CHAPTER–I
CHAPTER- I

PLACE OF GOD IN THE 'NEW TESTAMENT' AND SANKARADEVA'S PHILOSOPHY

The concept of God has played a dominant role in the New Testament of the Bible. The God of the 'New Testament' is unlimited, infinite, omnipotent, omnipresent. He is eternal and His existence is necessary. Nobody can conceive of His non-existence. He is without beginning and end. About the infinity and eternity of God there is a broad agreement among Semitic religions. The Jews are the Semitic people. They developed this idea of God. Yahweh is their only God and the corollary drawn is that other gods are non-existent. Yahweh is a territorial God. The Jews are monotheistic in their approach to God. A God who is the creator and eternal and absolute monarch of the universe can have no rival. Oneness of God is the central theme of monotheism. In Judaism, the Jews' confession of faith declares: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord, our God, The Lord is one'.

Jewish monotheism therefore denotes belief in the existence of God, and connotes denial of divine attributes to any other being. The monotheism of Christianity is an inheritance from Judaism. The revelation of God in Christ possesses characteristics which give the Christian monotheism a wider appeal to the reason, conscience and affection of man.

Christianity began as a movement among the Jewish people in the years prior to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, who observed Jewish law and customs, and his first followers were Jews. His entire life was spent in Palestine, and his message was directed primarily at Jews. Christianity recognises that its source is Judaism. The Christian doctrine did not grow without any
previous background. The monotheism and morality of Christianity were given to it by Palestine. The Jewish religion offered philosophy and Rome contributed order and organisation. Dr. Radhakrishnan observes that Christianity did not grow in vacuum but in a straight encounter between God and soul. It arose in a world full of warring sects and rival faiths and used whatever it got at hand.

Regarding the origin of Christianity, there are two main views. The first view is of Karl Barth, who holds that the different religions did not prepare for the revelation in Christ. His view is that Christ came in communion with God and gave quite a new religion to the world. The revelation of Christ is unique and disconnected with history, tradition and other religious influence. No historical growth led to the birth of Christianity or to the intuition of Christ.

The second view is that Christianity is the perfection and fulfilment, the fruit and flower of other religions, which were mere preparations for it. Such a view takes into account, the history of the people, the diverse influences, the varieties of mysticism etc., which gave rise to Christianity. Here Christianity is conceived of as a historical growth. This view is evidently correct for the diverse influences on Christ and Christianity can hardly be denied or ignored. In the words of Paul of Tarsus, Christianity is a 'Wild olive shoot', that was grafted into a domesticated olive tree. It is not you (the Christian) that support the root, but the root (the Jews) that supports you (Rom 11:17-18).\(^{10}\)

Christianity took shape as a new movement while still in Judaism which already possessed scriptures (the Old Testament). From the very beginning the early Christian community claimed the Jewish scriptures as its own. For the early Christians the primary focus of divine revelation was not the scripture but Christ, to whom the scripture were
understood to have borne witness. They believed that God's purpose for Israel as revealed in the scriptures reached its climax and fulfilment in Jesus Christ, and hence sought to show how the scripture too pointed to Christ.

Christianity has developed into a specific religion through a process of perpetuating the tradition of the 'Old Testament'; and at the same time, by receiving elements from all other religions. In the tradition of the 'New Testament', an attribute of God is perfection; predicated of God in formal, intrinsic and necessary way as one of many defining characteristics. Christianity is a way of life based on the teachings of Jesus Christ who was born in Palestine in approximately B.C. 4 and was crucified in A.D. 30. The 'Bible' claims that he is the saviour of the world and the fulfilment of the 'Old Testament'. Jesus claimed that he came to fulfil the Jewish love and not to destroy it. In fact he reformed the Jewish religion which is known as the new Israel, the Christian Church. From the earliest period, Christians presented their ideas and beliefs on the basis of the 'Old Testament'. The intellectual life of Christians in antiquity was devoted to interpreting the 'Old Testament'.

The Jewish conception of God is based on the revelations contained in the 'Old Testament'. Its views are based on revelation of God to man. The Jewish and the Christian way leads from God to man where God reveals Himself to man. In the 'Old Testament', the distinctive name of God in Yahweh as was revealed to Moses.

"He made known His ways to Moses; and the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face." Most of the seers and prophets felt that they had received direct, unique, unmistakable messages from God. They thus possessed exact record of what God made known. The chief deity of the pre-Mosaic Hebrews was a mountain god. All the members
were tribals and were considered kinsmen of the divine being. In the Hebrew 'Bible', the designation commonly used for God is 'El'. This was a general Semitic term for God. The ancestors of the Hebrews might have been polytheists at one time.

Abraham believed in the God called 'EL Shaddai'. 'Shaddai' was derived from the Babylonian word 'Shadu', meaning mountain. The name signified God as 'Almighty one'. Abraham's son Isaac worshipped God under the name of 'The Fear of Isaac'. His son Jacob revered the divine under the designation 'The Mighty one of Jacob.' Since Isaac spoke of his God as 'the God of my father, the God of Abraham' and since Jacob referred to the one he worshipped as the 'God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac', it seems probable that each son had, by deliberate acts, chosen as his own the God of his father. Thus the deity could afterwards be known as "The God of Your fathers, The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."12

Yahweh was the tribal God. Moab worshipped Chemosh, the Philistines acknowledged Ball, and the Amo ns had Molech as its God. The fundamental meaning of Yahweh was 'I am that I am' or 'I will be what I will be', which may also be rendered as "I will cause to be that which I will cause to be."13 God was saying "I am really and truly here. I am ready to help and to do, as indeed I have always been."14 It is clear that the Biblical theology is an attempt towards contextual theology. The Bible is the basis of Christian faith. The Bible speaks of God as the name of word. As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities His people who fear Him. Besides having the metaphysical attributes of omnipotence, omniscience etc., God was pre-eminently imbued with such moral qualities as justice, mercy, kindness, love, holiness etc. Christian theology consists of God's redemptive activities through out human history and all His acts and revolution
can be clearly understood when we study the Biblical theology. It is the basis of Christian faith, and the Bible is the foundation of the Christian church. Here we refer to the hermeneutical significance of Jesus Christ as the interpretive framework for understanding. In the first instance, the Christological chapter itself comes into sharp profile, the 'Old Testament' expectation and the 'New Testament' recollection giving content to Jesus Christ. Israel knows Yahweh by revelation which brings the message of His righteousness, loving kindness, justice and new convenant. * Mankind is created in the image of God (Gen. 1.26) though it has been marred by sin. God is righteous, condemning the guilty but showing His grace in clearing the innocent and defending the weak. Righteousness is connected with universal salvation.

The spirit of God (rouch) is active and brooded like a bird over the formless matter before the Cosmos emerged out of chaos (Gen. 1:2). It moves like the wind, and is the breath of God by which mankind lives (Ez : 37). It is the agent of prophecy (Ez : 37) and of special powers in man (Num 11). As the giver of gifts, both technical and spiritual, it is a synonym for God. In its brooding, ruling, speaking, quickening, the spirit is personal.15

Man (Adam) is linked with the soil (adamah) from which he comes. He is flesh (basar), transitory and frail but God and Angels are spirits (rouch). The discontinuity is balanced with continuity for humanity is made in the image of God (imago dei) and can

*The word Bible means 'Little Books' The word is derived from the Greek Bible or book (originally papyrus). We may regard the Bible as an anthology of the ancient Hebrews. The Early Christian literature has two or three books. These are the 'Old Testament' the 'New Testament' and the 'Apocrypha'). The 'Old Testament' has forty six writings and the 'New Testament' has twenty seven. The 'New Testament' corresponds to the 'Bible' of Judaism and it alone refers directly and historically to the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible has two fold authorship, Divine authorship as well as human authorship. It is the joint production of God and of individual human beings.
The Jews and the Christians believe that the Bible is God's words in human language. In terms of the history of religion, Judaism and Christianity appear to be two religions derived from one and the same Biblical religion. Judaism stresses on the laws of Torah of Moses and Christianity stresses on the prophets who foretold Christ. Judaism and Christianity are two blends and two different developments of the law and the prophets. Judaism prefers to be inspired by the 'Genesis' and develop a religion for fulfilling the law. Christianity is directed more towards the 'Apocalypse', and develops a religion of hope in apocalyptic salvation. Judaism develops the law through an oral tradition comparable in worth to the written law. Jews tend to equate Judaism with Biblical religion. A Christian also tends to think of Judaism as an extension of Biblical religion in effect. But at the same time he also maintains that the 'Old Testament' has its true culmination in Christianity and not in Judaism.

The touch-stone of Christian hermeneutics is the relationship between a written and an Oral Torah in Judaism. Schleirmacher explained the relationship between the 'Old Testament' and the 'New Testament' in terms of promise fulfilment, separating rather than uniting the two Testaments. For Schleirmacher, Judaism is more distant from Christianity than other religions.

Christianity emerged from a group of disciples of the historical person called Jesus of Nazareth. Early generations of Christians believed that Jesus had overcome death through the resurrection, and many seemed to hope that quite soon a supernatural event would take place with Christ's second coming to inaugurate the kingdom of God. Whatever be the denominational differences, the Christians share not only the living
memory of Jesus Christ, but also a common sacred writing, the 'Bible' or Holy scriptures. A great love of the Bible has been expressed in the twentieth century by the Christians. In the Bible, Christians find not merely a historical account of the life and teachings of Jesus, but also a record of the past. For them the 'Bible' is the living book today. God's own words resound whenever these pages are read with faith and devotion. The 'New Testament' enumerates no new God and no new doctrine of God. It proclaims that the God and Father of Jesus Christ is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus initiated the 'Old Testament'. Jewish faith in Yahweh, which held that God is the creator of the world. Jesus Christ is called the son of God by virtue of His being the second person of the Godhead. The son of the Bible is called the 'Word' the 'Likeness of the invisible God', the 'brightness of His glory', the "express image of His person and Emmanuel."16

God assumed or united human nature with Himself in Jesus, thus establishing a form of union between the finite and the infinite. Moreover, the Christian hope for redemption came to be conceived as a form, sharing in the being of God, as humans are incorporated in Christ through the spirit. The 'New Testament' concept of God is thus, at least to some extent, one which relates the Divine and the human, eternal and temporal in a rather different way from the one pictured in the 'Old Testament'. It is still basically an idea of One omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good creator, but the relation between creator and creation is now seen as involving the transformation of the finite into the infinite life of God.

The first Christians were the Jews who recited the ancient words of the Shema in their daily prayers. Though the earliest Christians were in agreement with their fellow Jews in admitting of one God, yet from the beginning Christianity set itself apart from
Judaism by the veneration it gave to Christ. This is apparent in the exalted language used to describe Christ in the 'New Testament' as 'Son of God', image of the invisible God; 'the eternal word who is with God', 'the One in whom the fullness of Godhead dwells'.

In the 'Old Testament', God reveals Himself as just and terrifying but in the 'New Testament' as good and loving. In Paul's teaching, "It is God, that said, light shall shine out of darkness, who shined in our hearts, to give the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."17

Christ can do nothing by himself; He is appointed to do His Father's work and to be His spokesman. So He says that no one knows His Father except Himself. It means that only the one who loves deeply has an insight into the true nature of God as Father, whose character is to suffer love. The God of the 'New Testament' is the God of the 'Old Testament' reinterpreted and more fully revealed in the light of the person and work of Jesus Christ. If Jesus of Nazareth was not born then the Christian teaching and faith would have been in vain.

Jesus said, "Before anything else existed, there was Christ, with God. He has always been alive and is Himself God. He created everything, there is nothing that He did not make. Eternal life is in Him, and this life gives light to all mankind. His life is the light that shines through the darkness and the darkness can never extinguish it (John 1:1-5)."18 This faith is reached after a progressive religious development which its agents regarded as the divine discipline of the Hebrews. Such monotheism necessarily stands opposed to polytheism. Hellenistic religion is polytheistic where St. Paul says, "There are gods many, and Lords many (1 Cor Viii, 6)." Against such polytheistic forms Paul defines the Christian monotheism with a clear mind. "To us there is One God, the Father
of whom are all things, and we unto him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through Him."\(^{19}\)

Monotheism is therefore a theistic religion par excellence. From the philosophical perspective, the major theological antithesis that one must confront is that between paganism and Judaism. It is a characteristic quality of paganism to deify nature, a consequence of the presupposition that God dwells within nature and not above it. Judaism as the religion of spirit appears to be the implicit and explicit denial of paganism, since the concept of spirit implies the freedom of God.

In the 'New Testament' the concept of God is toned down and compensated for by the concept of God, the son and the Holy spirit. So the doctrine of the 'New Testament' is not only monotheistic but also Trinitarian. God is painted as three persons in one. There is one and three. As Father, son and the Holy spirit He is one, the same as yesterday, today and forever. The doctrine of Trinity emerged as a result of the early church's effort to systematize the 'New Testament' experience in the context of Jewish monotheism and pagan polytheism. So the theology of the Trinity that emerged in Christianity in this period is important for its uniqueness and universality in the theology of religions. Christianity identifies its God as triune and the doctrine of Trinity teaches who the God is. It distinguishes the Christian conception of God from others. Robert Jenson says that Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the proper name which identifies the God of Christian faith.

The Christians of the 'New Testament' times are unable to state fully the meaning of Christian life without using the three names: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Paul salutes the Corinthian church with the benediction. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the
love of God and the communion with the Holy spirit be with you all." Here the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are set alongside each other which suggest three co-equal persons. Yet Paul does not think of three gods. It is the same God who works as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In the 'New Testament', we find the three gods in One Godhead. The theological formula for the conception of God resulting from these historical facts is three Persons in One substance. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are merely modes or successive phases of One God. The Coppadocians, for example, hinted that God was impersonal substance personalised as Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ as the Son and the Holy Spirit is the power which dwells in our heart. This problem clearly explains the Son's distinction from the Father without destroying the unity of God. This is called Trinity.

..... The Catholic faith is this "We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and the Holy Ghost is all one; the glory co-equal, the majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is such is the Son and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated and the Holy Ghost uncreated. ".....and in this Trinity none is before or after the other, none is greater or less than another, but the three persons are co-eternal together, co-equal, so that in all things the unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity is to be worshipped."

Such a kind of Trinity is very akin to the Hindu doctrine of Trimurti. In Hinduism we meet the Trinitarian group of Brahma, Viṣṇu and Shiva and in the Egyptian religion
with the Trinitarian group of Orisis, Isis and Horous, the divine family consisting of Father, Mother and Son. This Trinity is alike to the Hegelian Law of three stages of Thesis, Antithesis and Synthesis. We may find a real anticipation of and a preparation for, the Christian doctrine of Trinity in the Rigvedic conception of Varuna, Agni and Soma. Varuna is like God—the Father, while Agni and Soma are like the Son and the Holy Spirit. They descent from heaven to earth. The 'New Testament' doctrine of Trinity is in close association with the distinctive Christian view of 'Divine Incarnation'. In other religions, we encounter the idea of divine incarnation but it may be claimed that nowhere is the union of God and man so concrete and definite and so universal in its import as it is in the Christian religion.

The mystery of Christ is presented as a descent of the beloved through the seven heavens, inhabited by the angels, down to hill where the just people of the 'Old Testament' resides, now saved by the cross of Christ who ascents again to heaven accompanied by the shining and life-giving cross portrayed as a living thing. Trinitarian theology has a structure where the Son is portrayed as the glorious angel and the Holy Spirit in the form of Gabriel, the word is called the name. The touch stone of Christian hermeneutics is the relationship between the 'Old Testament' and the 'New Testament' like the relationship between a written and an oral Torah in Judaism. Judaism is based on hermeneutics or the interpretation of scriptures. The basic concepts of this hermeneutics are those of 'hatāka' and 'haggāde', whose earliest forms occur in the Biblical books.

Thus the Jewish, Christian theology is basically Trinitarian. Christianity maintains that revelation is brought to its unsurpassable, climax in the person of Jesus Christ who is
God's own Son, His eternal Word and the prophet image of the Father. God assumes or unites human nature with Himself in Jesus to establish a form of union between the finite and the infinite. God in the 'New Testament' is one who relates divine and human, eternal and temporal in a rather different way from that pictured in the 'Old Testament'. It is still basically an idea of One omnipotent, Omniscient, perfectly good creator who has a relation with His creation. The 'Gospel' affirms that Jesus is equal to the Father. Jesus asserts his own equality with His Father. Christianity on the other hand, might have developed an advaitic school on the basis of Christ saying - 'I and my Father are One (Jn. 10-30)'. Jesus also says that, "He who has seen me, it is written in the fourth Gospel has seen the Father."23

The Christian revelation is viewed as occurring primarily in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. Christianity has traditionally viewed God's revelation as being complete in Jesus Christ, or at least in the life time of the apostles. Revelation was understood to be a declaration of God's will rather than his personal self disclosure. The act of God in Jesus Christ meant that even when man remained in his sinful state, God manifested His love to him. God is therefore, not a moral judge, standing over man with a moral task and demanding ethical qualities. The concept of new life in Christ implied a kind of sonhood with freedom to the Father's house, perhaps keeping in mind the parable of the Prodigal son. Because the Christians believed that Jesus was the Messiah of thought and that a new age had dawned and the long promised redemption had arrived. The essential and necessary role played by Jesus in Christianity is an additional source of disagreement between Judaism and Christianity. According to Christian dogma, only Jesus as a consequence of his unique ontological status could redeem himself from
original sin, which is the heritage of all mankind. According to Judaism however, self-redeemption is the attribute of every human being, the elevation from the constraint's of nature and from sin is but a manifestation of freedom.

In the 'New Testament' Jesus' word and work are God's word and work because Jesus responded to God's call in complete faith and evidence. This is brought in Baptism, temptation, transfiguration and gathsemane narrative of the synoptists and parallels. Jesus's intimate address to God is Abba (Father). Jesus Christ as the word of God signifies that He is God's thought and also the expression of that in human flesh. "In the beginning was the Word .... and the,Word became flesh and dwelt among us." 24

In the fourth Gospel, we read that God has already been operative in all creation from the beginning. He is always revealing Himself to mankind. God does not mean to "Know Christ according to flesh, says Spinoza, for God's wisdom has manifested itself in all things and most of all Jesus Christ." 25

Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man. God manifested Jesus as the son of God by investing him with the power of resurrection from death. He sent Jesus to redeem mankind from sin. It is the central theme of Christianity that God historically manifested Himself in Christ and that He is still revealed in the world as the indwelling spirit. If we consider the origin and development of Christianity historically, we find its origin in God's unveiling of Himself to our first parents and its final perfection in the fuller revelation, that the Christ, the Son of God made to mankind while He was on earth. He was merciful, so He saved us through the water of rebirth and the renewing power of the Holy spirit. Christian theology does not contain metaphysical assertion of God's existence.
but is addressed to the God of the Christian religious consciousness, the God of faith, the God revealed in Christ and encountered by Christians.

**Place of God in Sankaradeva's Philosophy**

Since God is the ground of all being, He is the ground of the structure of being, He Himself is not subject to structure. God must be approached cognitively through the structural elements of being itself. These elements make Him a living God, a God who can be man's concrete concern. The statement that 'God is being itself' is a non-symbolic statement. Theologians must make explicit what is implicit in religious thought and expression. And in order to do this, they must begin with the most abstract and completely unsymbolic statement which is possible, namely, that God is being itself or the Absolute. Sankaradeva propagated a new religion (later known as Neo-Vaiṣṇavism) at a time when ritualism was gaining ground with occasional intrusions of ultra-religious animism and occultism.

In order to do away with mushrooming growth of Gods, Sankaradeva logically proceeded against the theological basis of polytheism. He emphasised the unity of essential Godhead. In the cosmology of Sankaradeva, God is the Absolute Reality. He is endowed with all auspicious and excellent attributes which are unsurpassable. A very pronounced feature of Sankaradeva's Philosophy is the strong tendency to devotion (bhakti) which is generally considered to be the heart of worship, the true religious attitude towards a personal God. We believe that He is personal because we find ourselves praying to Him, and we pray to Him because we believe that He is Personal. Such a personal being is ready to listen to our prayers. Dr. Radhakrishan says that personal God has meaning only for the practical religious consciousness and not for the
highest insight. Though God is more than personal yet we know Him personally. Our present contention only requires that God should not be less than personal. What we call personal God, the Isvara of Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, is only a phase of our experience of the Absolute at a certain stage of our consciousness. In the ultimate state, according to Shankaracharya's interpretation of Advaita Vedanta, Isvara is also merged in Nirguna Brahman and there remains no Personal God. Sankaradeva in his doctrinal work, 'Bhakti Ratnakara' without denying the indeterminate, attributeless aspect of God however, laid more stress on the saguna aspect, because loving devotion demands a personal God. In his celebrated work 'Kirtana Ghosa', he describes the twofold aspects of God and says that as the indeterminate God is not comprehensible, devotees worship and adore his beatific form in the Person of Narayana. The first two lines of the Kirtana have struck the above note in the following way:

"At the very outset, I bow down to the eternal Brahma who in the form of Narayana is the cause of all incarnations." 27

The Supreme Being Narayana possesses all the familiar three attributes Sat, Cit and Ananda. He is infinite in nature and attributeless. He is the omniscient, omnipotent, creator, preserver, and destroyer of the world. Sankaradeva gives expression to the above notion of God in this way:

"Narayana is the Supreme Soul and the only Lord of the Universe. Nothing exists without Him. He is the cause as well as the effect of the creation. Just as ornaments made of gold do not differ in substance from the material cause gold, similarly there is no distinction between God as the cause and God as the effect." 28
Sankaradeva did not directly formulate a clear-cut philosophical system. He seems, however, to have followed consistently the commentary of Śrīdharaśāṃī an ascetic of the Monistic school of Śaṅkarachārya. Śrīdhara interpreted the philosophical aspects of the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa' and the 'Gītā' in the light of the Advaita school tempered with loving devotion and faith. In the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa', God has been described as immanent and transcendent and having both Nirguṇa (unqualified) and Saguṇa (qualified) aspects.

'Bhāgavata Purāṇa' occupies a unique position in the history of devotional literature (bhakti-shastra) in India. It sheds a new light on the Bhakti culture which is the most fundamental tenet of the Bhāgavata Dharma, the early form of Vaiśṇavism. That is, the supreme dharma of man is to generate devotion to the Lord Viṣṇu or His incarnation, Śrī Kṛṣṇa who is of the nature of transcendental knowledge. S.N. Dasgupta has explained that according to the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa', God in His own nature must be regarded as absolutely devoid of forms. He is pure consciousness. It is by His power of materiality that He spreads out His illusion to the entire world. He is said to have three distinct powers: (1) the inner power as the very essence; (2) the external power of māyā and (3) the power by which the finite selves are manifested.

The 'Viṣṇu Purāṇa' as its very name suggests treats Viṣṇu as the Supreme God. The other main Purāṇas of these sects are the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa' and the 'Padma Purāṇa.' According to the 'Vaiṣṇava purāṇa' God is Viṣṇu. In this culture, Viṣṇu is known as Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa. Coming to religion as it is actually discussed in the various Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas, we find that although the monotheistic conception of God is always in the background, there is always a pluralistic explanation of the nature of God. God is one, no
doubt, but He is seen as many Sankaradeva as a monotheistic Vaiṣṇava thinker has prohibited worship of any other Deity but Viṣṇu Kṛṣṇa. Although he has admitted the existence of gods, he considers them offshoots or partial manifestations of the Supreme God Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa, who incarnated Himself as Gopala-Kṛṣṇa in all His glory. Sankaradeva expresses his monotheistic belief in the following verse of 'Bhakti Pradīpa."

"Devote yourself to me with a single mind,  
Forsake from a distance all other god's  
Surrender yourself to me alone,  
worship me, then you will be fit for liberation  
Never listen to the names of other Gods  
so that your devotion may remain unsullied."²⁹

As regards the worship of idols, Sankaradeva does not seem to have attached much importance to them. While initiating or ordaining neophytes, he always prostrated before a holy book placed on the altar. At the initial stage of his movement at Bardowa he is said to have installed an idol of Madana-Gopal with a view to attracting the Brāhmaṇas of the locality. But afterwards he did not encourage idol-worship. In his 'Kīrtana-Ghosā' he expresses his attitude towards idol-worship. People take ablution in water believing it to be holy, and consider a stone image as the deity but do not pay respect to a Vaiṣṇava as they do in case of water or idol. Such people are worse than cattle.

_Tīrtha buli kare jalata suddhi_  
_Pratimāta kare devatā buddhi_  
_Vaiṣṇavata nāi isava mati_  
_Garuta adhama Kṛṣṇa badati._³⁰

It should not, however, be taken that Sankaradeva totally discarded image worship. In his 'Bhakti Ratnākara' he prescribes the worship of idols for prakṛta bhaktas,
devotees, at the preliminary stage who cannot direct their attention to God without any external symbol or agency.

To understand the philosophy of Sankaradeva's monotheistic Vaiṣṇavism is to understand the uniqueness of the path of bhakti. It should be interpreted from a theistic perspective. To understand bhakti from a monistic perspective is to accord a relative status to bhakti but this position is different from that when a theist with a theistic perspective, a bhakta, from the path of bhakti, declares his God to be the only Supreme God. His path is the best path and his mode of worship the only suitable means of God realization. Sankaradeva declares: "There is only one Sastra, that spoken by the Son of Daivaki. There is only one God and he is the Son of Daivaki. There is only one religious duty, the worship of this God; there is only one mantra, the name of the God." Sankaradeva considered chanting the name of Hari (Nām Kīrtan) to be the best mode of devotion. In the following stanza, Sankaradeva declared Nām Dharma to be the only religion which would offer salvation to One and all.

"In the Iron Age by singing Kīrtāna
The thirty-four castes obtain heaven,
In the golden Age salvation was attained by knowledge."  

Sankaradeva like Rāmānuja considered God's blissful nature, His own transcendent joyful existence as permanent abode (inseparable from His essence). God's descent is the expression of his dynamic love (bhaktanugrahaya), Nārāyaṇa as leela tanu is none but Viṣṇu (the Nirguṇa Brahman of jñāna mārga is the Viṣṇu in Bhakti mārga). The Nirguṇa Deva is the Saguṇa, while appearing as the son of Daivaki. Kṛṣṇa is the Deva in Sankaradeva's Bhakti cult. He is the Vāsudeva, one who pervades, who is Viṣṇu,
Nārāyaṇa, Hari. Nārāyaṇa for Sankaradeva is not only the universe, He is also the ground of the creation. "Sarva avatārara karana Nārāyaṇa". Lord Kṛṣṇa being the son of Vasudeva, a scion of Yadava dynasty, is also called Vasudeva. There are different varieties of images of Vāsudeva under different names. According to the Vyūha doctrine of the 'Pañcarātra Sarhita', there are four forms of Viṣṇu, viz. Vāsudeva, Sankarsana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. In the Assamese version of the 'Bhāgavata', Sankaradeva refers to the four forms or manifestations of Kṛṣṇa and attaches more importance to Kṛṣṇa. Vāsudeva of the Vyūha group merged with the Supreme deity. Vāsudeva culture was a religion of synthesis. It too reflects a phase of bhakti which was associated with Kṣatriyas. The free speculations which led to Buddhism and Jainism are reflected in the Vāsudeva culture. The Ekānta devotees of Hari had access to God not through tapas and priests. All these reflected a similar trend towards the supremacy of bhakti. Sankaradeva has given due recognition to Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, Hari and Sri Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa is the spokesman of the ekānta bhakti in the 'Gītā'. It is quite evident that Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu reflected the Sun and for Sankaradeva, the Deva or the Supreme Deity is Kṛṣṇa the Sun.

"Kṛṣṇa Surya bhaikuntha udita
Nāṁ dharma kurila bidita."

Sankaradeva claims his Deva to be the essence of the Vedas. In the 'Uddhav Samvad' Kṛṣṇa said, Formerly the Vedas were to be destroyed in the great Deluge. "I have delivered them and told them to Brahma. O friend, hear me about what the Vedas say. All the religions relating to worship of other Gods are deluding. So they must be discarded and all the people shall take shelter in Me," "......men interpret the Vedas at their sweet will and leave away the true import which is bhakti......Even knowledge
cannot give deliverance without love. Others do not know the truth revealed in the Vedas namely the cult of love which I so much approve."

Having maintained a continuation of the Vedic theism, Sankaradeva, in line with other Vaiṣṇava Āchāryās, declared unanimously that Īśvara (Lord Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu for Vaiṣṇavās) is the supreme object of scriptures, the supreme goal of all chants, of all rituals and of all services. For Sankaradeva, "Brahma was born in your lotus, you assume incarnations from age to age". We find a similar concrete idea of Brahma as infinite and at the same time finite, personal and full of joy and bliss. The theist Sankaradeva, who recognized Īśvara as the Deva of his Ek Śarāṇa. Dharma is nirguna, because the Deva is the abode of all the auspicious qualities. He is Nirguna and above the three gunās. Sankaradeva's Deva is 'God is the soul Supreme'. He is science personified. He is without form and devoid of defects. He is even spotless. He is joy incarnate. He is without body and devoid of organs of sense. He is the master of the world. The Deva is the Purushottoma of the 'Gītā'. As Bhakti is participation of the profane in the Sacred, the Nām Dharma or the devotional practice itself implies the four realities—Nāma, Deva, Guru and Bhakta. The goal is the attainment of Bhakti. The Deva is present where there is bhakti and bhakti needs Bhakata, Nāma and Guru. Sankaradeva has announced that a true Vaiṣṇava should not worship any other God but Viṣṇu, must not enter into any temple other than that of Viṣṇu, nor should he partake of the offerings made to any other God. In his 'Bhakti Ratnākara' he prescribed the worship of idols at the preliminary stage for prakṛta bhaktas (devotees), who cannot direct their attention to God, without any external symbol or agency.
Sankaradeva evolved his unique religious faith on the basis of the teachings of the 'Gītā, the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa' and the 'Upanisad' and formulated his Nāma Dharma by harmoniously uniting the different messages of diverse branches of theology. All these scriptures have paid more interest to the Nirguna aspect of Brahman, but Sankaradeva puts special emphasis on the Saguna aspect of Brahman. In this regard, he explains that by propagating the human activities of Kṛṣṇa, who is the embodied form of Saguna Brahman, he wants to make people aware of God's love, grace and benignity. He expounds the bhakti dharma and maintains that 'bhakti' is the supreme religion, because it is easy to practise, Bhakta is universal in its ideals and is liberal in its views. Moreover, it rests on a firm philosophical basis.

References


24. Ibid., p. 66.


27. Ibid., I, VI.

28. Ibid., VIII, V. 37, *Bhagavata, XVV 13030-31*.


30. Sankaradeva, 'Kirtana Ghosa', XXIV.

31. Sankaradeva, 'Bhakti Ratnakara', Ch. 5.

32. Sankaradeva, 'Pasanda Mardana', pp. 73-74.

33. Sankaradeva, 'Uddhav Samvad' (Translation D. Neog light on history of Asamiya literature)