

## DOES SVARŪPALAKṢAṆA REALLY REVEAL THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTIC OF BRAHMAN?

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### I

The present paper is the result of the critical study of the *Svarūpalakṣaṇa* of Brahman given in the *Vaedāntaparibhāṣā* of Dharmarāj Adhvarīndra. In this context, - an effort has been made to enquire whether *Svarūpalakṣaṇa* really gives the essential characteristic of Brahman. At last a conclusion has been draw in favour of the fact that it can never give an idea of the essence of Brahman with some argument developed in the light of my understanding of Advaita Vedānta.

### II

Brahman is the Ultimate Reality in Advaita Vedānta. Liberation follows from the realisation of Self or Brahman. But the problem is how Brahman is to be conceptualised. If there is no idea about Brahman, one would not be able to try to realise it. For this reason the Advaitins argue that the characteristic feature of Brahman is of two types : essential characteristic (*Svarūpalakṣaṇa*) and secondary characteristic (*taṣastha-Lakṣaṇa*). When it is said that Brahman is Truth, Knowledge and Infinitude as evidenced from the Śruti- '*Satyam jñānam anantam brahma*', it is called essential characteristic feature.<sup>1</sup> The secondary characteristic feature (*taṣasthalakṣaṇa*) is that which, though does not exist as long as the definatum exists, can differentiate it from others. (*yāvallakṣyakālanavasthitatve sati yadvyāvartakam*).<sup>2</sup> As for example, the possession of smell is the secondary characteristic of earth, because smell does not exist in the atoms at the time of dissolution and also in jar etc., at the moment of origination. In the present context, the secondary characteristic of Brahman lies on its being the cause of origination etc. of this universe

(jagajjanmādikāraṇatvaṁ).<sup>3</sup> In this case, 'jagat' means not only the universe, but all the effect in general also. The word 'Kāraṇatva' (i.e., causeness) means 'Kartṛtvaṁ' i.e., agentness. On account of this though *Avidyā* is the cause of the creation of the universe, it can not be taken as an agent. Hence, there is no *ativyāpti* of the definition of *Kāraṇatā*.<sup>4</sup> Dharmarāja has taken the term *Kartā* in a specific sense of having immediate knowledge of the materials, desire to do, and volition (*upadānagocarāparokṣajñāna cikīrṣāmatvaṁ*).<sup>5</sup> As Brahman or God has got these characters, he is described as an agent of this universe and also as omniscient, etc.

Madhusūdana Sarasvatī in his *Advaitasiddhi* has considered the secondary characteristic (*taṭasthalakṣaṇa*) of Brahman. To him, if this *lakṣaṇa* is taken for granted, we have to consider whether Brahman is really an agent of this universe. He has reformulated the definition of *Kartā* as given by *Dharmarāja*<sup>6</sup> and justified his position.

### III

The role of *Taṭasthalakṣṇa* is very important in the Advaita Philosophy. This definition may also be described as *ad hoc* definition of Brahman, which has no permanent status. In fact, Brahman which is known through this definition is not the attributeless Infinite or Unlimited which is its real nature. Brahman as qualified by the power of creation etc. of the universe is *Sopādhika Brahman* or *saguṇa Brahman* which is described as God in Advaita Vedānta. To know this Infinite, Unlimited and attributeless Brahman the secondary characteristic of Brahman is essential initially and hence it has got some value for the beginners. As soon as the real Brahman is realised, this *saguṇa Brahman* known through this secondary definition becomes illusory and that is why, it is called *taṭastha* or secondary. But the problem is : Can really Brahman be defined? Can any definition describe Brahman? Even the *Svarūpalakṣaṇa* (i.e., essential characteristic) of Brahman like Knowledge, Truth etc. can not describe Brahman. The term 'Characteristic', whether essential or secondary is not applicable to Brahman. Because, Brahman is indescribable in character which is supported in the *Śruti* - 'Yad vācānabhyuditam' (one who is not capable of being described through language).<sup>7</sup> Even the term 'indescribable in character' is self-contradictory. One who realises Brahman cannot communicate others. To

describe Brahman as Truth etc. it again becomes *Tataṣṭha* because through this we do not get the indescribable Brahman. That is why, the realisation of Brahman is secret (*guhya*) and non-communicable to others. Moreover, Brahman can not be a lakṣya (object to be defined) so that definition can be applied to it. Hence, *Svarūpalakṣaṇa* cannot talk about the essential nature of Brahman. In other words, this definition or characteristic feature does not reveal the Reality. That is why, Śaṅkara says in his *adhyāśabhāṣya* that all statements given in the *Śruti* are based on superimposition. that is, all linguistic behaviours, vedic or secular, are superimposed.<sup>8</sup>

When it is said in the *Sūtra* and *bhāṣya* that Brahman is the source of all *Śāstrās* (*Śāstrayonitvāt*), Brahman is the creator etc. of all things (*janmādyasya yatah*),<sup>9</sup> These point to the secondary characteristics of Brahman.

Brahman is trans-relational and hence trans-conceptual. It follows from this that Brahman is trans-linguistic. If there is any effort to describe the nature of it in terms of language, it cannot express the real nature of Brahman. Moreover, though these characters of Brahman exist so long Brahman exists, they are known as *Tataṣṭha*. Even the *Svarūpalakṣaṇ* can not give the real picture of Brahman also due to its indescribable character.

In other words, if there is effort to have an idea of Brahman through the *Svarūpalakṣaṇa* it is of no use, as Brahman is not capable of being expressed through language (*avācya*). One can describe something if it is different from one. When an individual realises Brahman, there is no epistemological duality giving rise to the absence of subject-object relation. An individual will realise his own self in each and everything and hence, there is no relation between definition and object to be defined, subject and object. If there is no object as such, there does not arise any question of description. It is said in the *Kenopaniṣad* that if someone realises that he knows Brahman, he does not know at all (*Matam yasya na veda sa*).<sup>10</sup> An individual who possesses a credit of knowing Brahman has not really known Brahman because it can not be the object of knowing (*jñeya*). If he considers Brahman as the content of his knowledge, he has wrong awareness. As Brahman is both knower (*jñātā*) and (*jñeya*), there is no duality leading to the impossibility of description.

The Truth, Knowledge and Infinitude are the essential characters of Brahman through which we get *saguṇa* or *sopādhika* Brahman but not *nirguṇa*

or *nirupādhika* Brahman. Hence, it has to be taken as *taṭastha* but not *svarūpa*. As the realiser of Brahman cannot communicate his experience to others due to the absence of duality at this stage, Brahman is indefinable, but realisable. In one sense the so called *svarūpalakṣaṇa* of Brahman may be considered as *Taṭastha* on account of fact that characteristics of Brahman (Truth etc.) are essential for giving a real picture of Brahman to an individual who is desirous to know Brahman (Brahmanjijñāsu). When Brahman is realised, there is no necessity of this definition due to the nonduality between definition (*lakṣaṇa*) and the defined object (*lakṣya*) at this stage. Though Brahman exists, the definition is not there, which violates the basic characteristic of *Svarūpalakṣaṇa*. Hence, such *lakṣaṇa* also is not permanent, but *ad hoc*. The real nature of Brahman can be realised only by the concerned individual who has become the seer. What he knows can never be described because there is 'none' to whom it will be described due to the cessation of duality. If the *Svarūpalakṣaṇa* is taken to be a definition revealing the true picture of Brahman, how can it be proved or verified as true? If it is argued that the vedic seers have realised this and described as such, the problem remains unsolved. If the vedic seers have really seen Brahman they would have been essentially identified with Brahman having no duality, which stands on the way of any kind of description. *Taṭastha* or *Svarūpa*. Hence, there is no certainty as to the fact that *Svarūpalakṣaṇa* gives the essential characteristics of Brahman. Like *Taṭasthalakṣaṇa* the *Svarūpalakṣaṇa* is based on presumption and here an effort has been made to give an idea of the essence of Brahman, which may not be true. Hence, this definition, though refined to some extent, may be taken as *Taṭastha* again, but not *Svarūpa*. Moreover, *Svarūpa* and *lakṣaṇa* is contradictory in terms. If *Svarūpa* is known, the *lakṣaṇa* of it is not possible due to the absence of duality. In *Sruti* there are various descriptions of Brahman as essential character like *Rasa*, *Sat*, *Ānanda*, *Anna*, *Prāna* etc. which are nothing but an effort to know an abstract entity like Brahman. But if it is said that these are the essential characters of Brahman, it cannot reveal the indescribable (*anirvacanīya*), *nirupādhika* Brahman, the *Lakṣya* of the definition. As this definition cannot be applicable to *anirvacanīya* Brahman, it lacks the character of being *Svarūpa* and hence it is to be taken as *Taṭastha*. As such *lakṣaṇas* help us to realise Brahman, they have got an initial value. Unless we have an secondary and essential characteristic of Brahman, we shall not be desirous of realising Brahman after considering it as *asat* like hare's horn. Though these definitions do not reveal the true picture of Reality, they have got much importance in

leading an individual to the path of the realisation of Brahman.

It may be argued that the vedic seers and embodied liberated persons have realised the essential features through some transcendental means and afterwards they have explained the nature to others coming in the phenomenal world. This view is not also tenable. If Brahman is realised it is for ever. If this above mentioned view is accepted, it will lead to accept the transitoriness of the state of liberation arising out of the realisation of Brahman. If a seer comes back to the phenomenal world with the sense of duality, it will entail that he has retained to the world of ignorance or the world of bondage, which indicates his absence of liberation. If liberation is also transitory like other objects of this world, who will long for it? When Brahman is realised, all these definitions become superimposed (*adhyasta*). The true character of Brahman is non-communicable, secret (*guhya*) and non-describable. Though the essential nature of Brahman is purely subjective and non-communicable to others, one can take refuge to the characteristic features (*Taṭastha* and *Svarūpa*) to have a rough idea about Brahman. It is true that conceptual designations are denied of Supreme Reality. Still they are necessary means and aids to the human intellect and help in preparing the ground for self-realisation. Though these *lakṣaṇas* can not give us full picture of Reality, the 'hazy picture' got through them is highly essential as it is an index and pointer to the truth. Here in lies the importance of philosophical discourse and conceptualisation.

#### NOTES

1. "Tatra lakṣaṇaṁ dvividham - Svarūpalakṣaṇaṁ taṭasthalakṣaṇanceti. Tatra svarūpameva lakṣaṇaṁ svarupalakṣaṇam. Yathā satyādikarṇ brahmasvarūpalakṣaṇam." *Vedāntaparibhāṣa* (Visayapariśeḍha)
2. *Ibid.*
3. "Yathā gandhavattvam pṛthivilakṣaṇam. Mahāpralayaḥ paramānusūptikāle ghaṭādisu ca gandhābhāvāt. Prakṛte ca jagadjananmā.
4. *Ibid.* "Atra jagatpadena kāryajātam vivakṣitam. Kāraṇatvanca, Kartṛtvam tenāvīdyātau nātivyaṅgīh dikāraṇatvam."
5. *Ibid.*

6. *Advaitasiddi Edited by Anantakrishna Sastri, Nirnay Sagar Press, 1937, pp.759.*
7. *Kenopaniṣad.*
8. “*Tametamavidyākhyāmātmānātmano-ritaretarādhyasyaṃ Puraskrtya sarve pramānaprameyavyavahārā laukika vaidikasca pravṛttāḥ sarvāṇi ca śāstrāṇi vidhipratishedha-mokṣaparāṇi*” *Adhyāsbhāṣya.*
9. *Brahmasūtra. Catūḥsūtrī.*
10. *Kenopaniṣad, 2/3*
11. “*Mataṃ viditaṃ jñātaṃ mayā brahmeti yasya vijñānaṃ sa mithyādarśi viparīta vijñāno viditādanyatvāt brāhmaṇo na veda sa na vijñāti.*” *Vākyaabhāṣyaṃ on Kenopaniṣad, P121, edt. Sitanath Goswami, 1968, Calcutta.*