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The Uniqueness of the Saiva Siddhānta Concept of God

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Different schools of Saivism, such as Kashmir Saivism in Northern India, Vira Saivism in the Deccan and the Saiva Siddhānta in Southern India, show that Saivism of one form or another has been widely prevalent in different parts of India. Excavations in various parts of the country leading to the unearthing of Saivite symbols of worship ascribed to early ages are a further proof of the extensive acceptance of this religion. In spite of the large following Saivism has had through long years, and in spite of the great height reached by Saiva Siddhānta, in which Saivism attains its supreme expression, these schools of thought have not received the attention due to them.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SIDDHĀNTA TODAY

The study of Saiva Siddhānta is of importance today in view of a prevailing trend in the country to obliterate religious differences. It is interesting to study how the Siddhānta viewed other schools of thought with reference to itself and took pains to define clearly the position of these schools as well as its own. It went even further in using its own position as the criterion for evaluating the attainments of other schools and concluding that its own stand was the highest and best.

It is intended, in this article, to consider the uniqueness of this school with reference to its concept of God, both by considering the grounds on which it rejects the religious positions of its rivals and by studying the nature of God from the devotional writings of one of its saints.

Though dates can be assigned to the later forms of Saivism, such as the ninth century A.D. for Kashmir Saivism, and the twelfth century A.D. for Vira Saivism, it is difficult to determine the dates for the earliest origins of Saivism. When we get beyond traditions, such as that the scriptures which gave birth to this philosophic system were bestowed by God's agency on holy men before the Himalayas emerged from the seas to their present eminence, we find that the Mahābhārata, the date of which, according to scholars, is the sixth century B.C., makes mention of Saivism and the sacred writings of this school, the Saivāgamas.

According to scholars, the Saivāgamas, and with them, the birth of Saivism, may be ascribed to the seventh century B.C.

THE SIDDHĀNTA IN RELATION TO OTHER SAIVITE AND NON-SAIVITE SCHOOLS

Briefly stated, the Siddhānta maintains that Reality comprises the three eternal padārthas or substances of God, soul and the world. God is supreme among these substances, for though the soul is spiritual, it is subject to births and deaths in the stream of transmigration, and the cosmic stuff is material and inert. Both souls and the world are dependent on God for coming into action, for He alone is the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. He has the divine attributes of omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence. God is *sat-cit-ananda*, by which is meant that He exists, He is the great Intelligence and He is bliss.

Though there is broad acceptance of the Siddhānta position on the part of the other Saivite schools, yet there are important differences, on account of which, as will be shown later, the Siddhānta found it necessary to differentiate itself from even the other Saivite schools and to take on the distinguished name of 'the Siddhānta', by which is meant 'the final end'.

Saiva Siddhānta, primarily a South Indian philosophy, came into contact with not only other schools in South India, but also with several in North India when Buddhists, Jains and others worked their way southwards to gain adherents for their way of thinking. Saiva Siddhānta grew more self-conscious when other schools of thought, in attempting to get the upper hand, came into conflict with it. This circumstance explains a number of its major philosophical works, which are in Tamil, being in the form of apologetics. The Siddhānta, in surveying its position over against those of its contestants, discovered that its rivals differed from itself in varying degrees. On the basis of such differing affinities, the Siddhānta arranged them with reference to itself in the four different groups of the outermost, the outer, the inner and the innermost schools. The other Saivite schools are placed in either the third or fourth category.

The Siddhānta, in defining its position with reference to the stand taken by alien schools, brings out its distinguishing features. The points of difference between itself and other schools are in favour of the Siddhānta. Each of these differences marks the advance made by it over the others. Scholars evince great admiration for the Siddhānta not only for its comprehensive development and lofty attainments, but also for its firm stand against opponents' views.

POINTS OF DISAGREEMENT REGARDING THE CONCEPT OF GOD

The points of conflict between this school and its opponents with regard to the concept of God may now be considered. It

reckons that the schools furthest removed from itself are the atheistic positions of Buddhism, Jainism and others. Whether by positive denial or by lack of affirmation, God is ruled out in these systems. Their stand is opposed to that of the Siddhānta, which considers that among the existing three substances, God, soul and the world, which constitute Reality, God ranks highest. This highest status is ascribed to Him because souls are dependent on God for their salvation, and the world dependent on Him for its cyclic processes of origin, continuance and decay. Furthermore, the whole moral drama that implicates the soul throughout its history, and the world in its cosmic processes, derives its origin from God, as the moral law that makes imperative these vast developments is God's law. Thus the spiritual aspect of Reality traces its origin from God. In these many respects, God is vital to the Siddhānta. By virtue of this great rôle of God, the Siddhānta finds it necessary to place between itself and all atheistic positions the greatest possible distance. These schools are consigned to the outermost schools.

An example of the next proximate group, the outer schools, is the Vedānta. The disagreement, in this case, is that the Siddhānta's maintenance of clear differences between God, soul and the world, and the integral existence of each of these substances, are obliterated in the Vedānta which dismisses the world as illusory, and gives but transient integrity to the individual soul, which ultimately gets merged in the Supreme Reality.

Among the inner schools, mention may be made of the Saivite school of Pāsupata, whose contention that in the state of release, God and soul are equal to each other does not commend itself to the Siddhānta, which maintains that even in the state of release, when the soul is freed of many of its limitations, it is inferior to God, who at no stage has an equal, and is eternally supreme.

In the last group, the innermost schools, the position of the Saivite, Īsvar-avikāra-vāda, is noteworthy. Anxious to maintain that God is above change, this school maintains that in the redemptive process God remains passive and the necessary effort is made by the soul. The analogy used to clarify the situation is that of the cool shade of a tree being static, while travellers who have borne the heat of the day approach towards the shade. The Siddhānta reply is that God both initiates the saving of the soul and does much towards it, while leaving adequate scope for self-help on the part of the soul. Every activity is to be traced to God. However, God, at the same time, is above change because He carries out His operations through the instrumentality of His power or *śakti*, which, acting as an intermediary between God, on the one hand, and souls and the world, on the other, effects changes at this end while excluding change at the other end.

In thus stoutly opposing the views of its opponents in regard to the concept of God, the Siddhānta makes clear its own stand in regard to the point at issue. Over against the atheism of

reputed schools, such as Buddhism, it presents its firm rooted theism. The view that the soul, when liberated from transmigration, loses its individuality in the Supreme Being, does not appeal to the Siddhānta as the soul is deprived of an integral existence. Over against this view, therefore, the Siddhānta maintains that the soul, which is eternal, retains its individuality at all times. The view that in the state of release the soul becomes the equal of God is rejected by the Siddhānta, which holds that it would be presumption on the part of the soul to equate itself to God. The Siddhānta replies to the contention that the soul, in *mukti*, becomes the equal of God by saying that God alone can perform His various divine offices, and therefore, He is for ever supreme.

Besides what has been disclosed by the above controversies regarding the concept of God in the Siddhānta, there are some further noteworthy features. In being monotheistic, the Siddhānta is different from certain popular religions. The polytheism of the Vedas and the numerous village deities are examples of religions that claim large adherents. In spite of this popular homage to many deities, the Siddhānta struck out a different position for itself. God Siva is the Supreme Being. Though, perhaps, out of concession to conservatism, the plural gods are not eliminated from the system, they are so inferior in nature compared with the Supreme Being and so greatly dependent on Him that there is, besides an absence of rivalry, a profound consciousness of Siva as the One, like unto whom there is no other.

In eschewing traditional polytheism, the Siddhānta did not cease to appeal to the masses. It had compensating features which appealed to its worshippers. In being a *Bhakti* religion, like Vishnuism, it was a religion that gave scope for all religious emotions that find expression in a personal religion. Siva is Himself characterized by love as His chief attribute. So great is the rôle assigned to love in the system that it is said one may not only say that 'God is love', but also, 'Love is God'. If there is dependence on the part of God, it is that He finds souls necessary to bring out the expression of His love. Siva feels so greatly concerned for souls in the state of bondage that He brings into being the world so that it may furnish the stage on which souls can enter, and through performance of good and bad deeds, attain their freedom.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES OF SAINTS

It is not only for souls in general that Siva has a yearning, but also for individuals. Some of the saints of this school, who have also had literary genius, have left behind a volume of religious writings testifying to their personal religious experience. Eminent among these writers is Mānikkavāsagar (sixth century A.D.) whose name means 'he of the ruby utterances', a name he earned for himself because of the charm of his religious poetry. His numerous poems set to different measures deal with the

recurrent themes of the exploits ascribed to God Siva, such as the overcoming of all the gods in a trial of might, the description of the deity's appearance with all the paraphernalia with which He usually decks Himself, and above all the poet's religious experiences.

It is this personal experience of God that is of greatest value in understanding the Saiva Siddhānta idea of God as one who comes to mean much to those who turn to Him in sincerity, love and devotion. Mānikkavāsagar speaks of God Siva as one whose boundless love redeemed the poet who was sunk in sin, degradation and despair. He feels inspired by God who is holy and pure to turn away from evil and pursue a path acceptable to Him. Thereafter, God is his inseparable companion who is everything to him and whose praises he sings with enchanting variety. The following lines from the poet's work, *Tiruvāsagam*, bear out the above points.

See Him the First! See Him the Whole!
See Him Himself, Being without compare!
See Him adorned with the wild boar's ancient tusk!
See Him Whose girdle is the forest-tiger's skin!

.....

See, He is taken in the net of piety!
See Him, that One, Whose title is 'the only One'!
See, He extends throughout the wide extended earth!
See Him, more subtile than an atom small!
See Him, the King incomparably great!

.....

My Father! unto me Ambrosia Thou!
O blest Supreme! Thou art to honey like
That flows abundant, thrills the soul with bliss!
Thy loving ones enjoy Thee as their own!
Helper Thou art! with glist'ning glory crowned;
In weary anguish of Thy worshippers.
O Treasure! tell me, wilt Thou leave me here,
In this poor world to pine away, our King?

SIDDHĀNTA ATTEMPTS TO BRING GOD NEAR TO MAN

Besides arriving at a lofty concept of God by the philosophical approach, the Siddhānta also attempts to bring God close to man in various ways. These are:

- (a) Siva's manifesting Himself in His *bhaktas*;
- (b) Siva's manifesting Himself in idols.

These may now be considered with their practical implications for the religious life. One of the trends in Hinduism which may be traced to the Siddhānta philosophical works is the worship of *bhaktas* or saints. Speaking at Mirāj on May 15th, 1958, Acharya Vinoba Bhave is reported to have said that in Hinduism the

worship of *bhaktas* has greater value than the worship of God Himself (*Pioneer*—a daily newspaper—dated 16-5-58, page 1). The Siddhānta, in its *shastras*, countenances the worship of *gurus* and *siva-bhaktas* by saying that inasmuch as God is manifest in them, they are worthy of worship. So it happens that the worship of human beings finds sanction in the Siddhānta philosophical works. The worship of images that have been sanctified by religious rites is also sanctioned by the Siddhānta on the same ground advanced above that God's presence in the images hallows them and renders them worthy of worship. This accounts for the worship of Siva's images in temples. Many devotees go further in bathing and feeding the idols. For the masses of Saivites to whom the Siddhānta scriptures and philosophical works are beyond their comprehension, it is these last forms of worship that hold an appeal.

GENERAL ESTIMATE OF THE SIDDHĀNTA

In making an estimate of the achievements of the Siddhānta with regard to the concept of God, it must be granted that in making a firm stand against alien schools with regard to the concept of God, the Siddhānta makes laudable attempts to conserve certain significant values. In the various means adopted to bring God near to man, however, such as the worship of *gurus* and idols, the Siddhānta reaches an anti-climax as the means used to secure the desired nearness are contrary to its established tenets. The worship of *siva-bhaktas* or Saivite saints does not harmonize with the Siddhānta belief that souls though redeemed and filled with the grace of God, are still inferior to the Supreme Being. The worship of saints also conflicts with the Siddhānta principle that the soul must ever strive to render its homage to what it knows to be the highest. The sanction of the worship of idols is again very much at variance with the Siddhānta attempt to keep the cosmic stuff at a distance from God by interposing an intermediary so that the purity of God may not be contaminated in the process of acting on matter. In view of these conflicts, the worship of saints and of idols appear to be anomalies in the system. It is these anomalies, however, that exercise considerable influence on the religious practices of the adherents of this faith.