

REVIEW ESSAY

Philosophy of Bhagabata Religion in Medieval Orissa.

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

The spirit of assimilation and syncretism are the benchmark of Indian cultural tradition. This spirit has always empowered the culture to face the onslaught of dissidence from within as well as from outside; and to keep the tradition alive and healthy. Unfortunately the academic scholars in the post-colonial phase have assessed this grand tradition through the standard set by the Western intellectual norm. Their deep-rooted faith in the supremacy of their own intellectual scheme has never allowed the Western mind to understand that there could be system of thoughts in which reason and intuition, theory and practice, scientism and spiritualism could go hand in hand. But it is unpardonable that our own breed of scholars too have followed the West assiduously. This is one of the reasons why there is dearth of serious materials on the medieval philosophical literature. Our academicians have failed to take a note of the fact that in Indian tradition there can be hardly a religious system that is not rooted in some or other philosophical presupposition; they have often failed to realize that our conception of God is not necessarily a theologically loaded one. So it comes as a great relief that Professor A.C. Sukla has ventured to explore this misplaced myth and has undertaken the challenging task of unfolding the philosophical contributions of Sridhara Svami, the great scholar of the Vaisnava tradition. The book is an eye-opener for those who still smart under the feeling that philosophy and religion cannot go hand in hand. The author also very successfully challenges the other well-entrenched myth, i.e. the Indian philosophical activities came to a grinding halt after 10th to 11th C.E, whereas in fact some of the great philosophical minds flourished during the medieval period. Professor Sukla's detailed analysis of Sridhara Svami's philosophical position amply justifies the point.

Sridhara Svami, the great acarya of the medieval period offered his distinctive interpretation of the philosophy of the Vaisnavism mostly through his commentaries on three basic treatises of the Bhagavata cult, viz, *Bhagavata Purana (Bhavartha Dipika)*, *Visnu Purana (Atma Prakasa)* and *Bhagavadgita (Subodhini)*. In fact, he is the first thinker to offer a detailed commentary on the *Bhagavata Purana*. What makes Sridhara's contribution to Vaisnavism path-breaking is the wonderful syncretism of the apparently different systems like, Saivism and Vaisnavism, Sankhya-Yoga and Advaita. This assimilative mind-set could be attributed to his in-depth study of the *Sastras* and

Puranas of different genre as well as his Advaitic background. His philosophical stand reflected a rare kind of synthesis that defied strict bounds of the classified systems of thought. The demarcating line between *astika* and *nastika* tradition, between non-dualism and dualism, between the sectarian divisions like Vaisnavism and Saivism gets dissipated and replaced by a healthy spirit of assimilation.

The contents of the book can be broadly divided into two parts. The first two chapters provide the setting that prepares the reader for the proper appreciation of Sridhara's philosophical position. The work opens with a discussion on the life and times of Sridhara Svami. Unlike the West our tradition has paid more attention to the treatises rather than the person. So there is always a scope for debate about the biographical backdrop of the great minds of the Indian tradition. In most cases a scholar encounters the problem of fixing the backdrop without which a proper assessment of philosophical position cannot be properly analysed. The author therefore takes the help of some classics, historical records, and the relevant texts materials to locate Sridhara Svami in the historical space. He holds that this great scholar hailed from Orissa and flourished sometime during the later part of 14th C.E. What makes his claim more authentic is the fact that Orissa during the medieval period had transformed itself into a cradle of unparalleled type of religious syncretism where there existed a happy amalgamation of such divergent sects like Saivism, Vaisnavism, Saktism and also Buddhism. This perhaps provides a right background for Sridhara Svami to pay his obeisance to both Siva and Visnu in the same passage. This also explains that despite being the head of the Govardhana pitha founded by Sankaracarya that is well-known for its Saiva and Advaitic affiliation Sridhara could write commentaries on the Vaisnavic texts that draws heavily on the Sankhya ontology.

The second chapter entitled "Bhagavata Cult in the Making" is similarly exhaustive in its presentation. In India no intellectual tradition is linear in nature. All the traditions including the so-called religious traditions have grown with a spirit of assimilation. In no religious tradition this is more clearly pronounced than in the evolution and development of Vaisnavism. The cult clearly points to a curious mixture of the Vedic and non-Vedic elements. The shape of the Vaisnavism in the present form has passed through many vicissitudes. In this chapter the author provides a graphic account of how the Visnu-Narayana of the Vedas amalgamates with the non-Vedic idea of Krsna-Vasudeva of the Satvata clan, to finally culminate in the form of systematic image worship. The author Sukla takes care to throw sufficient light on the historical and political aspects of this transformation. The chapter also delineates in detail the role of the Tamil alvars that in more than one respect offers the foundation to the Vaisnavic conception of bhakti. The later Vedantic Vaisnavism of Acarya Ramanuja, Madhva and others, centres largely on the Alvar's depiction of Krsna-bhakti. The evolution of Vaisnavism, right from the Pancaratra texts to the Gaudiya School, is as such very complex. A scholar is likely to be at loss while tracing the exact pattern of the development of this most popular cult. But in this work the exposition is so lucid that there is no unanswered doubt left for a serious scholar. The author makes a pointed though brief discussion on the issue all along making the facts clear with the help of the relevant texts.

The second part of the book deals primarily with the central theme of the book, viz. the ontological, epistemological and eschatological dimensions of Sridhara's philosophy. The task is not so simple, for, there are lots of conceptual tangles to be untangled which the author does quite admirably. Professor Sukla does not hesitate to delve deep into the theories and concepts that comes in the way of explication of Sridhara Svami's views on ontology, epistemology and eschatology.

Examining the ontological structure of the Vaisnava theory is perhaps the hardest task a scholar is likely to face. Since *Bhagavata Purana* and *Visnu Purana* are not primarily works on philosophy; one has to make an extra effort to systemize the ideas from the scattered contents. Moreover, there is also the need for putting in place a plethora of anomalies one comes across while analysing the philosophical position of the Bhagavata texts. As far as the Vaisnavic ontology is concerned, the first and foremost anomaly one might face is, regarding the exact nature of the Puranic conception of the Highest Reality. Definitely the *Puranas*, especially the works of Vaisnavic genre hold on to a theistic position which allows no distinction between the Absolute metaphysical principle and the religious principle called God. It seems that such texts largely rely on the Sankhya ontology that paradoxically, in its initial stage of development was atheistic. But in later stages though it admitted of God its dualistic tenor continued dominate the metaphysical scheme. So it is not surprising that Vaisnavic texts like *Bhagavata Purana* and *Visnu Purana* adopt an ontology that accommodates Sankhya dualism within the framework of Upanisadic Monism. Without such assimilation their conception of God would have lost its force. So we notice that *Bhagavata Purana* makes an attempt to adopt the Yoga philosophical position offered by its founder Patanjali. An attempt is made to put Patanjali's theory of *Isvara* as the ultimate metaphysical principle in the Advaitic mould of the *Brahman*. These *Puranas* brought about certain coherence in their metaphysics also by identifying Sankhya conception of the *Purusa* with that of the Vedic concept of *Purusa* as enunciated in the *Purusa Sukta*, (who is also Visnu/Narayana/Vasudeva, the pure existence) of the *Rg Veda*. But their basic weakness comes to the fore as far as their explication of the relation between the Highest Reality and the phenomenal world is concerned. The Sankhya cosmology is structured around the thesis that the world is constituted of two basic elements - *purusa* (the individual soul), *prakrti* (that manifests itself as the material world) and *kala* (the time that makes this manifestation possible). But it could not offer a satisfactory explanation as to how the unmanifested *prakrti* is transformed into the material world. Complicating the issue further some of the major *Puranas* bring in the notion of an independent principle called *kala* or time. According to them it is the *kala* or time which initiates the creation and dissolution of the phenomenal world. However, the ontological independence of *kala* creates a logical crisis that was later on removed to some extent by *Kurma Purana* and further by Vijnanaviksu's commentaries. These texts reinterpret *kala* just as a condition (*upadhi*) of the Ultimate Reality. Thus the Advaitic and Upanisadic conception of *Brahman* as the one and Unique metaphysical reality is enforced in the Vaisnavic texts like *Bhagavata Purana*.

The other conceptual incongruity that affects the Puranic metaphysics is the identification of the Vedantic notion of *maya* with the Sankhya concept of *prakrti*. Both the concepts have different implications. The third problem one is likely to encounter in the Puranic metaphysics is the conception *Isvara*. It is metamorphosed to a fictional character with the verbal description of its forms and activities. Thus the impersonal *Isvara* of Patanjali is more or less presented as a personalized God. Not only this, *Isvara* as the God is put within the spatio-temporal framework, (for example, Vaikuntha in case of Visnu and Kailasa in case of Siva), and thereby subject to temporality too. This is not just the end of the matter. The Reality is also subjected to gender politics. Most often it is conceived as a male having a consort acting as its *sakti*. Moreover, this *sakti* is perceived as subservient to the male reality, viz. Visnu/Siva.

Sridhara Svami steers clear of such Puranic anomalies by treating the mythical character of Krsna as a metaphysical principle. Following the *Bhagavadgita* and *Gopalatapini Upanisad* he holds that Krsna is a name (*akhya*) of the Absolute Reality. The name serves as the basis of both – the phenomenal Reality as well as the Absolute Reality. It becomes evident from Sridhara's commentaries that he does not pay much attention either to historical or empirical accounts provided in the major Vaisnava *Puranas*. But it becomes obvious to Sridhara Svami or for that any thinker with a philosophical bent of mind that there are still more logical and conceptual cobwebs to be cleared before one could offer a consistent metaphysical account of the Vaisnavic ontology.

Once the ontological status of Vaisnavism is structured on non-dualistic ideology three basic questions may crop up –(a) what is the relation between the non-dual Reality and the phenomenal world that is characterized by diversities and temporality? (b) Is the transformation of the One and unchangeable to changeable and diversified phenomenal world a matter of illusion or is it metaphorical? (c) What is the relationship between the *Brahman*, that is of the nature of pure consciousness and the individual soul that too is characterized by consciousness? Following the interpretation provided in the *Bhagavata Purana* and *Bhagavadgita* Sridhara Svami admits that Krishna alone is the non-dual ultimate Reality with two forms of attributes – the essential or inherent (*svarupa*) and accessory (*tatastha*). The qualities like eternal truth, all-pervasive consciousness and unending beatitude are the essential aspects of this reality, at the same time the creation, existence and dissolution of the ever-changing phenomenal world are its accidental qualities. Sridhara would rather take sides with Madhva in placing the inherent as well as the accidental qualities on par, unlike Sankara who treats the *tatastha* qualities as of the nature of illusion. Thus the Reality is not only transcendental but also immanent. The God as the transcendental reality is beyond all the *gunas* or characteristics that control the phenomenal world (*nirguna*), yet it is not just an abstract and arid metaphysical concept. The phenomenal world is the manifestation of the Absolute reality; for, He is the material as well as the efficient cause of the world. Therefore, the phenomenal world cannot be cast aside as a mere illusion as conceived by the Advaitins. Here Sridhara brings in, following *Bhagavata Purana*, the

analogy of relationship between a lump of clay and different pots made of it to delineate the relationship between the phenomenal world and the Absolute Reality. So the transformation of the absolute reality to the phenomenal world is real for, Isvara/Krsna is the very foundation (*adhithana*) of everything. It is only the wise who see no distinction between the two.

It is a fact that to some extent Sridhara makes an honest effort to place the ontology preached by the Bhagavata texts to reinforce assimilation between the monistic position of the Upanisads and the cosmological theory of Sankhya. But he was fully aware of the possible objections regarding the conceptual plausibility of the theory. It may very validly be asked - how the conception of a changeless, indeterminate Reality can accommodate the conception of a phenomenal world characterized by change and determination? The Indian philosophical tradition as such has found it difficult to provide a coherent answer to the question. Some schools of thought like Advaita Vedanta do away with the idea of an independent reality called *Isvara*, so it becomes more comfortable for them to explicate multiplicity of the phenomenal world in terms of illusion. For them it is a case of superimposition (*adhyasa*) of the unreal on the real. This is a case of the illusory experience like seeing serpent in the rope. The Vaisnavas, including that of the Vaisnava Vedantins do not have the logical freedom to explain away the reality of the phenomenal world. Though Sridhara in his commentaries holds that the transfer of Reality to the phenomenal world is like a mirage yet finally he admits that the issue has to be explained through a different route. So he takes help of the linguistic theory of secondary and metaphorical use of language to prove the reality of the phenomenal world. It was not only Sridhara Svami but even Sankara had to take recourse to such theories to explain the Upanisadic position of the identity between the individual self and the cosmic self, i.e. *Brahman*. Indian philosophers including the Grammarian philosophers like Bhartrhari realized that human cognition has to be understood in terms of how our language functions. Man being limited in his linguistic potency can think or speak only through direct speech. So metaphors play a role in our understanding as well as our expression of the nature of the Reality. Sridhara Svami was very much acquainted with such theories. So it becomes easier for him to remove the contradictions involved in Vaisnava ontology with the help of the theory of *gauni laksana* or the metaphorical transfer of meaning between the subject and predicate, with dissimilar qualities. For example, when somebody says, "Devadutta is a lion", it does not imply the incongruous fact that a man called 'Devadatta' is a lion. The statement holds meaning because of the presence of lion-like qualities in Devadutta. This is known as '*gauni laksana*' in some philosophical tradition. Sridhara moves one step ahead and says the use of such metaphorical meaning is not only confined to statements but also to understanding of such metaphysical questions as 'How does the unchangeable Absolute Reality manifest itself as the changeable phenomenal world'? It is a case of metaphorical cognition in which case we connect two dissimilar qualities on the basis of certain similarity. So the relation between the phenomenal world and the Absolute reality is a case of metaphorical transference. As far as the relation between the individual soul and the highest Reality is concerned Sridhara follows the conceptual

route that lies between the Sankhya and Upanisadic scheme. As far as the relation between the individual soul and Reality is concerned, Sridhara sticks to the view that individual soul is not substantially dissimilar with the nature of the Reality. Both represent the same consciousness substantially. They appear to be distinct because the individual soul is the part (*amsa*) of the Reality/ *Isvara/ Brahman* is the whole (*amsi*). Thus the relation that can at best be described as a relation of the part and the whole. But still it may very validly be asked: why should there be two criteria to understand two aspects of the phenomenal reality, viz. the material world and the individual soul? For, the individual itself is conditioned by ego. Reversely, one can ask why can't we say "All this (the phenomenal world) is *Brahman*"? Sridhara here takes the help of the Sankhya conception of *prakrti* to sort out the question. According to him *atman* is self-illuminating and of the nature of pure consciousness. It is the *prakrti* that is responsible not only for the manifestation of the world but also the delimitation of the self by the ego. Though admitting the role of *prakrti* Sridhara did not agree with the Sankhya school of thought in ascribing independence to *prakrti*. According to him *prakrti* operates under the control of the *Isvara*, the Ultimate Reality. *Prakrti*, according to *Bhagavata Purana* (and also Sridhara) is nothing more than the energy or *sakti* of Visnu. Besides, the Vaisnava ontology does not share the Sankhya view of creation as transformation (*parinama*) but as manifestation.

But still the Vaisnavic form of monism advocated by such texts as *Bhagavata Purana* does not seem to be logically coherent. Once we admit the position that the phenomenal world is a case of real manifestation of the Absolute Reality; and it is not just a metaphysical principle but an all-pervading entity, who could be worshipped and adored, we have to explain -Why such an entity manifests itself as the phenomenal world. The Vaisnava texts most often invoke the concept of '*lila*' or the sport of the Almighty/God. In other words the manifestation is the sport of the Lord. But the term *lila* that is often translated as the 'sport', is not a simple concept. The concept of sport needs some conceptual clarification before it could be admitted as a plausible explanation. If it is the sport of Visnu, then one may come up with several questions -Is it played by one person or is it a participatory game? Is it played for some enjoyment? Can the player be detached from his play? Answering such questions seems to push the Bhagavata ontology from one contradiction to another. The Puranic monism would not allow the Vaisnavas to share Sankara's view that the use of the word '*lila*' or sport is a case of analogical expression taken from the ordinary language. So Sridhara without taking resort to the concept of sport tells in a straight-forward manner that Visnu alone is the all-pervading Reality. Such doubts come up because we discriminate the one and unique Reality from its manifestation in the form of the created world. It seems that Sridhara was very much aware of unending logical complications in case of the Vaisnava ontology. Finally exasperated with the logical and metaphysical arguments he recommends that the absolute surrender to the Almighty and His divine grace can alone help the mankind to escape from the suffering; and enjoy the ecstasy of the divine truth. Here one may note the *bhakta* in Sridhara wins over Sridhara as a dialectician.

The third chapter dealing with the Vaisnava ontology, in more than one sense, can be said to be the central point of the entire discussion on the religious philosophy of Sridhara Svami. It is very difficult for a lay reader, even trained in philosophy to understand the complex inter-relation between the varied metaphysical theories upheld by such prominent schools of thought like Sankhya, Mimamsa or Vedanta. Without a clear knowledge of the development of such theories one is likely to miss the essence of Sridhara's position as far as his interpretation of the Bhagavata texts are concerned. The author seems to be very much aware of the problem. So he makes a valiant attempt to go to the root of every metaphysical theory that is even remotely connected with his avowed task. Such complex and technical theories like the theory of time, the theory of linguistic meaning (especially, metaphorical meaning), the theory of aesthetic relish (*rasa*) are discussed in a remarkably lucid yet synoptic way so that the reader can judge the ontological structure of the Bhagavata philosophy as enunciated by Sridhara Svami. The Puranic literature as such is not very systematic in their presentation of the ontology they want to propagate. There are contradictions as well as logical gaps in this genre of literature. It is not very difficult to understand the why this is so. Such literature is based on religious sentiments rather than the logical analysis. Yet one cannot say that the Puranic literature of India was purely a series of religious outbursts. There are passages that deal with the metaphysical basis of religious belief. So a scholar of Puranic literature faces the enormous task of inter-relating philosophy and religion. Sridhara Svami as a commentator on three basic texts of the Vaisnavic literature encounters this onerous task. But still his writings need a lot of conceptual clarification which is quite admirably undertaken by the author.

In Indian philosophical tradition metaphysics and epistemology are considered to be two sides of the same coin. So it is quite apt for the author to devote one complete chapter to the Bhagavata epistemology. We have noted that Sridhara dabbles in complicated ontological issues to clarify the position of the Vaisnava theology. It is, therefore, expected that Sridhara should justify his ontological presupposition with a relevant epistemological theory. As a follower of Bhagavata school of thought he seems to be in a very tight spot. He does not have logical freedom like Sankara to dismiss the determinate nature of the Reality. There is a sort of compulsion on his part to admit that highest Reality/*Isvara*/ Visnu is not only a transcendental indeterminate principle but is also as personal God having name and form (Of course, Sridhara takes care to show that the determinations like names and forms applied to such a God cannot be compared to the ordinary names and forms). So Sridhara's or for that matter any Bhagavata philosopher's problem is compounded when he has to explain –How do we know such a God? However, Bhagavata school could always take some clue from the elaborate scheme formulated by the Indian philosophical tradition. It has been admitted that there could be various means of knowledge, like, perception, inference, analogical knowledge and verbal authority. But the Advaitins like Sankara always make it clear that the knowledge of the highest Reality is not achievable by such ordinary means of knowledge. It could be achieved only by direct apprehension/experience (*aparoksanubhuti*) of the Reality, that defies all the determinations and categories of speech and thought.

The Reality is realizable but not expressible. Though Sridhara supports a non-dualistic point of view he is in no position to admit that Reality is indeterminate or *nirvikalpa* in the footsteps of Sankara. For him God is a person who could even have birth, could have a particular form, who could engage himself in the activities of the world. So the question crops up-how do we know such a God? Sridhara would say we know such a Reality through our unflinching faith in His divine presence and grace. He can only be experienced through heart. Thus there is a definite shift from the intellect/intuition to heart. The individual soul pines for his grace and finally achieves an experience that can be *relished*. The realization is not only *aparoksanubhuti* but also *rasanubhuti*. Here Bharata's theory of *rasa* that was primarily intended to be applied to the dramatic or aesthetic experience is now introduced in case of God-realization. Bharata or for that matter the later *rasa* theorists categorized such relishable (*rasa*) experience to eight/nine categories like *srngara* (erotic love), *karuna* (pathetic) etc. They refer to the emotional states that work of art could evoke. However, *bhakti* is never accepted as an independent *rasa*. The Bhagavata ideology elevates *bhakti* to a form of highest relishable experience. So the Vaisnava philosophers add to the scheme of *pramanas* (methods or means of knowledge) a new category. *Bhakti* is not seen just as a path of God-realization but as an epistemological principle too. It is a form of knowledge that is direct and intuitive. But this is not the knowledge (*jnana* or *prama*) in the general sense of the term. *Bhakti* now comes to mean the ecstatic feeling that is associated with experiencing the *saguna* reality (a personalized God) or the Reality in a manifested form as Krsna. The distinctive feature of this new scheme of epistemology is that the highest knowledge is not only a direct experience, but an experience that is not rooted in human effort alone. God's grace is one of the conditions of such an experience. Unlike the classical Indian philosophical systems Vaisnava theories do not bother about the 'knowledge' in the technical sense of the term. So *bhakti* is presented as a path of the God-experience that is quite distinct from *jnana*. This is no wonder that in the *Bhagavadgita*, *bhakti* is recommended as an independent path of self-realization. Sridhara highlights on the path of *bhakti* as enunciated in the text. With this he parts way with Sankara who has always held *jnana* as the superior means of self-realization. Even his definition of *bhakti*, 'as a form of investigation in to one's self' (*sva svarpanusandhana*) toes this line of thought. On the other hand, for Sridhara *bhakti* is primary. It is the cause of *jnana*. There is no doubt about the fact that Sridhara, to some extent compromises his position as an Advaitin to stick to his allegiance to the Bhagavata ideology of *bhakti* as enunciated in *Bhagavata Purana* and *Visnu Purana*.

The concept of *bhakti* as enunciated in the Vaisnava texts like *Bhagavata Purana* and other works is not altogether a new idea. Long since such an idea was propagated by the alvar saints/ poets. The alvars (etymologically standing for those immersed in the love of God/Krsna) have delineated *bhakti* in terms of passionate love for Krsna. But in case of the Bhagavatas there seems to be some social and moral hitch when the treatises of this genre depicted *bhakti* in terms of a passionate love-play between Krsna and the *gopis* (milk-maids of Vrndavana). The *Bhagavata Purana* depicts in detail the passionate love (amounting to extra-marital love) of the *gopis* for Krsna, as

this is upheld to be the paradigm of *bhakti*. The idea finds its narrative expression in the episodes dealing with the *rasa* (love-play) of Kṛṣṇa with the *gopis* in both the texts, *Bhagavatapurana* as well as *Viṣṇupurana*. Sridhara as the commentator on these two works of Vaisnava order could not but defend the spirit of the narratives. He has to undertake the task in accordance with the Bhagavata cult that strictly follows the tradition. Both these narratives are to a large extent based on depicting the erotic dimension of love. As a commentator of the three major Vaisnavic treatises Sridhara definitely faces some problems in explicating the notion of *rasa* and the erotic elements associated with it. He at some points provides metaphysical and aesthetic justifications in defence of the presence of erotic element that was vehemently criticized by non-Vaisnavic section of the people. At the same time Sridhara was quite aware of the complications involved. So finally he concludes that we should not interpret such anecdotes as of the nature of erotic relationship as Kṛṣṇa himself is *atmarama* (self-immersed and self-relishing); so his enjoying anything else than himself is self-contradictory. He writes, “We therefore contend that five chapters narrating *rasa* episode reflect the transcendentality of the whole affair –no body is actually (or physically) enjoying passion anywhere, rather transcending it everywhere. The highest bliss lies in embracing Acyuta (the Lord) in meditation only”. As in case of ontology, in this case also we notice that the real *bhakta* and seeker in Sridhara comes to the fore. He interprets *bhakti* as a form of *sadhana* that needs the cultivation of *sattvika* qualities as prescribed in the *Bhagavatgita*, without any reference to emotionalism either literal or metaphorical.

The analytical acumen of the author Sukla is quite evident in this chapter too. He not only offers us a detailed exposition of the philosophical background of the theory of aesthetic relish (*rasa*) but provides a sociological and historical account of the ideas involved in the depiction of *rasa* in the major Vaisnavic Puranas.

In the chapter entitled, “Sridhara and Bhagavata Eschatology” the author tries to offer an exposition of the nature of human liberation and the experience of the ultimate Reality in the Bhagavata literature as such, with special reference to Sridhara’s estimation of such an experience. It cannot be denied that Indian tradition itself is more or less obsessed with soteriology, i.e. liberation, famously known as *moksa*, *apavarga*, *mukti*. Every discipline including, philosophy, theology, aesthetics, grammar, astronomy etc., aims at this goal. Of course, there is no unanimity of opinion among different schools of thought on the issue. If Sankhya and Vedanta have described it as a positive state of absolute bliss (*ananda*), then Yoga delineates it as a neutral state with no feeling of any sort (*nirvana/Samadhi*). Again, there are differences among the philosophical schools regarding the question whether such a state of liberation can be achieved during the lifetime (*jivanmukti*) or after the cessation of the physical body (*videhamukti*). According *Bhagavatgita*, *moksa* is a state of absolute calm and quietitude (*santi*), which could be achieved not by renunciation but by performing all the worldly duties surrendering the results to the Almighty. This text also makes it clear that there is a distinction between the heavenly happiness, on the one hand and absolute peace and bliss, on the other. Those who aim for the heaven engage themselves in the actions prescribed by the

scriptures. But the heavenly happiness is of limited duration, for, after a limited period, the soul comes back to the world by way of rebirth when the fruits of one’s action are exhausted. On the other hand he who achieves the *mukti* or bliss overcomes cycle of birth and death. Sridhara largely follows the *Bhagavadgita*’s conception of *mukti*. For him liberation is absolute peace without any trace of relativism. But the earlier Vaisnava Vedantins like Madhva introduced a categorization of the stages of *mukti*, viz., *salokya*, *samipya*, *sarupya*, and *sayuja*. The *sayuja mukti* is the ultimate phase in which the individual soul becomes a part of the body of the Almighty Viṣṇu. According to Sridhara this phase of *mukti* can only be attained by the *yogis* through their hard penance. This is not meant for the common man. So he emphasizes that *bhakti* is even superior to *sayuja mukti*. *Bhakti* in its purest form is achieved by divine grace triggered by guru. Liberation for Sridhara is an unworldly extraordinary ecstasy attained not by any dialectical or discursive argument, not by cultivation of rationality or ethical or moral values, but only by unconditional surrender (*saranagati*) to Narayana/Kṛṣṇa, the ultimate Reality, the non-dual consciousness who is also qualified by his profound love for those creatures who are absolutely dedicated to Him. Thus one of the essential qualities of God is His *bhakta-bhakti*, i.e. His love of those who love Him. So Sridhara does not appeal to the God for *jnana* but *anuraga* (attachment) for singing His glories. Regarding the question whether a *bhakta* attains the *jivanmukti* or *videha mukti* Sridhara’s answer may appear somewhat unclear. In certain contexts he announces that God’s grace is definitely obtainable in a person’s life time, but at certain places he seems to follow the text, *Nrsinghatapini* in claiming that *mukti* is achievable after the cessation of the body. But a close look at his works reveals that the contradiction is apparent as is evident from his interpretation of the term *dehanta* (cessation of the body). Once the *anuraga* or the grace from the God is obtained the soul’s association of the body, either in the gross form or subtle form is lost. So *dehanta* in this case does not imply the cessation of the body. Sridhara justifies his position by quoting a stanza from Abhinava Gupta’s *Gitartha- Sangraha bhakti* wherein it is stated that, *bhakti* is relished only by a living being. What ultimately matters in *bhakti* is the relishability of the ultimate Reality. We cannot exactly say whether *anuraga* leads to *bhakti* or *bhakti* leads to *anuraga*; for, in case of self-realization the relationship of cause and effect does not hold. Similarly, we cannot exactly pinpoint whether *bhakti* causes *moksa* or *moksa* causes *bhakti*. Sridhara identifies *bhakti* with *moksa* which is nothing other than singing the glories of Hari/Kṛṣṇa. Thus the highlight of his conception of eschatology is *bhakti* as a *rasa* experience. Now, the question may be raised that if *bhakti* is a *rasa* then it signifies some other form of emotional state (*bhava*). Being an emotional state it is dominated by *maya*. So *mukti* through *bhakti* is likely to be hindered by *maya*. If liberation is freedom from *maya* how liberation be equated with *rasa* experience? Sridhara’s answer to such a query is quite straight forward – *rasa* is experienced when *sattva guna* (pure and divine qualities) is predominant. The Bhagavata cult holds the predominance of the *sattva guna* in human life as its sole aim. So the effect of *sattva* domination in the form of *rasa* experience is the source of unadulterated ecstasy (*ananda*) that signifies

different phenomenal forms of Visnu (in such phenomenal forms the *sattva* quality predominates). Thus we note that Sridhara deviates from the Advaitic stānd that *moksa* means the absence of all the three *gunas*. From this argument it obviously follows that for Sridhara *moksa* is a direct experience of the *saguna Brahman* in the form of Visnu in His multiple manifestations. Clarifying his position Sridhara says, Brahman might be *nirguna*, hence beyond the linguistic expressibility, but in the case of *bhaktā's* relish of *Brahman* in its *saguna* form there is absolutely no necessity of the discursive knowledge of any linguistic function.

As far as *moksa* or *mukti* is concerned *Bhagavata Purana* even takes a bolder stand. *Bhakti* is now placed in the pivot. *Bhakti* is not only a relishable experience but also the means (*sadhana*) and the end (*sadhya*). Thus *bhakti* is even higher than *moksa/kaivalya/apavarga*, as advocated by different systems of thought. Following this line of thought Sridhara comments that, loving surrender to Visnu is the highest order of human experience, superior even to the highest level of *apavarga*. The love evoked by *bhakti* is the gift of Kṛṣṇa, the archetypal lover.

Sukla as usual presents a critical as well as analytical approach while discussing Sridhara Svami's notion of the God-realization. He enumerates the real nature of *bhakti* experience by ample number of examples from the *Bhagavata Purana* as well as *Visnu Purana*.

The author concludes the work with an examination of Sridhara Svami's influence on later Vaisnavism. As stated earlier, Vaisnavism cannot be said to be a uniform sectarian religion. Its metaphysics and soteriology have passed through many interpretations and reinterpretations. Nevertheless, the way Sridhara correlates the Bhagavata literary corpus, viz. *Bhagavadgita*, *Visnu Purana* and *Bhagavata Purana* is unparalleled in the history of Vaisnavism. The philosophical core of these Bhagavata literatures remained largely unexplored till Sridhara Svami came up with his commentaries on them. So it is natural that Sridhara's works deeply and extensively influenced the later forms of Vaisnavism. A clear stamp of Sridhara Svami's commentaries could be noticed in the works of such great Vaisnava santhas as Sri Caitanya, Sankaradeva, Jagannatha Dasa as well as some Vaisnavas of North India. In this context the author takes up for discussion certain post-Sridhara literary works. Rupa Goswami (of Gaudiya Vaisnavism) for example, treats *bhakti* as a *rasa* (the relishable experience) in his *Ujjalanilamani* and *Bhakti Rasamrtasindhu*. Though the works follow Sridhara's line of thought, the difference in the interpretation of *bhakti* as a *rasa* becomes apparent from the fact that in Sridhara's scheme there is no place for excessive eroticism or schizophrenic frenzy in the practice of *bhakti*. Nor did he approve of the trans-sexualism preached by the alvars. As the author has clearly explicated, despite handling of hard and circuitous metaphysical arguments Sridhara finally took a u-turn and took resort to *bhakti* as unalloyed and unconditional surrender to God and His grace. This is the reason why he did not see a water-tight distinction between *saguna* and *nirguna bhakti*. However, in post-Sridhara phase, there seems to be a dichotomized theories of *bhakti* – *nirguna bhakti* and *saguna bhakti* championed by Kabir and Tulsidas, respectively. Following Sridhara

the author argues that as far as their philosophical positions are concerned there is not of much difference between these two paths. Both these paths suggest *bhakti* as the ultimate means of God-realization.

The author of this work should be lauded in two respects. First, it is an onerous task to explore the metaphysical and ontological dimensions of any religious work; for, such writers do not systematically expound their definite stand. So the author must be commended for the pain he has undertaken to systematically present Sridhara Svami's philosophy on the basis of his commentaries on the works that primarily belong to the genre of religious literature. Second, the author seems to be constantly aware of the fact that his target readers are not only academic philosophers. So he makes a valiant effort to simplify very technical philosophical concepts like the concepts of *Brahman*, *kala*, *laksana*, *rasa*, *jnana*, etc. This helps the readers sail through the work effortlessly. It is an extremely enjoyable book which would definitely enlighten both academic scholars and lay readers in understanding the philosophical basis of Vaisnavism, in general and Sridhara Svami as a Vaisnava philosopher, in particular. Sahitya Akademi deserves our kudos for publishing such an interesting work.

Tandra Patnaik

Department of Philosophy, Utkal University,
Bhubaneswar