The Ratiocination of Advaita Philosophy

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The present article aims to present the most virulent arguments of the Socio-Spiritual reformer in Kerala, Sree Narayana Guru (SNG), who is also a contemporary to Sree Chattampi Swamikal. These two philosophers in Kerala had made great efforts to ratiocinate the true Advaita philosophy into a 'digestible to common man' perspective. These two personalities were responsible for the socio-spiritual renaissance laying foundation for a modern Kerala. During their times, or at least till the end of the 19th century, Kerala was a land immersed in darkness due to many of the prevailing social barriers like the caste and vaṇa . As a result of the privilege enjoyed by the Brahmanical lineage in all aspects of life, the distinction between savarṇa and avarṇa was blindly accepted as a norm. Such a caste-based distinction was detrimental to the welfare of the people considered avarṇa, including the Ezhava community to which Sree Narayana Guru belonged. In such times, wherein the Namboothiri sect had grabbed absolute control over the social, cultural and economic life of the land, the contributions that these two masters made to the uplift of the so-called oppressed class of the society are invaluable.

The Socio- Religious Milieu

At the time of the birth of Guru it was the common practice that anyone who is born outside the Namboothiri caste is expected to spend his life in sacrifice and service to the Namboothiris. Centuries of oppression and exploitation by the so-called upper class people had reached unprecedented excess. Due to this suffering the opportunity to think in the light of Guru's vision made them to rise against this injustice. The savarṇas believed that the lower classes did not deserve the slightest of humane treatment. It was at this juncture that Guru appeared as a powerful leader to guide the downtrodden masses. His universal principles inspired them and his presence lent them the leadership they

were in such dire need of and this paved the way for a widespread social revolution. The teachings of Guru gave them the strength to fight against injustice. Sri Ayyankali, for instance, imbibed the principle of "organise to gain strength" and formed the SadhujanaparipalanaSangham to stand firmly in support of the oppressed classes. The concerted efforts of such luminaries enabled to reduce this injustice to a great extent. Thus a sense of freedom and self-realisation was brought forth. The activities of Dr. Ambedkar that shook the whole of Indian society instilled more inspiration and strength within the oppressed classes.

Although there were several religious practices in Kerala, the Hindu religion hailed as Sanātanadharma was drowned into the structural hegemonism of the orthodoxy. The avarṇas were given a low stature in the society. In order to put an end to these evil practices that had survived through millennia, Guru followed and made use of the Advaitadarśana of Sri Śankaracharya. The gist of the Advaita principle can be found in the statement: ""Brahma satyam jaganmithyā jīvo Brahmaiva nāparaḥ". This statement insists that the only true being is Brahman, the universal principle. Jagat, the material world around us, is only an illusion. Thus the jīvātman is nothing but Brahman Itself. There are several such cardinal statements like "Prajñānam Brahma"[1]", "Ayamātma Brahma"[2]", ""Tattvamasi"[3]" and ""Aham Brahmāsmi"[4]", that declare the fact that the jīvātman and the paramātman are not two but one. The sole reason for suffering and sorrow in this world is avidyā or ajñāna, the lack of knowledge. True knowledge, jñāna or vidyā, is the realisation that "bhedabuddhi" is not real at all; that there is no distinction between the subject and the knowledge that he seeks. This ,jñāna is the only way to dispense off the worldly sufferings. Thus the statement "Jñānādeva tu kaivalyam, " Jñānādeva vimucyate"[5]" insists that it is only through the acquisition of jñāna that the ultimate release or kaivalya can be achieved. This principle was the most enduring tool that Guru employed for the complete reformation of the society in which he lived.

However Guru used the advaita principle to accept all the facts of the universe as facts. Gurudevadarśana, the vision of the Guru, stands at that point of spirituality which uplifts humanity from the malice's of caste distinctions. This is what makes Guru different from Sri

Śankara. While Sri Śankara gave prominence to the attainment of ultimate knowledge (pāramārthikasatya) beyond the gist of the universal, or the worldly, Guru's views stood firmly on the "ekalokasrṣti" which implies the reality of the world.

Religion - Apprehensions and Pursuits of 'Ekamata'

The Upaniṣads reveal that the ultimate truth relishes in Advaita beyond the confines of all detrimental divisions such as religion and caste. The Upaniṣads praise the one non-dual saccidānandacaitanya that is the soul of all living beings. Many eminent personalities like Sri Gaudapada, Sri Śankara, Sri Ramanuja and Sri Madhva have written commentaries on Upaniṣads. However none of them were on a level that was easily accessible to the common people. An important cause for this was the fact that only Brahmins were allowed access to education. The fact that the commentaries were avowedly difficult was another reason. The aim of Sree Narayana Guru was to release the knowledge of the Upaniṣads from much of intricacies. We see this mission reflected in all of his works.

For him, if the religion is one, then there can only be one God. Thus Man, who has been created by this Ekadaiva, must also be one; he cannot be differentiated through many castes; there is, thus, only one caste. Thus humanity is one whole mass that cannot be subjected to classification through institutions like the caste system. In no plane of social or intellectual activity can plurality have any place[6]. This idea is put across in a logical yet simple manner by Guru in Ātmopadeśaśatakam[7]. Here the gist of all religions is professed to be one as in the verse that begins with:

"Palamatasāravumekamennupārā-

tulakilorānayilandharennapole ...."

The analogy drawn here is between the story of the blind men who each touch one part of the elephant and think that is the essence of the elephant and the fact of fools all around whom, not realising that the gist of all religions is the same, keep thinking that theirs is better than all the rest. These people, in their efforts to rationalise the comparative greatness of their own religion, are wandering around wasting their time. All human beings are striving towards their own personal comfort.

The ""ekamata"" or the single ultimate religion acceptable to all is the attainment of bliss in self or ānanda in ātmasvarūpa. One should realise this truth and abstain from all sins that breed sorrow and remain serene to attain this end. Apart from these teachings, Ātmopadeśaśatakam also exhorts that the universe is an entity that exists as a vast ocean of knowledge.

The same ideas can be found propounded in most of his philosophical poems. In the poem "Arivu" ('Knowledge") he discusses this idea in detail:[8]

Since the day knowledge manifested, the universe also had existed. The universe is infinite; it has neither a beginning, nor an end. The only eternal thing is knowledge. There is nothing that merits comparison with knowledge. Thus the world stands filled in knowledge. There are many things that are known but knowledge is only one. Thus all things known are not knowledge; the knowledge that stands alone is the only true knowledge. This work is one where the shadows and impulses of Vedānta or metaphysical vision recur with considerable force. Knowledge is truth and it is the only true bliss. This is the theme of the philosophical peom Advaitadīpikā. [9]

Advaita- A Practical Assertion

This universe is an entity that includes all of the countless names, endless images that seem like reflections and the innumerable subjects that are linked to them. If one does not think things thoroughly, one may be tempted to asses this as reality like one thinks of the images in one's dreams as real while the dream lasts. Just like dreams, whose reality is challenged and illusory nature established when one wakes up, the world is also a passing thought that has no substance to it. If one can set aside the physical ocular faculty that perceives sights, then one realises that the world is only illusory, an optical illusion like a mirage. This world that is based firmly on causal relations still exists in the matter in which it was first conceived precisely because of the essence that is the cause of all matter. Like the wave and the water are the same, knowledge and the world are also the same. This realisation is the truth. This is the only bliss. This is the one that is saturated in truth. This is the only thing that glows and is a source of light. All else is nothing,

lacklustre. The mirages, the blue colour of the sky, the ākaśapuṣpam, are all unreal once you think of them. The only real thing is the sky. This everything is consciousness. Consciousness, or knowledge, is of two kinds: jµ¡na and vijµ¡na. While the former is the essence of common knowledge, the latter is more exalted; it is the cause of mokÀa. Thus Guru argues that the weapon that liberates one from all kinds of worldly inequality is knowledge of the second kind. The composition of Ātmopadeśaśatakam, "Arivu", Darśanamāla and Advaitadīpikā was made with the absorption of all such ideas that are spread across Upaniṣads like Īśāvāsya, Katha and Muṇdaka. Guru achieved the aim of uplift of the common people through the idea of advaita and thus implementing Vedānta on a practical level.

Among Guru's works, Darśanamāla stands unique as the essence of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. In this work, we find elaborate discussions of concepts like Īśvara, Prapanca, Māya, Mukti, Bhakti and Nirvāṇa. It is argued that life is momentary and universe is illusory.

In Nirvāṇadaśaka[10] he declares: Brahman is advitīya (non-dual) and eka(one, unique). One who realises this is not subject to rebirth. He is no longer there in the cycle of the world or samsāracakra. Nirvāṇa is the attainment of the realisation that "ekamevādvitīyam brahmāsti". A thorough understanding of Nirvāṇadaśaka makes it absolutely clear that it corresponds to the Advaita philosophy of Sri Sankara.

Guru translated the Īśāvāsyopaniṣad and published it as Īśāvāsyopaniṣadbhāṣya in order to convey the message that human beings must perform their karma with absolute disinterestedness for the well-being of the whole world. In effect it extols the same principle as found in Bhagavadgita.[11] The very first śloka of Īśāvāsyopaniṣadbhāṣya is an example for this:[12]

Guru's other works like Anukampādaśakam and Jīvakāruṇyapancakam exhorts the reader to be kind and sympathetic to all living beings and that this attribute of kindness is the true nature of the Advaita philosophy. Kindness, like knowledge, is unemotional and eternal. "Orupīṇayerumpinum varuttarutennullanukampayum sadā" (Sloka 1). In this poem, Guru recalls those like Lord Krishna, Vyāsa, Śibi, Sri Śankara, Nabi, Christ and Srī Buddha as epitomes of kindness. Moreover in Jīvakāruṇyapancakam, he repeats the same ideas.[13]

In his work Jātinirṇaya, Guru employs reasoning to establish with finality the fallacy of manmade divisions like the caste/varṇa categorisation based on brāhmaṇa-kṣatriya-śūdra distinctions.[15]

Daivadaśakam is a simple work in which one of Guru's most famous messages- "One caste, one religion and one God for Man"- is presented in the form of stotra. This work is recited in most homes even by small children as part of the lighting of the sandhyādīpam during the evening prayer ritual.

The prayer has its essence in the supplication that God who captains the vessel that takes one beyond the seas of the cycles of births and deaths so that one can escape forever the sorrows of this world and obtain eternal peace is the ultimate omnipotent power that guides one's life. The prayer appends a request that while in this world one must not suffer for lack in the daily necessities like food and clothing. The scheme of the prayer includes lines that have the instilling capacity of both bhakti in the worldly and revealing the depth and vastness of truth to the jñānis.[16]

It is the very Brahman that is the gist of the Advaita philosophy that Guru presents in "Daivadaśakam" in a form that is acceptable to the whole world and practitioners of all faiths. In Muktikopaniṣad, it is said that to understand the gist of the Advaita philosophy, it is sufficient to know the Māṇḍūkyopaniṣad alone (Māṇḍūkyamekamevālam mumukṣūṇam vimuktaye)[17] for the realisation of the message of Ekalokasṛṣti, it is enough to be familiar with this one work of Sree Narayana Guru.

To account further, Sree Narayana Guru's Advaita philosophy is a comprehensive plan that conjoins and brings into harmony the means and ends of life. Although there are views that argue that his philosophy of advaita is different from that of Sri Śankara, in principle, Guru was in agreement with Śankarādvaita. However he disagreed with many assumptions of the triple foundations of Śankarādvaita formed by Brahmasūtram, Bhagavadgīta and the Daśopaniṣads.[18] Instances are Apaśūdrādhikaraṇam in Brahmasūtra and "Cāturvaryam mayā srṣtam guṇakarmavibhāgaśaḥ" in Bhagavadgīta[19]. In Srī Śankara's

opinion, jñāna is ātman itself and hence it is also the way to salvation (Jñānādevatukaivalyam"). However Guru argues that Vijñāna is superior to Jñāna:[20]

One who is liberated according to the advaitic principle not only loses his personal identity but this identity now becomes the benevolent aspect of Brahman. In the light of this principle, it can be seen that Guru is also a true and complete advaitin. In his point of view, self-knowledge is the purest of all knowledge. Knowledge imparts bliss. Those who possess knowledge never suffer from sorrows. Those who suffer from sorrow are without true knowledge. Not only do the jñānis not hurt others but they also become instrumental in imparting the energy of consolation to others.

Although it has been clearly stated in the Upaniṣads that the way to get across the sins of this world, which operate through the cycle of births and deaths, it is essential to acquire knowledge, human beings who are bound by the shackles of illusion or māyā, cannot understand this in its specifics. It is in this lack of comprehension that we must find the roots of destructive activities like communal disharmony and riots which threaten the peace and quiet of the nation.

[21] In Bhagavadgīta it is said:

"Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavatibhārata

abhyutthānamadharmasya tathātmānam srjāmyaham"

Finally , it can be said that Sree Narayana Guru is a great sage who, like an avatar of the Lord send on earth to reinstate dharma, employed the philosophy of advaita to rescue the world from the depths of ignorance, uplift the downtrodden and aid his fellow creations to live a good life. The contemporary scenario it can be judged that of all the states in India, Kerala is perhaps the one with the least instances of caste-based discrimination. Even in this era, there are many in India who is still denied access to education, financial empowerment and cultural freedom because of the caste- prejudices that they are born into. As for Kerala, one cannot be completely certain that whether Guru's vision has been fully implemented in his birthplace itself. His teachings hold great value even today also.

References:

1. Aitareyopaniṣad V.3
2. Māṇḍukyopaniṣad-2
3. Chāndogyopaniṣad- VI, viii.7
4. Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-I, iv, 10
5. Yogatattvopaniṣad-16
6. "Orujāti, orumatam
   Orudaivammanuṣyanu
   Oruyoniyorākāra
   Morubhedavumillatil"(Ātmopadeśaśatakam Śloka-2)
7. "Palamatasāravumekamennupārā-
   tulakilorānayilandharennapole,
   palavidhayuktiparajnñupāmaranmā-
   ralavatukandalayātamarnnide¸am." Ātmopadeśaśatakam
   "Akhilarumātmasukhattināyprayatnam
   sakalavumiṇgu sadāpi ceytidunnu.
   Jagatiyilimmatamekamennucinti
   ccaghamanayātakatāramarnnideṇam"
   (Ātmopadeśaśatakam Śloka's-44 to 49)
8. "Arivennenneyitumu-
   ndarivundennāliteṇjuninnīdum
   arivonneṇṇamveri-
   larivallātenkilentirikkunnu.
   arivinnidamonnundi-
   llariyappedumennatinnuverāyi
   arivennālatetīī
   yariyappedumennaterumennīdil."(Arivu -Śloka's-8 to 9)
9. "Perāyirampratibhayāyiramiṇguvatti-
   lāralezhumviṇayamāyiramām prapañcam
   orāyāykilneritu kināvu¸arumvareyum

derā, muṇarnnalavu,arnnavanāmaśeṣam
neralladnnyamitudikkinenīkkinokkil"
"verallaviswamarivām maruvinpravāham
kāryattilnilpatiha kāra,asattayenye
verallavīciyilirippatu vāriyatre."
"ānandamasthiyathu bhātiyatonnutanne
ninaykilgaganamparamārthamākum." (Śloka's-1-2;15)

10. "Ekamevādvitīyambrahmāsti
nānyannasamśayaḥ
itividvān nivartetādvaitā-
nnāvartatepunaḥ" (Śloka-10)

11. "Karmaṇyevādhikāraste mā phaleṣu kadcana
Ma karmaphalaheturbhū ma te sangostvakarmaṇi"(Bhagavatgīta III;47)

12. "Īśanjagattilellāmā-
vasikkunnatul:kondunī
carikkamuktanāyāśi
kkarutārudeyumdhanam.
allenkilantyamvareyum
karmamceytiṇgusaṇganāy
irikkukayatallāti-
llonnumnaranuceytidān." (Śloka-1)

13. "Ellavarumātmasahodarare-
nnalleparayendatitorkukil nām?
kollunnathumenganejeevikale-
ttellumkilpayattubhujikkayatum"(Śloka-1)

14. "Manuṣyāṇam manuṣyatvam jatirgotvam gavam yathā
na brāhmaṇadirasyaivam hā! Tattvam vetti kopi na"(Śloka-1)

15. "Ḍaivamekattukolkangu kaividatingu- ñangale
nāvikan nī bhavābdhikkorāvivantoṇi ninpadam
annavastrādi muttāte tannu rakṣiccu ñangale
dhanyarākkunna nīyonnutanneñ ñangalkku tampurān"(Śloka's-1-3)

16. "Nī satyam jñānamānandam, nītannevartamānavum bhūtavum, bhāviyumverallotummozhiyumorkkilnī" (Śloka-7)
17. Muktikopaniṣad-26
18. Brahmasūtra Śankarabhāṣya-I.3-34-38
19. Ibid . IV.3
20. "Arivilumeriyariñjidunnavantannuru-vilumottupurattumujjvalikkumkaruvaṇu"- Ātmopadeśaśatakam -Śloka's-44 to 49) - Śloka-1
21. "Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavatibhārata abhyutthānamadharmasya tathātmānam srjāmyaham" -Bhagavadgita-IV.[7]

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