Summary of Bhagavat Sandarbha

In the first volume of the Sat Sandarbha, namely, the Tattva Sandarbha, Jiva Gosvami first establishes the Vedic sound revelation (sabda) known as SrImad Bhagavatam as the means of valid knowing of Ultimate Reality. It is ideally suited to do so because it not only provides veridical conceptual knowledge about that Reality, but also discloses it directly when received in perfect correspondence with the heart of its author, Srila Vyasa, and its primary speaker, Sri Suka. So, after equipping the reader with an infallible epistemological viewing frame, Jiva Gosvami proceeds to examine the nature of Reality itself. In that volume he first ascertains the Absolute (tattva) to be nondual consciousness (advaya-jnana), which is the impartial direct experience of all truth-knowers (tattva-vit). Now in this volume, the Bhagavat Sandarbha, Jiva moves forward from this general understanding to elucidate the nature of that nondual Reality in explicit detail.

The one indivisible total Reality (akhanda-tattva) is referred to primarily by the names Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan. These three different names refer to the exact same Reality, but seen from different points of view. When that Reality is intuited as unqualified being, it is known as Brahman; when realized as the Immanent Self, it is known as Paramatma; and when directly apperceived as the trans-conventional Person inclusive of all opulence and potency, it is known as Bhagavan. Since Paramatma is subsumed within Bhagavan, Jiva focuses the discussion here on isolating the distinction between the perception of Reality as Brahman and the view of the same Reality as Bhagavan.

To accomplish this, Jiva Gosvami first introduces three vitally important terms: višeṣya, the substantive prior to its being qualified; višeṣana, its qualifiers; and višiṣṭa, the very same substantive when qualified. When the Absolute is perceived as devoid of intrinsic potency and thus bereft of name, form, qualities and action, it is known as Brahman, when realized as the Immanent Self, it is known as Paramatma; and when directly apperceived as the trans-conventional Person inclusive of all opulence and potency, it is known as Bhagavan. Since Paramatma is subsumed within Bhagavan, Jiva focuses the discussion here on isolating the distinction between the perception of Reality as Brahman and the view of the same Reality as Bhagavan.

The above insight of Jiva Gosvami is highly significant because it radically alters the conventional view of nondual Reality popularized by Sri Sankara. The view of Sankara Vedanta, which has become so prominent that it is mistakenly thought to represent the sole Vedantic view, argues in exactly the opposite way. Sankara’s position is that any qualification of the Absolute in terms of potency, name, form and so on introduces duality into the realm of the nondual. Hence, for him the qualified Absolute is an inferior manifestation. This conclusion he has reached by giving sole importance to the Upanisadic statements that stress oneness and non-distinction (abheda), completely disregarding those that advocate variety (bheda) within unity.

What Sankara has failed to realize—and along with him the vast majority of Vedantic scholars and New Age Spiritualists—is that the distinction between the Absolute’s essential being (svarupa) and its form (rupa) is purely figurative. What Jiva Gosvami is making clear here is that the only difference between the unqualified Absolute and the same Absolute when qualified is that the former amounts to an incomplete vision, when the substantive is seen without attributes;
whereas, the latter amounts to the complete vision, when that same substantive manifests in a transcendental form with attributes that demonstrate the varieties inherent in its essential nature. As an extension of this principle, J
deva points out that the Absolute reveals Himself in direct correspondence to the specific qualifications and internal disposition of the spiritual aspirant. So brahma-jñāna leads to the indistinct or incomplete vision of the Absolute devoid of attributes (i.e.,
Brahman), whereas bhakti leads to the distinct or complete vision of the Absolute inclusive of all potencies (i.e., Bhagavān).

From this essential starting point, Jiva Gosvāmī proceeds to outline the ontology of Bhagavān. He explains that the transcendental variety that inheres in Bhagavān is a manifestation of viśuddha-sattva, or unadulterated being, which is untinged by, and utterly beyond, the guṇas of primordial nature. This non-material sattva is His own self-revealing potency by which He, the self-luminous supreme existent, is directly realized. As such the characteristics of Bhagavān are inherent within His essential being and not imposed or acquired from elsewhere.

Bhagavān is the refuge of mutually conflicting potencies, such as knowledge and ignorance. He is the support of both intrinsic and extrinsic potencies that are inconceivable and naturally existent in Him. The word acintya, inconceivable or trans-rational, means that His energies cannot be thought of in terms of oneness with, or difference from, Him. To accomplish the otherwise impossible is the meaning of acintya.

The potencies of Bhagavān are broadly divided into three categories: intrinsic, extrinsic and intermediary. The intrinsic potency is that which belongs to, or is identical with, His essential being (svārūpa). It is conscious by nature (cit) and beyond the guṇas. The extrinsic potency, also known as māyā, is inert (acit) and external to His svārūpa, being constituted of the guṇas. It is activated by and functions under the control of Bhagavān’s own self-expansion as the immanent Self, Paramātma. The intermediary potency refers to the conscious living beings (the jīvas), who are compared to ray/particles (or wave/particles) of the self-luminous all-pervading Sun, i.e.,
Paramātma. Since the intermediary potency (the jīvas) and the extrinsic potency (māyā) are directly related to Paramātma alone and only indirectly to Bhagavān, they are elaborately described in the next volume of the series, the Paramātma-sandarbha. Consequently, the balance of the Bhagavat-sandarbha is dedicated to an exposition of the intrinsic potency, which belongs to Bhagavān proper.

Jiva Gosvāmī explains that the qualities of Bhagavān are intrinsic to His nature, meaning that they constitute His essential nature. As such, they are not of the guṇas and are eternal, which is to say that they are never diminished by time. The form of Bhagavān is part of His essential nature. Consequently, His body is Advaya-Brahman, the nondual Absolute. Since time is under His control, His body is not subject to the influence of time. He is called amāta-vāpyu, “One who has an immortal body.” His body is without beginning or end. It is all-pervading (vibhu), meaning that it can be neither measured nor bound. It is inconceivably both localized and all-pervasive. Bhagavān has neither inside nor outside, neither front nor back. He exists in front of the cosmos and behind it. He is both within and without. He is the cosmos and yet beyond it. He is unmanifest and beyond sense perception, yet appears as a human being. Countless universes pass through the pores of His body like atoms through a window.

Bhagavān is inconceivable in all respects. No one knows where, how, to what extent or when He expands His intrinsic potency and enacts His divine play within the cosmos. He is all-expansive (Bhūman), including unlimited forms in His own form. This implies that He has one
primary form that simultaneously contains unlimited forms within it. Although one, He is seen as many in accordance with the maturation of worship. The degree of completion in the manifestation of the Absolute is determined by the completeness of vision of the worshiper. Thus Bhagavân exceeds Brahman in completeness and inclusivity. His pre-eminence is evidenced by His ability to captivate the attention even of highly self-realized sages, ātmārāmas, who delight in the Self alone.

Bhagavân’s form is finer than the atom and immeasurable, meaning, in fact, that it is the basis of all measurement. His form is neither subtle nor gross. Though His form is imperceptible, it can be seen by His grace, or in other words, by His own wilful self-disclosure. He is not visible due to having a body constituted of elements that are perceptible, but due only to His own will. Invisibility belongs to His body.

Bhagavân’s name, form, actions and attributes are transcendental, because they spring from His essential nature and are thus diametrically opposed to their material counterparts. There exists no conceptualization of name, class and so on in the eternal, immutable, unborn Absolute. His names are distinct from ordinary sound, being the cause of the cosmos consisting of material elements, such as sound, which come into existence only later on.

Bhagavân’s senses are transcendental. He is independent (svarāt), or, “self-luminous by the potency inherent in His own essential being.” He is the upholder of everyone’s sensory power (akhila-kāraka-sakti-dharāḥ). His bodily limbs are non-material, because He is the entity in whom all self-actualized potentialities eternally inhere. His form is the Supreme Absolute, because it is eternal, all-pervading, the shelter of everything, distinct from all gross and subtle material objects, beyond sense perception, self-luminous and that in which all the statements of the Śrutis find reconciliation. His form meets the criteria of being the ultimate end of all that can ever be aspired for (parama-puruṣārtha), which is supreme bliss. His form is that supreme bliss.

Bhagavân’s abode, Vaikuṇṭha, is also part of His svarūpa. As such, it is not attained by dualistic action of any kind. It is transcendental to the cosmos and the place from which there is no fall. Being the shelter of the nirguna state, it is attained only by one who is altogether free from the guṇas of primordial nature. It is eternal and attained only by pure devotion, which is to say that it is beyond liberation. It is the condensed essence of being, consciousness and bliss (sat-cit-ānanda). His associates, being residents of that abode, are also part of His essential nature. Consequently, eternal existence in their company is the highest possible good.

In this way, Jīva Gosvāmī has elaborated, in breath-taking manner, the trans-conventional nondual nature of Bhagavân’s name, form, attributes, action, abode and associates, or in other words, the variegated display of His intrinsic potency. This takes us right back to our starting point of viśeṣya, viśeṣana and viśiṣṭa. Brahman is the unqualified substantive, the above-described expanse of potency is the qualifier, and Bhagavân is the very same substantive when qualified with such multi-dimensional self-luminous power. From this it is unmistakably evident that Bhagavân far surpasses Brahman in completion and, correspondingly, that devotion transcends brahma-jñāna. Summing up all of the above, Jīva Gosvāmī conclusively demonstrates that Brahman is not independent of Bhagavân and that Bhagavân is in fact the entity to be attained by brahma-jñāna. Brahman is but a fraction of Bhagavân, being no more than His attributeless magnificence. Hence the experience of Brahman is included in the experience of Bhagavân. Bhagavân is beyond Brahman, meaning that He is the substratum (pratiṣṭhā) of everything, including Brahman. The primary meaning of the word Brahman is Bhagavân. His immeasurable attributes are collectively
indicated by the word Brahman (etymologically, “the all-expansive” and “the causing-all-to-expand”).

If all this was not enough already to arrest the mind with all its conventional or otherworldly ideas about truth, meaning and transcendence, Jīva Gosvāmi slips in at the very end, almost as an afterthought, one last piece to complete the picture; namely, that of the Divine Feminine. The One Absolute exists both as energy (Śakti) and as energetic source (Śaktimān). Bhagavān, as above depicted, is Śaktimān. In its primary sense Śakti refers to the intrinsic potency in the form of Māhā-Lakṣmī. She is the embodiment of existence (sandhini), consciousness (samvit) and bliss (hlādini), which are progressively more complete expressions of one essential power. Lakṣmī is the Lord’s eternal consort. Being the personification of His intrinsic potency (svarūpa-śakti), She is non-different from His svarūpa.

From all this Jīva Gosvāmi extracts one last final conclusion, that Bhagavān can be known only through the Vedas, for how else is one to know such a Being, who is in truth His own attributes and simultaneously in possession of them? And beyond mere knowing, here implying “mental intuition”, which is still a mediated state of awareness, the unmediated direct disclosure of Bhagavān is through devotion alone. Being constituted entirely of Consciousness, He can never be the object of consciousness.

It must be noted once again in parting just how significant is the contribution of Jīva Gosvāmi. The novel insight he provides by which to impartially assess the Absolute in terms of its qualified and unqualified capacities amounts to no less than a quantum leap in perspective in the understanding of Vedāntic thought and nondual metaphysics. Once the inevitable implications of this insight dawn, the over-simplistic “All is One” outlook can no longer stand the test of relevance, and we are forced to re-evaluate Bhagavān and bhakti in the light of a new all-accommodating emergent awareness.

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