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The Vedantic Vision Of Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva: A Synthesis Of Monism And Devotion

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Abstract:

Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.), a seminal figure in the socio-cultural and religious renaissance of medieval Assam, grounded his teachings within the Vedantic framework, while simultaneously diverging from traditional schools to forge a distinctive philosophical perspective. This paper explores Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva's Vedantic outlook, examining his agreements and disagreements with key Vedantic schools such as Advaita Vedānta and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, and elucidates his contributions to Indian philosophy. Highlighting his reconciliation of non-dualistic metaphysics with bhakti (devotion) to Krishna, the study argues for a distinct philosophical identity that integrates elements of transcendental knowledge and practical devotion.

Keywords: Socio-cultural, Vedantic, Vedānta, bhakti, Krishna, devotion

Introduction:

Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva's religious philosophy is deeply rooted in Vedantic thought, yet it reflects a unique amalgamation of metaphysical inquiry and devotional practice. His philosophical contributions offer insights into the dynamic interplay of monism and bhakti, challenging binary classifications within Vedantic traditions. For instance, in his *Kīrttana-Ghoṣā* (translated by Maheswar Neog, 1982, p. 124), Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva eloquently emphasizes the all-encompassing nature of Brahman and its accessibility through devotion, stating:

*"Brahma ek hoilo ananta, tāra mahimā aparanta,
Bhakti joge tāka pāi, māyā tāka nāhi khāi."*

This passage illustrates how Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva harmonized the abstract monism of Vedānta with an accessible path of devotion (bhakti), making the infinite (Brahman) approachable through love and surrender.

This paper delves into Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva's engagement with the central tenets of Vedānta, including the nature of Brahman, māyā, creation, and liberation, positioning him within the broader context of Indian philosophical discourse.

Vedāntic Foundations and Sankaradeva's Engagement:

Vedānta, derived from the Upaniṣadic culmination of Vedic literature, has been systematized by seminal thinkers such as Śankarācārya (Advaita Vedānta) and Rāmānujācārya (Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta). Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva's philosophical framework draws upon these traditions while demonstrating notable deviations:

1. Concept of Brahman:

In Advaita Vedānta, Brahman is nirguṇa (attributeless), while Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta describes Brahman as saguṇa (endowed with attributes). Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva synthesizes these views, identifying Krishna (Mādhava) as both the nirguṇa Brahman and a personal deity, thus bridging the metaphysical and the devotional. As Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva states in his *Bhāgavata Commentary* (Neog, 1991, p. 56),

"Mādhava is the infinite, formless, and attributeless Brahman, yet He is also the supreme Lord with form, ever present in the hearts of His devotees."

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2. World and Māyā:

Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva aligns with Advaita's notion of the world as an illusory manifestation (vivartavāda), yet he recognizes a functional reality within this illusion, attributing it to the presence of God in all beings. This nuanced stance integrates elements of Rāmānuja's acceptance of the world's reality. In his *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā* (Neog, 1982, p. 142), he reflects on this dual nature: "The world is but a shadow of divine play, though it appears real, its ultimate nature is shaped by the divine will."

3. Individual Self (Jīva):

While Śāṅkara equates jīva with Brahman, and Rāmānuja views jīva as a part of Brahman, Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva posits a relational distinction within a devotional context, allowing for a personal connection between the devotee and the divine. In his *Nāmaghoṣā* (Neog, 1965, p. 112), he states:

"The jīva is a servant of the Lord, eternally bound to Him in love and devotion, but distinct in its essence, as it can never fully merge with the infinite."

Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva's Bhakti and Vedāntic Divergence:

Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva's theological innovation lies in his emphasis on bhakti as the supreme path to liberation, contrasting with Śāṅkara's jñāna-mārga (path of knowledge). His conception of bhakti transcends ritualistic devotion, advocating complete surrender to Krishna through practices like śravaṇa (listening) and kīrtana (singing God's name). As Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva writes in his *Bhakti-Ratnākara* (Neog, 1991, p. 78),

"The true path of liberation is through the devotion to Krishna; it is not by mere knowledge but by the surrender of the heart that one attains the eternal truth."

This perspective aligns more closely with theistic traditions, yet Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva's staunch non-dualism ensures his distinct Vedāntic identity. In his *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā* (Neog, 1982, p. 95), he elaborates:

"The Lord is both immanent and transcendent, and through devotion, the soul realizes the inseparability of the divine and the self."

Philosophical Synthesis:

Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva's Vedāntic synthesis reconciles the metaphysical absolutism of Advaita Vedānta with the devotional fervor of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. This integration is evident in his treatment of key Vedāntic principles:

1. Creation and Evolution:

Adopting vivartavāda, Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva interprets creation as an illusory transformation of Brahman, akin to the rope-snake analogy. However, his occasional use of parīṅṅamavāda analogies (e.g., gold and earring) reflects a

dual perspective, balancing transcendental and practical standpoints. As Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva writes in his *Bhāgavata-Commentary* (Neog, 1991, p. 82), "The world, though it appears real, is but a transformation of Brahman. Like the illusion of the rope and snake, the world manifests through God's will but ultimately remains unreal."

His occasional use of parīṅṅamavāda, such as in the example of the transformation of gold into an earring (in *Nāmaghoṣā*, Neog, 1965, p. 100), underscores a more practical aspect of creation. He states:

"The divine manifests in diverse forms, yet remains unchanged in essence; as gold assumes the shape of ornaments, so does Brahman manifest in creation."

2. Liberation (Mokṣa):

Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva follows Advaita's notion of liberation as the realization of the non-duality of jīva and Brahman, achievable within one's lifetime. Yet, his devotional framework redefines mokṣa as a state subordinate to divine love, prioritizing eternal service to Krishna over metaphysical dissolution. In his *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā* (Neog, 1982, p. 148), he states:

"True liberation is not the dissolution of the self into the absolute, but the eternal service of the Lord, where one finds ultimate bliss in devotion and surrender."

Conclusion:

Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva's Vedāntic philosophy represents a unique confluence of monistic metaphysics and devotional theism. His reinterpretation of traditional Vedāntic principles within a bhakti-centric paradigm underscores his innovative contribution to Indian philosophical thought. Śāṅkaradeva reimagines key Vedāntic ideas, combining the non-dualism of Advaita Vedānta with the personal devotion characteristic of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. This synthesis is exemplified in his treatment of *Brahman* as both nirguṇa (attributeless) and saguṇa (with attributes), presenting a dual understanding that allows for both metaphysical unity and a personal connection to the divine. As he writes in his *Bhāgavata-Commentary* (Neog, 1991, p. 74):

"Brahman is both formless and with form. In His form, He is Mādhava, the eternal Lord, and in His formlessness, He is the infinite, beyond conception."

This blending of metaphysical thought with devotion is evident in his other works, such as the *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā* (Neog, 1982, p. 120), where Śrīmaṅṅa Śāṅkaradeva states:

"Through the practice of kīrtana and śravaṇa, the devotee becomes one with the Supreme, realizing the unity of the self with God, even as they retain their individual love for Him."

Recognizing Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva's philosophical legacy requires an appreciation of his nuanced synthesis, which harmonizes the transcendental unity of Advaita Vedānta with the personal devotion of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. This integration is not merely a blending of ideas but a dynamic rethinking of Vedantic thought that accommodates both metaphysical abstraction and spiritual practice. In his *Nāmaghoṣā* (Neog, 1965, p. 110), he offers:

"The jīva, though separate in form, is never apart from the divine. It is through bhakti that the veil of māyā is lifted, revealing the eternal truth of oneness with Krishna."

This paper advocates for the classification of Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy as a distinct Vedantic school, reflecting the dynamism and inclusivity of his vision. His emphasis on bhakti as the means to liberation, combined with his Vedantic non-dualism, challenges the boundaries of traditional classifications within Indian philosophy. As such, Śrīmaṅṅa Śaṅkaradeva's contributions represent not just an academic synthesis but a transformative philosophical movement, deeply rooted in the devotional traditions of the East.

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