

Vedantic Vaisnavism and Sridhara Swami

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Abstract

Sridhara Swami happens to be fourteenth century Vaisnava santha-philosopher of Odisha who had written commentaries on three major Vaisnovite texts, Srimad Bhagavadgita, Visnupurana and Srimad Bhagavatapurana. Out of the commentaries scholars have found out his distinct ontological stand. Prior to him the prevailing trend was Vedantic Vaisnavism in Odisha. In this perspective it is felt important to make an analysis, if his views can be considered as the continuation of the Vedantic Vaisnavism tradition developed in Odisha following Ramanujacharya or be treated to be a Puranic Vaisnavism of the traditional variety.

Keywords: Monism, Advaitism, Puranic Vaisnavism, Vedantic Vaisnavism, Saguna Brahman

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The tradition of Vedanta and Vaisnavism in India is very ancient. The origin of the Vedanta is the philosophy of the Upanisads which are the end part of the Vedas. The Vaisnavism can be said to be owing its origin to Lord Vishnu who can be treated to be a Vedic God. The Rg. Vedic statement: '*tad Visnoh paramam padam sadaa pasyanti suryah*' (1-164-4) expresses the affinity between Sun-God and Visnu. But the details about Vaisnavism pertaining to Vedic-Vishnu is not prominently seen in the Vedic cosmology. Neither was it thought that He is the single Supreme nor it has been supposed that the entire creation is caused by Him. However, in the Vedic days 'Visnu' as God was one unitary concept without being linked with Narayana or Krsna. Rather it would be difficult to assume that the concept of the lord Vishnu of the Vedic period can be treated to be same either with the *Mahabharata/Gita* concept of Vishnu which is non-different from Narayana or Basudeva Krsna or the *Bhagavata* concept of Krsna, the lofty hero whose playground was Brundavana. In the later Vedic period (around 8th century B.C.) in the major Upanisads like, *Brhadaranyaka*, *Chandogya*, *Isha*, *Kena*, *Katha*, etc. the monistic Vedanta philosophy developed conspicuously treating *Brahman* to be the only ultimate reality out of which everything has come and will go back. Posterior to the third century B.C the bhakti based philosophy of Vaisnavism came to existence in the Indian tradition through two major *Puranas*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Visnupurana* and also after a gap of three hundred years one more *Purana* *Srimad BhagavataPurana*. The three *Puranas* seem to successfully establish a tradition of Puranic Vaisnavism in India.

What important here to point out that if there shall be any attempt to distinguish between the *Mahabharata/Gita* based Vaisnavism and the *Bhagavata* based Vaisnavism then the former can be called 'Composite Vaisnavism' (where *jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti* are figured) and the latter as only bhakti based 'Simple Vaisnavism'. However both these Vaisnavisms are *Purana* based Vaisnavisms which are distinguished from the Vaisnavism found with Ramanujacharya who was a distinguished Vedantin. His track was also followed subsequently by Madhva, Nimbarka. All these philosophers were *Saguna Brahman-vaadi* Vedantins as well as Vishnu/Krsna followers. So their religio-philosophical stand has been treated as *Vedantic Vaisnavism*, which can be distinguished from the above mentioned two forms of *Puranic Vaisnavism*. In fact, such a distinction has been seen in the following words of Prof. Patnaik that

"In the development of Vaisnavism across the ages one can notice distinctively two different trends. First, the Vaisnavism growing around the Pauranic account of the deity depicts K[r]sna as the pastoral youthful hero indulging in love-

play with the cowherd girls of Vrndaavana. The second strand draws its inspiration from the *Mahabharata* and *Geetaa* where K[cGa is presented as the philosopher and the warrior king. In this aspect he is mostly seen as Visnu or Naaraayaṇa.”¹

Sridhara Swami is the fourteenth century *santha*-philosopher of Odisha had spent a major part of his life as a *mahanta* (chief priest) of Govardhanapitha, Puri which is a Sankarite foundation. He had written commentaries on three major Vaisnovite texts, *Srimad Bhagavadgita*, *Visnupurana* and *Srimad Bhagavatapurana*. Obviously he can be treated as a follower of Vaisnavite philosophy. Two other subsequent Vaisnava philosophers, like Jiva Goswami (16th CE) and Baladeva Vidyabhusana (17thCE) seem to have been influenced by his line of thinking. The question is that whether in Sridhara’s line of thinking is there any impact of the philosophy of the Vedanta or it is mere a synthesis of SriKrusna based many theological assertions of the *Puranas* reaffirmation of the *Puranic Vaisnavism*. Such a doubt has come to the mind for the reason that Baladeva Vidyabhusana has given the opinion on Sridhara that he is apparently *Advaitin* and he has utilized *Advaita* as “the meat on the end of a hook, meant to lure fish.”² Moreover Sukla, who seems to be the pioneer in presenting Sridhara as “A Medieval Philosopher of Religion” has clearly mentioned “Sridhara is not a Vedantin in traditional sense of the term.”³ So there is the necessity of saying few words on the *Vedantic Vaisnavism* and the Vaisnavism of Sridhara and to decide whether Sridhara can be treated as Vaisnavite Vedantin.

Vedantic Vaisnavism

There is no doubt that the Vedantins of different varieties accept the supremacy of the Upanisadic concept of *Brahman* and the relation of non-duality (*Advaita*) between the *Brahman* and *Atman*. But some have conceived such *Brahman* to be quality-less (*nirguna*) and some others have conceived it to be having quality (*saguna*). It is important to note that in the framework of *Nirguna-Brahman vada* the non-dual relation between *Brahman* and *Atman* is treated to be pure and unconditional. But in the frame of *Saguna-Brahman vada* the relation of non-duality is accepted along with the acceptance of some difference. For example, in the *Saguna-Brahman Vada* of Ramanuja the relation of identity has been understood like that of the relation between the ‘whole’ and the ‘part’. Any kind of difference between *Brahman* and *Isvara* is not acceptable in the *Saguna-Brahman Vada* as it has been presupposed by Sankara in his *Nirguna Brahman Vada*.

The Saguna-Brahman Vada and Visistadvaita Vedanta

The *Saguna-Brahman Vada* has been developed in a very systematic manner by Ramanujacharya in the 12th century prior to whom any such systematic theory has not come to prominence. The ultimate reality for Ramanuja is *Saguna Brahman*.

He differs from Sankara strongly on the view that *Jiva* is identical with *Brahman*. For him the *Jiva* cannot be identical with *Brahman* because *Jiva* is a *prakara* which is dependent upon the *Prakriti*, which is *Brahman*. It represents the relation between them is also conceived as *amsha* and *amshi* that is the part and the whole. Ramanuja considers that ultimate reality cannot be formless and indeterminate. Rather, ultimate reality is the abode of all good qualities and perfection. *Brahman* is *saguna* and *savishesha*. *Saguna Brahman* is conceived as the Supreme having *gunas* or qualities. He has all good qualities like Existence, Knowledge and Bliss, Truth, Goodness and Beauty, Lustre, love and Power. As inner controller he is *Antaryami*. He is eternal and unchanging.

Brahman is all pervading, subtle, omniscient, without end and omnipotent. He directs all activity. He is the soul dwelling in all. He creates the creatures with unequal lots according to their merits and demerits. The Absolute is a pure unity; it is the concrete whole or *visista*. Ramanuja's theory of *Visistadvaita* Vedanta developed as a harmonious combination of Absolute monism of the Upanisads and Vaisnavism of various the *Puranas*.

This is how the *Vedantic Vaisnavism* came to prominence following to Ramanujacharya with two major considerations that there is admittance of the ultimacy of the *saguna Brahman* as *Isvara* and such *Isvara* can be conceived as Visnu or any of his forms. In this context Patnaik writes that:

"Raamaanuja's conception of a *saguna Brahman-Isvara* became a permanent feature of Vedantin Vaisnavism. *Brahman* was no longer conceived as an abstract principle, but a personal God though the subsequent Vedantins preferred to ascribe different epithets to the same Lord Supreme. Madhva called Him Narayana Visnu, who is endowed with six divine powers, viz., *jnaana* (knowledge), *sakti* (power), *bala* (prowess), *aisvarya* (wealth), *veerya* (virility) and *teja* (energy). Nimbarka preferred to call Him K[cGa. He also introduced the character of Radha as the consort of Krsna." ⁴

Vaisnavism of Sridhara Swami

It has already been said that Sridhara has expressed his adherence to the Vaisnavite thought through the commentaries on the Vaisnavite texts while working as the head of a Sankarite institution. He did not find any distinction among the three chief figures of the three texts who has shared different names (*aakhyaas*) while being engaged with his functions or *lilas*. According to him Gita's Krsna happens to be Devaki's son, the character mentioned in the *Chandogya Upanisad* (III-17-6) and *Gopala Uttara Tapani* (87). In the *Visnu Purana* (VP) the primary name of Krsna is Vasudeva, with other names such as Govinda, Hrusikesa and

Pankajanaabha. And in the *Bhagavata Purana* (BP) Krsna has been identified (1. 8. 21-22) as Devaki's son who came up as the son of Nanda, the king of Gopa.

Sridhara has pointed out the importance of worshiping Krsna by saying that He is the source of liberation, the subject and object of knowledge. He has referred to the praises done by sage, Suta that there is no other goal of penance and sacrifices other than concentrating on Him. He is the goal of Vedas too. In this context Sukla writes that

“This Vasudeva/Krsna is variously glorified in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.2) by the sage Suta who holds him as the goal of the *Vedas*, Vedic sacrifices, knowledge, penance (*Yoga*) and *dharma*. He is the all-pervading conscious entity, the ultimate source of the creation of this world and final end of its dissolution. Sridhara comments that this Krsna/Vasudeva is the subject of discussion and the object of knowledge of all the scriptures. It is this Vasudeva who bestows salvation. Therefore, only He should be worshipped (by all the creatures in general and human beings in particular) always in all prescribed ways of bhakti.”⁵

In a nut shell according to Sridhara Sri Krsna is the name of Absolute reality who is available in both the forms, transcendental and phenomenal. He is *paramadhama* or Absolute reality or *Paramarthika satta* as well as *Jagatdhama* or relative reality or *vyavaharika satta*. A point of difference with the Sankara's Advaita Vedantic view can be found here that the phenomenal is treated to be illusory by Sankara whereas Sridhara considers it to be the *divya-leelaa* of the ultimate reality and cannot be unreal. Here again it is preferred to mention Sukla's presentation of Sridhara's stand in the following words.

“The transfer of the phenomenal world to Reality and vice versa is an illusion like mirage, Sridhara holds. But following the Mimamsa school we might add that only for a common man this transfer is an illusion whereas for a wise man this transfer is a cognition by qualitative metaphor or *gauneelaksanaa*. Metaphor either pure or qualified is a linguistic cognition, never an illusion like a mirage. *Maya*, if properly understood in this light of metaphorical cognition, never refers to any illusion or nescience. It positively refers to the activities of Reality in its phenomenal manifestation. In fact, it is in this sense that Sridhara understands the whole of *Bhagavata Purana* that Vyasa composes with a purpose of describing the properties (*guna*) of Reality both *svarupa* and *tatastha*.”⁶

Sridhara has considered that all those qualities applicable to the ultimate reality described in the Upanisads are also applicable to Krsna in the following manner. He is beyond the control of the three *gunas* and therefore *nirguna*. He possesses the qualities like omniscience, omnipotence, kindness, love and lustre

shows that He is also *saguna*. Kṛṣṇa can be considered as being pervaded everywhere and non- other than the *mūlā-prakṛti*. He is the source of creation, sustenance and dissolution. The creation is not like the manifestation theory (*parinama vada*) of Sāṃkhya where the cause-effect relation is evident, rather like the modification theory (*vikara vada*) of the Vedānta where the matter remaining constant the form changes only. Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa is both *nirviśeṣa* (universal/indeterminate) and *viśeṣa* (particular/determinate). Transcendently being beyond *sat* and *asat* He can be conceived as Viṣṇu/Brahman.⁷ So, the worship of Kṛṣṇa through any of his names, can be treated as following the path of the Upaniṣads or the Vedas.

Epilogue

That Sṛidhara has advocated Vaiṣṇavism in a very clear cut manner is beyond doubt. Now coming to the question raised earlier is: Should his Vaiṣṇavism be treated as the continuation of the *Vedantic Vaiṣṇavism* tradition or be treated as the Vaiṣṇavism of the Puranic variety where the concentration on the unconditional bhakti for the Lord is the only pivotal factor? In order to find out an answer to this question on the basis of the above presentations it can be said that Sṛidhara did not remain silent about the lines of understanding found in the Vedāntic thoughts. So in my considered opinion his Vaiṣṇavism can be treated as *Vedantic Vaiṣṇavism* but not *Vaiṣṇavite Vedantism*. In the former type some traces of the application of the Vedānta philosophy is expected which is very much there in Sṛidhara's philosophizing. In the later type the philosophy of Vedānta should receive the primary importance (like that of Rāmānuja's philosophy) which is absent with Sṛidhara Swami.

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