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SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆASIDDHĀNTASUDHĀ — A SURVEY OF THE SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA DARŚANA

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Vedānta philosophy as described within Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahmasūtras* has been interpreted in different ways by numerous philosophers including, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Bhāskara, and Nimbārka. Each *ācārya* presents unique perceptions about the ultimate reality signified by 'brahman' and the nature of the individual self and the material world. While Śaṅkara postulates the principle of *māyā* and maintains that the material world is only an apparent transformation of the Brahman, most of the other schools take the world to be the real transformation of the Absolute. There is also a difference of opinion about the stature of the individual self vis-à-vis the Absolute. The position of a personal god is yet another greatly debated point.

An interesting interpretation of Vedānta is offered by the relatively recent Svāminārāyaṇa school of Vedānta that was founded by Bhagavān Swaminarayan (Svāminārāyaṇa) (1781-1830). The teachings of this *darśana* is identified as the Akṣara-Puruṣottama philosophy. This philosophy extensively references scriptures to postulate *Para-brahman*, the supreme being, as distinct from Akṣara-brahman, the immutable cause of the universe. Parabrahman is identified with Nārāyaṇa and regarded as beyond any modification. Attaining identity with the Akṣarabrahman is not the end of the spiritual journey. In fact, it only paves the way for the real devotion to the Supreme *brahman*, who is to be approached with the sentiments of servitude. By maintaining this position, the philosophy harmoniously integrates Upaniṣadic doctrines of absolutism and theism. It also substantiates its position with numerous quotations from scriptures.

The present work is authored by Sadhu Bhadreshdas—an erudite scholar of the Svāminārāyaṇa *darśana*. The text provides an elegant introduction to the basic tenets

of the system in pure and scholarly Sanskrit. Sadhu Bhadreshdas has already won the acclaim of the scholarly world for his expert exposition of the *Prasthānatrayī* from the perspective of the Svāminārāyaṇa *saṃpradāya*. The present work, authored in the classical *vādagrantha* style, will be interesting to all students of Indian philosophy. It recreates the environment of ancient scholarly discourses, where philosophy was a matter of daily intellectual exercise and Sanskrit was the vehicle of scholarly exchange.

The work is divided into nine sections called *dhārās* or streams. The first section, called the "Maṅgaladhārā," offers benediction, pays obeisance to Akṣara-Puruṣottama and Shastriji Maharaj (Śāstrījī Mahārāja), and presents an account of the following five fundamental entities identified by the *darśana*: the *jīva*s (the individual self), *īśvaras* (conscious entities that are assigned with tasks by Parabrahman to ensure the function of the universe), *māyā* (the cause of delusion and bondage), Akṣarabrahman, and the supreme Parabrahman. While both Brahman (Akṣarabrahman) and Parabrahman are beyond *māyā's* influence, the *jīva*s and the *īśvara*s are understood as bound by *māyā*.

The second chapter, entitled "Akṣarabrahmadhārā" deals with the nature of Akṣarabrahman. It is described as the entity which neither diminishes (*na kṣīyate*) nor becomes destroyed (*na kṣarati*), which pervades all things and resides as the abode of all. The author demonstrates how the nature and distinct form of Akṣarabrahman is substantiated by scriptural authority by providing numerous references from the Upaniṣads that support its position. Among others, it recalls readings from the Kaṭhopaniṣad (2.16), Muṇḍakopaniṣad (2.2.2), Taittirīyopaniṣad (2.1.1), and also from the *Bhagavadgītā* (8.13). The author clarifies that within these and other readings the qualification 'Akṣara' cannot be applied to the Supreme Puruṣottama, who transcends even Brahman (Akṣarabrahman). As described in Muṇḍakopaniṣad (2.1.1), all entities of this universe emanate from Akṣara just as "sparks are emitted from a blazing fire."

In the third chapter, titled "Parabrahmadhārā," the author describes the nature and form of Puruṣottama, the supreme being, who is signified by the term 'Nārāyaṇa.' Parabrahman is portrayed as a being who is brilliant, eternal, divine, has definite form, is devoid of defects, and transcends and presides over *māyā*. Puruṣottama's form is worshipped by devotees. It is portrayed as being ever youthful (*kiśora*) and residing in the eternal abode, which is identified as Akṣaradhāman. The author quotes extensively from Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavadgītā*, and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* to establish the transcendental, effulgent, and omnipresent nature of this supreme being.

The epistemology of the *darśana* is discussed in the section called "Pramāṇadhārā." The author counters the view that knowledge is dependent on the means of knowledge (*mānādhīnā meyasiddhih*) even for liberated souls, who have realized the true nature of the ultimate reality. Adopting an eclectic approach regarding means of valid knowledge, the author outlines the nature of eight sources of knowledge (*pramāṇas*): perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāṇa*), analogy (*upamāṇa*), verbal testimony (*śabda*), presumption (*arthāpatti*), non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*), possibility (*sambhava*), and

traditional belief (*aitihya*). The school accepts the division of perception into worldly (*laukika*) and non-worldly (*alaukika*) perception, similar to the Nyāya Darśana. The *laukika* comprises of sensory perception, while the *alaukika* accounts for all types of extra-sensory perception. All the methods of language acquisition (*śaktigrahopāyas*), such as grammar and lexicon that are accepted by the Naiyāyikas are also accepted here as aids to verbal understanding. The doctrine of error accepted in the *darśana* goes by the name *cidacitkhyāti*.

The next section explains the nature of *māyā*. *Māyā* is understood to be that which results in the manifestation of the diverse material world. Similar to the Sāṅkhya *darśana's prakṛti*, *māyā* consists of the following three qualities (*guṇas*): *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. It is the inert entity that results in the creation of the universe. *Māyā* is also identified as the cause of ego and possessiveness. It has the power to conceal the true nature of the self and cause the self to become attached to the world. As in the Sāṅkhya system, *māyā* as the base *prakṛti* is understood to evolve into *mahat*, the ego (*ahaṃkāra*), the mind (*manas*), the intellect (*buddhi*), the five sensory organs, the five motor organs, the five subtle elements, and the five gross elements. The system accepts the process of creation as *pañcīkaraṇa*—the means by which all gross elements are intermixed. By advocating that the world cannot become as it is without a cause, the system rejects the notion of philosophical naturalism (*svabhāvavāda*). It also rejects the Sāṅkhya Darśana's accidental causal theory, the Vaiśeṣikas' atomic theory, the nihilist and momentary doctrines, the views of the Yogācāras, Vaibhāṣikas and the Sautrāntikas, and the doctrine of the Ārhatas.

The next section, entitled the "Jīvadhārā" establishes the existence of the individual self as distinct from the body, the sensory organs, and the mental apparatus. The *jīvas* are identified as sentient, eternal and distinct from the supreme Brahman (Parabrahman), Akṣarabrahman, and the *īśvaras*. They are many in number, immutable, and like atoms, minute. They are bound by *māyā* since eternity, partake in righteous and unrighteous actions, and experience the fruits of these actions. The *darśana* rejects the Cārvāka view that the self is indistinct from the body and the Buddhist view that the self is void and consists of knowledge in flux. The doctrine also rejects the Advaitin position that the relationship between *brahman* and the *jīvas* is comparable to that between an object and its reflection (*bimbapratibimbabhāva*).

The author discusses the nature and form of *īśvaras* in the proceeding section identified as the "Īśvaradhārā." The doctrine accepts that there are innumerable *īśvaras*, who are assigned various functions in the creation, sustenance, and destruction of the material world by the supreme Brahman (Parabrahman). *Īśvaras* are identified as distinct entities from Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, and the individual *jīvas*. They are conscious in nature and eternal. While they are inferior to the Supreme Brahman (Parabrahman) and Brahman (Akṣarabrahman), they are vastly superior to the *jīvas* in terms of their capacity for knowledge and power.

The spiritual endeavour of the system is outlined in the next section called the "Sādhanadhārā." At the outset, the author, references a Kaṭhopaniṣad passage to emphasize that the cessation of the *jīvas*' and *īśvaras*' worldly life (the end of the circle of life and death) is possible only by the grace of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. To attain such grace, the self strives to attain the realization of the supreme being with one's mind, body, and speech. Even though the *darśana* acknowledges the fourfold social order within the realm of the material world, it maintains that the qualities of an individual, not one's birth, determines one's social position.

The final section called the "Phaladhārā" describes the nature and state of liberation. The *darśana* rules out the possibility of *jīvas* and *īśvaras* attaining ontological identity with *brahman*. Liberation (*mukti*) is conceived as attained by the grace of the supreme being. Liberation is characterized by the following two: the abandonment of all undesirable elements, such as *māyā*, and the attainment of devotion (*bhakti*) for Parabrahman. In addition to accepting liberation after the cessation of the mortal body (*videhamukti*), the *darśana* also accepts the possibility of attaining liberation while being alive (*jīvanamukti*). In support it references several readings from scriptures like the *Bhagavadgītā* that reveal the *sthitaprajña* nature of the *jīvanamukta*. The *darśana* also recognises three types of passages for the liberated self and describes various stations of the self (*ātman*) in its final journey towards Parabrahman's divine abode.

The *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* has two appendices at the end of the text. The first consists of Svāmī Nārāyaṇasvarūpadāsa's (Pramukh Swami Maharaj's) outline of the essential doctrine of the Svāminārāyaṇa philosophy. The second appendix is written by the author of the work. It provides a concise summary of entire work in verse form.

Students of Indian philosophy will be greatly indebted to Bhadreshdas Swami for providing this scholarly introduction to the Svāminārāyaṇa philosophy. Its clear and comprehensible Sanskrit is commendable. Within this exceptional exposition, the author displays his thorough knowledge of not only the *saṃpradāya*, but also the various schools of Indian philosophy. He authenticates his position at every juncture with numerous references to scriptures, such as the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavadgītā*. Rival perspectives are presented clearly and accurately and responded to from the *siddhānta* position. Written in modern times, the work serves as a testament to India's living *darśanic* and *śāstra* tradition.