



## PEARLS OF VEDANTIC WISDOM IN SREE NARAYANA GURU'S POEMS

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### ABSTRACT

The paper titled "Pearls of Vedantic Wisdom in Sree Narayana Guru's Poems" probes into the philosophy of Advaita as delineated in the selected poems of Sree Narayana Guru. Sree Narayana Guru, a spiritual stalwart, yogi and mystically inspired poet, who lived in the latter half of 19th century and early half of the 20th century ushered in renaissance in Kerala at a time when untouchability and casteism reigned the social scenario. He was a karma yogi who practised the philosophy of Advaita to bring about a radical change in the mindset of the people in a society where the downtrodden were relegated and oppressed. In the Malayalam literary scenario, the Guru opens a new genre by using the poetic medium to express his intuitive experience. His simple interpretation of the non-dual philosophy enriches the Malayalam poetry and raises the art of poetry to a very sublime level.

**Key words:** Advaita, Non- duality, Brahman, Mystic

### KY PUBLICATIONS

Spirituality is an experience which cannot be attained by the mind or intellect or by any instrument of knowledge and perception directly related to the physical body. It can be experienced in stillness. It is a vision, a revelation and an inner illumination for which no cause can possibly be ascribed except that it exists as consciousness which is the ground and goal of all knowledge. A seer or a mystic gets the vision of the Absolute. The mystic's vision has a few distinctive characteristics: it deals with infinitude and it is an objectless experience gained without any dependence on the instruments of perception like the senses, the mind and the intellect. He loses his individuality in Universality. Sree Narayana Guru who hailed from south Kerala, was born in 1854 was a mystic poet, spiritualist, yogi and seer poet perceived the oneness of all beings. The Guru was deeply moved by the inhuman practices prevalent in the then social scenario of

Kerala. He practised the *Advaita Vedanta* and spread the pearls of the *Vedantic* wisdom to effect a change, to wipe out the darkness from the minds of the people. Mystic poems undoubtedly hold a seminal importance and relevance in this modern world where humanity is being distanced from moral values.

The poems which he has written in Malayalam, Sanskrit and Tamil clearly portray the depth of his mystical experience. They stand out as compositions of great poetic merit, having attained the pinnacle of poetic beauty from a literary standpoint. These thought provoking poems, contemplative in nature, embody great visions. *Atmopadesa Satakam*, *Darsanamala* and *Advaita Dipika* are some of the poems in which *Advaitadarsana* has been scientifically dealt with. Vedanta, "particularly Advaita Vedanta, admittedly represents the finality of Indian wisdom" (Swami

Muni Narayana Prasad, *The Philosophy of Narayana Guru* 5) is the only science that has unravelled the mystery of the Universe. This Supreme Truth, the pearl of wisdom that has dawned on the mind of the great seers during their experiential intuitive perception is embodied in the Upanishads.

The concept of *mahavakyas* of the Upanishads explains and illustrates the concept of *Advaita*. "*ishavasyamithamsarvamyatkimcha jagathyamjagath*" (God, the Supreme is everywhere) the opening verse of *Ishavasyaupanishad*, conveys the central theme of all the Upanishads. The *Mandukya Upanishad* says "*ayamatma brahma*" (individual self of man is *Brahman*). The *Aitreya Upanishad* proclaims "*prajnanam brahma*" (*brahman* is pure consciousness). The *Taittiriya Upanishad* says "*brahmavidyapnotiparam*" (the knower of *Brahman* attains the Supreme). The *Chandokya Upanishad* proclaims "*tat tvamasi*" (That thou art) and finally the *Brahadaranyaka Upanishad* proclaims "*ahambrahmasmi*" (I am *Brahman*). *Advaita Vedanta* is the theory of non dualism based on Upanishads.

The absolute is one and the eternal having no end or beginning and basically it is the nature of knowledge and bliss. The word *Brahman* is derived from the root *brh* which means to expand the entity whose greatness, magnitude or expansion cannot be limited or measured. The word is used in the *Rig Veda* both in the masculine and neuter gender (Sashidharan Nair, *The Philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru* 21).

*Advaita* is an experience, the experience of that Supreme Reality and discerning that One Reality in everyone. Permanence of Absolute Truth and transience of the phenomenal world is the main theme of his compositions. He uses the term *arivu* to denote consciousness or the Absolute Truth.

This one consciousness is termed *cit* in Sanskrit, and Itself is the essential content of *Brahman* or *Atman* of Vedanta, often defined as *sat-chit-ananda*. (Existence-Consciousness- Value-experience). As *sat* (Existence or Reality) It appears as the existence of the visible world, subjective as

well as objective; as *chit* (Consciousness), It manifests both as *vidya* (true knowledge) and *avidya* (untrue knowledge); as *ananda* (Value experience). It becomes conditioned as happiness and suffering (Swami Muni Narayana Prasad, *Shorter Philosophical Poems of Narayana Guru* 143).

*Advaita Dipika*, *Darsanamala*, *Atmopadeshasha thakam*, *Daivadasakam*, *Jananinavarathnamanjari* are some of the poems in which this philosophy of Non-duality is dealt with. *Advaita Dipika*, (Lamp of Non Duality) is a poem of 19 verses. This poem vividly portrays *Advaita*, one truth without a second as the only existing underlying Reality that blossoms into many. "Bringing forth the lamp of wisdom that dispels the darkness of *avidya*" (Swami Muni Narayana Prasad, *Shorter Philosophical poems of Sree Narayana Guru* 86). In this poem, his deep intuitive knowledge can be perceived in his delineation of the non-dual wisdom, the core of *Advaita*. He illustrates the existence of only one causal reality behind the apparent phenomenal world with its innumerable names and forms. This one Reality *chit* projects itself as the universe. To substantiate the existence of one Reality, he compares the Universe to a dream, the dream appears to be real, until the dreamer wakes up. On waking up he realizes that it was only a dream. An *ajnani* who is in the sweet slumber of *maya* considers the world with its multiplicity of names and forms as real, but when the knowledge of non - dual wisdom dawns on him, he realizes that there is only one truth behind this multiplicity, that is *chit* or consciousness. This realization comes to him only when he does contemplation.

*Janani Navaratna Manjari*, a poem in nine verses, is a hymn which the Guru has composed in praise of Goddess Sarada. What is striking about this poem is that it has emanated from his heart as a *mantra* while he was consecrating the idol of the Goddess Sharada at Shivagiri. It is said that Earath Krishnanashan, one of the Guru's disciples, has taken down this poem. Through this poem, he delineates his devotion to Goddess Sarada. He has woven the *Vedantic* thought in this poem. He perceives *Arivu* or *Brahman* as Goddess Sarada, the unitive wisdom. In the very first verse he calls

mother Sarada as (*onnayamamati*) cosmic consciousness. The *jiva* which falls into the ocean of myriad needs of material life is lost in the web of dualities. So the *sadhak* prays to the Mother, "O Mother, when will my inner being get merged within the domains of *Nadabhumi*?" (20) which is free from the tri-basic factor *triputi* (knower, known and act of knowing) The self gets merged with the Supreme consciousness. In the fourth stanza he brings forth a few well-known analogies of *Advaita Vedanta*, *Tantra* and *Kashmir Saivism*. On contemplation, it is revealed that waves are nothing but water and the snake perceived on a rope is nothing but a rope and a pot is nothing but clay. He says the causal reality of this Universe is none other than the mother, the Supreme consciousness and the cosmos doesn't have a separate existence from her. The feet of the mother is the root of all this phenomenon and the Guru begs to the Goddess to bestow on him the boon to know the real. He addresses her as "*rajayogajananani*".

He perceives mother Sarada as performing a cosmic dance known as *lasya* in Indian classical arts and she has covered her body with a fine cloth which is constituted by time, space and causality and because of that no one is able to perceive her. This manifested world consisting of the five great elements, i.e., earth, water, fire, wind and *akasha*, is nothing but the mother who is the abode of the *Vedas*.

The Guru's perception of oneness, his identification with the Absolute power, can be discerned in the following verse:

You became the deer, and the fish too,  
The snake, and the heavenly bird likewise,  
The firm earth, and the river also, woman  
as well as man,  
Even the world on high and inferno, within  
your name-form couple,  
Assuming varied natures, cognizes here,  
As the "I", that too is even you!  
O, one of word-content alone, all is comedy  
indeed! (97)

He perceives the deer, the fish, the river, the snake, the heaven, the earth, the man, the woman, the innumerable names and forms and even the 'I' in him and the 'I' in everyone as Goddess Sarada, the

divine mother. This poem is the Guru's earnest prayer to the divine mother to bestow on him her blessings to help him come out of the *triputi* so that his *jivatma* can merge in that pure divine power.

*Atmopadesa Sathakam* is written soon after he got enlightenment, philosophically explained as 'the great awakening', or, as 'the vision of the Absolute', or as 'the flash of Divine knowledge', reported as illuminating his inner self during his meditation in *Maruthvimalai*. In this poem, he shows the different ways in which one should instruct One's own self so as to realize the core of existence, which the Guru calls "*Karu*" or "*Arivu*". This dawn of 'Knowledge' or 'Realization' or 'Awakening' answers the myriad unanswered questions in the minds of devout humans who are seekers after Truth, in what normally baffles the 'ordinary' minds regarding the relationship existing between the Universe and the varied forms in Creation – what is often described as "the Absolute Truth" by seekers. The Guru stresses the importance of contemplation. The main theme of this poem is "contemplative self-realization". Just as no difference is there between the waves and water in the ocean, by contemplation one should become one with *karu*. Contemplation helps one realize one's self through reflection.

Of all the poems he has composed, *Daiva Dasakam* in Malayalam, (Ten verses on God) is the simplest, embodying his entire philosophical vision. Its centenary was celebrated globally on December 31, 2014. The universal appeal of this prayer is profound. He describes the deepest secrets of wisdom coupled with intense devotion. He addresses the Supreme Power as *daivame*, in the opening lines of this poem and who is shown as the navigator who rescues man who is tossed in the ocean of misery and sorrow. God is perceived as *drik*, the inner consciousness, the creator, the created and the myriad creations, and the substance of which all creation is made, then He is seen as *maya*, the maker of *maya*, the enjoyer of *maya* and the remover of *maya*; He is existence, consciousness and bliss and also present, past and future and is beyond time and space. He is that supreme power which fills the inside as well as the outside, that transcends all knowledge and in the concluding lines

the Guru says that each one of us has to merge in the ocean of His glory.

His seminal work in Sanskrit is *Darsana Mala, the Garland of Visions*. It embodies the core of Vedantic thoughts. *Darsana Mala* is divided into ten sections of ten verses, each written in a very clear, simple and lucid style.

His crowning achievement is the *Darsana Mala* in which the Guru rises far above what superficially might be esteemed as even his "own special note", a statement which lifts philosophy above the philosophical, above the systems, pure and noble, treating of all systematized thought and philosophies in the light of Wisdom itself (Nataraja Guru, *Life and Teachings of Narayana Guru* 270).

Each section is a vision. He observes the unitive wisdom from ten different angles and it is impossible to find any disparity among the concepts. *Adhyaropadarsanam, Apavadadarsanam, Asatya darsanam, Mayadarsanam, Bhanadarsanam, Karmadarsanam Jnanadarsanam, Bhaktidarsanam, Yogadarsanam and Nirvanadarsanam* are the ten darsanas which are the beads, and the thread that is used to make this garland, is the Absolute truth. In the first five sections of *Darsana Mala*, the Guru shows the relationship between the *prapancha* and the Absolute Truth, while the second half centres round the 'I' and the Absolute Truth. This is viewed again from five different aspects like *karma, jnana, bhakti, yogam* and *nirvana*.

*Darsanamala* is a Pilgrim's Progress. Though the flowers are each separate subjects of inquiry, they are all linked by the single thread of the Absolute. They begin with the initial questions about how everything here came to be and conclude with the self-realization which is called Nirvana in the text (Swamy John Spiers, *The Philosophy of Narayana Guru* 38).

The Guru propounds the philosophy of *Advaita* effectively and also conveys the idea that the aim of such a realization is also a search for happiness and that happiness and, the joy that one gains in life, should be helpful to others also. All these spiritual poems are the products of a mind which has had a

strong conviction of the spiritual truth gained from intuitive knowledge.

In the Malayalam literary scenario, the Guru opens a new genre by using the poetic medium to express his intuitive experience. His simple interpretation of the non-dual philosophy enriches the Malayalam poetry and raises the art of poetry to a very sublime level. The Guru, a mystically inspired poet of high aesthetic sensibility, portrays his visions in a very simple language and his success as a poet lies in his effective handling of the lofty philosophical visions in a language rich in meaning and making it comprehensible for the common readers. His mastery of words in illustrating his deep philosophical visions in a language clothed in figures of speech and examples drawn from nature enable the readers to comprehend the philosophic thoughts which he has woven in them. As a true seer-poet, he shows the Absolute Truth in its entirety.

His works are also noteworthy for their musical quality. What is most striking is his skill in using rhyming words, alliteration and assonance which inevitably bring in the musical quality which even a casual reader cannot miss. The most outstanding aspects of his poems are an amalgamation of *bhakti*, mysticism and *Advaita*. The visions of the poet enlivened in his poems have had a profound influence on the intellectual, spiritual and social life of the readers and the society at large. His poems have worked the magic of serving as a force to change the outlook of the society itself, elevating the minds to the people to levels sublime. They have undoubtedly endeavored to illumine the minds of the followers of the Guru, to bring to all ardent readers the knowledge of the *Upanishadic wisdom*, to impart to one and all a sense of the 'truth' of the 'reality' of the mundane world to help them live life more meaningfully. They have also opened the gates to all who care to know what a life of Universal brotherhood, sans caste and religious distinctions, is. It will be no exaggeration to say that these poetic works have been what a lighthouse is to the sailor lost at sea and a rudder to those in rudderless boats on the merciless waves of the sea ... to men and women of all walks of life giving them direction first and then

the great solution to come unscathed through the 'misery of life'. In particular, the Guru's teachings have awakened a society from its nescience and marked a revival in the stream of thought in his native Kerala. Very earnestly, the Guru has tried to impart to all mankind what he himself had imbibed from this universe of the Creator.

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