

Review Essay

History and Hermeneutics of Religious Texts

Ananta Charan Sukla, *Sridhara Svami: A Medieval Philosopher of Religion*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 180.

“All critics are historicist upto a point. The pastness of the texts that we interpret demands accommodations of critical approach to negotiate historical differences”. — *Paul Hamilton*

In ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’ (1956), one of his three most influential essays admired by F.R. Leavis [the other two being ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1917) and ‘The Function of Criticism’ (1923)] T.S. Eliot expounds the theory that criticism is ‘commentation’, ‘evaluation’ and exposition of work of art(s), and that the literary critic plays a crucial role in ‘elucidating’ and ‘analyzing’ texts/works of art as a dispassionate judge. While so doing in course of his ‘pursuit of true judgement’, an ideal critic, according to Eliot, should discipline and overcome his personal prejudices and cranks, and should resort to ‘comparison’ and ‘analysis’ as chief tools of literary criticism for better and more effective understanding of the reader(s). Whereas comparison facilitates the critic to correlate divergent thoughts, issues and nuances, analysis takes to elucidation as a necessary preparation for effective understanding and appreciation. At the same time, Eliot’s warning that a critic should know ‘what to compare’ and ‘what to analyze’ obviously points to another important requisite qualification of a critic that he must have a very highly developed sense of fact. ‘An ideal critic’, Eliot boldly pronounces, ‘must be an ideal reader’—a man of both range and depth, of critical insight and perceptive mind—so that he can satisfactorily correlate divergent ideas and issues in a befitting way. What is talked about an ‘ideal critic’ can be fairly applied to an ideal commentator on literary, religious and philosophical texts whose primary task is to make complicated and complex ideas easily accessible and aesthetically relishable for the reader through ‘interpretation’ of texts. Whereas comparison and analysis facilitate the process of understanding a text, it is interpretation that breathes life and soul into it. Eliot observes:

Comparison and analysis need only the cadavers on the table; but interpretation is always producing parts of the body from its pockets and fixing them in place. (*The Function of Criticism*)

In literary criticism, ‘interpretation’ falls under the purview of ‘Hermeneutics’—the art and theory of interpretation—which purports to reconstruct the original ‘context’ of

a ‘text’ in order to appropriate/validate interpretation itself. Timothy Clark in the essay “Interpretation: Hermeneutics” observes that in predominantly religious texts like the *Bible*, hermeneutics aims at achieving a correct interpretation of the text in religious context. Hermeneutics raises some crucial questions today: a) What do we mean when someone claims that he/she ‘understands’ the text?, b) Does it mean his understanding and interpretation go in consonance with the author’s life or its social or historical context?, c) Is it possible to understand/interpret the text exactly in the context in which it was produced?, d) How can a genuine understanding overcome the obstacles of both distance in historical time and often distance in culture?, e) Can we apply the same parameters of ‘interpretation’ and ‘understanding’ for literary, historical, religious and philosophical texts altogether?, f) Can’t we bring ‘texts’ written in the past to ‘reconstruct’ them for relevant understanding today rather than for mere explanation on the basis of the written words?

In modern hermeneutics, we encounter what is called ‘scientific appropriation’ of the text in the hands of critics/commentators. But Hans-George Gadamer drew on Heidegger’s arguments to endorse the authority of traditional intellectual skills such as textual interpretation by underplaying the scientific method. While appropriating Heidegger’s philosophy, Gadamer holds that the historical and topical situation/condition of the society inhabited by the interpreter should constitute the central focus of his interpretation. In his major work *Truth and Method* (1960) Gadamer argues that the past can be grasped only in relation to the present—an extension of the Eliotian concept of tradition and historical sense. To Eliot, tradition does not mean blind past, thrives on a special kind of ‘historical sense’ which involves a “perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (*Tradition and the Individual Talent*). The historical sense propels a writer/critic, Eliot further maintains, not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that he has to respect the ‘whole tradition’ in terms of an ‘unbroken continuity’ so as to realize the fact that the past and present are not two disparate segments for clashing with each other, but two facets of the ‘organic entity’ constantly conditioning and enriching each other. Eliot observes:

No poet, no artist of any sort, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, yet you must set him for contrast and comparison among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic not merely historical criticism. (*Tradition and the Individual Talent*)

In traditional method of historical criticism, interpretation is validated by external evidence and social-cultural context in which the author lived and his text produced. But, following Roland Barthe’s contention that the author is dead and that a work is basically different from ‘text’, there comes up fresh scope for new perspectives. Whereas a work is delimited to some pages and limited space in the library for accommodation, a text with its multidimensional space and facts including sub-texts/subversive nuances and intertextuality opens up enormous possibilities for interpretation(s). The New historicists

like Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield have attempted to situate literary texts with the institutions, social practices, religious and political ideologies on the ground that the 'text' interacts as both a 'product' and a 'producer' of cultural energies and codes. Their viewpoint is foregrounded upon the idea of history not as a homogeneous and stable pattern of facts and events which can be used as a background to the literature of a particular era, but as a constant interaction, negotiation, exchange, interchange/ transaction with other components inside the network of beliefs, institutions, practices and cultural power relations. The emphasis is laid on 'ordering of history' rather than 'periodization of history', and Stephen Greenblatt, a powerful exponent of New Historicism, emphasizes 'negotiation' and 'transaction' of diverse kinds of texts in relation to their institutional and cultural contexts: Contemporary theory must situate itself ... not out side interpretation, but in the hidden places of negotiation and exchange. (1989: 13)

The idea of negotiation of various texts is further extended in New historicism to the negotiation between the author, text and its readers who are constructed by the cultural conditions and ideological formations of their time. Since the ideology and cultural background of the author does not necessarily conform to those of his critics/ commentators/ readers, the New Historicists would therefore argue that the critic should not obviously 'naturalize' or 'universalize' the text in the backdrop of 'specific culture' and time bound representation. However, this does not mean that the contemporary socio-historical and cultural conditions in which the author lived and his text was produced should be blissfully forgotten. Louis Montrose in "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture" characterizes New Historicism as a reciprocal concern with the 'historicality of texts' and the 'textuality of history', whereas Paul Hamilton in "Reconstructing historicism "tends to negotiate the 'past' with the 'present' by celebrating the post-Structuralist position that there is no 'fixed meaning'/stabilized meaning and that literary texts can be adequately interpreted by situating them amid the discursive practices/friendship. To be precise, the pastness of the texts that we interpret demands, from New Historicist's point of view, accommodation of critical approaches to negotiate historical difference.

II

A. C. Sukla's book under review is a strenuous work and a stupendously executed critical achievement on Sridhara Svami (14th c. A.D.), one of the celebrated medieval philosophers of Bhagavata philosophy and religion that swept away the entire medieval India by virtue of its emotional ardour, passionate intensity and devotional ecstasy right from the days of Alvars (6th c. A.D.) down to the Bengal Vaisnavism of Sri Caitanya, Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva and Orissan Vaisnavism of the Pancasakha period. One of the significant aspects of medieval devotional mysticism, be it East or West, is that religion, philosophy and poetry constitute an inviolable trio, and this is all the more applicable in case of Dante, St. Bernard, the mine-mystics and the exponents of Bride mysticism as much as it is applicable to/for Jayadeva, Vidyapati and Candidasa who

infused religion and philosophy with poetic felicity and ecstatic expression. In their hands was achieved the reconciliation between sacred and profane when spiritual emotions were passionately conceived in terms of human relationship. Medievalism was characterized by what Richard Mckeeon calls "the poetic expression of philosophy as well as the philosophic criticism of poetry" (1946: 230). Similarly, devotion (*bhakti*) was lauded as the most effective medium of experiencing man's emotional union with God through deep devotion and endearing attachment for a personal Lord—Visnu, Narayana, Krsna, Vasudeva—who, unlike Aristotle's 'Unmoved Mover' and Plato's 'Abstract Ideal' came down by virtue of benevolent love and grace (Agape) to take part in the emotional longing and ecstasy (Eros) of the devotee. What is called attributeless Reality (*Nirguna Brahman*) in philosophy is metamorphosed into a lovable Lord of attributes (*Saguna Brahman*), and the entire paraphernalia of devotion backed by faith (*sraddha*) and unconditional surrender bridges the wide gap between sacred and profane in a state of what G.A. Grierson calls 'communion with a personally conceived Ultimate Reality'. The seminal texts on bhakti in India like the *Bhagvad Gita* (BG), *Visnu Purana* (VP), *Bhagavata Purana* (Bhp), *Garga Samhita* (GS), *Bhaktisutras* of Narada and Sandilya bear testimony to the emotional ecstasy and divine rapture experienced by the devotee and the Adorable Lord, apart from indicating the amicable affinity and interaction of philosophy, religion and poetry—one constantly enriching the other/another. In this connection, J.S.M. Hooper's observation is apt: Religion, for most men in India as in the west, is weakest when it is merely intellectual and without emotional sympathy. (1928: 3)

Keeping in view the observations made by Richard Mckeeon and J.S.M. Hooper, Sridhara's learned commentaries on BG, VP and Bhp and Sukla's assessment of Sridhara as a commentator and a philosopher of religion could be discussed together in the backdrop of the theoretical reflections of T.S. Eliot and the New-Historicists discussed earlier.

III

Eliot's authoritative remark that an ideal critic is an 'ideal reader' can be fairly applied to Acarya Sridhara whose invaluable Sanskrit commentaries on BG, VP and Bhp bespeak his profound scholarship, rare gifts of range and depth, intuition and critical insight with which he has handled philosophical, religious, linguistic issues, problems and questions. No less profound is the critical insight, range and depth in philosophy, religion, linguistics, history and literary criticism with which the author of the present monograph. Sukla decidedly competent as to throw sufficient light on hitherto untrodden areas of Sridhara's philosophic self— his major ideas and doctrines involving Ultimate Realty, individual souls and the phenomenal world and the ways and nature of experience of the Ultimate Reality. With his characteristic/constitutional seriousness, Sukla candidly states at the outset of the prologue that he finds it 'extremely risky' to 'study dispassionately' a philosopher of Sridhara's repute who was passionately attached to Bhagavat cult. While respectfully subscribing to Eliot's view that the ideal critic is a 'dispassionate judge', Sukla is equally aware of the responsibility of a cultural critic who

can't blissfully ignore the cultural context and the rich tradition of Bhakti movement and Bhagavata cult which nourished and nurtured the mind and heart of the medieval mystics, philosophers and men of religion. And Sridhara was no exception to it, Sukla observes:

The phenomenon must be set in its proper cultural perspective prior to its critical evaluation where the critic has absolute right in viewing the phenomenon from multifarious perspectives, as he considers reasonable and appropriate for his purposes. (p. 7)

The author has challengingly defined his task ahead as a 'cultural responsibility'—a responsibility to situate Sridhara together with his commentaries on *BG*, *VP* and *Bhp* with remarkable comprehensiveness within the ambit of a dignified synthesis/syncretism of Saktism, Saivism, Sankhya dualism, Vedantic monism and Vaisnavism. While so doing, the major problem Sukla faces is Sridhara's identification of Krsna with the Absolute Reality, even though historians and cultural anthropologists have frequently underplayed Krsna as a mythical figure rather than accepting Him as the Ultimate Reality. However, he is aware of the fact that the logic of a philosophical concept/a religious idea is not grounded upon history, even though history facilitates the development of the former. Like a dispassionate judge in Eliotian sense of the term, he denies neither the efficacy of philosophy and religion nor underestimates the claims of history:

I do not underestimate history. But I warn at the same time, any overestimate of history. History does not formulate ideas, although ideas are formulated in course of history. (p. 7)

Having said so, he also endorses the New-Historicist's view that literary texts can not grow single-handed and that the texts should be situated in terms of negotiation within the periphery of political ideologies, social practices and religious institutions. The *BG*, *VP* and *Bhp* as texts written at different times of history not only reflect the socio-cultural ethos in which they were produced, but also find themselves recreated/reconstructed through the commentaries of Sridhara and others thereby producing fresh cultural energies. Since history is not a homogenous and stable pattern of facts so that a specific historical pattern will be fixed for 'interpretation' of a particular text, what is felt as an imperative necessity is that there should be constant negotiation and interaction, exchange and interchange with other elements for cultural assimilation. In Sridhara's commentaries, one locates ample scope for negotiating various cultural strands. In the 'prologue' to his monograph, Sukla candidly states:

Sridhara's unification of the Saivite and Vaisnavite cults through the unification of absolute monism of Sankara, qualified monism of Ramanuja, Madhva's dualism in studying the Puranic Vedanta non-dualism with its due weightage on the Sankhya-yoga dualism and the practices of the eight fold methods of Kriya-yoga, taking simultaneously the religious ritualistic worship of the Tamil Alvars (6th c.-8th c. A.D.) and the Vaisnava Tantras (rituals) of the Pancaratra School into account opened a vast area of inter-connected issues, ideologies, doctrines, both sacred and profane that threw me instantly into a fathomless ocean of diverse experiences. (p. 2)

In the first place, Sridhara was a Brahmin of Paippalada branch of *Atharva Veda* whose traditional rituals characteristic of brahminism combined with Saivism and Vaisnavism when he became a direct disciple of a Sankarite monk (Ramakrishnananda Svami) in the monastery of Kapilasha, a famous Saivite shrine in Odisha. Again, his commitment to the worship of Gopala/Gopinatha in accordance with the *Tapani Upanisads* of the *Atharva Veda* and of Nrsingha-Narayana whose blessings (*Sri Nrsingha prasadatah*) made him a devoted Bhagavata, paved the way for religious syncretism and formulated his all-embracing thought-process as well. Viewed from the stand point of philosophy, Sridhara was opposed to Sankara's absolute monism and advocated pure monism (*Suddhadvaita*) which was preached by both Madhva and Visnu Svami, whom he quote in his commentary on *Bhp* (I. 7. 6). S.N. Dasgupta argues that Sridhara was acquainted with Visnu Svami's commentary on the *Bhp* when the latter came to Puri on a pilgrimage. (IV. 382-3) Sankara Vedanta views the phenomenal world as an illusion, and emphasizes the permanent/unchangeable nature of Brahman consisting of two characteristics—essential (*svarupa*) and accidental (*tatastha*). Acarya Madhva contests Sankara's view point and strongly advocates the point that both 'essential' and accidental characteristics constitute the integrated nature of Brahman. Reality is transcendental in its essential (*svarupa*) aspect, whereas it is immanent (*saguna*) in its metaphorical (*tatastha*) aspects. The Buddhist notion of 'garbha' signifying Reality as essenceless (*nairatmya*) entails the fact that it is devoid of essence and form and hence a void (*sunyata*). Therefore, the Ultimate Reality is the object of indeterminate perception/cognition which is only metaphorical because it is beyond the scope of empirical comprehension/verification. But, Madhva accepts the upanisadic concept of atman-Brahman as all-pervading, and to him, Visnu is the Ultimate Reality. Unlike Sankara, he views the phenomenal world as real always associated with fivefold differences between (a) the self and Visnu, (b) the selves themselves, (c) matter and Visnu, (d) matter and matter, (e) matter and self.

Before the emergence of Sridhara, a fertile climate and a conducive ground had been prepared for qualified monism and knowledge based devotion (*jnana-bhakti*) as against the absolute monism of Sankara. In chapter two of his book under discussion (Sridhara on Bhagavata ontology), Sukla has made an indepth analysis of the Ultimate Reality, individual souls and the phenomenal world. And while doing so, he has discussed that the Bhagavata ontology is foregrounded upon the *saguna* manifestation of Reality who was inclined to emanate itself for self-delight into different forms. The delightful self of Reality was more and more emphasized in the light of the upanisadic concept of *Rasa* (*raso vaisah*) and *Ananda* (*anandat khalu emani bhutani jayante*) as developed in *Taittiriya*. The paradigm of 'rasa-ananda' is solidly backed by the argument that Reality is Sat-Cit-Ananda and is necessarily constituted by Being the controller of all attributes and as the embodiment of purity and illumination (*sattva guna*), divine attributes (*gunas*), divine personality/incarnation (*divyavataara*) and divine activities (*divyavilala*).

While recognizing the transcendent as well as immanent aspects of the Reality, the Bhagavata ontology embellished Reality further by adorning Him with twelve attributes

in terms of endearing human worldly association: wisdom (*jnana*), energy (*sakti*), strength (*bala*), lustre of the divine body (*tejas*), creative power (*virya*), prosperity (*aisvarya*), easy accessibility (*saualabhya*), fine manners (*saushilya*), filial feeling (*vatsalya*), grace (*krpa*), generosity (*adarya*), and friendship (*bandhuta*).

One can now safely share with Prof. Sukla's argument that "Reality is no more an abstract concept", and that the wide gulf between sacred and profane is considerably shrunk through the harmonization of the phenomenal and the ontological aspects of the Reality. Before Madhva, there were Ramanuja and Alvars, the mystic devotees of South who experienced emotional relationship with the *saguna* manifestation of Reality as Visnu, Narayana, Krsna, Vasudeva, the adorable personal Lord of Vaisnavism who possessed/possesses the phenomenal emotions and feelings without ever being afflicted by them. The Alvars exploited the Krsna myth to express their devotional longing for the Reality in terms of different human relationships—Periyar as the foster mother of Krsna (Yasoda), Kulasekhar as the natural mother (Devaki) and Andal as a milkmaid (*gopi*), and the devotional-emotional attachment with Reality in terms of *gopi bhava* has been established in *Narada bhaktisutras* and *Bhp* as the highest form of devotion (*bhakti*)—*yatha braja gopikanam*. Prof. Sukla cogently observes that the "recreation of Krsna-gopi relationship in a mythical pattern expedites both the poetic and philosophical insight of Nammalvar", and that in the three Bhagavata texts, the milk-maids undergo a substantial philosophical metamorphosis into a collective ontological symbol—in so far as they represent the very erotic aspect of the Ultimate Reality spoken as Rasa and Ananda. The poetic experience of the philosophy of Rasa, Ananda and erotic sentiment (*srngara*) was exploited after the classical codes of Vatsayana's *Kamasutra* and Bharata's *Natyasastra*, by Jayadeva in his *Gitagovinda* wherein the erotic enjoyment of the Reality (Krsna) with His delightful/sportive energy (Allhadini-sakti) called Radha was delineated in terms of passionate poetic expression.

As against the Vedanta identity of the universal and individual souls, the Alvars developed a paraphernalia of feudal relationship and accordingly the soul was viewed as a subservient property of the feudal Lord (*Paramatman*) characteristic of the concept of courtly love. At the same time, the Alvars developed the idea of unconditional self-surrender (*prapatti*) to the Lord by observing six-fold disciplines (firm determination, humility, faith, ardent prayer, absolute trust and refrain from action prohibited by Sastras) which can be correlated with the nine-fold devotion (*navadha-bhakti*) in the *Bhp*—listening, singing the Lord's glory, contemplating His greatness, service at His feet, offering articles, prostrating, servitude (*dasya*), friendly disposition and self-surrender. In Alvarian mysticism, salvation is eternal servitude and absolute self-surrender (*saranagati*), and the primary objective is to pine for an eternal vision of the determinate form of Reality. One is here reminded of the Satvatas and their methods of worshipping the Reality as detailed in Pancaratra texts/Satvat scriptures and as exhaustively discussed by Prof. Sukla in chapter one of the book under the title 'Bhagavata Cult in the Making'.

With their non-vedic theology and rituals of worship (*satvata vidhi*), the Satvatas are divided into two groups—one worshipping the four heroes of their mythical tradition,

and the other worshipping only Vasudeva as the manifestation of Narayana, the Ultimate Reality. In case of the former, Vasudeva, Sahkarsana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha, are worshipped together as four Vyuhās—manifestations of the Ultimate Reality (Purosottama). Whereas *Narada-pancaratra* prescribes the elaborate method of Krsna worship during five nights, *The Ahirbudhnya Samhita* recognizes the fivefold forms of the Reality: transcendent (*para*), emanatory (*vyuha*), aspects of prosperity (*vibhava*), self-controlling power (*antaryami*) and the very spiritual essence of the images (*arca*). The *Bhp* refers to the devotees of Narayana in the land of Dravidas who were none but the Alvars who worshipped Narayana according to Pancaratra rituals and who agreed to the Pancaratra philosophy that Reality has five forms of manifestation as detailed above. Surprisingly, Sridhara is well aware of the fact that in *Bhp* (VI. 16. 33) Vasudeva-Krsna is the embodiment of Narayana, the deity of the Satvata scriptures (*satvata sastra vighraha*); and Sridhara interprets the Sanskrit phrase 'vighraha' (image) by indicating the fact that it is prescribed in the Satvata scriptures (*satvat saastrokta*) wherein emphasis has been laid on the spiritual essence of the images. More significantly, the Oriya poet Jagannatha Das (16th c. A.D.) who made an Oriya transcription of the *Bhp* not only recognized Sridhara with humility and great admiration, but identified Satvatas with Yadavas, the descendents of Yadu, son of the mythical king Yayati, from Sukra's daughter Devayani, and also spoke of Krsna as the deity of the Yadava dynasty. S.N. Dasgupta maintains that the 'Narayaniya' section of the *Mahabharata* (XII. 335-348) bears the stamp of the Aryan accommodation of the Satvatas, and that *BG* is composed by the Satvatas and later inserted into the epic (Dasgupta: I. 422). Here it is important to note that Sridhara's reference to and interpretation of 'vighraha' points to the entire paraphernalia of image-worship in Satvata scriptures/ Pancaratra texts including *Narada-pancaratra* and *Ahirbudhnya*, and also to the replacement of the vedic ritualistic method of worship by offering agrarian and natural products such as flowers, milk, curd, ghee, tila, dhanya, vrihi, incense and tambula. Sukla rightly states that the Satvat form of worship was 'appropriate for a pastoral and agrarian society during the later Vedic age. Evidently, the Vedic Visnu-Narayana merged with Vasudeva-Krsna of the Satvatas giving rise to systematic image worship which was absent in orthodox religious systems. Sridhara's worship of Krsna as the Adorable Ultimate Reality can therefore be situated/negotiated in the context of the Satvata system of agrarian society/economy and culture.

IV

Since Bhagavata Philosophy/Cult is grounded upon Saguna-bhakti, Sridhara is a Bhagavata reared in the tradition of qualified monism and knowledge-based devotion. Sukla categorically denies that Sridhara was a follower of Absolute monism of Sankara. S.K. De, a learned scholar on Vaisnavism, maintains in his *Early History of Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (1961) that Sridhara's commentary on the *Bhp* was instrumental in propagating knowledge-based bhakti in Bengal—a fact that has been unabashedly acknowledged by Krsnadasa Kaviraj in his *Chaitanya Caritamrta* (1615).

Sridhara has also been the central source of inspiration for Sri Caitanya and his philosophy of 'Achintyabhedvada', whereas his *Bhavarthadipika Tika* on *Bhp* has

established him as a decided philosopher of religion and a great critic/commentator so as to inspire Sankaradeva (Assam) and Jagannatha Dasa (Odisha) to render the *Bhp* into their native languages. Behind Sridhara's acceptance of the concept of qualified monism and knowledge-based devotion, none can set aside the influence of Ramanuja's Visistadvaita philosophy.

To Ramanuja who established his monastery at Puri and propounded Srivaisnavism as well, Reality is a determinate entity (*savisesa*) with attributes and a corporeal body that is organically related to the universe of sentient souls (*cit*) and non-sentient souls (*acit*). Unlike the Alvars who directed their eternal servitude to the Reality in terms of human relationship, Ramanuja proposed bhakti as worship (*upasana*) in terms of an intellectual approach in that action (*karma*) and knowledge (*jnana*) purify the mind of the worshipper thereby paving the path for *bhakti*. His intellectual approach involves a five-fold process of progression—approach (*adhihamana*), preparation of offering (*upadana*), oblation (*ijya*), recitation (*svadhyaya*) and devotion (*bhakti*)—which might not have escaped the notice of Sridhara. At the same time, with his access into Kriya Yoga and Patanjali's notion of Isvara, Sridhara too found a philosophical coil to heal the Sankhya concept of dualism between Prakrti and Purusa. Prof. Sukla therefore rightly observes that Sridhara's ontology of Bhagavata is a harmonization of the Vedantic monism with Sankhya-Yoga system, Pancaratra cult, Saktism and Saivism.

With his perceptive awareness of the 'historical sense' and the wave of religious and philosophical syncretism that exercised its strong foothold in the post-Sankarite period, Sridhara as an ideal critic generously kept all doors open for negotiation, exchange and transaction of ideas so as to encourage cultural assimilation. For instance, in his commentaries on three Bhagavata texts, he has accommodated, like his predecessor Madhva, a healthy compromise between dualism and monism, Saivism and Vaisnavism, and between Saktism and Vaisnavism. Here, it is pertinent to mention that several puranas composed during the Classical (6th -9th c.) period tended to synthesize/assimilate the trends of Saktism, Saivism and Vaisnavism to achieve social cohesiveness, religious tolerance/harmony, political unity and protection/preservation of culture against the onslaught of Islam. For instance, the *Markandeya Purana* and *Devi Bhagavata* synthesized Saktism with Saivism and Vaisnavism by interpreting *Sakti* not as an exclusive concept under the domain of Saktism, but by extending the concept to all other modes of worship. Consequently, Sakti, the spouse of Siva alone facilitated a synthesis of Mahakali (spouse of Siva), Mahalaksmi (spouse of Visnu) and Mahasarasvati (spouse of Brahma)—all merging into one in the concept of Narayani Sakti (Durga), the energy of Narayana, the adorable Lord of/in Vaisnavism. The juxtaposition of the two words — goddess (*devi*) and 'Bhagavata' (Visnu) further establishes the classical and medieval religious syncretism.

Viewed in a broader perspective, energies assigned to all gods and goddesses in Hindu Pantheon are essentially possessed by Narayana, the fountain source of everything. No wonder therefore is the fact that the divine energy of the Absolute is interpreted in terms of the feminine gender (Narayani). Sukla aptly observes that 'in post

Sahkara writings fictionalization of philosophical doctrines was a popular practice that drew upon epics and puranas, *Mbh*, *VP* and *Bhp* more than upon any dialectical treatises. (p. 54) For instance, Madhva was 'an extremely skilled hermeneutician' who not only allegorized the struggle between Kauravas and Pandavas as the conflict between good and evil, but also extrapolated his own views, through omission and imposition of views and episodes from other texts thereby encouraging intertextuality, 'exchange', negotiation and transaction. While justifying his dualistic views in terms of his discourses on *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavata Purana*, he selectively chooses those episodes and arguments which would strengthen his philosophy and critical approach without bothering for the contextual fallacy. This adroit art of interpretation is further discernible in his discourse on *BG* wherein he chooses the method of comparison and analysis to direct his discourse against Sankara's monistic views by banking upon the text and from other Puranas as well.

Sridhara is another shrewd hermeneutician who in course of his interpretation of *BG*, *VP* and *Bhp* tends to establish the supreme efficacy of Lord Krsna over others (*krsnam vande jagad gurum*). In the first place, he attempts to negotiate/achieve harmony between Vaisnavism and Saivism that are usually at daggers' drawn— Visnu being Vedic and Siva, essentially worshipped as a tribal god. In the very introductory verse of his commentary on *BG*, he salutes both Visnu and Siva with appropriate obeisance by semantically playing upon two words, i.e., 'Madhava' and 'Uma-dhava'. Whereas the former combines Saktism ('Ma'-Laksmi) with Vaisnavism ('dhava'-husband-Visnu), the latter points to a happy marriage of Saktism and Saivism —'Uma' epitomizing Sakti and 'dhava' in this case signifying Siva. Sridhara's purport to situate Visnu and Siva at par is adroitly indicated by the lyrical structure of the two words (Madhava + Umadhava) reminding the reader of the amicable affinity of poetry, philosophy and religion in medieval cultural condition. In much the same way, in the invocation part of his commentary on *Bhp*, he repeats the identification of 'Madhava' and 'Umadhava' as two sides of the same cosmic self. But, in his commentary on *VP*, he salutes Srikrnsna as 'saccidananda brahma' in conjunction with 'Umadhava'. The deliberate use of these two words in his commentaries obviously makes the reader curious to know about the speciality of their use and interpretation. And this inevitably forces the reader further to search for some socio-historical-cultural contexts and religious affiliations if any behind the entire episode. Historians of medieval Odisha like H.K. Mahtab (1958-59) argue that during the later Gahga rule in Odisha (from Narasinghdeva I-IV to Bhanudeva I-IV) extending from 1238 to 1436 A.D., Visnu and Siva were treated as two sides of the same Reality. Such was the larger religious sentiment/belief which not only preoccupied the medieval Odishan mind but also decidedly influenced/got reflected in the art, architecture, sculpture and methods of religious rituals and philosophical thinking. The mindset and prosperity for harmonization and cultural assimilation in fact points to a negotiation between Vedic-Aryan and non-Aryan thoughts on the basis of which was erected the edifice of Bhagavata cult— the synthesis of Visnu-Narayana with Krsna-Vasudeva worship of Satvatas. It is really difficult to believe that Sridhara, being an erudite scholar and a man of wide-

ranging experience/acquaintance was unaware of this contemporary cultural development. Sridhara the critic and commentator (contra Roland Barthes' theoretical position) can not be drastically taken in isolation from Sridhara the philosopher of religion because the very fact of his being a worshipper of Nrsingha-Narayana-Gopinatha-Krsna and a champion of Bhagavata cult cannot be separated from his association with Sahkarite monastery at Puri and with Lord Siva at Kapilasa hills. These are perhaps the intricate reasons why he has tenaciously insisted on interpreting 'Madhava' and 'Umadhava' as two sides of the Ultimate Reality.

Time and again, Visnu-Siva relationship crops up in the Vaisnavite texts, and in *Bhp* (X. 87. 25), now Siva is vanquished by Visnu and the next moment the latter comes to save him from the clutches of the demons like Bana and Brka (X. 62-63; X. 88). Siva who reduced the god of love (Kama) to ashes ironically falls in love with the attractive feminist form (Mohini) of Visnu. In *Garga Samhita* despite their duel, Visnu and Siva are treated as inseparable from each other. Sridhara's interpretation of the words like 'Madhava' and 'Umadhava' is strongly reminiscent of Jayadeva's association of 'Radha' with 'Madhava' in the *Gitagovinda* thereby pointing to the cosmic non-duality on the one hand and to the cultural harmony of Saktism and Vaisnavism in the medieval Orissa on the other. Sridhara's interest in the word 'Madhava' can be further appropriated and culturally correlated with the iconic evidences—worship of one brass image configuring both Visnu and Durga in the Madhava temple of Niali built in the 12th c. A.D. on the bank of the Praci river in the Puri district of Odisha. The worship of 'Durga-Madhava' can be further correlated with the worship of Vimala (spouse of Siva) and Kamala (Laksmi) as consorts of Lord Jagannatha at Puri, a place of religious syncretism. One is further tempted to know and realize how the word 'Madhava' has been a part and parcel of Odisha's cultural psyche and this is evident from the chanting of benedictory verses (mangalastaka) by priests of Odisha in the beginning of Vedic rituals wherein the word 'Madhava' is uttered several times.

Not only that, in the invocation to Sridhara's commentary on *Bhp*, one stanza is inserted (which is originally found in *Bhavisyottara Purana*) wherein Lord Visnu is addressed as 'Paramananda Madhava' which occurs in his commentary on *BG* also. The association of 'Madhava' with 'Paramananda' (Absolute Bliss) reminds one of the upanisadic glorification of Brahman as 'saccidananda' and of the *Bhp*'s definition of Krsna: 'Isvara Paramakrsna saccidananda Vighraha'. Prof. Sukla endorses the observation of Nabhadra in that Sridhara, the hermeneutician interprets Krsna, the Ultimate Reality as 'Rasa' and 'Ananda' by intertextually negotiating with *Taittiriya Upanisad* in order to make his interpretation more plausible and convincing in the context of Bhagavata ideology. Sukla, with his wide-ranging depth and scholarship, tends to extend the interpretation further by indicating how the upanisadic concept of 'Rasa' and 'Ananda' was later theorized by Bharata (*Natyasastra*) and the medieval aestheticians in the context of the ontology and epistemology of the theatrical performance and Rasa theory (*rasa nispatti*).

Since Sridhara unambiguously accepts Sri Krsna as the Ultimate Reality, his very interpretation of the word 'Krsna' is based on more in consonance with the Upanisad (*Gopalapurvatapani*) than with the linguistic etymology/interpretation — Krsna being derived from the root 'krs' meaning 'to plough'. He accepts the metaphysical perspective rather than the empirical one and accordingly Krsna is interpreted as 'existence' (krs) and 'ecstasy' (na). The focus in Sridhara's view of Bhagavata ontology is not the empirical/historical issues, but transcending the mythical/historical contexts in favour of religious signification. Accordingly, he explains Sri Krsna as the divine being who exists in the consciousness of his devotees as pure existence (sat), pure consciousness (cit) and pure beatitude (*ananda*). The focus is, as Prof. Sukla rightly puts, 'on the beauty and beatitude of the phenomenal manifestation (*divyalila*) of Krsna the Ultimate Reality' (p. 88). Whereas Vedanta considers this manifestation as illusions, the Bhagavatas like Sridhara consider it a metaphor (*tatastha property*) and emphatically affirm both the essential (*svarupa*) and metaphorical properties at par and in this respect he comes closer to Madhva in his opposition to Sahkara, who rejected the *tatastha laksana* of the Reality as false/illusory. Viewed from this perspective, Vaisnava puranas explain the concept of divine sport (*divyalila*) of Lord Visnu who performs as well as participates in this play/sport without being affected by it. Followers of Yamunacarya tend to justify lila as a self-play of the Brahman who has created the world in a playful manner out of spontaneity and also dissolves it with playful spontaneity. Since Visnu is pervasive in nature, His lila is as real as He Himself is. Sridhara universally pleads for bhakti as the only way of experiencing Reality (Visnu-Krsna), whereas Sahkara, emphasizing knowledge and renunciation of fiction, asserts that the experience of Reality is a 'conceptual cognition'. It is through bhakti that the Rasa experience of Reality can be fulfilled because Reality is within our reach as a lover/a man of sport (*lila*) rather than an abstract entity. The bhakti experience of Reality being essentially a rasa experience, and Reality being an aesthetic entity, the Bhagavata notion of bhakti elevates rasa to a level of purity (*sattva*) and ecstatic bliss (*anandamaya*) in which the devotees, taking part in the divine sport with the Divine-lover-Krsna are bound to rise above the low levels of passionate activity (*rajas*) and delusion (*tamas*). It is in this mode of interpretation that Sridhara streamlines his commentary on Krsna-gopi relationship within the framework of bhakti as adumbrated in the 'Rasa-pancadhyayi' section of the *Bhp* (X. 29-33). In chapter III of his book under the title 'The Bhagavata Epistemology of Sridhara', Prof. Sukla has very lucidly but convincingly brought out the 'whole some ecstatic reciprocation between humanity and divinity (Krsna) through bhakti on the ground that the devotee must whole-heartedly surrender himself/herself before the Divinity by purging off all petty selfish and subjective questions—of pride, jealousy, ego and arrogance. In the *Bhp*, the moment the gopis developed the ego of being the beloveds of Krsna who carried them on his shoulders, they were mercilessly thrown away by him. Sridhara's contention is that bhakti and ego are incompatible to/with each other. The Krsna-gopi relationship as interpreted by Sridhara is a rare paradigm, archetype of bhakti, absolute self-surrender (*atmanivedana*) and 'dehasamarpana'—surrender of body. Sridhara argues that the milkmaids attend Krsna

by their erotic relation (*kama*) in which there is absolutely no immorality in such relationship with Divinity. In other words, the sexual desire aimed at Divinity can not be interpreted as a sexual desire in ordinary sense of the term which drifts, in a way, into bestiality. Sridhara categorically rules out this contradiction in the following: When divinity itself is the object of sexual passion, the passion itself loses its burning character, resulting therefore in the experience of the highest bliss. (Sukla: 133)

At the same time, Sridhara defends the erotic-devotional relationship on the metaphysical ground that Krsna, being omnipresent, his relationship with milkmaids can not be branded as adultery and that they are his devotees. Moreover, the erotic relationship of a boy of seven years with many matured cowherd women can not be thought of. In the language of Sridhara, Krsna, being atmarama (self-relishing) enjoys rasa in terms of rasa dance by taking recourse to his inherent potency called *mayasakti* and in his tatasthya form, not in his svarupa form. The Reality can not be a victim to passion, as he is the cupid of cupids, and as such there is no reference to any erotic relationship in the episode of rasa. To be precise, the five chapters on Rasa, according to Sridhara, reflect the transcendental of the whole affair (*nivrttipara*) and the highest bliss consists in embracing the Reality (*Acyuta*) in meditation (*dhyana*) rather than in sense-perception. But, Prof. Sukla has rightly points out the contradictions confronted by Sridhara. On the one hand, he (Sridhara) agrees with Visnucitta in that one merges with Krsna through kama thereby accepting the question of physical union as described in the *Harivamsa*, *VP* and *Bhp*. On the other hand, he interprets the whole of rasa relationship in the *Bhp* as ‘nivrtti of passion’, and even extends the interpretation of *nivrtti* to other relationships—of fear, anger and enmity—thereby vindicating his stand as a skillful artist of interpretation.

In Sridhara’s scheme of things, Sri Krsna is the Absolute Reality (*paramadhama*) who by virtue of his all-pervasive nature (Visnu) is the master of the phenomenal reality also (*Jagatdhama*). The name ‘Krsna’ signifies both the absolute (*paramarthika*) and relative (*vyavaharika*) aspects (*satta*) of the Vedantic Brahman. Myth, History, Philosophy and Religion finally commingle in the concept of Krsna whose mythical character is, for Sridhara, a metaphysical principle—the Ultimate Reality (*parama satyam*) and the Absolute Lord (*paramesvara*). Sridhara’s quintessential Visnutattva, as interpreted in his commentary on *VP* (I. I. I) reveals that Lord Visnu/ Krsna is everywhere and that His transcendental and immanent play constitute the real truth. Reality pervades the whole universe as the fountain source of its creation, continuation and dissolution—and these are but phenomenal manifestation (*divya lila*) of the Absolute whose beauty and beatitude can be relished only through unalloyed devotion and total surrender. Prof. Sukla has done really a commendable job by bringing to the fore Sridhara’s treatment/ interpretation of Bhagavata ontology/ philosophy/ religion/ epistemology by correlating all orthodox and heterodox systems of philosophy/religious belief and by satisfactorily discharging his “cultural responsibility” of establishing Sridhara not in isolation but in his totality—as a saint, commentator and a philosopher of religion.

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