

Glimpses of Sankara's

Poetry

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*A perfect blend of lyric and metre adorns Sankara's
lofty thoughts making his poetry immortal*

Sankara the *advaitist* is well known to us, but this image of an abstract philosopher somehow has been overshadowing Sankara the poet who had an enviable command over the aesthetics of rhyme and rhythm.

In fact, if one were to look at some pieces of Sankara's poetry, unaware that the author was an abstract thinker of the highest order, one would call him a man of letters *par excellence*. Looked at differently, it was precisely this ability to use exalted syntax that enabled Sankara to conquer dissident scholars and polemicists and reestablish the supremacy of the traditional values of the land.

Apparent Paradox

The devotional poems of Sankara are essentially directed towards individual Gods, such as Devi, Siva or Vishnu. One may wonder how a practising monist who would not even distinguish between Paramatma and Jivatma might consider individualising the Paramatma entity into various anatomic forms and address pleas and prayers to them without disturbing the tenets of monism. This apparent paradox can be resolved if one takes a closer look at the thought processes and hidden logic behind some of Sankara's *slokas*.

It is no doubt that in Sankara's devotional poetry worship starts in an externalised fashion directed at a *murti* or form, accompanied by a set of rituals, such as *shodasopachara* with 16 services, *panchopachara* with five services, and so on. As the individual matures in intellect, he realises that the *murti* is only a reflection of the Supreme Being that he perceives within himself. The prayer thus becomes internalised but may still make use of the prop of a physically defined form of the Supreme Being. Eventually, however, the *bhakti* becomes so intense that the worshipper identifies himself with the worshipped in its totality. No wonder *advaita* can be and is reached along this path, although to begin with there is no harbinger of such fusion.

Sivanandalahari Similies

There are several examples of Sankara's slokas directed to individual Gods in which monism is directly or indirectly touched upon. A commonly quoted one is the Ankola *sloka of Sivanandalahari* wherein Sankara tells us of the force of attraction to the Supreme that can be called *bhakti*, making use of similies, such as the ankola seed, the magnet, the faithful wife, the creeper and the river. Of these, the most relevant one denoting the eventual total fusion between the seeker and the sought is that of the river and the ocean.

In another *sloka (Rodhastoyahrutah, No.60 of Sivanandalahari)* Sankara affords us a few more brilliant similies, even overshadowing the great poet Kalidasa. The pull of *bhakti* is likened to forces such as the longing of a man caught in the current of a river to reach the shore, a sunbeaten traveller seeking the shade of a tree, and one shivering in the freezing cold of winter to get the warmth of fire.

Again in *stoka 59 (hamsah padma vanam)* the author brings in the swan and lotus stem, chakora and moon, chataka and clouds, chakravaka and sun to illustrate the bond between the seeker and the sought.

Path of Knowledge

The driving force of deprivation is the strongest in nature and the soul of the seeker deprived of the refuge of the Lord's feet can only be as peaceful as a fish out of water. But having described the pull phenomenon, Sankara goes on to tell us how the seeker benefits by the removal of *avidya* or ignorance.

Sloka 9 describes how the illusion of worldly experiences causing the phenomenon of *avidya* disappears at the feet of the Lord. The resulting *jnana* symbolises the realisation of the Self within as part of the Supreme Self. This is monism pure and simple.

In *Sloka 29*, Sankara uses a similar approach. While seeking the Lord's fleeting but benevolent glance, even through the corner of an eye, (*veeksham me disa chakshusheem sakarunaam*), the author in fact looks forward to the benefit of Supreme Knowledge through this interaction. *Soukhyopadesam kuru* is the plea that signifies the Supreme Being's advice to the seeker to go past the misery of worldly experiences and to reach the ultimate in bliss (*soukhya*).

Nindastuti

One form of poetic excellence shown by Sankara is to praise the Lord through apparent derogation, amounting to prayer by irony. This form of literary subtlety could normally be expected only of poets and litterateurs but not a spiritual seeker.

For instance, in Verse 87 of *Sivanandalahari*, Sankara the poet wonders whatever the great Lord Siva can give him as a blessing, when He himself has only poison (*halahala*) as his food, snake as his ornament, deer skin as his clothing, and a wild ox as his vehicle. He concludes the verse by merely asking for *bhakti* towards His feet, as Siva has nothing else worthwhile to offer!

Again in Verse 89, Sankara refers to how the Lord was pleased not by elaborate *pujas*, but by seemingly impolite and injurious acts of great saints and loving devotees, and wonders whether he too should turn impolite or rude to please Him.

It is obvious that such irony and other sophisticated forms of expression used by Sankara denote as much his scholarship, erudition and facility with language as the depth of his intellect and spirituality.

Simple But Profound

The right choice of words as we all know from day to day experience, can make a world of difference in effective communication. And if the words chosen are also simple, the impact is even greater. This is precisely what we see in Sankara's *Bhaja Govindam*, also known as *Moha Mudgara*.

The author opens with a simple, well balanced, rhythmic use of the Lord's name and in the same verse tells us of the futility of mere cleverness and worldly perfection. To the modern mind, such advice may sound rather odd, what with 'rat races' of all kinds imposing themselves on anyone with any capability at all. To the average contestant in such races of the 20th or 21st century, life is nothing more than a series of "state-of-the-art *dukriyn-karanes*" (exhibitionism), or so should it seem. But there is a catch.

There is enough medical and sociological evidence to show that pursuing apparently logical courses of action with the objective of material possessions or successes in the world often results in apparently illogical phenomena like unhappiness despite success, nervous breakdowns despite excellent performance, and so on. Ailments such as anxiety neurosis and cardiac disorders are but one aspect of this problem. The failure to grasp the overall meaning of life's journey brings about a lot of misery to the individual, especially in the afternoon of life. The only effective but simple remedy for this is *Bhaja Govindam*.

The graceful lilt of these verses has to be experienced to be believed. Whether it is a quickfire sequence of consonants as in *nalinee dala gata jalamapi taralam*, or an up-and-down undulation as in *punarapi jananam punarapi maranam*, Sankara has proved himself a master of metre.

Difficult Ones

Of the hundreds of verses composed by Sankara on individual gods of Hindu pantheon, perhaps the most difficult ones are those on Devi, which in fact outnumber others in bulk as well. They are difficult not only because of their complicated meter and profusion of long compound words, but in their thematic content, too.

Hinduism is known to be unique among religions in making use of the female form to personify the Supreme Being. Explanations of this uniqueness have already appeared in the pages of this journal dealing with topics, such as Sri Chakra Upasana and Devi Mahatmyam. The Mantra Sastra viewpoint of Devi *slokas* will be considered shortly, but it is important to note that Sankara also offers us several descriptive verses of Devi's physical beauty.

Viewed separately, the symbolic approach and the descriptive beauty approach may sound rather conflicting, but they are not necessarily incompatible with each other as Sankara himself points out on several occasions. It may be said in a manner of speaking that the symbolic approach is more elevated from an intellectual point of view and may as such be taken as Sankara's choice in the ultimate analysis.

Descriptive Portrayals

The most profuse of such part-by-part description of Devi's beauty can be found in *Soundaryalahari*. For instance, even as small an entity as the parting line of Devi's locks of hair (*tanotu kshemam*, Verse 44), or the eyebrow (*bhruvou bhugne*, Verse 47) cannot escape attention of the author who distills the very essence of his linguistic prowess to bring out its beauty to the reader.

Descriptive verses are not confined to *Soundaryalahari* alone. *Meenakshi Pancharatnam* tells us how the pearl studded crown on Devi's head, the full moon like glow on Her divine face, tiny musical bells on Her anklets and bracelets, all add to the splendour of the Mother Goddess, As She stays worshipped by other celestial gods and goddesses, including Saraswati and Lakshmi (*muktahara lasat kirita rtvchiram*.)

To the Western mind, such a description may appear rather odd in a religious prayer, but the twofold objective here is to portray the Supreme Being as one's own mother and then to provide the seeker with a portrait as complete as possible for concentrating his mental energy while praying. This, is verily a Hindu way of worship and here Sankara the portrayer supplements Sankara the theologian.

Mantra Sastra

More sophisticated than form description is Sankara's abstract conceptualisation of the Siva-Sakti combine, forming the nucleus of Sri Chakra as nonanthropomorphic worship.

Right in the first phrase of the first verse of *Soundaryalahari*, Sankara captures the essence of Sakti as primal energy and goes on to offer through the verses that follow an elaborate set of concepts and practices of the Sakta school of worship. The immense complexities that attend these verses have naturally led to variances in their interpretation by commentators down the centuries.

Scholars have gone hairsplitting over what Sankara really implied in these verses, whether he leaned more towards the Kaula or Samaya or even the diplomatic middle of Misra subschools. This writer would submit that the modern practical reader of Sankara's poetry will lose nothing by steering clear of such controversies and concentrating instead on the basics of the issue as they relate to him in today's and tomorrow's working environment.

The fundamental point to note is Sankara's advocacy of realising the Divine Mother as the Supreme Power within the individual. This Power or Being can be elevated or lowered to any suitable level of abstraction or concretion depending upon the individual's intellectual level, without discord to the basic tenets of monism. And to us, working persons of today with our day to day obligations to meet in the material world, even an attempt to, be aware of this dimension of the intellect is a reward and a step forward.

All Gods Are One

The poet in Sankara has left no god form in Hinduism untouched, be it Ganesa, Kumara, Vishnu, or Panduranga. In all these cases, anthropomorphic descriptions are aplenty, but soon enough the author drives home the point that total surrender to the individual god form leads to salvation and further, each form is only a means to an end that lies beyond.

It is interesting to note that unlike other religions where a unified god figure is given a name, in Hinduism the gods of the pantheon alone have names. The next step of perceiving the singularity of god has no place for a name. It is only a concept. Further still, to feel one's own unification with that entity can only be an experience gifted to the very few that keep going untiringly along the stipulated path. Truly, it can be said that Sankara experienced this and communicated to humanity and to posterity the beauty of the Self in various ways.

If Sankara's use of poetry as a medium is technically superb, his choice of devotional poetry as a means to initiate the novice into his unique world is strategically clever. It is only by extension of this line that he could let an indescribable state be made even remotely describable to others. The seeker, of course, must have unqualified faith in the chosen path and pursue it relentlessly. It is up to every one of us individually to discover this in the heart of our own hearts.