

Environmental Consciousness in Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva's Philosophy

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Abstract

Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva, known for his contributions to the Bhakti movement has taught us the philosophy of oneness by emphasizing his Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma. Although, his teachings were predominantly spiritual, yet there are references to social, cultural and environmental wisdom in his teachings. Śaṅkaradeva portrays Bhakti as a path to spiritual liberation, rooted in the respect for all living and non-living beings. Śaṅkaradeva favours the idea of surrendering to one God and highlights the sacredness and intrinsic worth of all creation, emphasizing oneness and harmony with the Absolute. His teachings thereby acknowledge nature's divine essence, stressing the interconnectedness of all existence and rejecting discrimination among beings. Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy of oneness highlights his principles of respect for nature and thereby paves the way for environmental consciousness in his teachings. In this paper, an attempt is being made to focus on environmental consciousness that is found in the teachings of Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva by emphasizing the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature via Bhakti.

Keywords:

Bhakti, Intrinsic value, Nature, Oneness, Spirituality.

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Introduction

Environmental consciousness has long been a cornerstone of Indian culture, deeply intertwined with spiritual traditions that emphasize the interconnectedness of humanity and

nature. This paper delves into the ecological consciousness found within the *Bhakti* teachings of Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva, a renowned 15th-century Assamese saint and reformer. Śaṅkaradeva's *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*, a philosophy centered on complete devotion to a single God, emphasizes the inherent sacredness and value of all creation. Thereby, he reflects the harmonious coexistence between humanity and the natural world. Through devotional texts like *Bhakti-Pradīpa*, *Bhakti-Ratnākara*, and *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā*, Śaṅkaradeva presents *Bhakti* as a path to spiritual liberation that is deeply rooted in reverence for all living beings and even inanimate objects. His teachings acknowledge the divine essence within nature, highlighting the interconnectedness of all existence and rejecting any form of discrimination between beings. Furthermore, Śaṅkaradeva's descriptions of Kṛṣṇa's beauty, often interwoven with natural elements, and his emphasis on the oneness of all beings further exemplify his ecological sensitivity. This study aims to illuminate Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy of universal respect, oneness, and environmental consciousness, offering an insight into his *Bhakti*.

Environmental Consciousness

There is harmony in the world of nature and human beings because of which there prevails a systematic order in the world. Disturbance in this harmony results in the disturbance in the order of the world. The harmonious relationship between man and nature needs to be maintained at any cost without which the destruction of humankind will not be very far. Nature is the abode of all living beings including human beings; human beings have the responsibility to take care of nature. In Indian tradition, nature is given the utmost respect as there is reference in Indian texts and smṛiti texts to consider it as Mother. Another reference where there is a reflection of Nature being treated with respect is found in Vedas and Upanisads. Nature worship has been one of the fundamental practices of Indian culture. Even deities that we worshipped in Indian Tradition like the sun (*Surya*), fire (*Agni*), sky (*Akasa*), air (*Vāyu*), *Indra*, and are representations of various natural forces. Even, Vedic Samhitas' description of the gods shows that every intangible object of inert nature is the main abode of the Gods. Each God is portrayed as the ruler of several elements found in nature, including earth, water, fire, storms, wind, clouds, rain, lightning, and clouds. Each God described in the Vedas is an external symbol of a natural object, such as the God of fire, the God of water, the God of the sun, etc. Therefore nature-human relation has been acknowledged to a greater extent in ancient Indian literature and traditions.

From the practical point of view also, it is not possible to imagine human beings without nature as human civilization is closely associated with nature as without nature, no life is possible. The environment plays a vital role in human civilization. Human beings are closely related to the ecosystem in which they live. The ecology, consisting of earth, water, air, plants, and animals, provides the essential and adequate conditions for human life. With the growing population, the exploitation of nature has become one of the most significant issues facing today's people. However, there are various measures taken by environmentalists to tackle it, as mentioned earlier there are references in the text of various ancient Indian thinkers where there is mention of a way of life, which can easily help us to tackle this degradation of nature. One such thinker is Srimanta Śāṅkaradeva. In the teachings of Srimanta Śāṅkaradeva, there is a reference of profound insights into the relationship between spirituality and ecological responsibility. The *Bhakti* movement of Śāṅkaradeva emphasizes the inherent worth of all creation and is based on the idea of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nama-Dharma* (complete surrender to one God). Despite without specifically discussing environmental preservation, Śāṅkaradeva's teachings emphasize the interdependence of all life and the sacredness of the natural world. In the next section, a discussion on Śāṅkaradeva's philosophy of oneness will be taken up for discussion in order to highlight the interdependence of all beings.

Spiritual Unity in Śāṅkaradeva's Bhakti

Though Śāṅkaradeva does not specifically explain the concept of environmental protection, yet in his teachings there is a reference to the consciousness of the environment that highlights Śāṅkaradeva's consideration of nature as having intrinsic value. Śāṅkaradeva is known for his religious reform by his *Bhakti* movement. In his endeavor to reform society, he preached *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*. The main motto of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma* is to surrender to only one God, i.e., *Kṛṣṇa* and thereby prescribe worshipping one Absolute God. Therefore, Śāṅkaradeva preached a philosophy of oneness. However, there is a reference to various names for the Absolute: Vishnu, Brahman, Vasudeva, Hari, Narayana, etc.

Therefore, this acknowledgment of one Absolute God comes with the idea that there must be a journey to reach the one God. Śāṅkaradeva maintains the view that this reach is possible only by *Bhakti*. Although there are references to nine different kinds of *Bhakti*-*śravaṇa*, *kīrtana*, *smarana*, *vandana*, *arcana*, *pāda-sevana*, *dāsyā*, *sakhitva* and *deha-arpaṇa*; yet he considers *śravaṇa* and *kīrtana* to be the best forms of *Bhakti*. In order to reach the

Absolute, he emphasizes the importance of reciting, chanting, mumbling, or remembering the names and actions of the Lord (kirtana, nāma-kīrtana) and giving such activities (śravaṇa) one's full attention. For this reason, his faith is called *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma* (Neog 85). Śaṅkaradeva believes that only listening and chanting the names of God enable us to overcome and move against the pains and sufferings of the world. The spiritual realization, for Śaṅkaradeva, is thereby very much rooted in Bhakti (Neog 86). As a religious practice, bhakti is preferred over jñāna (spiritual knowledge) and karma (ritualism) since it is God's grace through *Bhakti* that leads to ultimate knowledge and, consequently, to release. In his texts such as *Bhakti-Pradīpa*, *Bhakti-Ratnākar* and *KīrtanaGhoṣā*, there is a reference to admitting Bhakti as greater than Mukti. Śaṅkaradeva, emphasizes the importance of *Bhakti* or devotion to God as the ultimate means of liberation.

Environmental Consciousness and Śaṅkaradeva

Śaṅkaradeva's monotheistic approach to God is intimately intertwined with his worldview. He acknowledges the existence of cit and acit along with the Absolute, although they cannot have an independent existence apart from the Absolute. He writes in *KīrtanaGhoṣā*:

Tumi paramātmā jagatara īsa eka

Ekū bastu nāhike tomāta vyatireka//

(*KīrtanaGhoṣā*, v. 519)

This verse emphasizes that You or Brahman is the highest or absolute soul of this universe. There is nothing in this universe apart from You. In other words, Ultimate Reality i.e., Brahman is an all-pervading, formless, eternal non-dual consciousness.

However, we cannot deny the fact that there prevails plurality in the world. But that plurality although seems real, is a result of illusion. According to Śaṅkaradeva, the plurality of the world is caused by *Māyā*, the divine illusion that hides the true nature of reality. Although *Māyā* gives the material world the appearance of variety and separation, the true reality remains the same. Śaṅkaradeva articulates this idea in his *Kīrtana-Ghoṣā* as:

“māyātesedekhaya Vividha pariccheda /

Svarūpatatohmāranāhikekichubheda //

Caitanyasvarupavyāpi eka nirañjana /

Tohmākabulibedvaitakonaajñajana //(KīrttanaGhoṣā, v. 83)

Through this verse, Śaṅkaradeva tries to explain that the diversity of this world is just the result of *Māyā*. *Māyā* is the cosmic illusion that makes humans think that the world has a division. In reality, everything is one, i.e., Brahman, sometimes called God, is the pure and unadulterated consciousness that permeates everything in the cosmos.

Śaṅkaradeva has often praised the idea of nature-culture interaction. The teachings of Śaṅkaradeva are of great utility to us and the world-society at large. In his various writings, Śaṅkaradeva described nature and advised to preserve nature. While referring to *Bhakti* towards one Supreme being Śaṅkaradeva emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature. He believed that all beings (sentient and non-sentient) should be treated with respect and should not be used as tools or means to fulfill other needs. There is a verse in *Kīrttana Ghoṣā*, where he writes:

Garu gopikā paśu brksya bana

Nāhi janmāntar kichu sādhana

Ehi janmemātra kari bhakati

Pāileka sakale mohora gati// (KīrttanaGhoṣā, v. 138)

This verse means, in the past the cows, the wife of the cowherd, the animals and the plants had not made any efforts toward salvation. However, during this life, they have shown devotion and reverence and as a result, they attained salvation in Me through bhakti.

Additionally, Śaṅkaradeva maintains the view that nature and human beings have an intimate relation. He emphasizes the value of oneness through his *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*. He declares that Brahman is one, infinite, all-pervasive, and it embraces everything. Therefore, he holds that God is present in all creatures and thereby all creatures are the manifestations of God. Thus, it is everyone's duty to respect all the creation of God –animate and inanimate. In this context, Śaṅkaradeva tries to break all types of discrimination and establish the universality, happiness, and oneness that nature exhibits. Therefore, he writes in *KīrttanaGhoṣā*:

Tumi kārya karaṇa samasta carācara

Suvarne kundale yena nuhika Antara/

Tumi poshu-pakshi surāsura taru-trna

Ajñānate murha jane dekhe bhinnabhinna// (KīrtanaGhoṣā, v. 520)

This verse emphasizes that *You* are the cause and the effect of this world, which implies that how God and the universe are the same things, much as gold and gold ornaments are essentially the same material despite their differing looks. It also explains that *You* are the animals, birds and plants, *You* are the one who pervades all; only the ignorant can differentiate for their ignorance.

In Śaṅkaradeva's teachings, nature has played a vital role. He emphasized the beauty of nature and described the beauty of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* through the natural elements like flowers. In this context, there is a verse in *KīrtanaGhoṣā*, where he writes:

Pitabastreśobheātiśyāmakalebaa,

Kamala locana cāru aruṇa adhara // (KīrtanaGhoṣā, v. 642)

This verse indicates that *Kṛṣṇa* shines with a black form, lotus-like eyes, and lovely red lips when he is dressed in yellow. Additionally, there is another verse in *Kīrtana Ghoṣā*, where he writes the same thing as:

Padma pātra xama ayata lochana

Bhrawa-yuge karai kānti

Nāsā tila phoola adhararatila

Dashana mukutā panti// (KīrtanaGhoṣā, v. 178)

This verse emphasizes that *Kṛṣṇa*'s eyes look like lotus petals that enhance the beauty of their face, and His eyes look like sesame flowers, red lips, and teeth like a row of pearls, and feet that resemble fresh lotus buds. Through this verse, Śaṅkaradeva tries to describe *Kṛṣṇa* with natural beauty.

Śaṅkaradeva additionally reflects that although each and every being in this although have different forms yet they are the same soul. The following verse from *KīrtanaGhoṣā*, can be cited here to strengthen this point:

“Xakala prānika dekhibeka ātmasam

Kukura srgāala gardabharo ātmarama

Jāniyā savāko pari karibā pranāma //(KīrttanaGhoṣā, v. 1825)

This verse means that all living beings are the same soul, regardless of form. It considers that every animal, whether it is a dog, jackal, or donkey, acknowledges the divine presence in all of them. Therefore, we should give equal respect to all the living beings. Through this verse, Śaṅkaradeva emphasizes that all animals are equal; all are the creation of the same soul or ultimate soul, i.e., *Kṛṣṇa*.

Conclusion

Śaṅkaradeva's understanding of God is centered on a monotheistic approach and both impersonal and personal facets of divinity are included in his vision of God, which makes his theology inclusive and approachable for followers. His worldview is based on the concept of *Eka-Śaraṇa*, or *shelter in One God*, which maintains that salvation is obtained through *Bhakti* by total surrender to *Kṛṣṇa*, the ultimate God. Śaṅkaradeva's concept of *Bhakti* or devotion to oneness gives a clear appeal for society to live unitedly with all fellow beings. His concept of oneness emphasized fostering a spirit of collaboration and avoiding discrimination towards other beings. Śaṅkaradeva believed that the idea of otherness disappears when people are illuminated with the light of unity. His idea of humanism is devoid of race, colour, nationality, and language discrimination. His humanism does not only emphasize human beings but also all living beings.

Another important observation that can be made with respect to Śaṅkaradeva here is that his reference to environmental consciousness is opposed to the anthropocentric view which emphasizes that only human beings have intrinsic value. Śaṅkaradeva acknowledges the intrinsic values of all beings and thereby *human beings and nature* distinction is swept away by the notion *human being in nature*.

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