

ŚANKARA'S INTERPRETATION OF UPĀSANĀ IN NIRGUṆAMĀNASA PŪJĀ

Radhika P.R

(Research Scholar, Dept. of Sanskrit, Sree Sankara College, Kalady)

Sri Śankara, the great exponent of the theory of Advaita Vedānta truly in conjunction with the Upaniṣadic thoughts, especially the metaphysical one, aims at the unity of all selves and finally realization of the fact that Brahman alone is the absolute Reality that has no duality of any sort. But he also does presents the multifaceted Vedānta philosophy in giving a suitable place for Upāsanā for cognizing the Reality. The core of his philosophy presents the whole essence of Vedas which are matrixes in karma. But it is not that Śankara accepts the karma explicated in the Vedas as such that he attaches himself with but the karma that favors renunciation of all worldly affections. His summing up of the whole of the Vedānta philosophy can be expressible through the famous axiomatic expression "Brahma Satyam Jaganmithyā Jīvo Brahmaiva Nāparah". Implicit in this cognition is the fundamental tenet of Advaita Vedānta that Brahman is the only Reality and that the world is an illusion. The entire world is an appearance in Brahman, which is the efficient and material cause of the world. In an account of upāsanā, Śankara tries to assign a causal role to the cognitive enterprise making it the universal concrete imperishable structure. The philosophy of the Vedānta thus is very pertinent to the human sphere of evolution which is no doubt the highest evolutes of life in this world and is the nearest to the Absolute. Certainly, the philosophy is deeply rooted in the scriptures giving auxiliary relevance to the Smrtis. How Śankara accounts for the scheme of Upāsanā in his otherwise truly metaphysical theoretic is very significant. The article is an attempt to highlight this point on the ground of Śankara's metaphysical construction.

The Nature of Brahman

The works of Sri Śankara are distinctively marked for their logical establishment of the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta as he views it from the Upaniṣadic view. For him, Brahman is the Ultimate Reality whereas the perceived world is merely apparent. Through the lucid and excellent commentary on prastānatraya, Sankara presents the realization of Brahman as the supreme goal of every man. He formulates this doctrine of Advaita Vedānta by validating his argument on the basis of quotations from the vedas and other scriptures.

For Advaita Vedānta the factor of 'experience' to its maximum extent as the intuitive experience is very significant.. Sankara says: "भूतवस्तुविषयत्वाच्च ब्रह्मज्ञानस्य" ¹. This experience is the परमपुरुषार्थ by which the total annihilation of the impressions of nescience will be effectuated. This experience brings immeasurable bliss in the mind of the aspirant whereby the empirical experiences lose their influence in him. This experience equated with that of the nature of Brahman is possible through the careful advancement of concentration and focusing on Brahman that reveals the true principle of existence in every being.

Upāsana

Upāsana is defined as the process of concentrating the mind on certain resting place or support prescribed by scriptures and producing a series of homogeneous thoughts without the intervention of any thing contrary to the series. It is a psychological way of leading a man to the highest level smoothly but surely. The basic objective of this meditative process is to help an individual rise in a hierarchy of spiritual thoughts gradually and when the highest stage is reached a man can realize the fundamental identity between Brahman and Jiva.

Brahman is pure consciousness (ज्ञानस्वरूप) and is devoid of any attribute (निर्गुण) and every trace of intellect. According to Śankara there is no difference between Brahman and Ātman. "The self-luminous Ātman, the witness of all, is ever present with in your own heart". From this point of the ultimate stage it is true that there is no distinction between God and Soul or between one soul and another, but from the point of view of worldly experience one cannot ignore the obligations of religion and devotion. Man finds it difficult

to identify himself with God. He is very much aware of this empirical fact that he is a limited being from every point of view. Though from the transcendental standpoint we are Brahman, from the practical and ordinary standpoint we are different from Iṣvara.

Thus the duality which is essential for a sense of devotion in the initial stages is conceded by Śankara. Śankara admits such a duality on the empirical level between the jīva and Iṣvara which is an essential ground for any devotion. Śankara says: “द्विरूपं हि ब्रह्मावगम्यते नामरूपविकारभेदोपधिविशिष्टम्, तद्विपरीतं च सर्वोपाधिविवाजितम्। यत्र हि द्वैतमिव भवति तदितर इतरं पश्यति। यत्र त्वस्य स्रवमात्मैवाभूत्तत् केन कं पश्येत्.. इति चेवं सहस्रयो विधाविद्याविषयभेदेन ब्रह्मणो द्विरूपतां दर्शयन्ति वाक्यानि। तत्रविद्यावस्थायां ब्रह्मणः उपास्योपासकादिलक्षणः सर्वो व्यवहारः।”²

This being the case it is in the state of ignorance that one can come into contact with Brahman within the range of empirical parlance, comprising of the object of devout meditation, meditator etc.. Among these different meditations of Brahman, some are conducive to the attainment of prosperity. Some to liberation by stages and some to the greater efficacy of actions. These differ because of the difference in qualities and delimiting adjuncts. And though it is the only one supreme self, the Lord that is to be meditated upon as possessed of those particular qualities, still the fruits differ according to these qualities. Sruti says: “तं यथा यथोपासते तदेव भवति” “यथा क्रतुरस्मिल्लोके परुषो भवति तथेतः प्रेत्य भवति”³ स्मृतेश्च “यं यं वापि स्मरन् भावं त्यजन्त्यन्ते केववरम् । तं तमेवैति कौन्तेय सदा तद्भावभाविताः।।”⁴

Upāsanā in Nirguṇamānasa pūjā

Generally Upāsanā is defined as “उपासनानि सगुणब्रह्मविषय-मानसव्यापाररूपाणि शाण्डयविद्यादीनि।”⁵ Because of the predominance of cognition with differences Upāsanā reminds of empirical activity that can't involve the attributeless nature or Brahman. At this juncture the ‘Nirguṇa mānasa pūjā’ put forth by Sri Śankara acquires unique significance. In this treatise Sankara presents the greater prilms or Upāsanā by which the aspirant can attain maturity of mind and thereby shows easier way to the human goal of liberation.

Nirguṇamānasapūjā is a small work intended to provide the non-dualistic approach in the field of Upāsana. It is not a theoretical text proposing any doctrine or arguments but it is an application of the doctrine in day to day life. The subject-matter is the daily worship done by devotees either at home or a temple, he shows fresh approach and meaning to the rituals in higher grade.

Śruthis and Smṛti's popularised Yajñas which were too elaborate and also expensive. There are sixteen Upacāras that have been standardized and are in vogue perhaps in the whole of India-Śoḍaśopacārapūjā i.e., worship with sixteen points of attendance.

आवाहनासनम्पाद्यमर्घ्यमाचमनम् तथा
स्नानवस्त्रोपवीतानि गन्धपुष्पे च धूपकम्
दीपम् नैवेद्यताम्बुलप्रदक्षिणविसर्जने

The verses of Nirguṇamānasapūjā shows all these very clearly, though it employs statements that are laconic in the manner of devotional Literature. The conferring of knowledge in the devotional language enables a Sādhaka to develop with adoration the traits of Kṛtārtha Brahmajña emanating from the realized one who sets the model.

The work starts with the question of an aspirant who has knowledge of Brahman. He inquires how the "Nirguṇa Brahman can be worshiped?

“अखण्डे सच्चिदानन्दे निर्विकल्पैकरूपिणि
स्थितेऽद्वितीयभावेऽपि कथं पूजा विधीयते।।”⁶

Śankara responds to the queries of the aspirant by presenting the Śoḍaśopacāra pūjā with a higher grade by showing the mahāvākhyārtha “अहं ब्रह्मास्मि”। The first stanza starts with -

“आराधयामि मणिसंनिभमात्मलिङ्गं
मायापुरी हृदयपङ्कजसंन्वष्टम्।
श्रद्धानदीविमलचित्तजलाभिषेके-
नित्यं समाधिकुसुमेरपुनर्भवाय।।”⁷

The worship is possible in order to avoid rebirth, the most precious thing that can be identified as Ātman, located in the heart's lotus of the city of ignorance with the thought process as showers

of the waters purified by the river of devotion and with the pure still moments of mind as flowers.

Throughout this work the Advaitic philosophy is reflected. Here 'Ātman' is the object of worship. It is the 'mind' where all kinds of ignorance are filled. By the process of worshipping, the mind is purified. The purified mind is the seat (āsana) of real knowledge. This knowledge of Brahman avoids the rebirth of man. Brahman alone remains here as the 'āsana'. Being सर्वाधारस्यासनम् this should be regarded as the chair to be offered.

Here Pādyam remains in this manner that an enlightened person should wash the feet of the deity with the purifying knowledge that He has no attachment with impurity i.e., the results of either good deeds or evil deeds. Arghya remains the water of beginningless nescience accumulated over the aeons of time, that has to be given up with folded hands before the lord; that indeed is the valued offering of the deity. Ācamana to Indra and other gods partake of a mere micro fraction of a tiny drop of the bliss from the ocean of bliss called realization of self. Here Brahman is the ocean of bliss. Having this idea in mind that all the worlds are pervaded by the waters of the bliss of Brahman and that this continuum can't be broken in the true ceremonial bath is the Abhiṣecanam of the Ātman.

A firm view in mind that 'I am the continuing thread holding the garland of countless words made of the mutations of the three gunas' is the real sacred thread to be offered. In garland, Sūtram is the thread called consciousness which pervades all the stages of experience. Upavītam is the loop of triple thread knotted together and worn across the torso. The three threads symbolize the three gunas. A clear understanding that I bear the world which is a mixture of the multitude impression on the mind is the befitting fragrance to be offered to the Ātman here. Vāsanā also means smell either good or bad just as the impressions in the mind which may be pleasant or unpleasant. Offering of the tila seeds and Akṣata remains vṛttityaga or abandoning all thought process arising out of the three gunas to avoid rebirth.

Śankara symbolizes all Ṣoḍaśopacāras within the platue of an enlightened one. Here every offering is the object and the subject is Brahman itself for avoiding rebirth. This work shows that there is

no difference between the experiencer and the experienced as well as the principle of Reality.

Conclusion

The work – Nirguṇamānasapūjā contains the quintessence of Advaita philosophy. The ideas and concepts brought out in this stotra are well supported and reflect the full essence of scriptures. In a short compass of 33 verses, Sri Śankara Bhagavatpāda graciously brought out the essentials of worship of attributeless Brahman in a concise form. This work points at every step to Brahavidyā, the Mahāvākhyārtha the basic but the hidden experience of Jīvanmukta. While this work is addressed primarily to the seeker of the highest competence by accommodating the practices of people with lesser caliber are also indicated. By his work, it is an easy task to fathom the depth of meaning hidden in the apparently simple language employed in these verses.

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