4) TOOLS OF SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY

If it is by revelation alone – the gracious, loving act of God revealing himself in person or through Scripture and the Guru – that God can be known, the question then remains, what place do human reason and endeavour, both past and current, have in the quest to better understand that revealed God? This shall be the subject of inquiry in this chapter. In particular, I shall be touching upon the role of reason, praxis and tradition in the Svāmināràyaṇa system by which to understand God and progress towards the goal of liberation.

First, though, it is important to note the function of these factors as *tools* in relation to revelation. That is, unlike revelation, they are not independent *sources* of theological knowledge, nor are they complementary or supplementary to it, for revelation is not necessarily deficient in any way that they could add anything new to whatever is already inherent within revelation. Needless to say, reason, praxis or tradition neither function as correctives to what is axiomatically believed to be infallible and sacred. Nor would it be correct to say that they somehow hold a decorative role; the beauty of raw revelation can be just as joyous and rewarding. In fact, any embellishments to revelation are not only unnecessary, but possibly even distractive, or worse, damaging. Similarly, reason, praxis and tradition do not serve as condiments to 'enhance' revelation, spicing up an otherwise bland version of the truth.

What the tools do provide, however, is a new vigour of light with which to better appreciate revelation and its latent beauty and power. They help illuminate

revelatory truths, so that seeing the same in a new light sometimes leads to a discovery of what had previously been missed. What may have been dim and blurry before, is now bright and clear. In this sense, these tools can also function like spectacles, bringing into sharper focus what – due to defects or deficiencies in the observer, not the object (i.e. revelation) – may have seemed obscure or indistinct. Rather than enhancing revelation, they enhance the capability of the reader to access and receive revelation more intensely. They serve to clarify and fortify its meanings, helping unlock deeper chambers of truth not immediately apparent. Again, all these are highly complex topics, warranting far more detail and discussion than is possible here. At the very most, we may be able to fleetingly point to their basic function in the sections below as we briefly introduce each in turn.

4.1) Reason

In his extensive commentary on BS 1.1.3, the Bhāṣyakāra strongly defends the primacy of śabda (verbal testimony) and its irreducibility to an inductive expression. In particular, he argues in some detail about the limits and defects of rational induction when employed independently of Scripture to prove the creatorship of Brahman. Using the Nyāyists' syllogism of 'All effects have an agent; the world (comprising of sprouts, etc.) is an effect, therefore it must have an agent, as with a pot', he systematically dismantles each technical constituent of the argument and rejoins a series of counter-arguments before issuing a warning: an overzealous application of reasoning or confidence in one's intellect

can blind one from seeing one's own limitations and fallacious argumentation, leaving one empty of higher, more subtle truths.[66]

Elsewhere[67], the Bhāṣyakāra adds that adeptness in argumentation alone is inadequate ("akiñcitkaram"), simply because the divine, not-this-worldly and sensorially imperceptible God can never become the subject of reason alone – just as the ears can never grasp the visual beauty of a rose and the eyes fail to apprehend the melody of a birdsong. Besides, all instances of inference are predicated on perception, and therefore the senses, whose limitations have already been well established.

The Kaṭha Upaniṣad, for example, clearly states that this highest theological knowledge is "atarkyam" (2.8), not of the realm of suppositional reasoning and thus not fully comprehendible by the intellect alone. The very next verse begins:

> Naiṣā tarkeṇa matir-apaneyā...
>
> Nor can this knowledge be grasped by argumentation (KaU 2.9).

As the Bhāṣyakāra affords some extra elaboration on this topic, he again warns that reasoning left to its own devices can be dangerous, because, after all, argumentation is a skill. A strong argument can always be thwarted by a stronger argument. So there is no telling which incisive piece of logic might be superseded by a yet more rational objector or by the same thinker at a different time or

[66] BS-SB 1.1.3, pp. 19-22, esp. p. 20.

[67] The following is based on BS-SB 1.1.3, pp. 17-24; BS-SB 1.1.5, pp. 29-31; BS-SB 2.11, pp. 164-66; KaU-SB 2.9, pp. 92-94; and KaU-SB 6.12, pp. 164-65, with added personal reflection.

place. Such contestations and disputes are endless and ultimately meaningless, he asserts, for this is not the way to decide or judge siddhānta ('established principles'). Besides, reasoning is designated as a quality of the buddhi (intellect), which the Kaṭha Upaniṣad later concedes is increasingly inferior to the soul, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman (KaU 3.10-11). It is thus a futile if not perilous and ridiculously arrogant venture to attempt to grasp knowledge of the supremely divine by that which is still shackled by māyā.

In conclusion, the Bhāṣyakāra states: how can there be any other reliable means of knowing that which is not fully perceptible to human senses and graspable by human intellect? Therefore, rather than perception or inference, it is the intrinsically certified, divinely spoken or divinely inspired words constituting Scripture which we must solely rely upon to form a valid understanding of God. Among all the sources of knowledge, Scripture is thus "paramapramāṇa" (the principal knowledge-source)[68], and God is, simply, "śāstraikagamya" (understandable by Scripture alone)[69].

Even so, while the above places reasoned argumentation in its proper epistemological position, it need not be totally abandoned in order to defer to scriptural authority. In the same comment on KaU 2.9, the Bhāṣyakāra makes the crucial difference between correct reasoning ("sattarka") and incorrect

[68] KaU-SB 6.12, p. 165.

[69] BS-SB 1.1.3, p. 22.

reasoning ("dustarka").[70] The former is that which is informed by and undergirded by śraddhā, which he describes at BS-SB 2.1.11 as "utmost faith in the Brahmasvarūpa Guru and the śāstra and siddhānta he propounds"[71]. Conversely, incorrect reasoning is that which is uncommitted to and independent of Scripture and Guru. Reason alone may be blind, but holding the hand of faith, it is able to reliably explore the wider contours of theological reflection. Faith gives it direction, leading it safely to fruitful ends.

Reason, therefore, becomes a valuable tool in understanding revelation when properly grounded in and guided by Scripture and the Guru. It helps not necessarily in discovering theological ideas anew, for their roots can always be traced to revelation, but exploring those ideas further and excavating from them deeper truths which had been within sight but not really seen. This is what we mean by reason providing 'insight', as it opens one to fresh, deeper, richer understandings of revelation.

Reason can also help in confirming and consolidating what has already been learnt from Scripture and refuting claims contradictory to it. Early on in the Brahmasūtra-Svāmināràyaṇa-Bhāṣya, an objection is raised about the inquiry into 'Brahman'. The question is this: If śāstra (Scripture) is the supreme authority of brahmic knowledge (theology), it is futile, then, to debate upon it because now there is no room for doubt and therefore there are no doubts to

[70] KaU-SB 2.9, p. 93.

[71] BS-SB 2.1.11, p. 166.

dispel. The Bhāṣyakāra rejects that idea, asserting realistically that doubts can still occur even within Scripture. Moreover, he adds, once doubts are dispelled, it is useful and even necessary to test and consolidate what one knows, just as one shakes a peg which has been freshly hammered into the ground.[72]

The very project of the Brahmasūtras testifies to the faithful employment of reasoned argumentation to harmonise meanings, clarify ambiguous content, refute contradictory interpretations, and rebut objections. Reason thus serves to consolidate and clarify that which has already been established by Scripture, to protect and embolden faith. The Bhāṣyakāra too defends his interpretations in the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya as being "śrutiyuktisammata", that is, in agreement with both revelation and reasoning.[73] Ratiocination is still permissible and profitable, when deployed on the basis of Scripture ("śāstrād evānumitam"[74]). Applying reasoned reflection, therefore, is not in contradistinction to the concept of *sola scriptura*, insofar as it is in consonance with and submission to revelation. Indeed, reason often works in the service of revelation, bolstering its authority and justifying its priority.

4.2) Praxis

Validation for reasoned argumentation or faithful inquiry can also be found at BG 4.34. The first half of the verse reads:

[72] BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 10-11.

[73] BS-SB 1.1.1, p. 8.

[74] BS-SB 1.1.3, p. 22.

Tad-viddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā |

Learn that [knowledge] by obeisance, inquiry, and service.

Importantly, though, 'paripraśna' (inquiry) is bookended by humble obeisance and sincere application. That is, the Bhāṣyakāra explains,

> only such an inquiry is herein advocated which is doubly bound and refined by being preceded by surrender and succeeded by service. Otherwise, any questioning divorced of a faithful obeisance to begin with and not followed by a subsequent commitment to practice is not conducive to theological understanding; it is verily averse to it.[75]

True inquiry must thus not only be grounded in revelation; it must also follow through into 'sādhanā' (literally 'means' or liberative endeavours), also referred to as praxis[76]. Indeed, a sincere application of theological ideas is an integral and necessary part of the process of understanding theological teachings. It becomes clear from Svāmināràyaṇa's sermons that he did not intend theological beliefs to be simply articles of faith for subscription. Rather, they are to be lived out and deeply integrated into every aspect of one's actions, thoughts, intentions and being. They are to be experienced, because, as Svāmināràyaṇa stressed, only when one experiences what one has learned from Scripture by faith is one's knowledge truly complete (Vac. Loyā.7).

[75] BG-SB 4.34, p. 110.

[76] This should not be confused with the "praxis" of Liberation Theology which binds together action, suffering and reflection.

In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa taught that theological concepts *grow* in their meaning as they are translated into personal theological praxis (which can take a physical and mental form). For example, in Vac. Sār.17 Svāminārāyaṇa states:

> As the vision of a person who worships God becomes increasingly subtle, he realises the unlimited nature of God and he increasingly realises the greatness of God.

He goes on to elaborate:

> When that devotee identifies himself with the body, he sees God as the witness of his waking, dream and deep sleep states. Later, when he realises himself as transcending the waking, dream and deep sleep states, he realises God as transcending them too. Then, as his vision becomes increasingly subtle, he realises God as being far beyond himself and understands the greatness of God even more. Then, as he becomes more and more lovingly attached to God, his upāsanā [loving worship informed by theological understanding] of God becomes even more firmly established.

Svāminārāyaṇa's import here is that one's understanding of God is predicated on a how well one understands one's self. Importantly, as one progresses in a correct spiritual self-understanding, one grows not only in understanding God but, naturally and inevitably, a deeper, richer and loving relationship with him.[77] In effect, Svāminārāyaṇa is saying: Along the path of theological understanding, one can only see from where one stands; as the aspirant walks further and rises higher, she advances in her theological vision and insights upon what had been accepted on trust from Scripture. This is the role of praxis in the task of theology.

Another example can be drawn from a particularly important sermon wherein Svāminārāyaṇa expounds the crux of his theological system with notable brevity

[77] See chapter 8.2.1 for a fuller discussion of 'Understanding the Self to Understand and Relate to God'.

and simplicity. He begins by explaining the nature and function of Brahman and then its ontological distinction from and subordination to Parabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa then states:

> Having understood this [i.e. having accepted these beliefs], one should develop a oneness between one's jīvātman and that Brahman, and worship Parabrahman while maintaining a master-servant relationship with him.

What is noteworthy here is that Svāminārāyaṇa immediately calls for the highly theological concept (the Brahman-Parabrahman distinction and connection) to be implemented by way of a living relationship with Brahman (i.e. the Brahmasvarūpa Guru) and God. Furthermore, he brings even such an application into the domain of 'understanding' as he goes on to conclude the sermon thus:

> With such *understanding*, 'brahmajñāna' also becomes an unobstructed path to attaining the highest state of enlightenment (Vac. Gaḍh. II.3; emphasis added).

This interplay between understanding and praxis is a key feature of Svāminārāyaṇa's teachings, revealing that he never intended faith to be passive. True faith is not an exercise in intellectual excogitation, but calls one to act, sincerely and devoutly. That is why Svāminārāyaṇa advocated and indeed engaged his followers in such endeavours as temple-building (Vac. Gaḍh. II.27) and works of religious service and public welfare (Vac. Gaḍh. I.31, Vac. Var.17). He admonished those who "sat idly", and urged those who wished "to attain the highest state of enlightenment" to "make an effort, but... not relax or lose courage" (Vac. Gaḍh. II.12). In one sermon he categorically stated:

> All deficiencies which do remain in a devotee are due to his own lethargy (Vac. Gaḍh. I.20).

Moreover, Svāmināràyaṇa added, the location of this praxis is the crucible of the faith community itself. Reading of Scripture may be a deeply personal endeavour, but imbibing its teachings in daily life becomes inescapably a communal enterprise. To be clear, this remains an individual effort, but one made within a living community of practitioners. In fact, Svāmināràyaṇa emphasised patient praxis within the community as a mark of faith, whereas those who sought to escape the community and practise in isolation as lacking in an essential understanding of God and what it means to be a person of faith (Vac. Var.5).

Svāmināràyaṇa was also careful not to reduce faith to emotional outpourings or intellectual musings, nor confining acts of devotion to mechanical procedures bereft of love and reflection. The key term he used to describe one's relationship with God, as noted above in Vac. Sār.17, was 'upāsanā', which, as we shall later discover more fully, is worship energised by loving devotion and informed by correct theological knowledge.

He often integrated the theoretical and practical aspects into what may be termed 'Applied Theology', that is, having seemingly abstract concepts brought to fruition through ways of practical application. For example, to gain in spiritual strength, Svāmināràyaṇa prescribes sincerely serving devotees of God through word, thought and deed (Vac. Gaḍh. II.63). To control or win over the mind, one should engage in acts of reverent devotion (Vac. Gaḍh. III.11). Dispassion towards material pleasures can be achieved by observing the basic code of conduct prescribed in religious texts, including physically serving other

devotees, listening to scriptural discourses, and performing other acts of devotion (Vac. Gaḍh. III.34). And after describing the essentiality of a correct, spiritual understanding of the self, Svāmināràyaṇa emphatically asserts that observing the commands of the Guru is indeed tantamount to realising oneself as the ātman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.51).

This emphasis on the pragmatic is also discernible in the questions posed by his disciples who sought not only answers to their theological queries but clear guidance for their sādhanā in progressing towards liberation. For example, when Muktānanda Svāmī asks in Vac. Kār.8,

> Mahārāja, the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas and the Itihāsa scriptures have described the saguna form of God and have also described his nirguṇa form. So how should one understand the nirguṇa form and how should one understand the saguṇa form of Śrī Puruṣottama?

his question is not complete until he concludes with the following:

> How much does a devotee of God benefit by understanding the nirguṇa form of that God, and how much does he benefit by understanding the saguṇa form of that God?

What is apparent is that the question being asked is not for mere data collection. It is not enough to simply know a concept. Rather, the aspirant is keen to incorporate the concept into his daily practice, and hence is seeking to understand its practical significance as well. As mentioned above, in-between the starting point of faith (based on revelation) and the finishing line of realisation (i.e. experience) lies this journey of praxis, of physically and mentally applying theological concepts until they come to full consummation.

This emphasis stems from the conviction that these theological ideas or beliefs are true, and the truth is to be lived. In living the truths, they in turn are vivified through personal experience. As we shall see frequently throughout the exposition of the main themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, Svāminārāyaṇa insists upon not just knowing about God, as in gathering cerebral information about him, but developing an intimate, personal relationship with him and his living medium, the Guru. Theology, for Svāminārāyaṇa, is not simply about ideas, but the transformation of the individual – progressing from material to spiritual, from bondage to liberation, from māyic to Brahmic.

This is why sheer textual information or theoretical knowledge was ever enough for Svāminārāyaṇa (Vac. Gaḍh. I.50, Vac. Gaḍh. I.35, Vac. Gaḍh. I.56, Vac. Gaḍh. III.36, Vac. Var.11, Vac. Gaḍh. III.2, Vac. Gaḍh. III.27). He insisted that only those who were making the sincere effort to reflect upon his teachings and imbibing them would be able to understand them (Vac. Gaḍh. I.18). Faith, then, which is operative, is attended by sincere and patient praxis, by which faith itself is fostered and fortified.

4.3) Tradition

If praxis is the application of scriptural teachings, how these theological ideas have been implemented and practiced over time provides further insight into their finer meaning. 'Tradition', as we may call it, thus becomes another useful tool in better understanding revelation. A verse from the Mahābhārata (Ādi Parva 1.267) often cited to substantiate this concept reads:

Itihāsapurānabhyām vedam samupabṛhayet |

It calls us to draw upon historical and epical texts to clarify and consolidate the meaning of the Vedas.

Vedic literature itself also attests to the tradition of drawing upon previous authorities of verified knowledge, whose lineage is often narrated as way of substantiating its authenticity. We see this in practice in the beginning of the Bhagavad-Gītā's fourth canto when Kṛṣṇa recounts preaching the yogic knowledge to Vivasvān, who in turn passed it on to Manu, who subsequently conveyed it to Ikṣvāku. He confirms:

> Evaṃ paraṃparāprāptam imaṃ rājarṣayo viduḥ |
>
> Thus this [knowledge] received by succession is known by the royal sages (BG 4.2).

Similarly in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (1.1.1-2), the author traces the transmission of brahmavidyā from Brahmā (not to be confused with Brahman) to his eldest son Atharvan, then successively on to Aṅgiras, Bhāradvāja Satyavāha, Aṅgirasa, and finally, to Śaunaka.

In other Upaniṣads we find the more general acknowledgement:

> Iti śuśruma purveṣām ye nas-tad vyācacakṣire |
>
> Thus we have heard from past [teachers], who explained it to us (KeU 1.4; similarly also IU 10 & 13).

Indeed, the very term 'Śruti' (literally 'hearing'), used synonymously with the Vedas and to describe revelatory literature in general, pays further testimony to

this emphasis on 'tradition'. The fact that the transmission of knowledge from guru to śiṣya is framed as an *aural* tradition, rather than an *oral* tradition, is telling. One would assume that the guru as speaker, being of much higher authority and learning than his audience of disciples, would be the protagonist in the guru-śiṣya dialogue, and thus the revealed texts should be more aptly termed 'Vakti' ('speaking'). The fact that they are not, and instead called 'Śruti', affirms, as above, that even the teacher has *heard* whatever knowledge he is imparting from his own previous teachers, extending the lineage indefinitely to, presumably, the initial divine revelation by God himself.

Within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, this idea of drawing upon 'tradition' and the transmission of divine knowledge takes on a more specific meaning revolving around the human personhood of Svāminārāyaṇa and, in particular, the Guru Paramparā, the unbroken succession of Brahmasvarūpa Gurus in and by whom Parabrahman chooses to be revealed and remain liberatively active. As perfect devotees, their lives serve as the ideal example of how theological principles should and must be practiced, of living out faith in all aspects of everyday life.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus urges his devotees to "reminisce" the "divine incidents and actions (līlā)" of God who lived among us, sometimes alluding to himself (Vac. Gaḍh. II.35; see also Vac. Gaḍh. I.3 and Vac. Gaḍh. I.38) and also the Brahmasvarūpa Gurus (Vac. Gaḍh. II.66). In Vac. Gaḍh. II.58, he explicitly instructs Muktānanda Svāmī, one of his most senior sādhu-disciples, to "continuously preach and write" about "your īṣṭadeva for the rest of your life",

because it is in the texts which narrate the life of one's own īṣṭadeva that "dharma [righteous, or 'right', living] as well as the glory of that īṣṭadeva are naturally revealed". In other words: If the Vacanāmrut is the 'textbook', the biographies of Svāminārāyaṇa and the Gurus are the 'workbooks' wherein we find real-life examples of theological ideas being put into practice, calling us also to emulate them. This is important because practices can be a useful tool when understanding or interpreting beliefs, since how one prays and worships reflects what one believes (and, correspondingly, what one believes, affects how one prays and worships).

The Guru-centric nature of 'tradition', and its continuous flow over time, ensures that 'tradition' itself is not a fossilised view of 'how things were done', but becomes an active process of reflection and interpretation, by which theological and spiritual insights are valued, tested, and transmitted. The very definition of 'sampradāya', even if translated as 'tradition', points both ways – not just to the past but, ironically, also to the future. The Halāyudhakośa lexicon states:

> Sampradāyaḥ syāt pāramparyam gurukramaḥ |
> A sampradāya is a lineage of successive gurus (2.402).

When elaborating upon the second half of the Bhagavad-Gītā verse cited above –

> Upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninas tattvadarśinaḥ ||
> Enlightened seers shall teach you that knowledge (BG 4.34)

– the Bhāṣyakāra is also keen to point out the use of the future tense in the verb 'upadekṣyanti' ('will preach') and the plurality in the nouns 'jñāninaḥ'

('knowers') and 'tattvadarśinaḥ' ('seers'). He interprets this as a clear affirmation of the succession of Brahmasvarūpa Gurus who will continue to transmit this knowledge to generations of seekers indefinitely.

Properly understood, then, tradition along with praxis and reason do not relegate revelation to an equal or lesser authority, but secure its position as the primary theological source even while establishing themselves as useful tools in the task of theology. This shall prove particularly useful when we (re)turn to these factors in the final Part to discuss a Hindu formulation of (Hindu) theology.