

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF ACHARYA SANKARA'S PHILOSOPHY

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This is an auspicious occasion, the annual celebration of the advent of a supreme spiritual leader and a mastermind the country has produced, whose name will perhaps be remembered as long as the sun shines in the sky. As revered Swamijis have already mentioned a few minutes before, the achievements of Acharya Sankara during the short span of his life on this earth were memorable indeed—achievements which cannot normally be expected of a human being during such a short period of time. This superb genius which he demonstrated in his personal life during these few years has compelled people to adore him as a divine incarnation. Nothing short of an incarnation could achieve such success in such profound fields of human life as the ones which adorn the life of Sankara.

People generally consider Acharya Sankara as a philosopher, a supreme advocate of the cause of God as the only Reality, a spiritual stalwart, a friend, philosopher and guide to seekers of Truth, a spiritual master. But, rarely

does it occur to peoples' minds, for obvious reasons perhaps, that he was also an unparalleled social reformer. It was only a person of his kind that could bring about a tangible change in the outlook of human life, an outlook which is of a permanent character, not subject to the whims of human minds or the vicissitudes of time. I would like to pinpoint the few words that I speak today to the social service that he has done—a point which always misses the attention of students of Sankara, who take him as a metaphysician, a mystic, a Yogi and a Godman. Yes, he was all these things, but he was also, as a matter of fact, a down-to-earth practical person, who did yeoman's service to bring about a revaluation of the values of life and to instill into the minds of people a sense of values which will bring real social unity and social welfare. We have umpteen social workers on our world. The world abounds in philanthropists, social welfare organisations and people who sweat day and night for the good of mankind. But we have seen with our own eyes that efforts in the direction of social welfare, purely on the social level, have not yielded the desired results. Human tension continues. Distrust, animosity, jealousy and incompatibility of natures continues in spite of world-organisations which have devoted themselves to the cause of social welfare.

What is the reason behind the travesty that seems to follow even honest efforts and endeavours in the line of social work and social peace? The reason is a lack of the wisdom that a person like Sankara possessed. Activity minus the wisdom of life will be an empty shell, like a corpse without a soul inside it. All social work is an activity, an outward skeleton which life puts on in its empirical

level; but the skeleton itself is not an organism and we cannot say that it has life. What we lack in social life today is a vital power, a soul in our existence. We lack soul, and a soulless outlook of life will naturally engender a soulless activity, whatever be the piety of intention that may be behind the activities of people. Goodness will succeed only when there is godliness backing it. Minus godliness, the so-called ethical, moral or social goodness will be empty of content. It is difficult to imagine sustained and meaningful goodness and valuable in life when it is divested of the divine element.

A stalwart and a towering personality like Sankara went deep into the root of the cause of human suffering and discovered that all sorrows are an automatic consequence of the absence of the divine element in human life. It is the abolition of God from existence, the banishing of the ultimate values of life from society that has led to the sorrows of mankind. Whatever be our efforts in our outer life to bring about peace and solidarity in the work-a-day world, that is not going to succeed unless there is the supreme cementing principle at the back of all aspirations and desires; and merely work without the divine power behind it will be like keeping bricks one over the other without mortar to keep them together. The whole structure will collapse. We have structures and edifices of human effort, all backed up by good intention, but what is the use of good intention – like a baby, an untutored man, building a huge cathedral, a temple, or a palace, without mortar, cement or the necessary implements to make it a stable whole. People lack the common sense which should recognise the necessity to accept the presence of God in

practical life. I should say, it is just common sense and not logic and philosophy—that is far from us. Sheer common sense which should be the endowment of an intelligent human being is lacking in life, and perhaps it is not merely humour when we say that common sense is the most uncommon thing in the world.

How can there be friendliness among people, love among brothers, sisters, parents, family and society? How can I have any kind of relationship with you at all, if there is nothing at all to connect you with me or me with you? People cry hoarse from pulpits that we should work for the welfare of mankind, that there should be one government, one humanity, etc. But why should there be this effort at all! Who tells you that there should be one humanity? How does the desire arise in the mind of any person that there should be commonweal, social peace? Let there be no social peace. What is the harm? Let the world go to the dogs. Why not? Who tells you that it is worthwhile having common peace? Why are you impelled by a sense within to love your neighbour as yourself? Why do you feel a sense of charitableness in your hearts? Why should it be? Why should it be necessary for you to be a good person? Why should you tell truth? Why should you be honest in life? Where is the need for ethics and morality?

There is a basis which is super-empirical, trans-social, and we may call it spiritual, for want of a better word. Acharya Sankara came with this cudgel in his hand, to drive into the minds of people the need to accept this transcendent element as an imperative even in our day-to-day life in the little family in which we live, and in the social endeavours upon which we are embarking. The philosophy

of the Atman, which was his forte, was the answer to the problems of mankind. He was not talking merely mysticism and yoga in any transcendental sense when he took immense pains to establish the existence of the Atman as the universal principle behind the varieties of the world. If the Atman were not to be one, if the Self or the Soul of the people were not to be a single unifying reality, how could there be a need felt to live in society at all? Where would be the necessity for me to speak to you, to look at your face at all? I would then mind my business, and you yours. Even an untutored, unphilosophical mind feels a sense of commonness with its neighbour. One has affection for people. We feel sympathy at times. How could sympathy be possible? Where is the rationale behind the feeling of sympathy, the sense of affection, the sense of duty, if there is not going to be a soul behind this sense, or aspiration? It goes without saying that the soul has to be one. Otherwise each soul would be cut off from the other. There would be no concourse or intercourse between the one and the other.

The philosophy of Acharya Sankara is simple common sense, and while his doctrine is the most difficult to grasp, it is also the most simple to appreciate. I have very little to tell at this hour except a prayer to people the world over, that it is high time for us all to be serious and sincere in our lives and not merely show lip-sympathy to the values of life, because nothing is more serious than life. If life itself is going to be a joke, or a play-toy, what could, then, be a more serious thing anywhere? The presence of the Atman as the Universal Principle is the reason behind the need for, as well as the feasibility of, social well-being of every kind. To live life is to live philosophy, says Sankara, and to live

philosophy is to live in God. This is to put the whole system of Sankara in a few pithy words which contain a wealth of significance and meaning, and I leave it to you all to ponder over this truth for the benefit of everyone.