

Survey:

SUDDHADVAITA: A SOLACE TO AN ORDINARY BHAKTA

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1. Introduction

The different forms of spiritualistic absolutism which one finds in Indian philosophy are in agreement with one another in their view that the real, the Brahman, is, ultimately, one and spiritual. They are, however, not in agreement with regard to the description of the nature of Brahman, His relation to the empirical world, the direct way for the realization of Him, etc. Theistically based systems of absolutist metaphysics believe that Brahman is a concrete Being and as such is identity in difference. They state that *bhakti* is the direct pathway for the realisation of the Supreme Being. In this context, *Bhakti* is defined as monotheism based on devotion to a personal God. *Bhakti* as a feeling of religious devotion still constitutes a part of every living religion.

Vaiṣṇava āchāryas like Rāmānuja, Mādhva, Vallabha and Nimbārka had upheld the concept of a personal God. They tried to combine upaniṣādic Brahman with theistic God (Viṣṇu) and showed us that devotion to a personal deity with auspicious attributes as the best means to attain salvation. It is believed that this kind of *bhakti* movement was a reaction against the religious ideology of Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkarāchārya. The impersonal concept of God and the path of jñāna, which Śaṅkarāchārya stressed, had a purely intellectual approach to reality. Such an intellectual approach was beyond the comprehension of common man, as he needs a God to whom he could surrender, love, depend upon and adore. The *bhakti* movement of Rāmānuja, Mādhva, Nimbārka and Vallabha presented such a personal God and really fulfilled

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the need of common man. So *bhakti* cult gets popularity and still occupies an important place among the people of India.

Among the *bhakti* schools of Vedānta, Vallabhāchārya's *Suddhādvaita* has an important place. Because of the profundity of the doctrines it expounds and the devotionism it teaches, *Suddhādvaita* is a quest for discovering the unity of all existence in the ultimate reality. Vallabhāchārya seeks to establish the supremacy of the divine personality, known under the different sacred names of Puruṣottama, Kṛṣṇa, etc., and equate Him with Brahman, the absolute of the Upaniṣads. For him the Supreme Being is a person with attributes; moreover, he admits reality of the world and self as well. He also points to the exclusive position of devotion (applicable to all) and the divine grace as the only means to overcome the fetters of *karma* on the *jīva*, to attain salvation. Although most of his teachings are theological, one can see the backing up of a consistent metaphysics to establish their reliability. He emphatically preferred to call his system *Suddhādvaita*, as Brahman is pure, *sat-cit-ānanda* and as there can be no touch of illusion in Him.

2. Metaphysics

Vallabhāchārya's system recognises only one independent perfect reality that is Brahman or Kṛṣṇa. He is both the agent as well as the enjoyer. God creates the world and individual souls by his *māyaśakti*, so he is both the efficient and material cause of this universe. Vallabhāchārya, in his *Tattvārtha Dīpanibandha*, writes: "Brahman is *sat cit* and *ānanda*, omnipresent, indestructible, omnipotent, self-dependent, omniscient and destitute of worldly qualities."¹

Kṛṣṇa is endowed with infinite power, infinite love and infinite knowledge. Vallabha even goes to the extent of saying that Brahman is the meeting ground of all contradictions; Brahman is suprarational. In the Vedas one can see contradictory statements about the nature of Brahman. Some passages state that Brahman is *Nirguṇa*, though at the same time some other passages express that He is the knower of all and sees and hears everything. Vallabha's view that Brahman is receptive of

¹Richard Bars, *Bhakti Sect of Vallabhacharya*, Haryana: Thomason Press, 1976, 87.

contradictory statements helps him to reconcile the contradictory statements in the Vedas. So Vallabha's philosophy seems to be more liberal than the other theistic Vedāntins. He pictures the reality in a manner demanded by theism and common man.

3. Vallabhāchārya: A Caviller of Śaṅkara's Māyavāda

Śaṅkarāchārya with the help of *māya* explains the world of plurality; *māya* conceals the real nature of Brahman and shows the world of souls and things. It is a fact that, common people are not satisfied with the doctrine of Śaṅkarāchārya. If *māya* is within Brahman, then, naturally it must be attributively related to Him and this view is against Śaṅkarāchārya's statement that Brahman is "Nirviśeṣa." If *māya* is a principle working outside Brahman, then dualism will be the result. Noticing all these, Vallabhāchārya, without using the principle of *māya* as a principle working outside Brahman, asserts the identity between soul and Brahman. *Māya* is a real power of Brahman, producing real effects and not false appearances. It is one of the powers of God and with the help of this *māya-śakti* the Brahman conceals part of himself to become the *jagat*. In *jagat* only the *Sat* of Brahman is visible, the *cit* and *ānanda* are hidden. Vallabhāchārya's explanation of *māya* principle looks more satisfactory to the common mind.

4. Avikṛta-Pariṇāmavāda

As mentioned above the Brahman himself manifests as the souls and the world, although he himself does not undergo any change or transformation. This is what is known as *avikṛta-pariṇāmavāda* or the theory of an entity expressing itself as an effect without itself undergoing change. To explain this Vallabhāchārya states the theory of *tirōbhāva* and *āvīrbhāva*. In this connection writes S. Radhakrishnan: "Brahman becomes whatever it wills by the evolution (*āvīrbhāva*) and involution (*tirōbhāva*) of its qualities."² Everything is God, but still things appear non-eternal in character, this is because, consciousness and bliss aspects are suppressed in the world; through his peculiar power, plurality and contrariness, every

²S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 2, Bombay: Oxford University, 1940, 757.

other distinguished relation is reconciled by God. Thus, creation of the world is only God's *līla* and divine sport.

5. Manifestations of Brahman

In addition to the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu, Vallabhāchārya points to three grades or forms of Brahman. They are the *ādhidāivika*, that is Parabrahman, or Kṛṣṇa or Puruṣōttama, the *ādhyātmika* that is *Akṣara Brahman* or *Antaryāmin*, the *ādhibhāntika* that is *Jagat*. Emanation, according to Vallabhāchārya, means concealing Lord's attributes of *bliss* and *consciousness* partly or entirely.

Kṛṣṇa has his immediate emanation in *Akṣara*. In *Akṣara* the *ānanda* aspect is considerably concealed. Vallabhāchārya says: "With the slight obscuration of Bliss the Brahman is called *Akṣara*."³ He is lesser than Kṛṣṇa and it is from *Akṣara* that all objects manifest themselves. *Akṣara* exists as the intermediary form between Brahman and *Jagat*. Everything comes out of it, just as sparks come out of fire. The *Akṣara* is the impersonal being with which the Śuddhādvaitins identify the Brahman of Śaṅkara's *Advaita Vendānta*. By the will of Parabrahman, the *Akṣara Brahman* appears as *kāla* or time, *karma* or action, *svabhāva* or nature. Time is supra-sensible, eternally pervasive and is the cause and support of all things. *Karma* is regarded as universal and it manifests itself in diverse forms and specific conditions as actions of individuals.

Svabhāva is admitted as a separate category. It is defined as that which produces change. At first there may be subtle changes, when they become manifest they assume the function of *svabhāva*. Out of *svabhāva* twenty-eight categories have evolved. As the categories are of the nature of God, they are called *tattva*. The twenty-eight *tattvas* are: "*Sattvas* (purity), *rajas* (activity), *tamas* (inertia). *Puruṣa*, *Prakṛiti*, *Mahat* (cosmic intelligence), *ahankāra* (egoism), five *tanmātras* (subtle elements), five *mahābhūtas* (gross elements), five *karmendriyas* (organs of action), five *jñānendriyas* (organs of knowledge) and *manas* (mind)."⁴

³G. V. Tagore, *Bhāgavata: Doctrine of Vallabhacharya*, New Delhi: D. K. Printwort, 1998, 68.

⁴Tagore, *Bhāgavata: Doctrine of Vallabhacharya*, 69.

The *jagat* is real because it is an expression of the *sat* element of Brahman. So there is no chance for error, but error is a common phenomenon in the world. One of the aspects of *māya* called *vyāmōhika* – a kind of illusion that is really responsible for error in the world.

6. *Jīva* or Individual Soul

Akṣara Brahman is the source of *jīvas* and they are eternal, formless and omnipresent. G. H. Bhatt states: “The Lord was alone without a second, in the beginning of a cycle. He desired to be many for the sake of pleasure and as he desires, thousands of souls came instantaneously out of *Akṣara* Brahman like sparks from fire. The souls emanate from the Lord himself. The soul is thus an *amśa* of Brahman and is eternal.”⁵ The soul is atomic and it does not vary according to the size of the body it exists. It is the body that is born and not that the *jīva*. The *jīvas* are not different from Brahman in quality, though they are less than Brahman in quantity, as they are only small parts of Brahman. Misery of the *jīva* is due to its connection with the body, but Brahman is not affected by the misery and pleasure of the *jīvas*. He is merely an onlooker.

Chaithanya or intelligence is a quality of the soul and it is through this quality that the soul experiences everything in the body and experiences various things of the world. All *jīvas* in essence are equal because all *jīvas* are part of Brahman, but Brahman in order to perform His divine *līla* created different kinds of *jīvas*. The souls’ difference in nature is necessary to bring variety. They are classified into three groups, *pravāha*, *maryāda* and *puṣṭi*. By pointing to the different kinds of *jīvas*, Vallabhāchārya clearly explains the different spiritual ability found among human beings. The *Pravāha* souls are mainly interested in worldly matters and they have little potential for liberation. *Pravāha jīvas* are of two kinds: those that are knowingly evil and those that are unknowingly evil. *Maryāda* souls are followers of Vedic teachings. The *puṣṭi* souls worship the Lord out of pure love. The *puṣṭi jīvas* and *maryāda jīvas* have the potential for liberation.

⁵G. H. Bhatt, *Srivallabhacharya and His Doctrines*, Delhi: Butala and Co., 1980, 70.

The highest kind of *jīva* is *puṣṭijīva*. *Puṣṭi* or *Poṣaṇa* means the special spiritual nourishments the *jīva* receives through the grace of God. In *jīvas* the bliss aspect is latent or unmanifest, while it is present in *Saṁsāra*. By the action of *avidya*, the *jīvas* forget the real nature; they are also ignorant about their *svadharma*. The *svadharma* of a *jīva* is service or *seva*. The *jīvas* think that they are unique, independent and can perform actions according to their own will. This creates egoism in them and egoism separates the *jīvas* from Brahman. The existence that is formed by the *avidya* of *jīva* is called *saṁsāra*, which is wandering through an endless cycle of births. *Saṁsāra*, therefore, is absolutely unreal. Although it is a sheer mental attitude, the *jīvas* consider it to be true.

Vallabhāchārya, like other Indian thinkers, accepts the doctrine of *karma*. The soul is both the agent and enjoyer of *karmas*, so God is not cruel or partial and God distributes the fruits of the *jīvas* in an impartial way. In order to reap the fruits of their *karmas* the living beings must undergo an unending series of births. It is the *jīva* that passes through the infinite series of births.

7. *Bhakti*: The Way to Attain *Moksa* or Liberation

Bhakti, according to Vallabhāchārya, means service of Lord with mind, body and speech. A true *bhakta* is one who believes in complete self-surrender; he will do his duties without any condition or desire for the fruits of action.

Vallabhāchārya prescribes two different categories of *bhakti*: *maryāda-mārga* and *Puṣṭi-mārga*. He personally advocates *puṣṭi-mārga* because it is in agreement with his *Vaiṣṇava* faith. The advantage of this path is that all people including the lower caste and uneducated through divine grace can rise so high in the scale of devotion. There is no condition for this grace. This path is open to all, and God by his own will selects some to play with Him. Avoidance of evil, performance of good deeds and practice of spiritual discipline are part of this method, although sometimes these efforts will not help man to attain *Puruṣōttama*; He can be realised only by one whom the Lord himself lifts up. Thus, a devotee has no right to question the priority of the Lord's choice. Bhatta writes:

It is most interesting to note that the divine bliss is purely a gift of divine grace that is called *puṣṭi* in the *Suddhādvaita* system. The best illustration of divine grace is found in the case of the *gōpīs* of Vṛndāvana, who are rightly described as the spiritual teachers who have opened the path of *puṣṭi* to the world at large.⁶

The *jīvas* selected by the Lord are called divinely nourished souls, as they are accepted by the Lord as His own. God is impartial and distributes the fruits of the actions of the *jīvas* in an impartial way. The distinctive feature of such *jīvas* is that they have an innate and unconditional love and attachment to God. This kind of love is not something stimulated by external conditionings but a reflection from the souls, because of the Divine favour that has fallen on them.

Vallabhāchārya explains the *maryāda-mārga* as the Vedic path compatible with *jñāna*. This kind of liberation is also possible only by the grace of God. *Maryāda jīvas* motivated by the desire for *mōkṣa* from *samsāra* depend on the effort they put in and merge in the impersonal *Akṣara*. Moral and spiritual efforts help man attain the *Akṣara Brahman*, *maryāda-jīvas* through the discipline of *Jñāna-mārga*, imagine that they liberate themselves, when they are merged into the *Akṣara Brahman*. The limitation of *maryāda-mārga* is that it can be practised only by males belonging to *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya* and *Vaiśya* groups. In *puṣṭi-mārga* there are no such limitations. It is not reserved for any particular caste. It is applicable to all without any distinction of caste, sex, creed or nationality. A devotee of *puṣṭimārga* does everything out of his natural love and for the sake of the Lord. Here one can say that by presenting the *Puṣṭimārga* Vallabhāchārya shows his belief in the oneness of all human beings. He is a man who believes that in the eyes of God the class and caste distinctions that we see around are meaningless. Total self-surrender is necessary for the practice of *puṣṭimārga*. It is only by the grace of Kṛṣṇa that one can attain His grace. Dedication of oneself along with one's dependents and belongings, to God is the central feature of self-surrender. Richard Bars writes: "*Puṣṭimārga* is a way ... and was used to denote the way pointed out by Buddha for escape from the pain of existence in which the only support and strength is the grace of Śrī Kṛṣṇa."⁷

⁶Bhatt, *Srivallabhacharya and His Doctrines*, 17.

⁷Bars, *Bhakti Sect of Vallabhacharya*, 87.

According to Vallabhāchārya, *bhakti* is an affection for God, and he considers love as the seed of *bhakti* and describes it as a combination of *prema* and *seva*. *Seva* or service may be of the body (*tanuja*), of material wealth (*vittaya*) or of the mind (*manāsa*) service with body and wealth has taken the form of serving God in images.”⁸

Vallabhāchārya holds that an ascetic life is not essential in the religion of grace and, therefore, he remained a householder even at the age of fifty-three. There is a *Saṁsāraka* called *Brahmasambānda* in which the *jīva* surrenders himself completely to God and starts a new life of complete dependence on divine grace. In order to take membership in *Brahmasambānda*, acceptance of asceticism is not recommended. As Vallabhāchārya has expressed it, “It is not necessary to take vow of *Sannyāsa* in order to practise the nine fold *bhakti*, for in practice of that *bhakti* the help of other *bhakta* is essential, both the pride common to the state of *Sannyāsa* and the duties of the state of *Sannyāsa* are contrary of *bhakti mārga*.”⁹ But he never completely rejected *Sannyāsa*. *Sannyāsa*, according to him, had a place in one’s life when one begins to feel the separation from God in the most acute form. This feeling points to the fact that it is time to give up worldly life and concentrate one’s attention on God alone, thus the need for *Sannyāsa*.

The dominant *bhaktibhāva* of Vallabhāchārya’s *saṁpradāya* is *Vātsalyabhāva*. Child Kṛṣṇa is the most common *mūrti* that is to be worshipped. *Puṣṭimārga* is dedicated to the pure love for Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Vallabhāchārya accepts idol worship because he realised that such kind of worship is a solace to the ordinary man. Idol worship (child Kṛṣṇa) still exists in different parts of India. *Sringāra* form of devotion is also accepted in this sect. It is, however, recommended only for the select few of very high qualification. The first qualification for a follower of *Sringāra Bhakti* is absence of sexuality or desires of a sensual nature.

The result of *bhakti*, according to Vallabhāchārya, is three fold. First, the devotee attains to *alaukika sāmāthyā* or efficiency of divine nature. The pure love of the devotee, *sāyūjya* or association with the Divine, is another end which the devotee attains. *Sevopayogideha* is

⁸S. N. Dasgupta, *History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 5, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955, 347.

⁹Bars, *Bhakti Sect of Vallabhacharya*, 33.

another end in which the soul gets a spiritual body suited for divine service. In the case of *puṣṭi* souls there is no emergence but eternal service of God in the transcendental state. This is the higher destiny of the soul. Although Vallabhāchārya does not say anything about *jīvanmukti*, he believes that when *avidya* is destroyed, the material bodies, being the product of *avidya*, are also destroyed and the souls enter into the eternal abode of bliss.

Vallabhāchārya's conception of *bhakti* is a support to simple souls who have naturally got unflinching faith in God and submission to His will. He had never presented *bhakti* as a religious principle opposed to *jñāna* (because he provides both *puṣṭi* and *maryāda mārga*).

8. Conclusion

In Vallabhāchārya's philosophy one can see a beautiful blending of monistic philosophy with the principles of *bhakti mārga*. He emphasises the oneness of material objects, *jīva* and God. In *Akṣara Brahman*, *Sat*, *cit* and *ānanda* are present, though *ānanda* aspect is partially concealed. If the quality of *cit* is developed in the material objects, it becomes *jīva*; again, if the quality *ānanda* also is developed it becomes *Antaryāmi*. Here one can see the oneness of *jada*, *jīva* and *antaryāmin*

Vallabhāchārya gives devotion a metaphysical background and believes that devotion together with God's grace is the right and easy way to attain Brahma realization. Vallabha's conception of God, soul and matter seems to be more satisfactory because even the uneducated layman can grasp it.

Brahman is a supra-rational phenomenon and, therefore, there is no need to have firm faith in our reasoning capacity. Different philosophical systems may be regarded as describing some partial truth of reality. No philosophy can give us a total description of supreme reality. Though Vallabha rejected Advaita philosophy, he was not hard in his criticisms against other systems. Thinking likewise one can say that Vallabhāchārya's philosophy leads to tolerance. He had faith in *Srī Kṛṣṇa* but this does not mean that he rejected other Gods. He was of the opinion that *Mahādeva*, *Srī Kṛṣṇa*, etc., are different names for the same Brahman. He was a broad-minded theistic thinker and not a fanatic *vaiṣṇava*.

Today it may be difficult for people to follow the various rituals and ceremonies prescribed by religions to attain salvation. *Puṣṭi mārga*, however, is the right and easy pathway to God, which can be practised by all men. Vallabhāchārya showed us that liberation could be attained without much difficulty and ritualism, but with the grace of God alone. In fact, asceticism is not necessary to attain liberation. So his doctrine did give a real consolation to the common man. As a religious man Vallabhāchārya was opposed to ritualistic tendencies and he rejected the blind traditionalism and ritualism. His religious practices are characterised by simplicity, and instructs others to dedicate whatever is with them completely to God. Modern men live in a tension-ridden world, and many of them look towards God for relief and in present day 'situations Vallabhāchārya's teaching has special relevance because it had a democratic outlook embracing all sects and communities. It is suitable for the modern man because it is very much practicable for all and it appeals to their total life.