

The Rhetorical Strategy of the Nama-ghosa

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It is as a literary work that we propose to study this holy book of Assamese Vaisnavism. While the power of the text owes something to the authority it has for the believers, there is no doubt that the imaginative appeal is created through conscious craftsmanship. The nature of medieval Vaisnavism helped. The kind of Vaisnavism propagated by **Sankaradeva** and **Madhavadeva** was not a primarily intellectual doctrine. In fact it called for '*Rasamayi Bhakti*' (devotion characterized by *rasa*) in conscious opposition to such paths of salvation as jnana and karma, and the word '*rasa*' is not unknown in aesthetics and literary criticism. The preachers of Bhakti in medieval India deliberately used literature for religious ends, with a view to giving religious doctrine an attractive and appealing form. In doing so, they were forced to draw on established traditions of rhetorical and literary skill. They also extended those traditions through new experiments. But the immense religious authority of the text virtually obscured that aspect of the matter. While an author like **Tulsidasa** could combine religious ardour with cultivation of literary taste and skill, in the case of **Madhavadeva** the intensity of devotion itself seems to have dissolved all awareness of separate literary values. But this is not to say that these may not be examined in isolation.

Dr Banikanta Kakati, a believer who had been trained in western methods of literary analysis and criticism has written perhaps the most authoritative essay on the *Nama-Ghosa* in his *Purani Asamiya Sahitya*. He sees the work as Madhavadeva's swan-song, a monument built out of the wholesouled devotion to which he had committed himself. He finds the Nama-Ghosa reverberating with notes of profound world-weariness, disenchantment and sense of personal unworthiness, as well as ecstatic and enraptured praise of the saviour-God (*Nama*), and regards the work as a distillation; very perceptive, has to be qualified a little. To be sure, none of the works of Sankaradeva.

His preceptor and mentor, breathes such a concentrated sense of the miseries of the world and the distress of the soul separated from God. But neither the ache nor the longing seems to have the personal accent of modern romantic poetry. On the contrary, the woes of the world and the pain and despair of the lost, comfortless soul, appear to represent the experience of generations of suffering men. The few personal allusions have an obvious general import. Madhavadeva may have heaved a sigh from the very inmost depths of his soul here, but there is nothing to mark it as uniquely and peculiarly his own. There are no references to the grinding poverty and hardships he had known, nor any complaint against betrayal, ill-treatment and persecution with which he had been familiar. He had sufficient strength of mind and self-discipline to rise above the temptation to whimper and grumble. What he laments is spiritual weaknesses and spiritual frustrations that many other people besides him had known.

There are of course such references as that to Sankaradeva's revelation of the power of *Hari-Nama*, or the vile pretences and smear-campaigns of false prophets opposed to Sankaradeva. But his intimate personal relationship to his Guru is less important here than the role of Sankaradeva as a destined redeemer of suffering humanity. The persecution of Sankaradeva and his first disciples becomes symbolic of the world's treatment of true Vaisnavas. Thus all accidental and contingent circumstances of personal life are purged from the religious picture of human life presented here. The Guru-Caritas or lives of the saints, preserved orally in the Satra institutions of Assam down the centuries, tell us of his material distress and mental agonies in the different stages of his life. The disciples who gravitate towards the two Gurus also appear to have been people familiar with toil and poverty. It is possible that the rise of the Bhakti movement in Assam had been accompanied by widespread economic distress and social upheaval, due to the coercive imposition of feudalism and the extremely restricted growth of commodity production in the North-East. That may have exacerbated Madhavadeva's feelings of bitter despair and horror. In any case the point is that those feelings do not find personal expression here. They are the content of generic man's travails in life.

What impresses the reader is the range and variety of the literary effects, achieved with the help of a large diversity of means. While it is everywhere urgent and intense, the language modulates with ease from weighty sublimity to colloquial raciness and the feeling can ascend from poignant misery to rapturous bliss. Though not a philosophical tract the Nama-Ghosa states with remarkable force and succinctness the cardinal principles and beliefs of Assamese Vaisnavism. It cannot be denied that the *Gita* itself had bequeathed to most of the schools of Bhakti a certain degree of philosophic eclecticism along with the pious hope that God Himself will be the ultimate meeting ground of all the conflicting doctrines of epistemology and logic and metaphysics. The Nama-Ghosa is no exception to this. The stratagem barely helps solve the basic conflict between dualism and non-dualism. But those contradictions are just swept aside by the surge of feelings of Bhakti.

Bhakti is first advocated on the ground that since God is all-pervading and inexpressible, He can be neither conceived nor worshipped directly. Hence the need to take refuge in the praise of an incarnation God (Verse 5). But the far greater reason is the incomparable richness and unsurpassable sweetness of the taste of Nama itself, which makes the devotee averse to the philosophic end of spiritual liberation or Mukti. The true Bhakat (devotee), as Madhavadeva re-iterates in verse after verse (e.g. verses 1, 77, 79, 236, 244, 288, etc.) is indifferent to personal salvation and is content to serve God with His praise. Nama is the bridge between the objective existence of Godhead and the subjective raptures of Bhakti. And God Himself is pleased with Nama as, in His mysterious way, He 'loves to hear His own praise'. (Verses 21, 81, etc.) Of course there is also the corollary that Nama pleases God because it saves His creatures. Bhakti is the highest mode of worship as it cleanses the mind completely and is available to the meanest of men (e.g. Verses 28, 119, 501, 608, etc.) And it is especially suitable to the epoch of universal corruption, *Kali yuga*, which has tarnished everything else (e.g. Verses 267, 268, etc.) Yet the unregenerate soul fails to realize the immense good fortune in the availability of Nama both as an unfailing means of salvation and a source of quenchless joy and incorruptible well-being (e.g. Verses 42-52, etc.) The mind of man is therefore to be purged of all vacillations and weaknesses and be made ready to be solely the

instrument of service to God. A detailed identification and examination of the obstacles like mental weaknesses that prevent the soul's turning to God are thus part of one's prayers, necessarily.

A most interesting consequence is the thoroughly democratic and humanistic character of Bhakti as expounded by **Madhavadeva**. It is said to be the most appropriate form of worship for the unlettered and unsophisticated masses. But His is no condescension. Hari-Nama is also the highest form of worship because it is available to all humanity without exception, (Verse 118). Learning and austerities are not considered passport to salvation. In fact logical polemics are decried as a danger to the soul (Verses 42-43). It is Bhakti that throws wide open the doors of heaven to the poor and the unlettered. Since orthodoxy and priesthood insist on correct observance of *Niyama* and *Sangjama* and scrupulous adherence to rites, the power of Hari-Nama is said to dispense with all *Niyama* and *Sangjama* honoured by the *Shastras* (Verses 28). Indeed, it transcends even the authority of the rules of *Varnasrama-Dharma* (Verse 119). Those whom the Brahminical orthodoxy have held in abysmal contempt as undeserving salvation - women, the *sudras*, and the *candalas* - are declared to be saved by *Nama*. And those races that lay outside the pale of Hindu society, the Miris (Mishings), the Ahoms, and the Kacharis (Bodos), are not excluded from God's grace (Verses 473, 501, 608, etc). All this may not be quite in the spirit of modern democracy which starts from the assumption of human dignity and equality. But in the medieval society under the stranglehold of illiberal Brahminical orthodoxy, it must have been a revolutionary statement. The rejection of *Vidhi* or social prescription as the guide of human life also had revolutionary implications.

We may dwell a little longer on this aspect as certain people from vulgar-Marxist positions strenuously deny the presence of such democratic elements in Assamese Vaisnavism. One of the characteristic features of democratic humanism is a renewed appreciation of the worth of man as such. Man himself, independent of all accidental features of race, clime and class, is saluted. As **Candidasa** had remarked, man was true above all things, and none was above. The repeated emphasis on the greatness of human

life and the human body - in that it is capable, for all its weakness and corruption, of reaching God through *Nama*. Whereas the Brahminical orthodoxy sees in the created world a perpetual cycle of birth and re-births that lead from the life of the insect to the life of the gods, bhakti sees human life as peculiarly fortunate in its capacity to free himself from the cycle of karma. Human birth is therefore a rare good fortune (Verse 27); while worldly happiness is possible in all kinds of life, only human life is worthy of the service of God (Verse 29).

The only human authorities admitted are that of the *Guru* and of the *Mahanta* or Sadhu. The Guru because He reveals the path of Bhakti to the fallen man in the lowest station in life, and the Mahanta because he shows Bhakti and Nama in practice. The devotee is a social being. While he is responsible for his choices he can attain the path of Bhakti only under the influence of and in the company of Mahantas and under the guidance of the Guru. Thus Bhakti is unlike the lonely methods of salvation like jnana and the yogic austerities. It is above all else a form of relating to others, God man and the world.

The dominant metaphor of Bhakti in the Nama-Ghosa is that of *rasa*. It is like nectar, like water to thirsty souls, like honey. And Bhakti itself is like a 'river of love' expressing the glory of the celestial world and it is **Sankaradeva** who made it over-run its banks through the whole world (Verse 371). There is again an enchanting image of Bhakti as a lake of sweet water with bees drunk on the honey of lotus-flowers and swans crooning the Name of God (Verse 644). The verb repeated most often is 'to drink' (Verses 111, 219, 237, 244 etc.). But this sublime experience comes only to him who has prostrated himself absolutely at the feet of the world's master. Hence the next important metaphor is that of the slave, the servant, who takes refuge in the service of God. There are traditional gestures of submission like taking straw grass in one's teeth, holding the master's feet, and in one striking instance, of selling oneself as a slave:-

“O Banamali! Buy me with the money called Nama, what lordship is that which would not buy a slave offering himself? Buy me, O Lord! Buy me, for your own service. I require no other price than Nama” (Verses 541-542)

There is no discernible structure in the text which still makes a profound impression of unity. Traditionally the verses have been strung together into sections under headings such as ‘*Namaskara*’ (Salutation), ‘*Ninda*’ (Condemnation), ‘*Atma-Ninda*’ (Self-Reproach), ‘*Kheda*’ (Lamentation), ‘*Upadesha*’ (Self Counsel), etc. Though all of them constitute a world with its own atmosphere, there is no linear continuity like that of a tale or an argument. But there is a good deal of repetition of themes as well as phrasing. No doubt, the repetition reinforces the effect aimed at. But it also suggests the possibility of a cyclical structure, common enough in the traditional Indian tale, whether oral or written.

There is also a kind of dramatic dialectic linking up different sections. The praise of the Guru is followed by the condemnation of the false preceptors. The misery of worldly life is set over against the bliss of Bhakti dedicated to God. Self-reproach is followed by a resolve to overcome weaknesses and devote oneself solely to Nama. Bhakti is paired with Mukti, Maya with God’s gracious revelation of the Truth, and so on. The different themes are expressed in appropriate metrical form and tonal atmosphere, so that the whole work strikes one as rich orchestral composition. Of course, all the verses are chanted musically in an appropriate manner. But the passages translated from the *Gita* constitute perhaps the most sublime and exalted moments in the work. It is as if from the depths of His sense of his own degradation and unworthiness, the devotee rises to the very heights of exalted meditation here. The variety of diction and the author’s easy mastery over various kinds of it are amazing. In imagery it does not have the rich sensuousness of some of Sankaradeva’s works but the austerity here is deliberate and controlled. Whenever he chooses he surprises and delights the reader with a sharp and vivid image. The call of the world upon the senses is controlled as the author’s intention is to point beyond it.

Stanzaic quatrains of varying length are interspersed with rhymed couplets. But within the same metrical form there is great variety, ranging from colloquial briskness to musical evocation of pathos, from sublime majesty to lyrical beauty. The grave, measured tones of exalted meditation are in contrast with the desperate intensity of self-reproach that stops barely short of the energy of street-quarrel. The entire varied exercise leads gradually towards the absolute self-surrender and ecstatic freedom of the end. The *Nama-Chanda* or the ecstatic repetitions of the **Names of God** from Verses 852 to 977 would have been a monotonous incantation anywhere else. But as it is carefully prepared for and anticipated it gives the impression of sweet intoxication. All the obstacles to Nama have in the mean time been met and overcome, and all the reasons for it have been affirmed, until all doubt is dispelled and we are ready to join the ecstatic celebration of the greatness and glory of the divine being.

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