

Saundaryalahari : A Vision

Saundaryalahari, the Wave of Beauty, also known as Anandalahari, the Wave of Bliss and Cidanandalahari, the Wave of Consciousness-Bliss is a remarkable work of great poetic excellence and philosophical depth. It is the outcome of a unique vision which is inwardly deep, spiritually transcendent, and superbly aesthetic. Charming tenderness, ease and elegance of expression, smooth flow of metre, rhyme that creates a unique sound effect, blended with matchless poetic imagination and spiritual insight, make it a unique work both in the fields of literature and spiritualism. It is said that the two dimensions of greatness height and depth, contradictory as they are, cannot co-exist, but in Saundaryalahari both of them fuse together, subsumed as if within a third dimension of greatness which is so great that it can never be surpassed. It is the unfolding of the Advaita vision of the great poet-seer Sankara Bhagavatpada in the expanse of divine love and bliss. If Sariraka Bhasya is the greatest creation of his mind, then Saundaryalahari is undoubtedly the loftiest expression of his heart. Indeed, this work is second to none of its kind in the entire Sanskrit literature both in depth of meaning and height of expression.

Saundaryalahari is the unfolding of a cosmic experience, an apocalyptic vision of the highest truth that not only reveals the ultimate reality but also leads one to its realization. It is a cosmic song describing the consummation of a cosmic process, which, when pursued purposefully and sincerely, can lead one to self-realization and perfection through the re-creation of this cosmic process within the individual. Through this, one can realize his identity with the source of all life and can re-live an enlightened life, opened to a vaster existence with infinite dimensions and wider ranges of possibilities which hitherto have remained unrevealed.

What does this vision reveal? It reveals a great presence and power, a great beauty and bliss, a vaster reality, an unbound expansion, an unconditioned love which sustains and gives meaning to all that live or even exist. By way of describing the exotic beauty of the divine mother, Tripura Sundari, variously called as Tripura, Lalita, Sodasi, Sundari, etc., Godhead in its aspects of beauty, bliss, love and compassion, this work unveils the hidden aspects of the ultimate reality, which corresponds to the unfolding of the hidden recesses of the spirit in man. In this, Acarya Sankara had employed some Tantric terms, symbols and ideas to expound the Advaitic truth, here known as Lalitadvaita, which is not different from the Brahmadvaita of the vedantic works, though the method of exposition differs.

Saundaryalahari begins with an obeisance to the divine mother, “Siva, if united with Sakti, is capable of becoming the lord of the universe; otherwise, the God is not even able to move. How, then, a person who has not acquired merit, can worship or praise

you, who are worthy of being adored by Hari, Hara and Viranci?" In this verse, the poet-seer reveals the greatness of Sakti in the form of the divine mother, who is not only the basis and the support of all cosmic transactions but the very essence of Siva, the lord of the universe. She is the essence and the expression of the Lord, the very Godhead of the God. The cosmic processes such as creation, maintenance and dissolution of the universe derive sustenance from her. In the next verse, it is said that a tiny spec of dust from the feet of the divine mother is fashioned by Brahma as the entire universe which, Visnu, in the form of Ananta, bears on his head somehow with care and Rudra smears it over his body as vibhuti after destruction.

It is to be borne in mind that this conception of Sakti as the basis of the entire cosmic process is not the outcome of a philosophical speculation. It is not the exposition of a religious belief or idea nor is it the fanciful imagination of a poet. It is the intuitive experience of the seers, an experience of a higher state of consciousness. Man has been pondering over the great problems of life and experiences. Religion, science and philosophy are the three expressions of this quest for the ultimate truth, but the intuition of it cannot be confined to what religion, science and philosophy are.

What is the nature of the ultimate reality? It may be defined as existing for ever or unconditioned by time. It may be conceived as all-pervasive or unlimited by space. It may be described as inexhaustible power. However, the Agamas conceive the ultimate reality as supreme illumination, para-prakasa, which, itself being self-revealing and self-consistent, reveals and substantiates the entire universe. Though it is one and the only one reality, it expresses itself in a twofold way as prakasa-vimarsa, known as Siva-Sakti combine in the Tantras. Illumination or prakasa means the revelation of that which has not been revealed, asphutasya sphutikarah, and vimarsa is its self-assertion and self-expression. In the infinite ocean of prakasa, the innumerable waves of vimarsa surging endlessly are the expression of the exuberant delight; thus, it is said to be sphuratta-lahari-yuta, as described in the Yoginihrdayam. This vimarsa, being the essential nature of prakasa is also known as sara (essence), sakti (power), svatantrya (freedom) and hrdaya (heart) of the former in the Tantras. She (described in the feminine) is neither inert, jada, nor different from Siva as the maya and the prakrti of Advaita Vedanta and Sankhya. The entire universe is her manifestation. Since Sakti, unlike prakrti, is identical with Siva, non-dualism is not affected. In the allegorical language, she is described as the consort of Siva. Though the ultimate reality is non-dual or advaya, its conception in the dual form is the explanation of the apparent dualities and the multiplicities perceived in the world of phenomena. The love, beauty, sympathy, wisdom and other such virtues relevant in the human context are indeed the reflection of the supreme Caitanya in its aspect of vimarsa. Human relationship is sublimated in the relation of Siva and Sakti, more so in the context of the relationship between a man and a woman. The beauty and bliss

experienced in the world are the infinitesimal spark of the unbound beauty and bliss of the Divine.

The supreme Sakti sustains the entire universe because she has herself manifested as the manifold universe. So, the Acarya extols her, “Beyond you thus manifested nothing else exists” (S.lahari.35). Not only that she is the source of the things of the world; she is also the fountainhead of all fulfillment and beatitude. In the Saundaryalahari she is described thus, “For the ignorant, you are the ever-illuminated island-city of the sun that dispels their inner darkness; for the dull, you are the stream of nectar flowing from the flower-bunch of consciousness; you are the rosary of the cintamani gems (wish-fulfilling gems) for the poor; and for those drowned in the ocean of recurrent births, you are the tusk of the divine boar (Visnu incarnate as a boar), the enemy of the demon Mura.” (S.lahari.3). Thus, she dispels ignorance, the root cause of samsara, takes away inertness enlivening as the inner vital energy, enriches life putting an end to material and spiritual poverty and rescues those drowned in the ocean of samsara. She is the source of all happiness and glory. Fulfillment in both the material and the spiritual levels is the result of her unflinching grace. She is therefore described as the grace of Siva embodied for protecting the world (S.lahari.93).

The aesthetic merit of this work finds expression in the depiction of the exotic beauty of the divine mother. As the appellation “Tripura Sundari” implies, the form of the divine mother is the epitome of the boundless and formless beauty which she is herself; the beauty depicted within names and forms is only an approximation. So, going to depict the divine beauty in S.lahari, Sankara always undervalues the upamana. Metaphors, similes and hyperboles only lead to a certain point where imagination is transmuted into intuition. The anthropomorphic representation is due to the fact that the higher values such as love, compassion, wisdom, etc, have justification only in the human context. Since human feelings and emotions can be better understood and shared in the human environment, the Divine is conceived in the human form. Symbolizing the supreme beauty, bliss, and compassion in the form of a woman, the ancient sages have asserted this great truth that every woman, because of her capacity of being a mother, is linked inwardly with the ocean of infinite love and compassion. By contemplating on the unalloyed beauty of the gross form of the divine mother, the sadhaka can easily ascend the level of unbound consciousness, which is the ultimate goal of life.

The first half of S.lahari describes the intricacies of the Tantric paradigm through which the ultimate truth is depicted. The second half abounds in the description of the beauty of the gross form of the Goddess though the sense of transcendence is not lost. For this, the first half is termed, according to some commentators, as Anandalahri where as the second half is known as Saundaryalahari. Indeed, the second half forms a piece of great ornamental poem which is matchless in the entire Sanskrit literature.

Going through the work, one gets an unmistakable feeling that this is not simply a work of poetic imagination, but a vision which manifests as an esoteric poem. A vivid description of different limbs such as the face, the simanta, the eyebrows, the forehead, the eyes, etc, is given by the poet. Sometimes the poet goes on describing the beauty of the hidden parts of the divine form which seems as if describing the beauty of an uncovered beautiful woman, but viewing as such is very much misleading and dangerous. The divine beauty is beyond the reach of mind and words; the gross form is only a means to the realization of the unbound beauty and bliss which is the essential nature of the Divine. To truly understand and appreciate the divine beauty, one has to have a certain sense of transcendence, with a mind unstained by any impurity. The gross form, with the power of suggestion, also gives an unmistakable sense of formlessness and intangibility, which is so much common to all sublime mystic poems.

In the 7th verse, Sankara describes the gross form of the Goddess, “Having a tinkling waist chain, stooping a little with the breasts resembling the temple of young elephants, slender at the waist, with the face resembling autumnal fool-moon, holding a bow, arrows, noose and goad, may the Pride of Siva (thus embodied) manifest before us.” The benign face of the mother laughs at the beauty of the lotus. Encircled by the locks of curly hair it seems as if surrounded by a swarm of bees. When smiling, the teeth resemble the lotus filaments and the sweet fragrance of the lotus emanates from it. Sankara says that the eyes of the destroyer of the cupid (Siva) revel therein as bees. The suggestive meaning is this that even the conqueror of the cupid, the destroyer of the universe, Siva, cannot resist the attraction of this enchanting beauty. It is not only the source of attraction of the Lord; it is also the basis of all love and attraction found in the world.

The description of the simanta (the parting line of hairs on the head) gives a vivid picture of the sublime beauty, “May the simanta line bearing the mark of vermilion resembling the twilight ray of the rising sun imprisoned as if by the mighty enemies of darkness in the disguise of thick hairs and forming the path of the stream (parivaha-srotah) of your overflowing facial beauty, confer well-being on us.”(S.lahari.44) The poet likens the mark of vermilion to the crimson light of the rising sun at the dawn and the thick bunch of hairs on the head to the all-pervasive darkness before the sunrise. Dawn stands for the beginning of time and creation. It symbolizes love, beauty and delight. Darkness imagined in the bunch of hairs stands for the un-manifest condition of the world or avyakta. The poet says that the beauty in the face of the Goddess becomes so much that it could not be contained in the face for which it overflows out in the form of a stream giving rise to the simanta line. This verse is one of the finest examples of a rare poetic imagination and mystic vision. Saundaryalahari abounds in such verses which lift the mind to a great height of spiritual realization. Description of the gross form of the divine mother from the

crown to the toe as met with in this work, bears an unmistakable note of the transcendental beauty. It is the visualization of an esoteric experience of the highest order which can re-create this experience in the aspirant when pursued with devotion and sincerity.

The bow in the hand of the Goddess stands for manas; the five arrows made of flowers stand for the five tanmatras; the pasa for attachment and goad for aversion. Her crimson hue stands for unbound love and attraction. She herself is the unbound supreme Consciousness, the beginning, the end and the basis of the entire cosmic order, the realization of which is the final goal of life. S.lahari is a rare vision of the Divine in beauty. Every verse is a wave of the ocean of beauty which inundates the heart of the sadhaka as well as the entire world with delight and devotion.

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