

Sri

An Appreciation of Ramanuja's Sri Bashyam

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1. The Vedic texts must be read with running commentaries like Sayana's on the *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas* and Sankara's *Bashyas* on the chief *Upanishads*. But these by themselves do not contribute to a full comprehension of the contents of the sacred texts.

2. The systematisation of the Vedic writings and conciliation of apparent contradictions is done by a separate *Sastra*, the *Mimamsa*.

3. The *Purvamimamsa* deals with the systematisation of the *Karmakanda*, the texts dealing with *action*.

4. The *Utharamimamsa* deals with the systematisation of the *Gnanakanda*, the texts dealing with *knowledge*.

5. The followers of the different Vedic *Sakhas* get over conflicting statements regarding details of sacrifices by the assumption of *vikalpa* or optional proceeding. Hence the numerous works in the *purvamimamsa* *sastras*.

6. Conflicting statements about the true knowledge of *Brahman* have to be reconciled as there can be only one true knowledge. Hence the *Utharamimamsa* is systematised in a single work—the *Vedanta Sutas*—which concisely state the teaching of the Vedas and establish by argument the interpretation of Veda adopted in the *sutas*.

7. The phraseology of *Vedanta sutra* of BADARAYANA are so eminently obscure that an understanding is not possible without a commentary.

8. Outstanding of the commentaries on these *sutas* are the *Sankara Bashya* of Sri SANKARACHARYA and the *Sri Bashya* of Sri RAMANUJACHARYA. Of these Sankara's is chronologically older but Sri Ramanuja's ideas are equally old if not older since they are drawn from earlier commentaries of authentic existence, but now lost. Moreover, disagreement with Sankara's views by *Vedantic* teachers are found in the *sutas* themselves. Sankara himself refers in his commentary to the opinion of 'another' whom Sankara's commentators refer to as *Vrithikara* referring to a work known as *Vrithi* by BODHAYANA. So it is certain that the ideas expounded by Sri Ramanuja in his *Sri Bashya* has authoritative representatives at a period anterior to Sankara. The sect of Sri Ramanuja is closely connected with the so-called *Bagavathas* or *Pancharatrias*

who are known to have existed from a very early time. This is proved by the fact that the Vedānta sūtras refer to the tenet of the Bagavatha sect, a tenet of the Sri Rāmānuja sect also, that *Brahman* manifests itself as (*Vyūha*) *Vasudeva*, *Sankarshana*, *Pradyumna* and *Anrudha*, these being identical with the *Parabrahman*. Whether these tenets are approved by the sūtras as according to Sri Rāmānuja or do not, as according to Śaṅkara, it is certain that the Bagavatha system, the direct forerunner of the Rāmānuja system (as it is mentioned in the sūtras) must have reached considerable importance when the sūtras were composed. Since there is a general agreement between these two systems, we can, with right suppose that these two sects were at one also in the mode of interpretation of the Brahmasūtras.

9 *A summary of the Śaṅkara system*: Whatever is, is in reality, one. There truly exists only one Universal Being called the Parabrahma (*Brahman*) or the Highest Self. This Being is of an absolutely homogeneous nature; it is pure BEING or which comes to the same, pure INTELLIGENCE or THOUGHT (*chaitanya*, *gnana*). Intelligence or thought is not to be predicated of *Brahman* as its attribute, but constitutes its substance. *Brahman* is not a thinking being but thought itself. It is absolutely destitute of qualities (*nirguna*). Whatever qualities or attributes are conceivable can only be denied of it. But if nothing exists but one absolutely simple Being, whence the appearance of this world by which we see ourselves surrounded and in which we ourselves exist as individual beings? *Brahman*, the answer runs, is associated with a certain power called *maya* or *avidya* to which the appearance of this entire world is due. This power cannot be called *sat* for 'being' is only *Brahman*; nor can it be called *asat* 'non-being' in the strict sense of the term, for it at any rate produces the appearance of this world. It is in fact, a principle of illusion; the undefinable cause owing to which there seems to exist a material world comprehending distinct individual existences. Being associated with this principle of illusion, *Brahman* is enabled to project the appearance of this world in the same way as a magician is enabled by his incomprehensible magical power to produce illusory appearances of animate and inanimate beings. *Maya* thus contributes the material (*Upadana*) cause of the world, or if we wish to call attention to the circumstance that *maya* belongs to *Brahman* as a *sakti*, we may say that the material cause of the world is *Brahman* in so far as it is associated with *maya*. In this latter quality, *Brahman* is more properly called *Iswara*, the Lord.

Maya, under the guidance of the Lord, modifies itself by progressive evolution into all the individual existences (*bheda*) distinguished by special names and forms of which the world consists; from it there spring in due succession, the different material elements and the whole bodily apparatus belonging to sentient beings. In all those apparently individual forms of existence, the one indivisible *Brahman* is present; but, owing to the particular adjuncts into which *maya* has specialised itself, it appears to be broken up—it is broken up as it were—into a multiplicity of intellectual or sentient principles, the so called *Jivas* (individual or personal souls). What is real in each *jiva* is only the Universal *Brahman* itself; the whole aggregate of individualising bodily organs and mental functions which in our ordinary experience separate and distinguish one *jiva* from another, is the offspring of *maya* and as such, unreal.

The phenomenal world of ordinary experience (*Vyavahara*) thus consists of a number of individual souls engaged in specific cognitions, volitions and so on and of the external

material objects with which those cognitions and volitions are concerned. Neither the specific cognitions nor their objects are real in the true sense of the word; for, both are altogether due to maya. But at the same time we have to reject the idealistic doctrines of certain *Eaadhya* schools according to which nothing whatever truly exists but certain cognitional acts or ideas to which no external objects correspond; for external things although not real in the strict sense of the word, enjoy at any rate as much reality as the specific cognitional acts whose objects they are.

The non-enlightened soul is unable to look through and beyond maya, which like a veil, hides from it its true nature. Instead of recognising itself to be Brahman, it blindly identifies itself with its adjuncts (*upadhi*) the fictitious offspring of maya and looks for its true self in the body, the sense organs and the internal organ *manas* i.e., the organ of specific cognition. Through its actions it burdens itself with merit and demerit the consequences of which it has to bear or enjoy in a series of future embodied existences, the Lord as distributor and dispenser allowing to each soul that form of embodiment to which it is entitled by its previous actions. At the end of each of the great world periods called *Kalpas*, the Lord retracts the whole world i.e. the whole material world is dissolved and merged into non-distinct maya while the individual souls, free for the time from actual connections with upadhis lie in deep slumber as it were. But as the consequences of their former deeds are not yet exhausted, they have again to enter on embodied existence as soon as the Lord sends forth a new material world and the cycle of birth and rebirth has to go on.

The means of escaping the endless cycle, the way out of which is never found by the non-enlightened soul is furnished by the Veda. The Karmakanda cannot lead to final release. In the Gnanakanda a knowledge of Brahman in so far as it is related to the world of Iswara, the lower Brahman, does not lead to final emancipation. The soul may gain the world of the lower Brahman and continue there, although in the enjoyment of great power and knowledge. Only the highest knowledge can effect final release — a knowledge of the identity of the soul with the highest Brahman transcending all the attributes. The student whose soul has been enlightened by sayings like *tathwanasi* that there is no difference between his true self and the highest self obtains immediate final release on death.

10. *Sri Bashya*: There exists only one all embracing Being called Brahman or the highest Self or the Lord. This Being is not destitute of qualities but endowed with all imaginable auspicious qualities (*sagunam*). It is not pure intelligence but intelligence is the chief attribute (*gnanam-guna*n). The Lord is all-pervading, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-merciful. His nature is fundamentally antagonistic to all evil (*akhilaheyapratyanika*). He contains in himself whatever exists. While according to Sankara, the only reality is to be found in the non-qualified homogeneous highest Brahman which can only be defined as pure 'Being', all plurality being mere illusion, Brahman according to Sri Ramanuja comprises within itself distinct elements of plurality which all of them lay claim to absolute reality of one and the same kind. Whatever is presented by ordinary experience-matter (*achit*) in all its various modifications and individual souls (*chit*) of individual classes and degrees are essential real constituents of Brahman's nature. Matter and souls constitute, according to Sri Ramanuja, the body of the Lord and stand to him in entire dependence and subserviency in which a matter forming an animal or vegetable body stands to its soul.

or animating principle. The Lord pervades and rules all things which exist - material or immaterial-as their *antharyamin*. Matter and souls forming the body of the Lord are also called his modes (*prakara*). They are to be looked upon as his effects but they have enjoyed this kind of individual existence which is theirs from all eternity and will never be entirely resolved into the Brahman. They exist in two periodically alternating conditions-sometimes in a subtle state in which they do not possess those qualities by individual name and form. Matter in that state is unevolved (*avyakta*). The individual souls are not joined to material bodies and their intelligence is in a state of contraction or non-manifestation (*sankocha*). This is the *pralaya* state which occurs at the end of each kalpa and Brahman is said to be in its causal condition (*karanaavastha*). To that state all scriptural passages refer which speak of Brahman as being in the beginning one only without a second. Brahman is then said to be not absolutely one, for it contains within itself matter and souls in a germinal condition; but as in that condition they are so subtle as not to allow of individual distinction being made, they are not counted as something second in addition to Brahman. When the *pralaya* state comes to an end, creation takes place owing to an act of volition on the Lord's part. Primary unevolved matter then passes over into its other condition—it becomes gross and acquires all those sensible attributes, visibility and tangibility and so on, which are known from ordinary experience. At the same time, the soul enters into connection with material bodies corresponding to the merit or demerit acquired by them in previous forms of existence. Their intelligence at the same time, undergoes a certain expansion (*vikasa*). The Lord, together with matter in its gross state and expanded souls is Brahman in the condition of an effect (*karjavastha*). Cause and effect are thus at the bottom, the same; for the effect is nothing but the cause which has undergone a certain change (*parinama*). Hence the cause being known, the effect is being known likewise.

Owing to the effect of past actions the individual souls are implicated in *samsara*, the endless cycle of births, action and death, final escape from which is to be obtained by a study of the Vedas (*Gnanakanda*). Compliance with the *Karmakanda* does not lead outside *samsara*. But he who, assisted by the Grace of the Lord cognises and meditates on Him in the way prescribed by the *upanishads* reaches, at his death, final emancipation i.e., he passes through the different stages of the path of the gods up to the world of Brahman and there enjoys an everlasting blissful existence from which there is no return into the sphere of transmigration. The characteristics of the released soul are similar to those of Brahman. It participates in all the latter's glorious qualities excepting only the Brahman's power to emit, rule and retract the entire world.

Comparison of Advaita with Visista - advaita

1. Both teach *advaita* i.e., non-duality or Monism. There is only one all embracing Being.
2. (a) Sankara's *advaita* only is of a rigorous and absolute one. (b) Ramanuja's qualified or modified (*visisht*) *advaita* is non-duality with a difference.
3. (a) According to Sankara, whatever is is Brahman which is absolutely homogeneous, all difference and plurality being illusory. (b) According to Ramanuja also,

whatever is Brahman, but contains within itself elements of plurality owing to which it truly manifests itself in a diversified world.

4. (a) The world with its variety of material forms of existence is not unreal *maya*, but a real part of Brahman's nature, the body investing the universal self.

(b) The Brahman of Sankara is itself impersonal, a homogeneous mass of objectless thought transcending all attributes. A personal god it becomes only through association with the unreal principle of *maya* so that this *Iswara* is himself something unreal.

(c) Sri Ramanuja's Brahman is essentially a personal God—the all powerful and all wise ruler of a real world permeated and animated by his spirit and so there is no room for the distinction between a *param nirgunam* and *aparam saguna Brahman* or between *Brahman* and *Iswara*.

5. (a) Sankara's individual soul is Brahman in so far as limited by the unreal *upadhis* due to *maya*. (b) Sri Ramanuja's individual soul is really individual. It has sprung from Brahman and is never outside Brahman but, nevertheless enjoys a separate personal existence and will remain a personality for ever.

6. (a) The release from *samsara* means, according to Sankara, the absolute merging of the individual soul in Brahman due to the dismissal of the erroneous notion that the soul is different from Brahman.

(b) According to Sri Ramanuja, it only means soul's passing from the troubles of earthly life into a paradise where it will remain for ever in undisturbed personal bliss.

As Sri Ramanuja does not distinguish a higher and a lower Brahman, the distinction of a higher knowledge from a lower one is likewise not valid for him.

The teaching of the *Upaishads* is not twofold, but essentially one and leads the enlightened devotee to one result only.