

Title: A Hermeneutic Approach to reconciling Sisupala's moksa in the Bhagavata Purana

Abstract

The Puranas, by and large, are dominated by the ideology of 'bhakti'. Even the Bha.P, which has many passages akin to advaita thought, is still a bhakti oriented compilation which devotes itself to describing bhakti as well as glorifying the life of Sri Krsna, described as Bhagavan himself (krsnastu bhagavan svayam I.3.28). Whether in the Gita or the Bha.P, it is the loving aspect of bhakti that is uniformly emphasized. When we look at the nine-fold definition of bhakti in the Bha.P or when we examine the supreme importance accorded to 'asraya' in the ten fold characteristics (dasalaksana), there is no indication of bhakti being an expression of hatred or dvesa which can also qualify as bhakti and which can then lead to mukti. But we come across other statements that allow "the mind to be fixed on Bhagavan either through constant enmity or through devotion or through fear or affection or love". (VII.1.30). While there is acknowledgement of bhakti here there is also a subtle shift in the discourse to fixing the mind on Bhagavan alone, irrespective of the accompanying emotion. The Bha.P even goes further and adds that "A mortal may not attain such absorption into Him by fixing his mind through devotion as through constant hostility" (VII. 25-26). And indeed we have such examples as Sisupala, Dantavakra and others who do just that and yet attain mukti.

This paper looks at the various hermeneutic devices employed in the Bha. P itself to justify mukti to persons like Sisupala like (1) trying to subsume it under mythology (III.16.12, 26), or again (2) trying to give a psychological explanation for it by using the example of the kita and pesaskrta for instance (VII.1.27; XI.9.23). These were rather weak attempts at finding some sort of an explanation for such events mentioned in the Bha.P. This must have bothered the Vaisnava Gosvamins like Rupa and Jiva of the Bengal school for whom the Bha.P is the pramana par excellence, and they had somehow to find other more convincing ways for accommodating such examples as Sisupala within the category of bhakti itself. They thus come up with new categories of bhakti within which they include what is known as 'raganuga-bhakti'. However they are

mindful of the fact that Sisupala's dvesa can in no way be equated with the loving bhakti that the Purana extols. So, even while finding some justification for the mukti/liberation of Sisupala in the raganuga bhakti and in the rasa theory of bhakti, they do not allow for the highest form of bhakti known as samipya to such as Susupala but assign a status lower than that known as sayujya . Sayujya in the eschatology of Bengal Vaisnavism is equivalent to attainment of oneness with the indeterminate Brahman through the practice of knowledge, and is a lower kind of mukti (I.5.12). Even the attainment of Paramatman through the practice of yoga is inferior to the attainment of Bhagavan which can only be achieved through suddha-bhakti (pure bhakti) (Bha.P XI.14.20). Thus the Vaisnava theologians vindicated what the Bha.P had to say regarding people like Sisupala even while not sacrificing the paramount importance accorded to 'loving-bhakti (priti) within the threefold concept of Krsna as Brahman, Paramatman and Bhagavan (I.2.11). But the most interesting and fascinating interpretation is that of the Advaita philosopher Madhusudana Sarasvati who redefines bhakti in his Bhakti-rasayana-sutras in such a way, as to reconcile it with his non-dual stance and also allow a kind of liberation for people like Sisupala .