



The Bhakti Movement as an alternative to hierarchical economic systems: Insights from Sankardeva

Dr. Khagen Das¹, Sanjeeb Kalita²

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Pub Kamrup College, Assam, India

² Assistant Professor and Head Department of English, PNGB Govt. Model College, Kakopathar, Assam, India

Abstract

What is primarily known as a religious and spiritual revolution during the medieval India the Bhakti Movement was based primarily on personal devotion to a formless divine, transcending rigid caste distinctions and social hierarchies? This movement of Bhakti was taken to straddling this with social and economic reforms by Sankardeva, a seminal person in the Bhakti Movement of Assam. Lessons offered an alternative to the hierarchical economic systems fully ingrained in feudal and caste-based social orders. This paper examines how Sankardeva's Bhakti, based on equality and community, served as a counter narrative against exploitative economic structures of his time in order to propound a more participatory and inclusive economic model. This paper contends that by studying Sankardeva's contributions through the lenses of social, spiritual, and economic equality, his vision of an egalitarian society was not only a religious one but an economic alternative to hierarchical systems.

Keywords: Sankardeva, social reform, economic inclusivity

Introduction

Indian Medieval period was a period of rigid social stratification which gained strength of caste system as well as feudal economic order. The social and economic roles were determined by his, often at the cost of exhausting and historically enhanced marginalization and exploitation of some groups. The feudal system concentrated the economic power held by the few elites with whom power resided, such as nobles, priests, and landlords. In this context, the Bhakti Movement focused on a personal, egalitarian relationship with the divine that took off from south India in the early part of the 7th century and went on to subcontinent. The rejection of external ritualism, idol worship and caste distinction that the hierarchical structure often depended upon for survival.

A significant feature of the Bhakti movement was Sankardeva, who was a saint — scholar and cultural reformer from the Assam of the 15th — 16th century. Under the philosophy of Eka Sarana Naam Dharma (religion of the one God by chanting His name), he rejected castes and their social hierarchies. Sankardeva had a vision beyond the spiritual world; he also visualised a more economically and socially inclusive, equitable and participatory society. This paper considers Sankardeva's alternative teaching to hierarchical economic systems in terms of his focus on social and economic equality, community welfare, and rejection of caste-based distinction. Thus, it showed how Sankardeva's Bhakti philosophy ought to be interpreted as a critique of the exploitative and uneven economic structures prevalent at that time.

The Bhakti Movement: Spiritual and Social Foundations

At base, the Bhakti Movement was a devotional one focused on personal devotion (bhakti) to formless deity, usually Vishnu or Shiva, with no ritualistic practice or priestly intermediary involved. Ramanuja, Kabir, Meera bai and Guru Nanak rejected traditional Brahmanical hierarchy and

ritualism and instead advocated a personal direct relationship with God. By stressing the concept of equality before God, Bhakti based that divine equality denied the existence of such things as caste, gender and social status. And he advocated that wealth accumulated by a human being should be equally fragmented for performing five types of duties:

*“Suniyoka bali yena sastara bihia
Paca bhage Kari bighagibe nija bitta
Dharma artha Kama yasa mahaputrara nidane
Taves thakibe pai sukhe sarbaksane”*

(Ibid, 8th Canto vs. 285)

(Listen Bali, what is prescribed in Holy Scriptures, Divide your money into five parts. For performing duties towards religion, wealth, basic requirements, knowledge and future generation. Then only you could live in peace always)

In its social dimension, the Bhakti Movement was an attempt to destroy the vertical divide between the high and low castes, and the sort of spiritual liberation which was not alienated by caste. Bhakti saints railed against the wretchedness of caste systems and the feudal social order and even had something critical to say about the exploitation. They taught people to break free from social and economic oppression, mostly the marginalized. Bhakti according to Sankardeva was unique in that his vision contextualized the social, and economic conditions of Assam. He wasn't just about spiritual salvation, he was about creating a more just and equitable society. He ignored the caste-based discrimination that existed in the region and supported the social unity through the practice of Naam Kirtan (congregational chanting of God's name that brought the people of different caste backgrounds i.e., Dalits and backward classes together. Through the course of this spiritual practice, it was an economic and social integration.

Sankardeva's Social and Economic Reforms

Rejection of Caste Hierarchy

But the most important of Sankardeva's critiques stemmed, first and foremost, from the deeply ingrained caste system of his day, which consigned some parts of society to a life of poverty and marginalisation. The Brahmanical religious establishment was convinced that one's caste proved both one's social identity and one's economic role. For instance, upper caste people enjoyed political and economic power while lower caste got involved in menial labor, subsistence farming rarely having any chance to move up.

It was revolutionary that Sankardeva rejected caste. He stated that all human beings are equal before God, and so superior position or social status can't be an element in discriminating the human being one from another. Among other things, people from all castes could join together in communal prayers, spiritual practices and community service in the *satras* (monastic institutions) that he created, spaces that he socialised. It was a direct challenge to caste divisions and the economic segregation that went with them. Sankardeva undercut the links between caste and economic hierarchy because he brought everyone into his religious practices whenever possible. For instance, in his *satras*, **labor** was made equalizing in which people of all castes took part in weaving, pottery, agriculture and various other crafts. These activities were not determined by caste but by the communal needs and spirit values of the group.

Economic Inclusivity

A deeply inclusive economic philosophy of equality, service and community well being was the mainstay of the philosophy Sankardeva preached. His ideas were revolutionary — contrary to the strict social stratification of the day, and something closer to what we'd call a more egalitarian society. As far as religious and social realms were concerned, he made this inclusivity accord well beyond economic life too, to the extent that he aimed to ensure that no one — irrespective of the caste, gender or social status — was discriminated against in terms of having to access available resources and opportunities for development. Rejection of caste system was one of the most important aspects of Sankardeva's economic inclusivity. He believed that human beings were equal before God, and it was also in the economic realm. Sankardeva's movement, called the *Eka Sarana Naam Dharma*, was not confined to any class (e.g. higher castes, middle castes and lower castes were all welcomed), as many people from lower classes were excluded from traditional society. This promoted a feeling of social and economic unity, among all, by allowing everyone to participate in religious and cultural activities, such as the congregational singing of devotional songs (*sankirtan*).

Sankardeva would also advocate for resource distribution to be fairer. He attacked the ways in which wealth became concentrated in the hands of a few — the Brahminical priesthood and feudal elites. His message focused on living in accord with nature; self sufficiency; and sharing of resources among the members of the community. The communal life style of collective labour and cooperation contributed to the creation of a fairer environment than the one of wealth and labour which were exclusive to one's social rank. Sankardeva also had an economic philosophy, which related to the encouragement of artisan crafts and rural entrepreneurship. Promotion of traditional crafts such

as weaving and pottery helped him to support the local economy where old people earned a living. His work to create *satras* (monastic institutions) as sites of social, cultural, and economic communal exchange where farmers, artisans, and traders could congregate in a spirit of collaboration and mutual benefit all lay within the realm of his social, cultural, and economic work. He believed that the finest way to use one's hard earned money is by sharing consumption and by donating as he penned down in *Bhagavata*:

*Nija bharyya putraka banciya yito nare
Kare anna byanjana bhojana ekesware
Pare andhata misrata bhunjavai yatana
Yamadute karai sasti haraicai cetana*
(Ibid, 3rd Canto, vs. 270)

("One who consumes everything himself even by depriving his own wife and son: he falls in the darkest place: he is bound to suffer lots of miseries in hell")

Equality, community, and fairness were the principles, which Sankardeva used in building his economic inclusivity. Not only did he reject the caste-based discrimination and advocate for the welfare of all people, but he also transformed the spiritual and the social fabric of Assam and contributed to the making of an equitable and inclusive economic model because the *satras* themselves became economic hubs and people did farming, weaving and craft work there. Without middlemen, there would be no exploitative middlemen to interfere with the pooling of resources to build infrastructure and provide for the welfare of the community. In this system, there was neither hoarding of wealth in a few but dispersion for the common good. This was a counterpoint to the feudal system that featured the centralization of economic power in a few, and general exploitation of the lower classes.

A key aspect of Sankardeva's broad economic inclusivity was provision of support to artisan crafts and local entrepreneurship. In his time artisans, both from lower castes, were excluded from the mainstream economy. While their work was essential for the functioning of society, their work was under valued and under paid. Self sufficiency and artisan labor were however of central importance in Sankardeva's philosophy. Those were essential to the sustenance of the community, and he encouraged people to participate in doing local crafts such as making weaving, pottery and carpentry. He gave dignity to these professions by promoting them within the framework of religious and spiritual practice not only, but also made them a central feature in the economic life of the society. Furthermore, *Namghars* and *satras* became open spaces in which artisans were able to exchange goods and services as well as knowledge, helping localise and involve more people in the creation of the local economy.

Sankardeva's Legacy and Relevance Today

The spiritual, social and economic reform movement set by Sankardeva is still going on today in a very effective manner. He was the Godfather of the *Bhakti* movement in Assam and his teaching went far beyond the spiritual fraternity and brought about a cultural revolution which was inclusive, communal and equal. It is not only the religious legacy that we can see in his work, but it seems that it can

be helpful for the modern sociologist to answer the questions of inequality, communalism, and economic exclusion. The main idea of the philosopher Sankardeva was the theory of people's spiritual equality. However, in opposing the caste system, and in preaching that all men are created equal in the sight of God, he advanced his own mission known as Eka Sarana Naam Dharma. His vision was indeed a vision of equality, a vision which was against caste oppression and which provided a response to castebased oppression and discrimination in his own society and which is a challenge to societies of today. In the present world, Sankardeva's idea of equality and inclusion is a clear approach towards the counter to which caste system is still prevalent in many areas of India, it provides a model for social justice and one for unity.

An important part of Sankardeva's work extended into the social and religious domains but did not stop there, it extended into the economic domain as well. In the context of promoting a community-based system that was founded on a cooperative economic model, that was designed so that the wealth of the community would be with the people, not the elite: Namgyia also provided what could be called Satras and Namghars which were places of worship where he gathered people from all the castes to live, work and share. This is a challenge to modern economic systems that mostly support individualism and inequality. Sankardeva's vision of a society based on cooperation, self-sufficiency and equality can act as a useful guide to the construction of more integrated and sustainable economies of today. In other words, Sankardeva's concentration on the vehicles of art, culture, and education for social change is as relevant even to this generation. He contributed to a unified theory of the creed of equality, unity, and social justice through his Ankiya Nat, and devotional song and dance to reach the masses. The cultural practices of Assam that incorporated religious lessons into the lives of the people are to this day observed and are utilized as a means of creating unity and cultural inclusion. Today, they can act as models of movements for the cultural renaissance and social cohesion in multicultural societies, against such cleavages. Even today Sankardeva's legacy holds true and offers teachings of spiritual inclusivity, social justice and economic equality. He supported social equality of all the communities, other castes and classes, equal respect for all kinds of work and fight against any kind of discrimination; he provided a way towards a more equal, tolerant and sensitive society.

Conclusion

Likewise, Sankardeva was one of the leading figures of the Bhakti Movement and made some religious reforms but at the same time, he also played some role in economic and social development by his work towards formation of a more liberal society. He did not accept the caste system, endorsed folk work, and endorsed handicrafts as opposed to the feudal type economy that was common in medieval India. Sankardeva's vision of a society which is characterized by justice, equality and fairness in distribution of wealth and resources in which everyone works for the welfare of all, is an apt model of how the present global economic divide might be overcome. His teachings remain relevant to those who look for other ways of eradicating the economic relationship that is exploitative and he is a live example of how religious and social uprising can alter economics.

References

1. Bhuyan SK. Sankardeva and His Society. Guwahati: Asom Publication Board, 1950.
2. Choudhury BK. The Bhakti Movement in India: A Study of Sankardeva's Contribution. Guwahati: Department of Philosophy, Gauhati University, 1967.
3. Das Maheswar. Social and Economic Reforms in Medieval Assam: A Study of Sankardeva's Philosophy. 2nd ed., Assam University Press, 2005.
4. Gupta D. The Bhakti Movement and Social Reform in India. Routledge, 2003.
5. Hazarika D. Sankardeva: The Life and Legacy of a Saint-Philosopher. Prakashan Publishers, 2010.
6. Kakati Banikanta. The Role of Sankardeva in Assamese Society and Culture. 1st ed., Guwahati University Press, 1989.
7. Sankardeva Borgeet: Songs of Devotion. Translated by Maheswar Neog, Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1965.
8. Sankardeva Kirtan-Ghosha and the Assamese Bhagavata. Edited by Maheswar Neog, Publication Board of Assam, 1982.
9. Singh HK. Bhakti Movement in North East India: Ideology and Practice. DK. Printworld, 1999.