

Kashmir Saivism: The Path and Destination

Kashmir Saivism, the Pratyabhijna School, as it is popularly known is, in some sense, the highest attainment in the Indian philosophical tradition. Like Advaita Vedanta it upholds a kind of non-dualism according to which the entire world is nothing but Siva, the non-dual supreme reality, as it is termed here.¹ Unlike Advaita Vedanta which has its foundation in the Upanisads, Kashmir Saivism draws its inspiration from the ancient Agama works. Some other foundational works like the Sivasutras and Sivadrsti also supply the conceptual framework to this school.² Non-dualistic world view, in whichever form it might have been conceived in different intellectual and spiritual traditions of the world, points to the same mindset and the same set of perceptions which go into its making. However, different schools adopt different methods to reach their conclusion depending on the manner they confront the world of experience. Here, the idiosyncrasies of the particular thinker and the belief-system of the environment where he is born and brought up play an important role. But it is imperative to study the set of experiences that mould the non-dualistic thinking since there only consummates the process of knowing, more so with regard to such sadhana-intensive disciplines as Kashmir Saivism.

In our entire quest, in all our journeys, we have a path and a destination. Sometimes we are not clear regarding our goal even though we have some faint ideas; even we may have some projected object as our goal; or we may not be aware of the right path which leads to our destination. In all our knowledge-situations, empirical, rational and intuitional, with reference to our myriad quests we may remain confused as to the path and destination, more so when we question their ultimate status and value.³ Speculative metaphysics divorced from real situations of life cannot make us reach the ultimate goal; apart from philosophical speculations, what we need is sadhana, a real method through which we expand and have the plenary Advaita-experience. Like Advaita Vedanta, Kashmir Saivism enunciates its standpoints and leads the pursuer along the path that consummates in enlightenment and emancipation.

The main problem of Kashmir Saivism is to find the reality of the world of phenomena as well to recognize one's own reality. This is not only the ultimate destiny of the cosmic process but also the fulfillment of the individual life, since in all the scriptures ignorance is said to be the cause of bondage and knowledge is said to be the means of emancipation.⁴ But conceiving knowledge as well as ignorance differs from system to system. The ultimate reality here is termed as para prakasa, supreme illumination, the unbound consciousness which not only illuminates the entire universe but also sustains and gives value to all. It is not only the ultimate reality; it is the essential nature of the things, the knowable, since unless something is revealed it cannot have either manifestation or reality.⁵ Even non-reality of the objects is solely grasped by some camatkara, the marvelous flash of revelation. The knowledge, 'The sky-flower is unreal' is even possible being reflected in consciousness.⁶

The supreme consciousness, Siva is inseparably associated with his supreme Sakti, known as vimarsa. This vimarsa constitutes the essence, the nature of prakasa. Here there is a marked difference from Advaita Vedanta conception of reality. The Saivites of Kashmir hold that without vimarsa which is the very nature of prakasa the latter is not different from illumination emanating from inert objects like the crystal.⁷ Even though the ultimate reality is non-dual it is revealed in both the aspects; thus it is of the nature of prakasa-vimarsa. Vimarsa is said to be apperceptive, the self-perception or aham-bhava of prakasa. It is the ultimate repose, visranti of illumination, since it is free from all dependence.⁸ Sakti is anuttara pratibha of Siva, the unconditioned supreme freedom through which he becomes the entire universe.⁹ She (in the feminine) is also known as svatantrya, sphuratta, para vak, sara, hrdaya etc. She is the immanence of the transcendent supreme Lord, the dynamic aspect of the self-contained stir-less supreme consciousness for which Siva is said to be both transcendent (visvottirna) and immanent (visvamaya). Ksemaraja differentiates his position from others by pointing to this; the Brahman of Vedanta, he says, is only transcendent.¹⁰ In the Devipancastavi, the divine Sakti is described as the power, body, the presiding deity, the inner self, knowledge, action, volition, senses, mind, lordship, the abode and the covering of the Lord. There is nothing which she is not of Siva.¹¹

It is to be noted that even though the supreme reality is conceived as of both aspects in this system, non-dualism is not at all hampered. We find that, in this concept of Sakti, the maya of the Vedantins and the prakrti of the Sankhyas are assimilated. In the enumeration of tattvas, both maya and prakrti are included, even though being overpowered by the imposing Sakti they lose their importance. However, Sakti is remarkably different from both of them. According to the Sankhyas, prakrti is different from and independent of purusa, inert by nature and real, so the result is necessarily a dualism. According to Advaita Vedanta, maya is inert, dependent on Brahman, by itself not existent, neither real nor unreal. Since it is not an ontologically co-existent entity with Brahman (samana-sattaka), non-dualism is never affected. However, in Kashmir Saivism, Sakti being of the nature of consciousness (indeed, she is the very essence of consciousness), one with Siva and real, non-dualism is the necessary outcome. It is to be noted that, in contrast to the theory of falsity of the world of the Vedantins, it holds the world to be real. The theory of falsity of the world is advanced by the Advaita Vedantins to prove that Brahman is only real, where as the Pratyabhijna school takes the world to be real. But since nothing exists which is not Siva, non-dualism becomes evident with such a world view.

It is to be noted that Sakti is only the non-different dynamic aspect of the selfsame cosmic consciousness. The Vijnanabhairava says 'The highest state of Bhairava free from all notions of direction and time, not characterized by space and intention, incapable of indication and indescribable by words, full of bliss of inner experience, free from all vikalpas, that state which is all-pervasive, is said to be Bhairavi, the supreme Goddess.'¹² As the power of burning is not different from fire, Sakti is not different from Siva. It is only the threshold through which the knower enters the object (becomes capable of knowing it).¹³

It is to be borne in mind that in order to explain the multiplicity of the world in face of the non-dual reality the Advaitins have to posit another principle maya, which, with all its effects, must be mithya, non-real (in the Advaita Vedanta language neither

real nor unreal) on par of dream experience or appearance of the serpent on the rope. For the same reason the Sivadvayavadins of Kashmir posit Sakti, the unconditioned boundless freedom of Siva, which is as much real as Siva, with all her proliferation, the myriad things of the world on the evidence of the universal experience of the thing and its capacities such as the qualities, actions etc. For the Advaitins, jati, guna, kriya etc which are nothing but superimposition (adhyasa) on the substantive are false since their non-dualism does not tolerate difference. For the Sivadvayavadins, they are as much real as the substance; however they are not separate principles as they are conceived by the Nyaya-Vaisesika realists. These are only the manifestation, the powers of the substance. Saktiman is the dharmin and sakti is the dharma. This relation also holds good in the case of Paramatma and Para Sakti.¹⁴ To repudiate the contention of the realists, Abhinava even states that sakti is the very being of the bhava which is only posited by the knower.¹⁵ However, one should not take it to be a form of idealistic phenomenalism. Spiritual wisdom, based as it is on intuitive revelations, is capable of a philosophical or a scientific interpretation. But in the core it is beyond the purview of both of them. It is a unique viewpoint which is intended to make one capable of the final Advaya vision through looking at the things as the manifestation of the power of the non-dual supreme reality. An attitudinal change and correction of vision are the starting point of sadhana.

Sakti is the cause of manifestation of the world. The individual jiva does not know its divine nature as it is limited by the five kancukas, the limiting factors projected by maya. Thus consciousness having its power diminished becomes jiva. Again by gaining his power it becomes free. The Spandakarika remarks, "That Sakti of Siva, having action as its nature, existing in the pasu, the bound soul, becomes the cause of bondage; however, when known as the path towards realization of one's true nature becomes the source of all fulfillment."¹⁶ That is why Sakti is said to be the door of entrance into Siva in the Vijñanabhairava, "When one enters the state of Sakti and thereby gets established in the vision of non-distinction, then he becomes Siva himself, so Sakti is declared as the door of entrance into Siva. As by the light of the lamp or by the rays of the sun difference of space and such other things are known, so Siva is known through Sakti"¹⁷

Sakti as the unbound freedom or svatantrya of Siva or as his svarupa vimarsa is one and identical with him. But in her manifestations, she is infinite in number. The innumerable manifestations of the world are his saktis. This is how Sakti is one and many. However, the main expressions of his Sakti are three, iccha, jnana and kriya, otherwise known as para, parapara and apara. Related to them are the three upayas, the paths of realization, sambhavopaya, saktopaya and anavopaya which are discussed in detail by Abhinavagupta in the beginning chapters of his famous treatise, the Tantraloka.

The entire process of regaining the pristine glory of jiva is known as sadhana, the spiritual practice for enlightenment, which culminates in grace and consummates in self-recognition. In this sense, Sakti herself is the path, the highest knowledge (vidya) and grace, (anugraha) of the Lord. "The idea of Siva is the highest conception of God as approached by the spiritual intuition of man" says sister Nivedita in her marvelous work "The Master as I Saw Him". The conception of Siva-Sakti is the answer to the

apparent dualism and ultimate oneness of all existence; it is the flowering and the fulfillment of all relationship through which we enter the heart of reality that is our own being and the essential nature of the universe.

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References

1. Spandakarika 2.4
2. Tantraloka 1.10-11
3. Allusion to the story of Alice's encounter with the rabbit in "Alice in the Wonderland"
4. Tantraloka 1.22
5. Tantraloka 1.52
6. Tantraloka 1.53
7. Isvarapratyabhijna 1.5.11
8. Siddhitrayi, Ajada- 22
9. Tantraloka 3.66
10. See Ksemaraja's comments on Pratyabhijna hrdaya, Sutra 8
11. Pancastavi, ambastava 25
12. Vijnanabhairava 14-15
13. Vijnanabhairava 19
14. Vijnanabhairava 18
15. Tantraloka 1.69
16. Spandakarika 3.16
17. Vijnanabhairava 20-21
18. The Master as I Saw Him, p105

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