

The genius of Acharya Madhva – An analysis of the invocatory verse of brahma-sUtra bhAshya and aNubhAshya

Introduction:

In Sumadhva Vijaya Sri Narayana Pandithacharya describes Acharya Madhva's writing very beautifully saying that while even children can understand it superficially, the full meaning is beyond the grasp of even erudite scholars ("baala sanghamapi .."). This kind of terse writing that reveals hidden gems upon deep introspection can be seen in all his works. We only need some helpful guides like Sri JayarIrtha, Sri Vyasa tIrtha, Sri Raghavendra Swamigalu (Rayaru) to show us these jewels! As an example, this article offers the result of some very preliminary and superficial analysis done on the invocatory verse of brahma-sUtra bhAshya (and aNubhAshya), using Rayaru's Tattva Manjari as the guide.

Background of the Brahma sUtra bhAshya:

In tattva manjari, Sri Raghavendra Swamigalu (Rayaru) gives a concise summary of the reasons leading to the creation of the BrahmasUtra bhAshya (iha khalvadhikAriNAmakhilakIEshanivRutti ..chikIrShitam pratijAnItE). Knowledge of the Lord's greatness (mAhAtyama gyAna) is the key to resolving all miseries and attaining supreme bliss. The eternal and infinite Vedas are there to provide this knowledge. It is not possible to know about the Lord without a correct understanding of the Vedas. Lord Narayana incarnated as Sri VedavyAsa (also known as Krishna DvaipAyana and bAdarAyaNa) to compose the BrahmasUtras and provide this knowledge. However, inappropriate commentaries on the BrahmasUtras made this effort futile since nobody could grasp the true meaning of the sUtras.

Sri Vayu devaru incarnated as Acharya Madhva and authored 4 works on the brahmasUtras - BrahmasUtra bhAshya, NyAyavivarana, AnuvyAkhyAna and AnUbhAshya. According to the Sumadhva Vijaya, Acharya Madhva dictated the four chapters of AnuvyAkhyAna to four disciples simultaneously, revealing his extraordinary genius. He also condensed the gist and core of the BrahmasUtra bhAshya into AnubhAshasya, a short work of 32 verses. Rayaru's commentary on AnubhAshasya is tattva manjari. The brahma-sUtra bhAshya and aNubhAshya have the same invocatory verse, which is the focus of this article.

Invocatory (MangalacharaNa) verse of brahma-sUtra bhAshya and aNubhAshya

OM nArAyaNaM guNaissarvairudIrNaM dOShavarjitaM
j~JEyaM gamyaM gurUMshchAPinatvA sUtrArtha uchyate ||

(Loose) Translation:

The meaning of the Brahma sUtras are stated after paying obeisance to Narayana, who is full of auspicious attributes, devoid of all defects, who should be known and attained, and (is) my guru too.

Why Narayana?

According to Rayaru (tattvamanjari 1.7), the 'api' used in the verse is to remind us that the four adjectives used in this verse for Narayana are a summarization of the four adhyAyas (or chapters) of the Brahma sUtra. To understand this, we need to take a closer look at the four adhyAyas.

The first adhyAya, called Samanvaya (Concordance) adhyAya, postulates that every Vedic text primarily proclaims Vishnu. The second chapter, called avirOdha (non-conflict) adhyAya, states that Sri

Hari is completely devoid of all defects; it also discusses and refutes the possible objections against Vedanta. The third chapter, called sAdhana adhyAya, describes the process of obtaining liberation or moksha from the cycle of births and deaths. The fourth and final chapter, called phala adhyAya, describes the state of liberation.

The word “Narayana” contains all the four characteristics used in the verse. The reasoning is as follows:

- ‘ara’ indicates defects, ‘nAra’ indicates its opposite i.e, guNas or auspicious attributes. ‘ayana’ means abode. Thus ‘nArayana’ is the abode or repose of all auspicious attributes. This is captured in the adjective “gunairudIrNam”
- In a similar manner, ‘arAyaNa’ indicates one who is the repose of all defects. Thus, ‘nArayana’ means who is totally bereft of all defects. This is captured in the adjective “dOshavarjitam”.
- ‘nara’ indicates the human species. ‘nAra’ indicates a quality associated with humans i.e, gyAna or sentience. Thus, nArayaNa means one who is the ultimate goal of all knowledge, which is equivalent to ‘j~Jeyam”.
- ‘ara’ means defects and sorrows . ‘nAra’ means those who are never subject to defects or sorrows i.e, liberated souls. Thus, ‘nArayaNa’ indicates one who is the repose of all liberated souls. He is the one who is to be attained. This is the meaning of ‘gamyam’

One objection raised by opposing schools is “How can a person with a body be devoid of defects? And how can somebody without a body be full of auspicious attributes? Rayaru answers this objection very smartly. Using his vast knowledge of Acharya Madhva’s works he points out in Tattamanjari (1.3) that the Gita bhAshya quotes the following reference from Brahma Vaivarta:

“dehoayam me sadAnando naiva prakruti nirmitaah
paripUrNashcha sarvatra tEna nArAyaNOasmyaham

(My body is always made of bliss. It is not made by nature. It is pariPUrna everywhere. That is why I am called Narayana).

As stated by the above reference, “Narayana” implies a body full of bliss, which is complemented by the phrase “gunairudIrNam” meaning a body full of auspicious attributes. This answers the objection raised above with the following solution “A body can be devoid of defects if it is made up of only auspicious attributes that are totally flawless and not made by nature.”

Other Reasons for invoking Narayana:

In addition to the above, there is another consideration. The first sUtra ‘OM aThAto brahma jignAsa OM”, serves as the invocatory verse for the entire brahma sutra and lays the foundation for the sUtras that follow. If one disregards the first and last Omkaras (which are part of every sUtra) this sUtra consists of 8 syllables. Since each sUtra is equivalent to a mantra, this Sutra is in effect a mantra with 8 syllables. The most famous 8-syllabled mantras in shastra are the Omkara and the Narayana AshtAkshara. So, in effect, Lord VedavyAsa is saying that the brahma sutras expound the knowledge contained in the Omkara, and that the patron deity for this is Narayana. None of the other Acharyas seem to have caught this drift.

Gyanis point out that the four syllables of the word “Narayana” represent the four adhyayas as follows:

- ‘nA’ stands for ‘nAra’ meaning auspicious attributes as reasoned above. This indicates that the Lord is the personification of all auspicious attributes, which is the meaning of the samanvaya adhyAya

- 'ra' indicates decay or absence (the sanskrit verb 'ring' means 'kshaye' or decay). This says that all defects have totally decayed making 'nArayana' devoid of all defects, which is the meaning of the avirOdha adhyAya
- 'ya' indicates 'yatna' or effort. This says that 'nArayana' resides in us, and based on our individual worth, helps us perform sAdhane. 'yA' also stands for 'yApayati' meaning that He banishes us from samsaara by granting us liberation. This is the essence of the sAdhana adhyAya.
- 'Na' stands for 'nivrutti' or happiness. This is the essence of the phala adhyAya.

The final point to note is that 'nArayana' is the name of the moola or original form that remains during pralaya. At the beginning of creation, four other forms emerge from this form. These forms are aniruddha, pradyumna, samkarshana and vAsudeva. It makes sense that the jIva should worship this moola form in order to obtain emancipation from the cycle of births and deaths.

Implications of 'Brahma jignasa'

Stipulating that inquiry into Brahman be performed implies the following:

- brahman is accessible through jignasa or enquiry. If not, the entire exercise is pointless and Lord Vedavyasa would not ask us to perform such a meaningless task. Acharya Madhva is implying this by saying 'gneyam'.
- performing enquiry into brahman is desirable and leads to positive results, otherwise there is no sense in performing this. Acharya Madhva is implying this by saying 'gamyam'
- brahman is real, jignAsa is real, the performer of the jignAsa is real and the conclusions attained through jignAsa are real. Without this distinction, the exercise becomes meaningless. This underscores the reality of the world and shatters the concept of mithyavaada or illusion.
- brahman is different from the person performing the jignAsa. This underscores the concept of bheda or difference.

It is very gratifying to note that the entire Brahma sUtra reverberates with the concepts of Dvaita, starting with the very first Sutra. It is even more gratifying to see that the invocatory verse captures the essence of this too!

sutrArtha uchyate:

The straightforward meaning of the term 'sutrArtha' is "meaning or purport of the sUtras". As there is no qualifying adjective, 'sUtra' means brahma-sUtra since it is a rule in shAstra that when something is stated without qualifying adjectives, the most important member in that category should be taken as the meaning. This raises the question "Why is this commentary needed when there are others on the same subject?" The answer is "this commentary is needed because none of the others reveals the true meaning of the sUtras".

Even a casual perusal of the Brahma-sUtra bhAshya underscores this fact because it is filled with quotes and references from hundreds of sources, supporting Acharya's interpretations. He does this to show that his interpretation reflects the true spirit of the scriptures and is in conformance with what Vedavyasa had in mind.

In addition to the above, one needs to remember that one of the well known names of Vayu (and Sri Hari) in vedic literature is 'sUtra'. Hence, this phrase could also mean any of the following:

- the meaning intended by sUtra (i.e, the Lord)
- the meaning grasped by sUtra-nAmaka Vayu

It is intriguing to count the number of syllables in the mangalacharana shloka. They add up to 32, which is the symbol of perfection. When Hari, Lakshmi or Vayu incarnate as human beings, their body is physically perfect, having 32 marks of physical perfection. This distinction is not present with lesser deities. By authoring a shloka with 32 syllables, Acharya Madhva is indirectly telling us that his work is perfect and that he is an incarnation of sUtra-nAmaka Vayu.

There is another consideration. ‘artha’ also means ‘for the sake of’. Hence ‘sutrArtha uchyate’ could also mean – “this is being stated for the sake of sUtra (the Lord)”. This makes sense since we see time and again that Acharya has no motive or end-goal for any of his actions other than pleasing the Lord.

Reason for invocation to Guru:

Shastras say that at the beginning of any religious work one needs to get the blessings of four entities – Vishishta devata (the Supreme entity), iShTa devata (one’s favourite deity), adhikruta devata (the one glorified in the work) and one’s one guru. In this case, Narayana plays all the four roles for Acharya Madhva. Despite this, Acharya includes a separate invocation to Narayana as Guru. The well known reason stated for this is ‘shishTAchAra’ i.e, Acharya wants to set an example to his followers that it is necessary to invoke the guru’s blessings. However, Acharya combines ‘cha’ (and) and ‘api’ (also or too) with Guru when just one of them would have done the job.

According to Rayaru, the “cha” in “gurUmshcha natva” implies that Acharya is offering his salutations to both his Guru and devata. In tattva prakAshika, Sri JayatIrtha says that “api” shows that Narayana is both guru and devata for Acharya Madhva and that he is not interested in distinguishing between Hari and guru (since they are the same to him).. Usage of the plural form ‘gurUn’ is to show respect.

There is another consideration. The first four characteristics used in the verse – gunairudIrNam, dOsha varjitam, gneyam and gamyam – are attributes that all jIvas should associate with the Lord and include in their worship. The last one (guru) however is special because it applies to Brahma and Vayu only. Even though we pray to Sri Hari as guru, it is always as an entity present within our own gurus, it is never a direct prayer. Brahma and Vayu have the Lord as their guru and so can pray to Him directly, without any intermediaries.

Conclusion:

Even in the preliminary verse Acharya Madhva reveals his brilliant intellect. In one verse he summarizes the main concepts of the Brahma sUtras, salutes his guru and god, dismisses the wrong commentaries done by other philosophers and gives us hints about his own personality! If just a very preliminary analysis can reveal such hidden meanings, imagine the wealth hidden in his total works! Let us pray to Sri Hari, Vayu and Guru that we may be blessed to have the guidance of a gyAni to unearth these pearls of wisdom after deep introspection.

shrI krishnArpaNa mastu