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Sri Bhagavadacharya's Approach to Commenting on and Propagating of Vishishtadvaita-Vedanta within the XXth century's Ramanandi Tradition

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Abstract. Bhagavadacharya (1879—1977) was the central figure in the Renaissance of Ramanandi tradition in the 20th century. He dedicated his life to gaining independence for his school from Ramanuja Sampradaya, whose leaders regarded Ramanandis as “third-class” members of the movement mostly because of the lack of shastric scholarship and inter-caste commensalities among the latter. To achieve this goal, Bhagavadacharya wrote commentaries on most of the *Prasthāna-traya* (*the triple canon of Vedānta*) as well as many other works popularizing the Ramanandi version of Vishishtadvaita. He widely used his knowledge of philosophy in shastric debates with his opponents among whom were not only followers of Ramanuja but also a famous Advaitin guru and political activist Swami Karpatri whom he allegedly defeated in a dispute which concerned the rights of Harijans (*the so called untouchables*) initiated into Vaishnava tradition to enter temples and share communalities with the so-called “pure Hindus”. In my paper, I will present key philosophical and practical ideas of Bhagavadacharya based on my research conducted in the library of Bhagavadacharya Smarak Bhavan (Ayodhya) in August 2021. It will include basic details related to the acharya's background and activities as well as analysis of his teachings within the frames of his main scope of Vishishtadvaita's propagation among Hindus in general and Ramanandis in particular.

Keywords: Bhagavadacharya, Vishishtadvaita, Vedanta, Ramananda, Ramanuja, Ayodhya, Vaishnava

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Introduction

Swami Bhagavadacharya (1879—1977), formerly known as Bhagavadas, being the cornerstone of the contemporary Ramanandi movement, provided his Sampradaya not only with fundamental teachings based on Vishishtadvaita-Vedanta but also with political and social independence from its allegedly “mother sect” Sri Ramanuja Sampradaya. Since the year of his death (1977), in which he was also proclaimed the first Jagadguru Ramanandacharya of our times, his biography and legacy have been obscured and remain barely known to most Ramanandi pandits and sadhus, let alone secular researchers. His name is accompanied by a brief description of his role in the history of the traditional features in some works by Peter van der Veer who presents him as a leader who “forged” the Sampradaya's parampara (guru-disciple succession) to omit Ramanuja with moving it out of control imposed by South Indian Sri Vaishnavas [1. P. 101—106]. Daniela Bevilaqua calls him “a radical and a nationalist with a Gandhian imprint” [2. P. 227]. For the first time, I came across Bhagavadacharya's literary heritage in October 2010 in Ayodhya while waiting for the Verdict of the Allahabad High Court bench on a division of Ram Janmabhumi plot among Muslim and Hindu claimers. The role of caste conflicts in the disintegration of the Hindu community was being broadly discussed by me, Ramanandi sadhus, and lay devotees, and a dispute between Swami Bhagavadacharya and Swami Karpatri was mentioned by some of them. The plot of the argument was whether devotees apart from the twice-born had a right to study the Vedas or not and whether the ban to enter temples for Harijans (Dalits) was justified by Hindu scriptures or not. Karpatri was sticking to the strict casteist view while the Swami advocated for an equal agenda. I got to know that one of the important centers of the Ramaite pilgrimage in Ayodhya, Manni Parvat, used to be one of Bhagavadacharya's residences in the town and that some of his works can be found in local temples' libraries. Unfortunately, the search was fruitless and only several years later I provided myself with the Swami's autobiography in Hindi (Volume I) entitled *Svāmī Bhagavadāchārya* [3. P. 116]. In August 2021 during my work at Bhagavadacharya Smarak Bhavan, I found a few volumes by Bhagavadacharya in a very poor condition and hidden on shelves that have been locked for decades. The present paper results from the first approach to the works' analysis from both Philosophical and Anthropological perspectives. I will try to outline the peculiarities of the Swami's approach to Vishishtadvaita-Vedanta and place them in the setting of his social and religious activities directed at enhancing the power of Sri Ramananda Sampradaya in the Vaishnava world.

Bhagavadacharya's Teachings on Brahman, Jivas, and Prakriti

In the introduction to his *Divyastotrakalāpa* written intending to popularize his teachings among fellow Ramanandis, Bhagavadacharya states that the main goal of any Sampradaya's gurus, sadhus, and devotees is to propagate the cult of its Ishta-devata (chosen Deity). Ishta-devata of Sri Ramananda Sampradaya is "Sarveshwar Sri Sri Sita-Rama Ji", the Lord of all Sita-Ram as a binary Deity comprising male and female manifestations. The Swami says that "remembrance of the tradition's acharya, in our case Ramanandacharya, is equal to the remembrance of God himself"¹ [4. P. 1]. Thus he declares his adherence to Sri Sampradaya (leaving out the existence of the sect's Ramanujacharya's branch!) and to the philosophy of Vishishtadvaita-Vedanta taking into consideration that the Supreme Brahman is identified not as Vishnu-Narayana but as Rama. For Ramanandis it is common to speculate that Vishnu is nothing else but another name of Rama describing his attribute of being all-pervading, while Narayana is one of his three original manifestations along with Krishna and Narasimha. He also states that the version of Vedanta propagated by him was established by Ramanandacharya (14th century) in a work *Ānanda-Bhāṣya* ascribed to him (discussing the authenticity of this attribution is beyond the scope of the present paper, enough to mention that it is accepted both by Bhagavadacharya and most contemporary Ramanandi teachers).

Bhagavadacharya describes the nature of Reality following the traditional Vishishtadvaitin pattern. There are three tattvas: conscious beings, material elements deprived of consciousness, and the Supreme Ruler. He calls all of them (viz. chit, achit, and Ishwara) Brahman, however, not in the Advaitin sense but keeping in mind that the former two are qualified by the third, Ishwara or Rama, also known as Parabrahman. He also defines jivas, conscious beings, as enjoyers and material nature as the object of enjoyment, while the underlying principle permeating both is Rama. To end suffering, one has to comprehend these three tattvas. They are eternal and two of them (jivas and prakriti) constitute Ishwara's body, so the latter is also called shariri (the owner of sharira, the body). In his commentary to *Puruṣa Sūktam* Bhagavadacharya explains: "The whole universe is the Supreme Ruler's body having gods, humans, cattle, birds, and others as its parts. Virat-rupa (cosmic form) of Paramatman pervades throughout his virat-shakti (cosmic energy). There is no duality between the shariri and his sharira... This Deity is present in the universe as its soul or shariri... Taking into consideration the unity of a body and its owner it becomes clear that Purusha has thousand heads, eyes, and legs as he is the soul of all bodies in the universe" [5. P. 25—26]. As we can judge from this excerpt Bhagavadacharya has a trace of shakti-parinamavada (Brahman's manifestation through his energy) in his exposition of Vishishtadvaita: he essentially agrees with Ramanujacharya's concept of shariri-sharira but answers the question how exactly Antaryamin (an all-pervading aspect of Vishnu-Rama)

¹ Here and further original texts by Bhagavadacharya are translated from Hindi by the author of this article.

qualifies jivas and prakriti and is present in all of them from the perspective of his shakti's expansion. This view could have developed in the Swami's teachings due to his association with his guru Rammanoharprasad, the then Mahant of Badasthan (Dasharath Mahal) in Ayodhya, primarily Rasik² institution.

Bhagavadacharya strives to find scriptural proofs for the reality of living entities and the material world (deemed to be unreal by followers of Advaita-Vedanta). In the same commentary, he elaborates on this question: "Capabilities and qualities of the Supreme Ruler are not presented in a figurative sense nor they are speculations of mind. He protects the three worlds residing at his feet in reality. He is the defender of the really existent material universe. Describing him as all-pervading presupposes the existence of a real substance that he pervades. If our world were not real, it would have been impossible to pervade it... His true and real form is present in the endless and indescribable divine country (divya-pradesha) and it is also enthroned in hearts of great personalities whose minds are pure" [Ibid. P. 27].

The Swami adheres to the idea of *Pāñcarātra* that Brahman is manifested in five principal aspects: Para (equated to Rama in his transcendental youthful form by Ramanandis, at least those of Rasik persuasion), Vyuha (the four original forms of Ishwara responsible for the projection of the worlds and rethought as Rama-Vasudeva, Lakshmana-Sankarshana, Bharata-Pradyumna, and Shatrughna-Aniruddha), Vibhava (Ishwara's avatars), Antaryamin (the all-pervading Spirit) and Archa (temple idol). A peculiar idea appearing in his writings is that Antaryamin is only active in the hearts of devotees for whom he takes shape of their beloved Ishta-devata. In other beings, he is present in a dormant mode and can be considered impersonal. In this sense, it can be said that God exists for his devotees only and not for the rest of the living entities. Bhagavadacharya played with this idea in public discourses provoking the anger of his Orthodox vis-à-vis like Swami Karpatri who directly accused him of being atheist, to whom he sarcastically replied: "Anyone can call me nastik or anishwaravadi (atheist), but I gave a unique support to Bhagavan Rama" [3. P. 116]. Bhagavadacharya explains: "Vyapaka-svarupa (the all-pervading form) of the Supreme Ruler along with all of its upadhis (attributes) is visibly present in the universe. His immortal and destroying all sins for only manifests in the hearts of his devotees... Brahman pervading all animate and inanimate things is not a due object of worship. One should worship his eternal and devoid of upadhis form" [5. P. 28]. It should be noted that in this text the word upadhis implies material qualities and not eternal attributes of Brahman, which are always with him according to Vishishtadvaita-Vedanta. The term nirguna, preferred by Advaitins to describe Brahman as being beyond all qualities is understood by Sri Vaishnavas of both sects as being independent from gunas of prakriti.

² Rasiks are "romantic" or "emotional" devotees of Ram or Krishna. Being an integral part of Sri Ramananda Sampradaya, Rasiks have especially been active in Ayodhya, Mithila, and Galta. Their teaching has a strong Shaktist current proceeding from the idea of jivas being partial manifestations of Adi Shakti, Sita.

Bhagavadacharya uses this word in another context as well—he calls himself nirguna, lacking noble qualities, while Rama (or in the case quoted below Sita) is always saguna, possessing divine attributes: “Oh, Mother, I am deprived of any qualities (nirguna!), / You, instead, eternally possess all benign perfections. / This is why I am plunged in your lotus feet just like a bee in a lotus flower” [6. P. 2].

Bhagavadacharya’s approach to the creation/manifestation of the world, Bhagavadacharya holds the position of Parabrahman’s relative neutrality. In a brief commentary to *Bhagavadgītā*, he states that both Purusha and prakriti are beginningless. The universe with its qualities and duties is born from prakriti, there is nobody who would give birth to them. “In the Himalayas water turns into snow though there is nobody who performs this action of turning it into snow. The change happens by itself” [7. P. 36]. According to him, nowhere in the *Gītā* Krishna declares himself to be the creator. Gunas, qualities of the material nature, handle creation. He goes on to say, “if we consider Ishwara to be non-created, that is, there is nobody who created him, then why the Universe cannot be non-created? The second idea is that all created things in this universe have a creator which has a material form and is mortal. Thus, if we assume that the Sun, the Moon, and stars also have a creator, he would possess a material form and would be mortal as well. This is not what Ishwaravadis (theists) believe about Ishwara. None of them believes that the Lord is a material object and is mortal. So Ishwara is real, self-manifested, eternal, and intelligent; jivas (living entities) are also real, self-manifested, eternal, and intelligent. And if we say that the material nature is also real, self-manifested, and eternal, nobody can object to it. If instead, we assume the universe is created by the Lord, we will also have to admit that he is dependent as it is impossible to create the universe without jīvas and karmas. Thus, he will become subject to certain laws and his independence will end. Also, if we assume the Lord created the universe, we will have to accept that he is incapable and cruel as life in this universe is far from being perfect... Why did he create such a world in which one disaster is followed by another one? Being creator, he would be merciless. Some beings are enjoying and others are suffering — that would be an obvious drawback in Ishwara’s work... It is clear that in this universe there are neither moral laws nor the Ruler... In this universe, there is no place for the Lord...” [Ibid. P. 37].

To sum up Bhagavadacharya’s Vedantic ideas I would say that although his scope was to propagate Ramanandis’ vision of Vishishtadvaita-Vedanta at least among his fellow devotees, who often lacked philosophical knowledge at all, he coined a few ideas that differentiate his teachings from the mainstream scholarship of his sect. The most outstanding one is his teaching on creation, which seemingly contradicts the basic perception of Brahman being the material and instrumental cause of the universe. The Swami “sets Rama free” from personally creating/manifesting the world, leaving this role to the inherent karmas of living beings which start the process of manifestation to be worked out. Brahman remains the universal qualifier, providing both jivas and prakriti with the energy required

for this process through shakti-parinama. And this position “saves” Bhagavadacharya from going astray from Vedanta as it is: as a universal qualifier and underlying principle Ishwara is still the cause of all, even without being involved in the practical work of establishing and arranging the world.

Bhagavadacharya as Ramanandi Community Builder

Unlike Bhagavadacharya’s teachings and philosophical writings, his role as a Ramanandi community builder has already been presented in international scholarship, for instance, in the abovementioned works by Peter van der Veer and Daniela Bevilaqua. Both researchers used Swami’s autobiography in Hindi and the results of their interviews with the contemporary successor of his gaddi (guru’s throne) in Varanasi, Jagadguru Ramanandacharya Swami Ramnareshacharya. In the early 20th century in Ayodhya, there were a series of rows between acharyas of Sri Ramanuja Sampradaya and those of Sri Ramananda Sampradaya. The ground for these conflicts was because Ramanandis were considered to be devotees of inferior level by their South Indian counterparts due to the non-compliance of the latter with rules of ritual purity. It was common among Ramanandi sadhus to take meals together irrespectively of their caste origin and to take water from sadhus of the so-called lower castes. As a result, Ramanuja’s followers used to exploit Ramanandis as servants during religious processions, especially on occasions of Kumbha-Mela. The crisis became clear when some time during the second decade of the 20th century mahant Anantachari of Totadrimath visited Ayodhya and refused to prostrate in one of the main Ramanandi temples Kanak-Bhavan and to receive prasad, insulting Ramanandis as inferior to South Indian Vaishnavas. At the next Kumbha-Mela which took place in Ujjain in 1921 Bhagavadacharya (the then Bhagavadas) called acharyas from Sri Ramanuja Sampradaya to a shastrartha (scriptural dispute) during which he presented proofs that Sri Ramananda Sampradaya has always been a separate branch of Sri Vaishnava tradition and Ramanujacharya had never been a part of it. The argument became a turning point in the history of both traditions as at this Kumbha-Mela Ramanandis fell out with their South Indian counterparts and acknowledged their still Sri Vaishnava, but independent identity. Bhagavadacharya neutralized one of the constant claims of both followers of Ramanujacharya and secular scholars that Sri Ramananda Sampradaya have no their commentaries on Vedanta by the popularization of *Ānanda- Bhāṣya* mentioned in part II hereof and by writing his own bhashyas in Sanskrit from the perspective of Vishishtadvaita-Vedanta.

Analyzing Bhagavadacharya’s writings related to his efforts to enhance the Ramanandi community, I distinctly see that he was aware of his unorthodox approach to its inherent hierarchy and tried to find solid scriptural proofs for his reform. I could identify two sets of scriptural and logical evidence suggested by him: those he brought from Arya Samaj at a school of which he used to study as an orphan child and those of Vaishnava origin. He tried to use the first one to eliminate barriers for non-dvija (shudra and outcaste) sadhus and devotees to study the Vedas

and to have access to all aspects of the sect's life. According to him, it was crucial to build up a strong undivided community able to compete with pandits of Smarta persuasion and with followers of Ramanujacharya. For example, he writes: "Those people who think that Vedas are only for the twice-born should contemplate this mantra in which not only Brahmanas and members of the three varnas are greeted but many others, like charioteers, coppers [etc...], tribals (nishadas) and adi-shudras and if so, is there any sin for them to read the Vedas? If according to the mantra all these people are revered by brahmanas, then who can deprive them of the right to study the Vedas?" [8. P. 173—174]. He even condemns certain passages from dharmashastras considering them to be later interpolations: "[I allegedly stated that] dharmashastras are fairytales for common folks. In reality that's what I said: the statement of Gautama that a shudra's [who heard the Vedas] ears should be filled [with molten iron], tongue torn out or body destroyed has never been heard of in any stories. So I do not take this [statement from dharmashastras] for anything more serious than a fairytale for common folks. I didn't speak about all dharmashastras. I was discussing only the part of *Gautama-Dharmaśāstra* concerning filling ears and cutting tongues... There are many other ridiculous passages in Dharmashastras such as cooking beef for guests, eating meat offered to gods, drinking wine — in my opinion, all these ideas contradicting dharma were added to Dharmashastras and are erroneous..." [Ibid. P. 175—176].

The second set of evidence he uses to present Vaishnavas as a separate social category beyond the traditional varnashrama and thus not bound to caste limitations imposed by Smartas. The name of Ram and the process of prapatti, surrender to Vishnu or Rama, is a universal purifier. And according to Vaishnava scriptures, everyone is entitled to chant Rama-mantra, thus everyone can become ritually pure by joining the society of Vaishnavas. Bhagavadacharya says: "Disciple, it is stated in *Nāradapañcarātra*: brahmacharya, grihasthya, vanaprastha, sannyasa — these are the four ashrams. And Vaishnava-ashram differs from all of them, being the fifth. Oh disciple, being a member of one of the four ashrams a person is a slave of shastras... He lives under the orders of the Vedas, that is, whatever the Veda orders, he does... Vaishnava is a crest-jewel of the Vedas and he is the servant of the Lord alone and not of the shrutis..." [Ibid. P. 178].

The last point to be mentioned is Bhagavadacharya's perception of Gandhian thought. The Swami was a supporter of Mahatma Gandhi's efforts directed both at attaining independence from Great Britain and the democratization of Indian society. Retracing Gandhi's voyages, he visited South Africa where probably hoped to start an international Rama-bhakti movement but lacked resources, both moral and financial, for this enterprise. Bhagavadacharya's Sanskrit poem *Pārijātasaurabham* dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi (and, by the way, published in Mombasa for the first time!) reveals the lens through which he saw the latter's speeches and writings: the leader of Independence Movement was an explicit devotee of Rama who propagated chanting the name of this god at all political and social events and considered him to be the main ideal for Indian society. Such

cooperation between a Ramanandi leader and the “Father of the Nation” could stimulate the development and popularization of Sri Ramamanda Sampradaya. Which did not happen still presents Bhagavadacharya as a smart community manager with a prophetic vision. As an example, I will cite one verse from this poem ascribed to Gandhi by the Swami: “Devotee of Sri Ram is never devoid of ethics and two original vices — attachment and animosity do not abide in him. / He sees all people and the whole universe as the form of the Supreme Spirit” [9. P. 153].

Author’s Contribution

Although the name of Bhagavadacharya is not unknown to researchers of North-Indian Vaishnava communities and his role in the building of the contemporary Ramanandi community has already been outlined in other papers, his writings have never been duly studied and analyzed. Moreover, his books have mostly been forgotten and lost in libraries of Ramanandi temples in Ayodhya and Ahmedabad. A few efforts were taken by Indian enthusiasts to digitalize some of them, but still, they did not draw the deserved interest of researchers. The author of these papers considers his discovery of a collection of Bhagavadacharya’s books in Ayodhya to be a first step to the salvation of his legacy, which may lead to the translation of some of his writings into English and further publication in form of Anthology.

Some of the found books have never been read or quoted by researchers: *Śrī Bhagavadgītā-Tattva-Vimarśa*, *Pārijātasaurabham*, and *Divyastotrakalāpa* to be mentioned among them. Besides, most philosophical ideas of the Swami are introduced here in English for the first time. While working on this research and translating excerpts from books, I visited places in Ayodhya related to Bhagavadacharya’s activities and had a conversation with Mahant Ramdev Shastri from Hanuman Garhi, who was an eyewitness of his movement. Shastri Ji shed light on the Swami’s disputes with Karpatri who, according to him, acknowledged the former’s position of “being blessed by Sita herself”. Finally, the results of my initial research and understanding of Bhagavadacharya’s role in the community building of Ayodhya’s society were incorporated into a fiction story written by me in Hindi for Chattisgarh Mitra magazine and published under the title *Ayodhyā kā cchipā khajānā* (*Hidden Treasure of Ayodhya*) [10. P. 40—45].

Conclusion

Bhagavadacharya has undoubtedly opened a new page both in the history of Sri Ramananda Sampradaya and in the propagation of Vishishtadvaita Vedanta in contemporary India. Results of the former endeavor are obvious: Ramanandis is now considered an independent movement within the larger Vaishnava family of schools. Outcomes of the second one are not so apparent, but it doesn’t mean that they are non-existent. They hide in the whole texture of Vedantic thought spontaneously transmitted in various lineages of the Sampradaya. One of the main

achievements of Bhagavadacharya was to persuade both his rivals and fellow devotees that religious and philosophical treatises circulating among Ramanandis are authentic and pramanik, a valid source of sacred knowledge for Vaishnavas. He was a success to a certain degree and his vision formed a great deal of contemporary Ramaite gurus' mentality. Thus, his role in the Ramananda community can hardly be overestimated. Oblivion of Bhagavadacharya's name is a historical paradox which at the same time opens an opportunity for researchers to rediscover his legacy and present it in the light of both academic scholarship and the popularization of contemporary Indian philosophy.

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Подход Шри Бхагавадачарьи к комментированию и популяризации вишиштадвайта-веданты в рамках традиции рамананди XX века

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Аннотация. Бхагавадачарья (1879—1977) был центральной фигурой ренессанса традиции рамананди в XX веке. Он посвятил жизнь завоеванию независимости своей школы от Рамануджа-сампрадаи, считавших рамананди второстепенными последователями движения по причине отсутствия у них традиционного религиозного образования,

а также несоблюдения кастовых правил приёма пищи. Для достижения своей цели Бхагавадачарья написал комментарий на всю *Прастхана-траю* (тройной канон веданты, включая *Упанишады*, *Веданта-сутру* и *Бхагавадгиту*) и множество других произведений, популяризирующих вишиштадвайта-веданту как в рамках собственной школы, так и на уровне всего индуистского сообщества. Он активно использовал свои знания священных текстов в дебатах с оппонентами, среди которых были не только последователи Рамануджи, но и знаменитый адвайтин и политический активист Свами Карпатри, которого он, по убеждению его биографов, одолел в споре о правах хариджанов (“неприкасаемых”) получать посвящение в вишнуизм и принимать пищу вместе с так называемыми “чистыми” индусами. Другой его задачей было утверждение института джагадгуру Раманандачарьев по аналогии с джагадгуру Шанкарачарьями, что способствовало бы популяризации движения Рамананды в различных слоях индийского общества. В статье представлены ключевые философские и практические идеи Бхагавадачарьи. Описаны основные этапы жизни ачарьи, его взаимодействие с другими учителями и политическими деятелями (в частности, с Махатмой Ганди). Проанализированы важнейшие положения его учения на основе оригинальных текстов, переведённых авторов данной статьи с хинди на английский язык. Она основана на исследовании, проводившемся в библиотеке Бхагавадачарья-смарак-бхавана в Айодхье в августе 2021.

Ключевые слова: Бхагавадачарья, вишиштадвайта, веданта, Рамананда, Рамануджа, Айодхья, вишнуизм

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