

# The First Verse of Bhajagovindam

*The myth and fact about the grammarian's bugbear is:*

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*Bhajagovindam* has a unique place in the compositions of the great Sankaracharya. It is said that the venerable Acharya composed only 12 verses and the rest are by his various disciples. That is why the work is known as *Dwadasa Manjarika*, a bouquet of 12 verses.

It is significant that the commentator, Swayamprahasha Yati has commented only on these 12 verses. It is rightly said that the work is a manual of Advaita Vedanta; each verse has to be studied, contemplated and meditated upon. Each verse acts like a window opening out to the vision of the Advaitic truth.

There has been a persistent misinterpretation of the first verse of *Bhajagovindam* and this misinterpretation is buttressed by a story about the genesis of the poem and a verse interpolated after the 12th verse. It is regrettable that popular opinion also subscribes to this view and the followers of the Acharya have not cared to assess critically the materials available to them regarding the poem. The first verse runs as follows:

*Bhajagovindam, bhajagovindam Govindam bhaja moodhamate San-prapte sannihite kale  
na hi na hi rakshati dukrn karane.*

The first line of the verse presents no difficulty. It means: "Oh foolish mind, worship Govinda, worship Govinda, Govinda do thou worship." The second line is given the following meaning: "When the appointed time (for departure) comes, the repetition of grammatical rules will not indeed save you." *Dukrn karane* is taken to stand for all grammatical formulas and in fact 'for all secular pursuits.'

The story is told that the great Acharya saw an old scholar reciting grammatical rules. Taking pity on the scholar, he went up to him and advised him not to waste his time on grammar but to turn his mind to God in worship and adoration. And a verse is added at the end of the *Dwadasa Manjarika* to say, "Through the 12 verseblossoms all this entire teaching was imparted to the grammarian by the most wise Sri Sankara Bhagavatpada."

## **No Grammar, No Story**

It is noteworthy that in the commentary of Sri Swayamprakasha Yati, there is no reference to the grammarian or to the story. The verse at the end of the 12 verses says that the teaching was imparted to disciples (instead of to grammarian in the interpolated verse.) All this goes to show that the grammarian episode is suspect and has been foisted by some interested parties.

The great Acharya Sankara, like all other Indians, considered the Veda as the revealed word and said that it is through grammar that the Vedas are known - *vyakarnena hi podadi vibhagasah rgvedadayo jnayante*. Bhartruhari, the author of *Vakyapadiya* says that for liberation, grammar is the right royal road, *ajihma, raja paddhatih*.

If the Acharya had such contempt for grammar, he could not have written the *Sariraka Bhashya* which is acclaimed by all literary critics as an exquisite masterpiece of literature. Some people with narrow minds and prejudicial outlook have superimposed their ideas on the writings of the master, and it is a case of a master's reputation suffering from the prejudices of disciples.

## Preparation for Life

What then is the correct interpretation of the line, *samprapte sannihite kale na hi na hi rakshati dukrn karane?*

If a man wants to master the vast field of grammar, he does not start with the elementary *sutra, dukrnkarane* at the fag end of his life; he should have started the study of grammar much earlier in his life. Similarly, if a man wants to worship God, there is no use in starting it at the end of his life. He should have started worshipping God very much earlier. This is the real meaning.

The Acharya exhorts: "Oh one of foolish mind, worship Govinda here and now. Do not postpone it to the end of your life." The emphasis is on *samprapte sannihite kale* and not on *dukrn karane* which only illustrates the point. The theme of the poem is the worship of God, *Bhajagovindam* and not a tirade against grammar.

In fact, this is the real purport which is borne out by the statements of the old commentators. For instance, Sankarananda, the commentator explains *purvam api antakale ca*, 'formerly and at the time of departure as well.'

Why the name of God chosen for adoration in the hymn is Govinda, is discussed at length by scholars. There is a happy explanation. To Sri Sankara, his Guru was the God, Sri Govinda Bhagavatpada and so, the name Govinda became the appellation of God to him.

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