we respect every man, every race, every culture ,every creed".³ According to Radhakrishnan the Indian culture is such that from the time of Rg Veda till today,impirees the Indin people to move together to develop common ideals and purposes:

*"Sangacchadhvam Smivadadhani sam manamsi Janatam samano mantrah samitih samani samanam manah saha citt mesanm.Samani va akutih samana hridayani vah. Samamastu va mano yatha vah susahasati"*⁴

The meaning of this Sloka is-

Meet together, talk together
May your minds comprehend alike
Common be your action and achievement.
Common be your thoughts and intentions
Common be the wishes of your hearts
So may there be union amongst you.

It is an excellent example of humanism and a rich culture of Indian civilization. The influence of Indian culture has been felt abroad since the 4th century B.C specifically, we can mention the name of the states ,viz, Indonesia, Indo-China ,Combia in the east and East Africa , South Africa and also some other places in the world. Every Indian feels proud of Budhha, as he tells us that if we wish to escape from suffering, we should develop understanding and increase compassion, i.e Prajna and Karuna, which are the keys of cultural Humanism. Prajna is the deepening of ones awerness, making oneself into a spiritual being. Karuna is the quality in which prajna manifests itself and it is the compassion for the whole of humanity ,not only for the Indians .There are great ideals of Indian culture ,they are abhaya, asanga and ahimsa, Abhaya means freedom from fear, we can remember here from the upanisad that:

"asoto ma sadgamaya tomoso ma jyotirgamaya mrtyar ma amritangamaya."

Like the existentialists of the twentieth century European philosophy Nietzsche we the Indian do not think that the world is a sat and subject to mortality, that is why 'God is dead'. We all Indians believe that God is always with us.

The Indian culture is very optimistic and spiritualistic that, it teaches us there is a reality in this universe and the Reality transcends this universe, This gives us hope to be free from the fear. Even janma (Birth) and Mritu (Death) are taken as symbol of time in Indian culture. Seeing the truth in solitude doesnot mean that we should not engage ourselves in public affairs. We have to do it in a spirit of detachment, in a spirit of asanga.And our attitude should be one of ahimsa, i.e non violence. Non Violence does not mean that the surgeon should not do any operation. These three qualities of Indian culture have given us an attitude of absolute toleration.It has not been made by any race, any one religion or any one sect it is because of the unity of all religion which was the aim of the humanism of Dr Bhagavan Das, the spiritualistic humanist of the twentieth century's Indian philosophy. That is why Dr Bhagaban Das writes that, "In the evolution of this nation wide and country wide religious life the contributions of different racial elements have so

commingled that today it is difficult to separate them"⁵. Gandhi also remarks that he did not wish to live in a world which is not united we see that all living religions are gathered in and around India and which widen the culture of it.

We know that Assam is an illustrious model of pluralism with the multi-religious, multi-cultural multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society like that of India. In fact, Assam is a mini-India.But the vast cultural diversity of different unique and indigenious tribal communities reflects sometimes conflict, violence, intolerance, separatism segregation etc. But Sankaradeva has given an immense contribution in the evolution of religio-philosophical culture of Assam with a new outlook. He attempted to unite the people of Assam on a common basis of vaisnavism through the medium of Bhawona congregational prayer in Namghara accompanied with music. Probably, because of Buddhist influence, Sankaradeva designed his form of initiation as Sarana and divided it into three as nama sarana, guru sarana and bhakta sarana corresponding to the Buddhist dharma sarana, Buddha sarana and Sanghs sarana.

But in this regard, we can mention here that, Sankaradeva's concept of sarana is unique as it includes deva sarana, which is completely different from that of other vaisnavism in India.Commonly, it is used as the 'caribastu' nam, deva, guru and bhakat. Sankaradeva also brought Indian culture closer to Assam by giving a new meaning and new life to the Assamese culture with the ambit of great Indian culture.

Sankaradeva remodeled the Assamese society by giving religion, literature, music, dance, drama, art etc. to the people of Assam, on the whole new culture which have been a source of life energy to us up till now².He has reconstructed Assamese culture and upgraded it to such a level that, once Mahatma Gandhi remark that "Assam is beyond my dream, my services are not required here." As Gandhi knew that, the social evil of untouchability against which he had fought in the twentieth century, India was struck at the root by Sankaradeva in the fifteenth century at Assam. According to Sankaradeva the duty of man is to effect a transformation in his own nature.This transformation can be brought by the path of devotion, i.e. Bhakti.

Primarily, Sankaradeva was a religious reformer and preached Bhakti cult of Vaishnavism, but he did not confine his activities to the field of the religion alone. He utilized the most effectively the precious moment of his life in giving new forms and richness to the Assamese language as well as laying the foundation of a organized and distinct form of culture.He had advanced a new process of consolidation and expansion of Assamese culture embracing within the fold of distinctness and contraction of diverse section of people inhabiting in Assam at that time. Far this unique effort, Sankaradeva realized to establish his unique ideas of 'Satra' and 'Namghar' .His aim was mainly to establish harmony and to promote fellow-feeling on the basis of good-will, tolerance, co-operation and love. "The Satra acted more or less as the guardians of morality by keeping close vigilance over their disciples, the head of the Satra tried to tone up then

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moral of the people”⁶. The heads instructed the disciple on right life and right conduct, wherever necessary. In maintain disciple, order and morality of the villagers, the Namghar has been playing a prominent part during the last five hundred years. There is a Namghar in every village of Assam. It is the institution around which all culture activities of an Assamese village more. Namghar is an extended wing of Satra, which is also a village prayer hall, a court or a theater. Villagers assembles here on various occasion to various matters related to the village. It has also been serving as the village public hall, all public functions especially dramatic performance known as ‘Bhaona’ are also held in the Namghar .Thus through the establishment of Satra and Namghar , Sankaradeva advanced a unique cultural philosophy that, which has a new dimension to Assamese society . This ‘Namghar’ is the main institution of Assamese village which is run, under democratic style uptill now. The ‘Satra’ and ‘Namgharas’ have given immense construction to the reconstruction of cultural philosophy of Assam. It is accepted by all the inhabitants in Assam, that, role of the Satra and Namghara in the moral and spiritual upliftment of them is really great. Without the moral

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and spiritual upliftment of the people a cultural philosophy does not last long. That is why. Sankaradeva was always concerned with the development of the moral and spiritual values among the people .The sense of co-operation, fellow-feeling, moral and spiritual sense and communal harmony are the main contribution of Satra and Namghar to the cultural philosophy of Assam. So, Sankaradeva’s cultural philosophy is mainly concerned with the cultural and spiritual refinement of the individual and society. Universality is a salient feature of his philosophy; because of devotion and love has universal appeal and as such people from all castes are attracted towards it.

Reference

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