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## **Sankaradeva and Kabirdas: A Short Comparative Analysis of Their Bhakti**

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### **Abstract:**

*In the history of Bhakti movement in India, the greatest reformers Sankaradeva and Kabirdas occupies a prestigious and glorious space. As a result of the Bhakti movement lead by Sankaradeva and Kabirdas, the social life of India got a new dimension. In the context of Bhakti, both these two great personality have established a stable idealism in the society by removing the differences of caste, religion and community and creating a united society. In Assam, Sankaradeva did preach the Bhakti cult to the people who taught them the meaning of 'Love' and 'Tolerance' and finally Bhakti or 'devotion' towards the Almighty God. Sankaradeva wanted to reform the then Assamese society with the spirit of Vaishnava Dharma where Bhakti is the primary concern. Kabirdas was a Vaishnavite. He was deeply influenced by Nirguna Bhakti and he held high faith and respect for the truth beyond worldly affair. He described his God as Nirguna. He tried to establish the superiority of Bhakti as the path to achieve Supreme Being. According to him, the easiest way to get closely associated with God is Bhakti.*

**Keywords:** *Bhakti, Sankaradeva, Kabirdas, Nirguna, Vaishnava Dharma.*

### **1. Introduction**

In the history of Bhakti movement in India, the greatest reformers Sankaradeva and Kabirdas occupies a prestigious and glorious space. As a result of the Bhakti movement lead by Sankaradeva and Kabirdas, the social life of India got a new dimension. In the context of Bhakti, both these two great personality have established a stable idealism in the society by removing the differences of caste, religion and community and creating a united society. In Vaisnavism, Sankaradeva first proved his essence of thinking and established the primacy of Nirguna Bhakti in his famous '*Ek Sharana Naam Dharma*'. Sankaradeva is called the '*Mahapurush*' who has interpreted the problem of divisionism or religious difference among different communities and people after him have followed his path. Similarly, Kabirdas, who was a bold and uncompromising reformer in the religious history of mediaeval India, was always against cast distinction. He tried in his whole life to reconcile the religious differences among different communities which raised its ugly head out of superstition and religious dogmatism. Sankaradeva and Kabirdas - both gave importance to Bhakti because they knew that without Bhakti, Jñāna and Karma become meaningless. For Sankaradeva and Kabirdas, Bhakti or devotion alone can lead one to realize oneself from bondage. They remind mankind that human life is transient and illusory, but mankind can make it real by devotion to Hari, for there is nothing real on earth other than devotion. With the help of devotion, one can annihilate selfishness and thereby realize *Moksha*. The obligations of devotion are therefore an unfailing authority in favor of purpose. It is indeed an unfailing mean to help man to attain real success in living a religious life.

### **2. Objective of the Paper**

As far as the study of the Bhakti movement in India is concerned, much work has already been done. But as far as the comparative study of Sankaradeva and Kabirdas in the North- East (Assam) is concerned, not much work has been done as far as the similarities and dissimilarities between Sankaradeva and Kabirdas Bhakti is concerned. If a comparative and analytical study of the Bhakti Dharma of both Sankaradeva and Kabirdas is done, then it can be determined how significant these two great reformers were and also the unification of an all Indian thought. Therefore, a humble attempt is being made here to churn out some important aspects from the comparative study of Sankaradeva and Kabirdas' perspective of Bhakti and to identify the similarities and dissimilarities.

### **3. Methodology**

Preparing this paper, a comparative and analytical method has been used. The data have been collected from the secondary sources and these secondary sources were collected from different books written by different writers.

### **4. Discussion and Comparison**

Sankaradeva was a great social reformer of those times when the greater Assamese society bore the brunt of many social as well as religious malpractices. Moreover, Sankaradeva was the chief of the Barabhuyans – a ruling class who had to see to the welfare of their subjects. (N. Saikia: 2011; p.19). This gave a political edge to his reform measures as well. He was also a scholar par excellence and a

dedicated teacher cum preacher. While preaching the *Ek Sharana Naam Dharma* among the wretched and downtrodden people in society, Sankaradeva was well aware of their fickle psychological mindset. He introduced the ever fascinating and adorable character Sri Kṛṣṇa to the people. Sri Kṛṣṇa is the full incarnation of lord Viṣṇu. His exploits are well read and well heard all through the ages. Sankaradeva tried to inculcate the numerous exploits of Sri Kṛṣṇa into the minds of these masses. The creative talent in him made a good orator of him. In the long run he was able to motive and mould the mass psychology and they willingly embraced the *Ek Sharana Naam Dharma*. In short the mass appeal of the new found *Ek Sharana Naam Dharma* of Sankaradeva brought a new revolutionary wake of change into society and religious life of the contemporary Assamese society. (P. Choudhury: 2012; pp.19-21). In Assam, Sankaradeva did preach the Bhakti cult to the people who taught them the meaning of 'Love' and 'Tolerance' and finally Bhakti or 'devotion' towards the Almighty God. Sankaradeva wanted to reform the then Assamese society with the spirit of Vaishnava Dharma where Bhakti is the primary concern. As a pilgrim Sankaradeva travelled all over India and the unity of Hindu culture become a deep conviction with him. He travelled all over Assam preaching his new gospel. He was the father of the religious revival of Assam, which towering and deep rooted influence is felt till today. Like Sankaradeva, Kabirdas was one of the most famous authoritative persons of Nirguna sect of Bhakti age. He was a poor Julaha, a Mohammedan weaver of ancient Kasi, the modern Benaras. (J. Singh, V. Singh: 1996; p. 7). The period in which Kabirdas was born came to be known as the beginning of 'Bhakti Movement' in India. Kabirdas appears to modern India to be the true devotee of non-conformity; of all that is free, noble and challenging in the Indian tradition. The doctrines of Bhakti were preached by Ramananda but it was popularized by Kabirdas and his followers. Kabirdas was a Vaishnavite. He was deeply influenced by Nirguna Bhakti and he held high faith and respect for the truth beyond worldly affair. He described his God as Nirguna. He tried to establish the superiority of Bhakti as the path to achieve Supreme Being. According to him, the easiest way to get closely associated with God is Bhakti. It is the highest sentiment of respect and love. Kabirdas' God is absolutely impersonal. No word can define Him. Kabirdas has to leave the concept of God as it might stand by itself unexplained. He does not believe in the incarnation of God and a personal God. The God, who is formless, has been adored by Kabirdas. Yet, he states that Bhakti or devotion is the main way for realization of God. (J. Sing, V. Singh: 1996; p. 7). His treatment of Bhakti stands for harmony and peaceful co-existence of the different believes. Actually, in simple words, Kabirdas wanted to reform the society through the religion of Bhakti which may be acceptable for all people of different faiths.

#### 4.1. The Similarities and Dissimilarities of the Bhakti of Sankaradeva and Kabirdas

Though Sankaradeva and Kabirdas were two different reformers of different times and place but there are lots of similarities of their views about bhakti. Based on their view an attempt has been made to identify the similarities and dissimilarities between the Bhakti of both.

##### 4.1.1. Similarities

As far as the similarities are concerned the following points can be taken into consideration –

- (a) Both the saints advocated for Dashya Bhakti. In Kabir's doha (couplets), many a time Kabir mention himself as das Kabira. Similarly, in Sankaradeva's writings one can find the same. For example:

“Raghupati Houk Goti  
Tumar Charane Narayana  
Dasa Buli Damudara  
Diyuko Sharana” (Sankaradev: 2009; p.345)

(Meaning: Ye Lord Raghupati! I am at your feet, Narayana! do give me shelter as your slave, O Lord Damodara)

Similarly, for Kabirdas,

“Sukhiya Sab Sansharhai  
Khawe Aur Shawe  
Dukhia Dasa Kabira  
Jage Aur Rowe” (M. S. Karki: 2001; p.26)

(Meaning: All those of the mundane world are happy and happily they are sleeping; only poor dasa Kabira is awake and crying)

- (b) The One whom Sankaradeva addressed as Param Brahma, Paramattma, Govinda, Narayan, Hari, Viṣṇu, etc. the same has been addressed as Rama by Kabirdas. Of course Sankaradeva too, has used the word Rama to address the Supreme Being in his writings at some places. For example:

“Joy Hari Govinda Narayan Ram Keshaba Hari I  
Rama Rama Kesaba Hari II  
Prathame Pranamo Brahmarupi Sanatan I  
Sarba abataror karon Narayan. II”

(Sankaradeva :2009; p.21)

(Meaning: Hari be hailed! Govinda! Narayana! Rama!Keshava! be hailed! First and foremost, I offer my prayer to Lord Narayana who is the Sanatana God in the form of Brahma, who is the cause of all the incarnations)

For Kabirdas,

“Ram Rahim Ek Hai, Naam Dharai Dui I

Kahe Kabir Do Naam Suni Bhrami Pare Mat Koi II  
 Krishna Karim Ek Hai, Naam Dharai Dui I  
 Kahe Kabir Do Naam Suni Bhrami Pare Mat Koi II”

(M. S. Karki: 2001; p.114)

(Meaning: Though there are two names, Ram and Rahim are the same. Kabir says that one should not make a mistake that Ram and Rahim are separate entities. In fact, both Krishna and Karim are one; it's only that there are two names. So, one should not make a mistake after knowing this.)

(c) Both Kabirdas and Sankaradeva gave stretch on Chanting (kirtana) of the name of Hari and remembering (smarana) of Hari's name. Sankaradeva has quoted in Bhakti Ratnakara-

“Tomaro Namor Ananta Mahima  
 Acharya Ati Parama  
 Naamo Matro Loile Chandalo Dehote  
 Howe Oti Shresthatama.

(Sankaradeva :2012; p.60)

(Meaning- The greatness of your name is beyond comparison. Even a lowly Chandala attains greatness by the chanting of your name.)

Similar to Sankaradeva Kabirdas too, has given importance to the chanting of the name of Hari. Kabirdas has said –

“Khash Pe Naam Le, Birtha Khash Mat Khoi  
 Na Jane Ush Khash Ka, Awan Houe Na Houe”

(G.N. Das 1991, p. 16)

(Meaning: Kabir reminds man of the uncertainty of human life. Keeping this in view he warns that man should chant the name of the Lord during each breath which he takes, for human life is uncertain and man knows not whether he would be able to take the next breath or not.)

(d) Both Sankaradeva and Kabirdas share the same view as far as the remembering (smarana) of the name of Hari is concerned. Sankaradeva has said that one who always remembers the name of Hari equally in happiness and sadness; it is he who doesn't have to suffer from fear, hesitation and physical pain. According to Sankaradeva

“Tomar Saran Smare Jitu Jan  
 Manot Nissoy Kori  
 Shitu Bhakatar Ateke Mukhyak  
 Diya Prabhu Deva Hari”<sup>11</sup>

(Sankaradeva :2012; p.77)

(Meaning: That devotee (bhakta) who remembers Your Name, O Lord Hari! Do bless him with *Moksha*)

Kabirdas has said –

“Dukh Mai Sumiran Sab Kare  
 Sukh Mai Kare Na Koi  
 Jo Sukh Mai Sumiran Kare  
 To Dukh Kahe Ko Hoi”

(M. S. Karki: 2001; p.22)

(Meaning: -All remember God during their bad days; but forget to take the name of God during their days of happiness. How can he be unhappy who remembers the name of Hari?)

(e) After Smarana Bhakti both Sankaradeva and Kabirdas gave stress on self-surrender. For example, Sankaradeva has said –

“Bhava Baitarani Maje Mojiloho  
 Nere Muko Shoko Bhoyo  
 Tomaro Charane Sharan Poshilu  
 Kripa Kora Kripamoyo”

(Sankaradeva :2009; p.120)

(Meaning: The maladies of this mundane world has made one confused and lost, liberate me from fear, O Benevolent Lord! I seek refuge at Your feet.)

Similarly, Kabirdas has said,

“Bhagati Duheli Ram Ki, Nahi Kayar Ka Kaam  
 Sish Uttare Hath Kori So Keshi Hari Naam”

(G.N. Das 1991, p. 28)

(Meaning: One can realize Lord Rama only if he makes complete self-surrender before the Lord. Kabirdas pointed out that this is no easy task. The devotee has to bow his head down before the Lord and readily serve Him.)

(f) While discussing the Bhakti Dharma preached by Sankaradeva and Kabirdas it will come to one's notice that both the saints gave stress on this aspect that man need not be a scholar or a sage to practice Bhakti in the true sense. God is pleased when a Bhakta or devotee remembers the name of Hari with all purity of heart-

“Nalage Devo Dwijo Rishi Huibe  
Nalage Sambhuto Shastra Janibe  
Michate More Aano Karma Kari  
Howonta Bhakatite Tusta Hari II”

(Sankaradeva :2009; p.33)

(Meaning: - (You) need not be a god or a Brahmin, nor a sage, you need not master all the holy scriptures, it is useless to toil for the Lord in other things, it is simply Bhakti through which one can please Hari.)

Similarly, Kabirdas has said –

“Pothe Porhi Jagmuwa  
Pandit Huwe Na Koi  
Dhai Akshar Prem Ka  
Porhe So Pandit Huwe”

(G.N. Das 1991, p. 15)

(Meaning: - It is not by reading the scriptures again and again that one becomes learned and wise, but by knowing the essence of love of the Lord that one becomes learned and wise.)

(g) Both Sankaradeva and Kabirdas gave importance to the association with pure hearted people, i.e. Satsanga. Sankaradeva has said

“Sadhusowe Diye Samahita Upadesha I  
Sedanta Monor Joto Sansaya Nihshesha II  
Eteke Dusanga Eri Buddhimanta Jone I  
Sadhuro Sangaka Matra Loibe Sorbakhyana II”  
(Sankaradeva :2012; p.20)

(Meaning: Being in the association of Sadhus one gets fruitful advice, it helps him to break through the complexity of the world. So, one should abstain from bad company and seek the company of righteous people)

Similarly, Kabirdas has said,

“Kabira Sangati Sadhu Ki, Hare Aur Ki Byadhi  
Sangati Buri Kusadhu Ki, Aatho Prahar Upadhi  
Kabir Man Panchi Bhaya, Jaha Man Taha Uri Jaye  
Jo Jeisi Sangati Kare, So Tesi Fal Khaye.”

(M. S. Karki: 2001; p.55)

(Meaning: Good person's or Sadhu's company will give you mental peace and tranquility of the soul, staying in the company of fake Sadhu will bring restlessness to the mind; so, do select your company carefully as for the outcome of your mental health depends on the company you keep.)

(h) Both of them advised people to abide by their Gurus and mingle up with Sat Sanga i.e., with those fellow disciples or fellowmen with purity in their thoughts and deeds. For example –

“Nibindhila Guru Sewa Granthara Addyyat  
Lage Guru Upadesh Xakalo Karyyat II  
Samanyya Biddyak Guru Upadeshe Pai  
Harirbhakati Guru Sewa Bine Nai II”

(Sankaradeva :2012; p.3)

(Meaning: Service towards the teacher or Guru is the foremost duty of one, a Guru's advice is needed at every steps of life; the Guru's advice can be attained from the little knowledge that he bestows upon one, serving the Guru is serving Hari)

Again, according to Kabirdas,

“Guru Govind Dono Khare  
Kiske Lagu Paai  
Balihari Guru Apne  
Govind Diao Batai II” (M. S. Karki: 2001; p.55)

(Meaning: Guru and Govind are one, only the form is dual. Comparing Guru and Govind Kabirdas firstly respect the Guru because Guru can show us the path for attaining God)

(i) Both these saints looked to the downtrodden in society and preached Bhakti among them to guide them towards spiritual wellness as well as all round development of the physical self. If the sixth similarity is considered it will come to one's notice that both of them were against idol worship and pilgrimage. For example:

“Hari Hen Etu Dui Gutu Akhyar  
Jihva Aogre Thake Jaar  
Ganga Goya Kasi Prayag Setut  
Jai Baak Nalage Taar II”

(Sankaradeva :2009; p.59 )

(Meaning: That the two syllable word Hari is at the top of the tongue of that person, he need not go to the holy Ganges, Kasi or Prayag to attain salvation)

Similarly, according to Kabir,

“Tirath To Sab Belori  
Sarbelyashai  
Kabir mulnikandiyā  
Koun Halahal Khaye II  
Pahan Puje Hari Mile  
To Mai Puju Pahar  
Tate Yoh Chakki Bhali  
Pisi Khai Sansar II”  
(M. S. Karki: 2001; p.54)

(Meaning: Pilgrimage is the venom tree which’s spread over age to age; Kabir has uprooted the tree, why should a man this hemlock takes? if God’s realized by stone worship, then let me worship a mountain; but a hand mill of stone is better since the world feeds on its grounded grain.)

(j) Both these preachers worked for communal harmony among the Hindus and Muslims. Kabirdas’ life itself is an ideal example of Hindu- Muslim unity. Kabir asserts that all those who are dedicated to the Lord and chant His name are equal in his view. Differences in their caste, creed, colour, language, etc. are of no consequence. Kabir implies that man plays a very insignificant role in God’s vast universe. Also he asserts that basically or from birth no man belongs to any particular faith or cult. He is born as man alone. Sankaradeva’s task was much more diverse than this. He not only brought the greater Hindu community in friendly and harmonious term with the Muslim community, but was also responsible for revitalizing the lower sub-castes of the Hindu community to live a life of dignity and cheer. According to Sankaradeva,

“Brahman Chandalar Nibisari Kul  
Datat Dhurat Jen Dristi Ektul  
Nisot Sadhut Jar Bhoilo Ek Gyan  
Tahakuhe Pondit Bulio SarbajonII”  
(Sankaradeva :2009; p.16)

(Meaning: It is meaningless to classify a Brahmana from a Chandala, even a person of low cast, by dint of wisdom, attain the same position as a sadhu and people would recognize as a scholar.)

According to Kabirdas-

“Sab Hamare Ek Hai, Ju Sumire Hari Naam  
Bastu Lohi Pehchan Ke, Bashon So Kya Kaam II”  
“Hindu Kahu to Mai Nahi, Musalman Bhi Nahi  
Panch Tattwa Ka Putla, Gewo Khele Mahi II”  
“Jati Na Pucho Sadhu Ki Puch Lijio Gyan  
Mul Boju Tarwal Ki, Para Rehne Do Myan II” (G.N. Das 1991, p. 11)

(Meaning: All we are one who remember the name of Hari, he is neither Hindu nor Muslim; what to be proud of this body made up of five elements? It will break down to nothingness. A saint isn’t known by his cast or creed but by his wisdom, the sword is important rather than the covering of the sword.)

In this way it can be seen that though Sankaradeva and Kabirdas were from different places, yet they shared the same thoughts as far as Bhakti Dharma is concerned. There are similarities in their preaching of Bhakti Dharma. But there is also some dissimilarity in their approach. An attempt has been made to discuss these dissimilarities as well.

#### 4.1.2. Dissimilarities

Although both Sankaradeva and Kabirdas gave importance to Kirtana and Smarana of Hari’s name, yet it is seen that Sankaradeva gave much importance to the Sravana of Hari’s name apart from the Kirtana and Smaran of Hari’s name. Moreover, there is the presence of a particular class of people in the Naamghars known as ‘Sravanis’. The task of these Sravanis is to listen (sravan) to the Hari naama kirtana in the Naamghars. A close look into the Bhakti Dharma of Kabirdas will make it clear that he has, time and again repeated about the Smarana and Kirtana of Hari’s name. But he didn’t find a single person who spoke to him about the glory of Rama. According to Sankaradeva the glory of Krishna is boundless. One who listens to the glorious name of the Lord, it is in his heart that Narayana resides. Listening, chanting and remembering the name of Hari make man’s mind free of fear, hesitation, haughtiness etc. It has been said in the Kirtana Ghosha-

“Ishwara Krishnar Leela Charitra Jijone  
Param Shraddhaye Sada Koranta Sravana  
Ati Alpo Kale Aasi Taharo Hiyato  
Hanta Bhagabanta Krishna Prakasha Syakhyata II”

(Sankaradeva:2012; p.47)

(Meaning: one who is inspired by the Leela of Lord Krishna, one who always listen His blessed name with devotion; it is into his heart that the Lord goes into and distributes His divine glow. It is here at this point that Lord Krishna shines with all splendour.)

Again,

“Guse Ahankara Chinde Joteko Songshoyo  
Karmar Baxona Mane Sobe Huwe Khyoy  
Atma Ishwarat Matra Dristi Howe Taro  
Krishnar Kotha Sravanar Mohima Aparo II”  
(Sankaradeva:2012; p.47)

(Meaning: Listening to the blessed name of Lord Krishna work wonders- It removes arrogance from the mind, sets the mind at peace chasing off hesitation, carnal desires leave the mind and directs the soul towards God the Almighty.)

But there is no special mention of Sravana Bhakti in the couplets of Kabirdas. Kabirdas has lamented thus –

“Esha Koi Na Mila, Jalti Jot Bujai  
Kotha Sunawe Naam Ki, Tan Man Rahe Samai I”  
(G.N. Das:1991; p.13)

(Meaning: Kabir implies that it is rare to find a man who is by his wisdom removes from another anxieties and anguish of his mind and by reciting the name and message of the Lord, fills the latter’s mind and body with love and reverence for him.)

Sankaradeva has talked about incarnation. But Kabirdas has different view regarding this. He doesn’t support incarnation. Still, at places he has but mentioned about incarnation. Kabirdas has taken into account both Sringara Bhakti as well as Madhurjya Bhakti. Many a time Kabirdas thinks himself as a beloved of Rama. But Sankaradeva hasn’t said much about Madhurjya Bhakti. He has given much stretch on Dashya Bhakti only.

## 5. Conclusion

At the closure of the discussion of this particular chapter it can be concluded that both Sankaradeva and Kabirdas can be described as such great personalities who brought about revolutionary change to an era in his own right. Such great personalities, by dint of their merit and ability, can mould generations and bring historic change to human mindset and society at large. In this way they script golden era in history (as far as social history is concerned). Such noble minded human beings are blessed with excellent qualities and a selfless motive to do good for society. Similar to other saints cum preachers of Bhakti movement in other parts of India, Sankaradeva and Kabirdas too, had good knowledge of their social surroundings. Their minute observation power helped them to identify the flaws in social as well as religious life and tried to correct all those drawbacks of society. As per the motto of the Bhakti movement, these preachers cum social reformers tried to cut through the barriers of caste and other vices of social life that was a barrier in the path of development and growth of liberalism in the human mind for the long term development of society. Both Sankaradeva and Kabirdas realized the flaws present in their respective societies and offered remedial measure for those. Through their intelligence and Prema Bhakti (loving devotion), they got into the skin of the prevailing problems and sought for long term solution to such problems. Their Bhakti was and for the betterment of humanity. It had humanistic appeal of its own. The overall appeal of the Bhakti movement motivates people to practice and realise Vaishnava Bhakti Dharma.

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