CHAPTER - III

THE TERM VEDĀNTA AND DIFFERENT SCHOOLS OF THE VEDĀNTA

The Vedic literature consisting of a wide variety of materials regarding the performance of ritual, also contains esoteric teachings of philosophy and theology as well, that flowered eventually in classical Hinduism. The Upaniṣads are the concluding sections of the Vedic canon, as such the Upanisadic literature is literally what the term Vedānta also means. The Vedānta philosophy thus is that philosophy which takes its lead from the Upaniṣads. To be more specific, Vedānta means literally "end of the Veda" or conclusion of the Veda (Veda + anta). By observing the Upaniṣads as having been the last section of Brāhmaṇa or Āraṇyaka, it is clear that the position they occupy in the Vedic literature is significant; and these Upaniṣads have their place in the portion which is in fact the end (anta) of the Vedic canon handed down by each branch-sect. In this sense, the Upaniṣads have been termed "the end of the Vedas" that is the "Vedānta". Besides this meaning, however, the word Vedānta is also used in the sense of the 'Ultimate purport of the Vedas' or 'secret principle of the Vedas'. In these cases, there is homogeneity with the meaning of "final portion of the Vedic sacred canon."
"Vedānta is regarded as the perfect system of the Hindus. Hinduism is the popular name for the religion of the Vedānta. It stands out as the most significantly 'clear native Philosophy of India.' It is the most impressive attempt at system building made in India. It answers at once to the strict demands of metaphysics and the deep requirements of a sound religion that does not surrender the claims of reason or the needs of humanity. Vedānta in one form or another has become a contemporary spiritual force working for the good of humanity."

In addition to the Upaniṣadic texts, the Bhagavadgītā and the Brahma-sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa have also been regarded as constituent parts of the Vedānta philosophy. Thus, the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavadgītā, and the Brahma-sūtras comprise what is considered to be the triple texts of absolute authority for the Vedānta philosophy. Great portions of these works are concerned with the niceties of language and it is mainly in later times that philosophers make bold to compose independent treatises in which the elements of the Vedānta philosophy are set forth according to the logic of the views themselves, rather than in an order determined by that scriptural authority.
Commentators on these triple texts of the Vedānta have interpreted them with different emphases in the way of defending their own schools of Vedānta. Of the Vedantic schools, Śaṅkara's Advaita school, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita school, and Madhva's Dvaita school, have been more prominent as they have large quantity of philosophical literature of sufficient weight and quality. Every system of Vedānta declares that it derives its doctrines from three texts viz., the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavadgītā and the Brahmasūtras. Each school holds that its interpretation of the texts is the only correct version and those of others wrong. Thus we have different systems of Vedānta being fastened on to the same triple texts.

Śaṅkara's system of the Advaita

The particular type of monism taught by Śaṅkara is very old, though in its final form it owes a good deal to his contribution. Śaṅkara (788-820 A.D.) has written many more works, yet it is difficult to say exactly how many works have been written by him. Of his works, some are as below: Commentaries on the ten major Upaniṣads, the Śvetāsvatara, the Atharvaśīkha, the Atharvasīras, the Nṛsiṁha-tāpanīya, the Brahmasūtras, the Bhagavadgīta; separate works like the Upadeśasahasrī, the Vivekācūḍāmāpī, the Dakṣiṇāmūrti stotra, the Harimīdestotra, the Ānandalahari, the Saundarya-
lahari, the Āptavajrasūci, the Ātmabodha, the Mohamudgara, the Daśaśloki, the Aparokṣānbhūti, commentaries on the Viṣṇusahasranāma, the Sanatsujātiya, Vākyavṛtti etc. The views expressed in these works have attained wonderful celebrity, both on account of the subtle and deep ideas they contain. Due to his sublimity of thoughts and illustrious divine personality, whenever we speak of the Vedānta philosophy, we mean the philosophy propounded by Śāṅkara. Such is the greatness of the philosophy of the Advaita propounded by Śāṅkara. The main idea of the Advaita Vedānta is that the ultimate and absolute truth is the self, which is one, though appearing as many in different individuals. The world has no reality and has no other truth to show than this self.

Salient Features of Śāṅkara's Advaita System

Śāṅkara's Advaita philosophy may be divided into a theoretical and practical basis. Some propositions that characterize the theoretical basis are -

1. The purpose of philosophy is to point the way to liberation from the bondage of Samsara.

2. Bondage is a product of ignorance; the Absolute Truth is never bound and is eternally liberated.
3. Bondage remains as long as ignorance (ajñāna) not removed.

4. Since bondage depends on ignorance, liberation is manifested upon the removal of ignorance by acquiring Its knowledge.

5. The operation of ignorance consists in its creating apparent distinctions, where none actually exists.

6. Therefore knowledge involves the awareness that all distinctions are false, especially the distinction between the knower and the known.

7. This awareness, which constitutes liberating knowledge, which is free from subject-object distinctions, is pure, immediate consciousness.

8. The true Self is itself just that pure consciousness, without which nothing can be known in any way.

9. And the same true self is not different from Brahman, because if Brahman were conceived as the object of self-awareness, it would involve subject-object distinction.

10. The real is that which is not set aside as false, not sublated (badha), in contrast to the products of ignorance, which are eventually sublated.
11. Assuming the above criterion of reality, it follows that Brahman is the only Reality.

12. The perfect identity of Jīva and Brahman is liberation. This is by no means a list of Advaita tenets. Now, for some 'practical' propositions -

13. Since all distinctions are the product of ignorance, any positive account of a path to liberation involving distinctions, must be ultimately false.

14. This universe is neither sat nor asat nor even sadasat; hence it is inexplicable. So Śaṅkara's theory of error is known as Anirvacanīyakhyāti-vāda.²

Thus the doctrines of the Advaita Vedānta can be briefly stated in a few propositions: 1) Brahman is Reality 2) The world has apparent reality; 3) The soul is non-different from Brahman. Śaṅkara on the whole, posits the reality of only one category. He calls that entity Brahman. There is nothing besides Brahman. All that exists, is Brahman. There is no second to It. The absolute is non-dual. Śaṅkara established these views on the authority of Śruti and logic. In the words of William James, Śaṅkara's system is "the paragon of all monistic systems."³
"The philosophy of Šaṅkara can best be described as the best type of spiritual humanism. It is rationalistic in its approach to the problems of philosophy and experimental in its confirmation of the truth. It is the only religion that has the chance of being accepted by our generation who are children of science and reason. As religion, it is least dogmatic, most universal and least sectarian. It is at once a philosophy of values and a grand metaphysics. Šaṅkara's imposing and inspiring system of metaphysics is the greatest contribution of India to world thought and religion. Through his devotional poems and grand philosophic prose and supreme organisational powers, he stands as the greatest of India's philosophers for all times."

Rāmānuja's system of the Viśiṣṭādvaīta

Rāmānuja, son of Keśava Yajvan, was born in 1017 A.D. He received his education from Yadavaprakāśa, a teacher of the Vedānta of great reputation. There arose afterwards a difference of opinion between Yadava and Rāmānuja on the interpretation of some Upaniṣadic statements, which Yadava interpreted in the monistic manner. As a result of his often falling out with his teacher, on philosophical discussion, Rāmānuja was driven out. Just after the death of Yāmuna at Srīraṅgam, Rāmānuja took up the work of executing Yāmuna's three unfulfilled desires: 1) to convert the people
to the prapatti doctrine of Vaisnāvism, making them all versed in the works of Alvars,

2) to write a commentary on the Brahma Sūtras, and

3) to write many works on Śrīvaiśnāvism. When Rāmānuja was about 30 or 32 years of age, he was then initiated by Mahāpūrṇa according to holy rites of asceticism. After establishing himself as a sannyāsin, learnt certain esoteric doctrines and mantras from Gosthipūrṇa, then dedicated himself to the worship of Raṅgeśa at Srīraṅgām. He then started writing the philosophical works. Those are as follows:

1. Gadyatraya (Saraṇāgatigadya, Śrīraṅgagadya and Vaikunthagadya),

2. Śrībhasya

3. Bhagavadārādhana-krama

4. Vedāntadīpa

5. Vedāntasāra

6. Vedārthasaṅgraha

7. Gitābhasya.
He then took up the work of propagating the teachings of the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta all throughout India, especially southern India. He died in 1137. He thus enjoyed an extra-ordinary life of one hundred and twenty years, which was spread over the reigns of the three Chola kings. He built many temples and mathas during his life time.

**Salient Features of Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita System**

The Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja, which is usually translated as qualified monism, signifies the One Reality Parabrahman qualified by its attributes Cit (soul) and Acit (matter). Following is the list of the important doctrines of Rāmānuja's philosophy:

1. Rāmānuja admits three pramāṇas: perception, inference and the verbal testimony. Perception is the real knowledge acquired through the sense organs. It is of two kinds - Savikalpaka and Nirvikalpaka (determinate and non-determinate). Inference is the means to a knowledge of Vyāpti. Sabda is the means to a knowledge of the Vedas, Upaniṣads and the puruseya texts, like the Vedānta sūtras, the Gītā etc. which do not contradict śruti.

2. Regarding the theory of truth and error, Rāmānuja says that the truth is the knowledge of a thing as it is (yathārthajñāna). Error consists in knowing a thing
differently from what it is. Error arises out of the defective way in which the instruments of knowledge are used. But error is capable of being sublated by truth. At the same time no error can be looked upon as unreal. It is real so long it last. Thus, Rāmānujites have called Satkhātivādins.

Of the three factors - Cit (soul) acit (matter) and Īśvara (God) recognized by Rāmānuja, the first two are absolutely dependent on the last though all are equally ultimate. The body is that which a soul controls, supports and utilizes for its own ends. Matter and souls being the body of God are to be regarded as directed and sustained by Him, and existing entirely on account of Him. Thus the elements are termed Viṣeṣapas and the predominant one, Viṣeṣya. Because the Viṣeṣapas cannot exist by themselves or separately, the complex whole in which they are included, is described as unity. Hence the name Viṣiṣṭādvaita.

4. The relation of Brahman to the sentient and non-sentient creation has been elaborated by Rāmānuja in his concepts of Sarīra-Śarīrī-bhāva, Viṣeṣaṇa-viśisya-bhāva, Śeṣa-Śeṣī-bhāva, Aṁāṁśi-bhāva, Adhārādheya-bhāva.

5. Rāmānuja admits three distinctions of Jīva - baddha jīva, mukta-jīva and nitya-jīva. On the question of creation, Rāmānuja inclines to the Brahma-paripāmavāda. Creation is real and is the play of Īśvara. Māyā implies the power of God.
6. Rāmānuja says that there are six dravyas which are divided into two classes - jāda and ajāda. The former includes prakṛti, kāla and the ajāda - dharmaḥ kāta, nityāvibhūti or suddha-sattva, jīva and iśvara.

7. He recognizes the four ways to the final goal viz. jñānay karma, bhakti and prapatti. The way of Prapatti or absolute self-surrender, is also called Saranagati. The doctrine of prapatti plays an important role in the attainment of salvation. "Rāmānuja attaches so much importance to prapatti that he makes it essential to bhakti also in its final stages. He maintains that it represents a form of knowledge and is not therefore in conflict with the Upaniṣadic view that jñāna alone is the means of release - an explanation rendered necessary by prapatti being the distinctive characteristic of Vaiṣṇavism rather than of the Vedānta... Rāmānuja commends the cultivation of an attitude which makes one feel and act as if that personality did not exist. He means thereby that it is not belief in a permanent self but selfishness which is the enemy of true life."

8. Liberation is of four types - sālokya sāyujya, sāmīpya, sānīdhya. In none of these states, does the soul become Brahman. In fundamental truth, self and Brahman are same just as the part and whole are one, but by reason of
the part and whole cannot be said to be identical.

"The great Vaisnava writer declares, because our salvation is in the hands of God and His nature, we are certain of it. If salvation was in our hands, we will never realise it or long for it. We will go in quest of false happiness and spare no effort to realize it. We humans are uncertain. God's love of man is infinitely greater than man's self-love. Ramanuja has given us the most adorable theism and established the concept of God as love for ever."6

Madhva's System of Dvaita

Madhva (1238-1317 A.D.), the historical founder of the Dvaita system of Vedanta, appeared on the Indian philosophical scene after the systems of Saṅkara and Rāmānuja had become well-established. The reasons that led him to propound the Dvaita system of Vedanta were his dissatisfaction and ideological dissatisfaction with contemporary trends of schools of thought, particularly with the system of Saṅkara. In spite of Rāmānuja's theistic revolt against Saṅkara, Madhva could not agree with him on many points of the theistic doctrines. Therefore, he felt necessary to give a new orientation to the philosophical thoughts.
Madhva was born in Tulunad, of a humble brahmin family in the village of Pājaka, in 1238 A.D. and lived for seventy-nine years. At the age of sixteen he was admitted into the holy orders of Sannyāsa by his teacher Acyutapreksa, under the name of Pūrṇaprajña. It seems therefore, Sāyana Madhva calls Madhva's system “Pūrṇaprajñadarśana”. After initiation, he spent some time in the study of Vedantic classics under Acyutapreksa, beginning with the Īstasiddhi of Vimuktātman. Frequent disagreement of view between the teacher and the disciple terminated the studies. His studies in the Śāstras had convinced Acyutapreksa of inherent weakness of the Advaita philosophy. Later he began to expound the Prasthanatrayi independently, from a new standpoint, laying bare defects in Śāṅkara's interpretation. Sometimes, he used to enter into scholastic disputations with veteran scholars of the day. He toured all over India several times and propagated his philosophy and religion.

Madhva has left the thirty-seven works in all. They include 1) Ṛgabhāṣya - a commentary on the first three adhyāyas of the Ṛgveda, (2-11), Commentaries on the ten Upaniṣads, (13) Brahmasūtrabhāṣya, (13) Anuvyākhyāna, (14) Nyāya vivaraṇa, (15) Anubhāṣya (16-25), Daśaprakaraṇas - ten philosophical monographs expounding his logic and metaphysics, (26) Bhāgavata-tātparya-nirpaya, (27) Gīṭabhāṣya, (28) Gītātātparyanirpaya, (29) Mahābhārata-tātparya nirpaya,

"Madhva's writings are characterized by extreme brevity of expression and compression of thought. They need the help of a very good commentary to be understood in their fulness of thought and depth of meaning. His commentator Jayatīrtha has infused into them the necessary amplitude of utterance and expansiveness of thought."  

Salient Feature of Madhva's Dvaita System

The term 'dvaita' indicates the most fundamental principal of the system: That is two-fold tattva, one is the lord Viṣṇu who is Svatantra, and the second tattva stands for asvatantra category which includes both matter and sentient-beings. This is one of the profoundest conclusions of the Dvaita metaphysics reached by the evidence of perception, inference and the verbal testimony. The cardinal doctrines of the Dvaita Vedānta may as below:

1. Lord Hari is the supremest god of all. He is the independent Being possessed of all adequate and unrestricted powers in regard to the Cjit and Acit, and who is Omniscient.
He is the One who controls the sentient and insentient reals which are of a different from Him. The attributes and actions of Brahman are the same as itself. There is no mutual difference either among them.

2. This world is real at all times and is not illusory. Like a magician's projections. And the reality of world experience is expressed in a system of five-fold distinction. This five-fold difference is the difference that exists as between jīvas, material principles and Brahman on the one hand and mutually among the jīvas and material principles themselves on the other.

3. All individual souls are different. This difference among the jīvas is not due to conditioning factors (upādhis).

4. All individual souls are dependent upon Him, for each and every action.

5. The individual souls possess the quality of being superior or inferior in accordance with their intrinsic nature.

6. Experiencing one's own bliss is itself the state of Mokṣa. The worship of the Lord there is an unalloyed
bliss in itself. It is an end in itself and a fulfilment the selfhood.

7. And Bhakti which is deep love of God inspired by and based upon an adequate knowledge of His majesty, is the means to liberation.

8. Madhva accepts in his theory of knowledge a scheme of three pramāgas or means of valid knowledge – sense – perception, inference and scripture. Perception is the flawless contact of sense organs with their appropriate objects. Flawless reasoning is inference, and flawless word conveying valid sense, is Āgama.

9. Lord Hari is known by only Sadāgamas.

Besides, the significance of Madhva's concept of Ānanda-tāratamya lies as much in its logical trenchancy as in its mystic inwardness. This unique conception applies the principle of peaceful co-existence and fellowship to the whole community of the released souls and gaurantees to each one of them the fundamental right to the complete and distinctive enjoyment of its own selfhood and Svarūpānanda.
Chapter-III

Foot-Notes


4. Ibid., p.162.

5. M.Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy, p.413.


8. स्वतंत्र्य अस्वतंत्र्य व द्वित्य तत्त्वसंबंधः।
स्वतंत्र्ये भावानि विष्णु: भावामाया दियेकं कर॥
Madhva, Tattvasankhyana, p.1.

9. श्रीमन्तथयते हारि: परतारं तत्त्वसंबंधेऽभिन्ना जीवणा: तत्त्वतः नीपोच्चार्यतः।
गुणिकार्न्ययुक्तमुनितिरमला भौतिकय तत्त्ववाच्यः
स्यादिशिष्ट्य प्रमाणादिकान्यासैष्ठैः हारि॥
Navaratnamala, p.1.

10. तत्त्वाक्षरतत्त्वायित: स्त्वतंत्र्यो शेषसंबंधः।
निर्वाकात्त्वादित्यन्तयतः हृदयो नाहु रामायतः॥
Madhva, Tattvodyota, p.1.
11. गुणिक वाणो विषयोः स्वर्यां नान्यदिश्यते ।
अतो मिथ्योऽपि भैरो न तेषां करिष्किदाधन ॥
Madhva, Vijnaptatvanimaya, p.31.

12. जीवितवरभिदा धैव जीवितवरभिदा तथा ॥
जीविद्विदो निधिकृतम जीविवरभिदा तथा ।
निधिकृत जीविद्विदैः पुर्णो भैरव्यक्त: ॥
Ibid., p.27.

13. वर्त्तमानम चाल पद्म सुखसिद्धिः ।
न हृत साधसूतरा सा तिनिर्वात सा यत: ॥
Madhva, Brahma Sutrabhāṣya, 4.4.21.