Chapter: ii

SIGNIFICANCE OF GURU, SAINTHOOD AND HOLY COMPANY

GURU

The word Guru is the combination of two Sanskrit root words, namely, ‘Gu’ meaning – darkness or ignorance and ‘ru’ meaning dispeller. Thus, Guru means the dispeller of darkness or ignorance.

The Śrīmad Bhāgavatam explains the word Guru in three different forms. One is the Parents through whom one is born. Second, the teacher who teaches one the worldly knowledge and third, the spiritual master who leads one to spiritual enlightenment.

The glory of Guru is sung in virtually every scripture of the world. A Guru is a friend, philosopher and guide and more importantly imparter of the most elevated spiritual knowledge and divine selfless affection. He is the transmitter of values, wisdom and deep underlying secrets of scriptures. He is the gateway to the eternal salvation for all the souls. In essence, the Guru is one who dispels ignorance and liberates his disciples from the bondages of the perpetual cycle of life and death.

The spiritual heritage of India glorifies the indispensability of such a Guru or a spiritual master in one’s life, may he be a layman or a king or even incarnations of God for that matter. Lord Rāma accepted Brahmārṣi Vāśiṣṭha as His master. Lord Kṛṣṇa too, accepted the discipleship of his Guru Sāndipanī Rṣi. Śivājī who is acclaimed for his military accomplishments in Indian history, credited all his success to his spiritual master, Swami
Rāmadās. Śivājī's unflinching faith and dedication towards his master honoured him not only as a great king but also an ideal devotee.

The Guru is verily a link between a finite individual and infinite divinity. Though he lives in the realm of immortality, he willingly and gracefully accepts the mortal entities to elevate the struggling individuals into realm of everlasting joy and infinite bliss.

Man can learn only from a man and hence, God teaches the eternal principles of consciousness to the human beings through a human body – Guru. He is the human ideal of perfection and the pattern into which one wishes to mould oneself.

If one wishes to light a candle, one inevitably needs another burning candle. Even so, for any one who wants to embark upon the spiritual path, a Guru is necessary. Thus, it is obvious that an illuminated soul alone can enlighten another soul. “The Gurus are the light-bearers to mankind. They are messengers of the timeless. They do not claim to teach the new doctrine but only to renew the eternal wisdom.”

Guru is an endless ocean of knowledge and mercy. He is the true captain of the soul. He is the fountain of joy. He nullifies all troubles, pitfalls and obstacles from the life of one who comes in his contact. He safeguards him for all the odds of life. He not only shows the divine path but also accompanies one till the end of the journey. He tears the veil of ignorance and extrovert vision. Scriptures are full of passages having esoteric meanings, diverse significance, and hidden explanation. It is the Guru or preceptor who explains the right meaning and removes the doubts and ambiguities to bring out the essence of the teachings of scriptures.

It is only the Guru who can erase your false ego and make you realize the self. Anyone can chant mantras, can meditate or practice different kinds
of *sādhanā* but for all these to bear fruits one inevitably needs the grace of the *Guru*. The sun illuminates the pot, but the pot cannot illumine the sun. Similarly, no *sādhanā* can illumine the inner self. Only if the self reveals itself to us can we see it. And the self reveals itself most easily through the grace of the *Guru*. It is for this reason that the sages of all traditions tell us that in order to attain the Truth, we need a *Guru*. You cannot attain the Truth through your own effort alone.

The very meaning of the word *Upaniṣada* means sitting close i.e. at the feet of the Guru. Therefore, it is rightly said that only he who submits himself to a God ordained Guru and serves him with firm faith and reverence can attain peace.

Study of the books helps to develop our intellect but not the spirit. One who is studious, can speak wonderfully on spiritual subjects but when it comes to live accordingly, one finds oneself despondent. Swāmī Vivekānand rightly observes, “It is because books cannot give us that impulse from outside. To awaken the spirit that impulse must come from another soul. That soul from which this impulse comes is called the *Guru*, the teacher…”

Swāmī Vivekānand says, “Find the teacher, serve him as a child, open your heart to his influence, see in him God manifested. This is the spirit in which we are to be taught. Such teachers are few in number.”

Thus, a *Guru* – a spiritual master is the perfect medium that guides the energy of the disciple towards the quest for liberation. He is as essential for spiritual life as oxygen is for the existence of the physical body. He is the *mokṣadwāra* – a gateway to the ultimate liberation.

*Lord Swaminarayan* has blessed mankind with four divine boons. One of them is his perpetual succession on this earth for the time eternal. It is
such a boon in the history of spirituality that promises the presence of Guru or Brahmaswarupa saint for all the time to come.

SAINTHOOD

A true saint is an embodiment of God’s grandeur and His supreme omnipresent and omniscient powers. He rightly understands the glory of Lord and thus, serves the Lord as a true servant. His most striking feature is his unaltered communion with God and his submission to the God’s will. The common man is ruled over by his mind and senses whereas a saint commands over his mind and senses.

It’s not the turban on a shaven head, saffron coloured clothes, sandal wood paste mark on forehead or a string of beads in hand but the saintliness that is a real credential of a saint. The saint is recognized not by his body, but by his temperament. Harmoniously synchronized thoughts, speech and conduct is the true identity of a saint.

A true saint is one who is quick in apprehension, clear in discernment of far reaching and all embracing knowledge, magnanimous, generous, benign, mild, energetic, enduring, worthy to command reverence, distinctive, concentrative and ever-loving.

All the virtuous qualities dwell in a saint. God is at the center of his life. He possesses the cardinal divine quality of Godly love. So, there is no room for hatred in his heart. When the sufi saint Rābia was asked whether she hates ṣetān (devil), she replied that her love for God left no room for hating even ṣetān. Jesus Christ, a saint full of love and magnanimity too, uttered the words of forgiveness at the time of his crucifixion, Oh Lord! Please forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.

One of the most revered saints of Maharashtra, sant Ekanāth, once was coming from river Godāvari after his morning bath, when he was harassed by a man. Under the influence of infatuation, the man spat on him. Without
any aversion, Ekanāṭh went back to the river and had another dip. The man spat again and again. He spat for one hundred and eight times on Ekanāṭh and each time Ekanāṭh chanting God’s name went to have a fresh bath. He was as calm and serene as before. In fact the man was offered some money if he succeeded in making Ekanāṭh angry. But seeing his sublime saintliness, the man fell at the feet of Ekanāṭh and asked for his forgiveness, ‘Please forgive me as I did all this for the want of some money.’ Ekanāṭh replied, with a sheer magnanimity, ‘You should have told me earlier, I would have at least pretended to be angry so that you could have got the money.’ Such is the climax of sainthood.

To highlight the true qualities of saint, Lord Kṛṣṇa in the 12th canton of The Bhagavad Gītā says, “He who hates no creature, who is friendly and compassionate to all, who is free from attachment and egoism, balanced in pleasure and pain and forgiving, ever content steady in meditation, self-controlled, possessed of firm conviction, with mind and intellect dedicated to Me, he, My devotee is dear to Me.”

Rādhākṛṣṇan enunciates his view on saintliness thus, “The sage is not egocentric in the sense of caring of his own soul, or altruistic in the sense of caring for others, or theocentric in the sense of wishing to enjoy God in the solitude of his soul. He is at the heart of the universe in which he himself and others live, move and have their being. He is conscious of the wider destiny of the universe.”

Love is the very breath of a saint and mercy his very nature. His heart overflows with compassion towards all. He prays for the well-being of those who curse him. In short, he absorbs the evil and gives away the good. Being firm in God’s consciousness, he lives for the sake and service of others. He takes the whole world as the projection of God.
To him, every moment of his life is an opportunity to please God and serve others. He lives being one with the whole world but remains unaffected by the changes of the world. No external happenings, calamities can shake him off his balance and blissful state as the secret of his ever-blissful state lies in his desirelessness.

A God-realized saint transcends all the worldly discriminations such as caste, creed, colour, nationality and is concerned only with the essence i.e. soul. Therefore, they are the true citizens of the world who belong to whole the mankind.

In his vision, every one and every thing is equal. To him, gold and stones, pleasure and pain, honour and insult are all alike. Saint is free from I-ness and my-ness. He is free from lust, anger and greed. He loves all beings as his own self. He is endowed with dispassion and mercy. He speaks the truth and serves all. He is ever joyful and peaceful, fearless and generous. He never begs but gives. He is majestic and lordly.

Saints are often accused of being inactive and never contributing in the activities of social welfare. But such accusations are absurd because the very nature of saint is to spend his whole life for the benevolence of humanity at the cost of his own happiness. Even if he has to bear chronic insults, negligence and humiliation from the society, he never gives up his mission of service. In fact, his love for the Lord and his devotees never allows him to remain inactive. Thus, the only motto of a true saint is to live for the betterment of others.

The ideal saint is unfailingly a practical man. The real saint moves the whole society towards activity keeping himself in the background; he always supports the right cause. He does not perform any miracle but God performs
them for him. The true saint demands from his disciples nothing but the service of God and humanity.

As Rādhākrṣṇan rightly comments, “The saint is not liberated from action on this earth. He does not leave behind the concrete world of finite values and meanings. His self is not lost by participation in the life of the Divine. Only he becomes not merely a part of the world but the ground of the whole. The saint is ever ready to bring a cup of water to his sick brethren.” ⁶ Further Rādhākrṣṇan says, “Love is organic to spiritual life while the eyes are lifted up to the Eternal, the arms are stretched out to embrace the whole creation. Some of the greatest contemplatives were those who were most intensely active in the service of others.” ⁷

The compassion of Lord Swaminarayan towards His devotees is reflected in His own words as:

“My soul has the same tendency as that of Jāḍ-bharat, Śukadev, Dattātreya; so I also like to stay in the forest, in the mountain and in the jungles, such is my nature. Still I stay among lakhs of people not for any self-interest but for the Lord and His devotees. I consider any type of activity (pravṛtti) done for the sake of the lord’s devotee as inactivity (nivṛtti).” ⁸

It is the saintliness of a true saint that entrances all, the rich and the poor, the ignorant and the scholar, the aspirant and the atheist. He is amiable towards all. Heart-broken people would go to him, express their grief at his feet to become fresh and free and experience influx of holy and divine love. Through his intuitive understanding of human character and intimate knowledge of the human psyche, he is able to inspire millions on the path of holy and happy living. His words are penetrating and effective because his wisdom is full of conviction and honesty, devoid of hypocrisy and selfish motive.
A saint’s selfless love penetrates the soul to such an extent that even the lowliest person abandons his brutality and easily overcomes his vices which otherwise could not be done even after severe penance of several years. One cannot see God except through him. “They are much higher; they can transmit spirituality with a touch, with a wish, which makes even the lowest and most degraded characters, saints in one second.”

The unique quality of a saint is deliberately concealing their virtues from society. The saints are disinterestedly generous like clouds, and fulfill all the aspirations of those that commit themselves to their care. Their contemplation is absolutely free from doubt. They live with unfailing peace of mind. True saints can confer a vision of God on their disciples. They establish the kingdom of God on earth. “The one purpose in the life of a saint is to protect real religion and suppress atheism, to cleanse the minds of the people in the holy Ganga of self-knowledge, and to fill men with ecstatic joy of divine love.”

In the Bhagavad Gītā: A saint is described as Sthitaprajña (one who is steady in wisdom), Guṇāṭīt (beyond three qualities; sattva, rajas, tamas) bhakta (devotee), yogī (who has complete control over body and soul) and brahmabhūta (one who has become Brahma). Lord Swaminarayan also used synonymous terms for such a saint: atisaya motā puruṣa, bhagawad bhakta motā sādhu, paraṁ bhāgawat santa, guṇānīt sant, paraṁ ekāntika sādhu and paraṁ ekāntika satpuruṣa, the embodiment of dharma (righteousness), jnāna (knowledge), vairāgya (indifference to worldly objects) and bhakti (devotion).

In a nutshell, if all the above mentioned qualities and virtues are possessed by a saint he reaches to an immeasurable spiritual height and acquires the powers that are more or less behelded by God Himself. It is
only the true saint who can bestow its very essence to pilgrimage, scriptures and mankind as a whole. To glorify such a true saint, Lord Swaminarayan says,

“I would smear the dust from the feet of such a saint on my head. I would be afraid to pain him and would long to have his darśana...

The darśana of such a resolute devotee of God is equivalent to the darśana of God Himself and by his darśana infinite condemned souls are redeemed. Such is his greatness.”

THE HOLY COMPANY OF A SAINT

It is rightly said that a man is influenced by the company he keeps. Even a minute dust particle, if accompanied by the wind, soars high in the sky and if accompanied by muddy water, it becomes dirty mire. Similarly, if the air is in the company of flower, it wafts around a sweet aroma and if accompanied by offal, it disseminates a foul odour. If a parrot is kept in the company of true saint, it chants the name of God unceasingly and if kept in the evil company, it starts abusing the passerby. Therefore, it is obvious that if any one who keeps the company of a true saint, attains the self-knowledge and eternal bliss, whereas if he keeps the bad company he is bound to commit vicious deeds and end up his life in a mess.

The history of mankind is witness to the fact that the effects of evil company are extremely disastrous. A man who keeps the evil company is prone to be affected by it. His mind gets filled with all sorts of undue thoughts and ideas. He is sure to develop the vices and ultimately loses his character forever. Immortality licentiousness, vicious habit, voluptuousness, sensuality, hypocrisy, arrogance become the very part of his personality leading him to the point of no return.

If a person is destined to attain the liberation in his very birth, it may take him infinite births to do so and if he is destined to attain the liberation
after infinite births, he may so in his very birth; all that counts and depends on is the company he keeps. Thus, to abstain from the evil company and to follow the code of discretion of company, Lord Swaminarayan in Śikṣāpaṭrī says,

"None shall keep the company of thieves or vicious persons, addicts, heretics, those inclined to sexual indulgence and alchemist."

"Likewise none shall associate with any one who hankers after woman and wealth and practices sinful acts under the guise of hypocritical devotion or false wisdom."

"Non shall ever listen even religious discourses from a person whose preaching might lead one to fall from God’s devotion."

"My followers shall give up the company of ungrateful persons."

"None shall ever listen to or give credence to scriptures skillfully contrived to deny the existence of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and His incarnations."

"My widow disciples shall always avoid the company or touch of a woman who advocates abortion; nor shall they indulge in speaking about or listening to amorous talks about males."

Thus, Lord Swaminarayan strictly cautions us against keeping evil company. The word evil company is not singular in its relevance. It includes the company of all those who are indulged in immoral activities such as committing adultery, stealing, cheating, cross-dealing, indulging in idle talks, backbiting and criticizing.

Śrījī Mahārāj disfavoured the company of a vicious worldly person (kusangī) and advised firmly to keep away from such a person. To confirm this, He says,
"Just as a finger bitten by a snake is immediately cut-off to ensure the survival of the whole body; a polluted soul should be banished from this *satsanga*." 17

Evil company does not necessarily mean an individual but it includes living in low localities or in the vicinity of gambling houses, liquor shops, brothel houses or any thing that excites passion and evil thoughts.

The Lord says, shun evil company everywhere, all times, by all means, avoid the company of wicked. Take refuge in the shelter of sages and saints who heals your sores, infuses new life into you, rejuvenates you and shows you the path of eternal peace and happiness.

*Lord Swaminarayan* on one hand refrains from keeping the bad company and on the other hand emphasizes on keeping the company of God-realized saint. In His view, this single discipline, if observed carefully is sufficient enough to provide answers to the unending questions of mankind today.

**ŚIKṢĀPÂTRĪ AND SAINT – A GATWAY TO LIBERATION**

In today’s world of complexities and competitions, the ideal way to lead a stable and serene life is to live a life of simplicity and devotion. Such devotion can only be understood and acquired in the company of a saint. The company of a God realized saint is virtually the company of God Himself. He is the living manifestation of divinity as God speaks, walks on the face of earth, and breaths through him only.

A word from such a saint is a word from God. Perhaps he may not teach anything but his presence or company is inspiring and stirring. In his divine presence all the doubts that clouds the human mind are cleared. His very company is self-illuminating. Living in his company itself is a spiritual education. Though such saint may not be an eloquent speaker or an orator,
his mere silence is persuasive enough to elevate one’s soul. In fact, his spiritual vibrations not only purify his surrounding but also the whole world. His very presence on this globe gives hope, encouragement and direction to the mankind.

The very company of sages and saints has tremendous transforming effect on the lives of an aspirant. It lifts him up to the heights of sublimity, purity and spirituality. It does not fail to affect even the rank materialists. They are the real advisers because they are selfless and possess the highest wisdom. It’s only the saints who can improve the morality of the masses. One moment in the company of a holy saint is enough to build a ship of solace to cross this stormy ocean of life.

The company of a true saint gives a new life, a fresh encouragement for the purpose of higher religious life. In fact, such a push is needed everyday because quite often, due to many unpredictable and unavoidable reasons, disciples get depressed. The vital energy is lost and the enthusiasm drops. To get a new courage and zest in life religious discourses from true saint become very important in instigating the whole downtrodden situation.

Therefore, it is said that the aspirant who is under the guidance of and in the company of a saint is safe from being led astray. Satsanga or association with saint is an armour and fortress to guard one against all the temptations and unfavourable forces of the material world.

Lord Swaminarayan was of a strong conviction that only an association of one with a true saint is the surest pathway to lead a life of peace, bliss and happiness. Therefore, in Śikṣāpatrī, He stressfully says that,

“... the learned should impart their learning to others and should constantly keep company of saints.” 18
“Śrījī Mahārāj said, “in the 12th chapter of the 11th canto of Śrīmad Bhāgavat Lord Kṛṣṇa has said to Uddhava, ‘I am not captivated as much as by eightfold yoga, sāṁkhyya, tapa, tyāga, tīrtha, vrata, yajña and dāna as I am captivated by seeking the company of saints i.e. satsang. It means that satsang is the greatest means of God realization.’”

Lord Swaminarayan emphasizes on the inevitability of a true saint in one’s life saying that,

“Bhāgavat dharma can only be fostered by association with an ekāntika sādhu of the Lord. The one who worships him with swadharma, jhāna, vairāgya and bhakti accompanied with the knowledge of Lord’s glory and greatness, the doors to ultimate salvation are opened to him. Bhagawān Kapildeva in his address to his mother Devahūti said,

‘prasangamajaram pāśamātmanaha, kavayo viduhu
sa eva sādhuṣu krto, mokṣadwāramapārťam’”

(The intensity with which the soul is deeply attached to its bodily relations, if it gets attached to the ekāntika sādhu with the same intensity; the doors of ultimate salvation are opened to him.)

To conclude, if one actually wants to get rid of his anger, lust, jealousy and ego, if one really wants to hand over the burden of chaotic life and get relieved from the same, if one wants to sanctify his inner self i.e. to synchronize his thoughts, words and deeds, if one really wants to be happy, joyful and contended at physical, mental, social, economical and spiritual level, the only surest way is the company of a true saint.

Beyond the above mentioned realities, if one wants to control and direct the adamant nature, typical temperament and the destiny that determines the level of peace and joy in one’s life, it is the company of saint that stands as the only remedy for the same.
Brahmajñāna from his Guru. It was the unquestioning faith in the Guru's command that eventually rewarded him with the realization and enlightenment of knowledge. Spiritual history is full of many such incidents.

Thus, the development of the soul, that is perhaps not possible even after several thousand births, becomes easily possible if one establishes a frank and open relationship with his spiritual master. If one succeeds in doing so, the spiritual master then claims his right over such a disciple and considers him to be his very own dear child (Bhūlku). Then, he not only gifts him with a special wisdom and the power of discrimination, but also sanctifies his whole being and annihilates the ego of his disciple by engrossing his soul into the true glory of the Lord. Ultimately, he makes him experience the bliss of God Himself for the time eternal.

Notes & References:

8. *Vācanāṁrta*, Gadhādā Last 21
11. *Vācanāṁrta*, Gadhādā First 37
12. Śiṣṭa-patrā, 27, 28
13. Śiṣṭa-patrā, 25
14. Śikṣāpatrī, 26
15. Śikṣāpatrī, 29
16. Śikṣāpatrī, 170
17. Vaṇanāmrta, Gadhadā First 18
18. Śikṣāpatrī, 36
19. Śikṣāpatrī, 114
20. Vaṇanāmrta, Gadhadā Last 5
21. Vaṇanāmrta, Gadhadā Middle 59
22. Vaṇanāmrta, Gadhadā First 14
23. Vaṇanāmrta, Gadhadā First 8
24. Vaṇanāmrta, Gadhadā Middle 54
25. Vaṇanāmrta, Gadhadā First 54
26. Śikṣāpatrī, 200