



The Image of God Presented in the Devotional Poems of Narsinh Mehta

Chintan Jayvant
Arya

Ph.D. English Literature, Bhuj-Kutch, Gujarat (India)

ABSTRACT

The medieval history of India is full of socio-political and religious upheavals that changed the straight-jacketed scenario of pre-medieval time. The spontaneous reformation that took place with the creations of Poet saints of the time brought drastic changes in the political, social and religious panorama. It mainly took its initiatives from the South Indian Movement propagated by the Alwār and Nayanār tradition of saints that advocated the Bhakti as a means to retain salvation. In Gujarāt, the systematic growth can be traced in the creations of Narsinh Mehta who is hailed as the Ādi Kavi for his earliest compositions in Gujarati. History of Gujarati Literature will always be indebted to Narsinh for his matchless creations. He presented the most complicated philosophies of Vedic Brāhminic religion in couple of lines with utmost ease and that is his mastery. He mostly propagated Premlakshanā Bhakti in his poems. In most of his poems he addressed God Krishna as his beloved and hence desperately urged for His benevolence. Unlike the earlier projection of God, he projected Krishna as a shepherd that dwelled among countryman in day to day life, taking care of their problems. Hence, he broke the conventional portrayal that was presented by the upper Sanskritized class and made Him a God of common man.

KEYWORDS : Transformed image of God, humane God, Premlakshanā Bhakti, Sanskritized class, Vedic religion, Brāhminic religion,

Introduction

Āadi Kavi Narsinh Mehta is the iconic figure in the history of Gujarati Literature. His devotional poems reveal the spirit of true devotee. His short lyrics are mostly woven around the day to day routine of middle and lower classes that made them memoriter and popular. People found the reflection of their own emotions in Narsinh's creations. That is one of the reasons of universal acceptance. Narsinh tried to give solution to prevalent issues that had made religion complicated for the common man of society. He mostly discussed issues i.e. form and the formless God, sagun- Nirgun, mode of worship, rigid caste bias and untouchability, Shāiva and Vāishnava conflict, Dwāit - Adwāit etc. Narsinh lived the life of a true saint and propagated the message through actions. In his poems one can find strong reliance on the will of God and the role of fate. We often find him trapped in worldly problems that actually he does not care about and leaving them to be resolved by the almighty. We find him as a true saint detached from worldly affairs.

Simplification of the Conventional mode of Worship

The foremost contribution of Narsinh is in the simplification of the mode of worship. His poetries are silent oppose against the excessive ceremonialism popularized by the earlier Sanskritized upper class. Unlike the earlier complicated tradition of worshipping, Narsinh insisted very simple path of devotion. Instead of external ceremonialism in the path of devotion, Narsinh propagated the internal purification and inner upliftment of an individual. He thus advocated complete aversion from the prevalent customs of offerings to the idol of God, temple going, and different rituals that were performed in the temples in front of the idol of God. He advocated the supreme and purest kind of guileless love for almighty that automatically abides God, and enables Him to take the form, even though He is formless. That form too resembles the image that is in the mind of the devotee. This theory made individual worship that was done with Puja that was done with musical offerings to God more personalized. It even liberated an individual from Puja and emphasized merely on the guileless love to almighty. With this, new chapter was added to the existing scenario.

Humane Image of God

To quote a line of Narsinh “ને ગોપાળ ગોવાળ માંહે, જમે કરમલો કુર દહીં” [Dr.Dholakia: 97] This was the image of God as shepherd that dwelled among countryman, lived with them doing all day to day routine. The image he presented is rather pastoral that narrates the simple country life of people. In his poems Narsinh sings that almighty is the master of endless treasures, yet just because of the bondage of love, he comes to play in the compound of shepherd

and eats the simple hard food with ardour. True devotion demands no excessive accessories for the worship of almighty. This point has been emphasized again and again in his creations. This affected a lot to the common man's way of life. This made people accept the existence of almighty as a living human being hence made them conscious for walking on the right path; at the same time detached them from worldly affairs and consoled them from worries as God is always there to help them. This personal God and personal worship affected a lot to the individual upliftment and omission of middle man between God and devotee. It also made them liberal in their stubborn attitude or caste bias, untouchability, status of women, monopoly of Sanskritized, sway of Sanskrit, etc.

Form and Formless God

In his poems Narsinh also generated his philosophical views on the formed God (સગુણ) and the formless God (નિર્ગુણ). Instead of getting involved in the conflict, Narsinh projected the midway to this complication. He said that God is bound by the true love of His devotee. Though He is the formless and supreme creator, He takes the form in order to satisfy the cravings of His devotee. He even said that the form that God takes very much rely on the image that is in the mind of His devotee. The mode of relation is not decided by the almighty; it is the devotee that presumes his relation to God in different frames of relations i.e. beloved, son, father, child, friend, brother and so on. Humans have tendency to frame each relation in to definite structure. It is interesting to note that at the same time Narsinh also praised the almighty as formless or the Universal in tone. Narsinh also discussed the issue of Dwāit form and Adwāit form of God. He said that there is only one absolute Brahma and that takes different forms, hence almighty is Adwāit and Dwāit at the same time. The biggest contribution of Narsinh was transformation of aristocratic image of God making it easily accessible to the lower strata, just with the help of simple hearted devotion. Narsinh Mehta repeatedly discussed this point in his works. The image of Narsinh's Krishna was that of a tribesman, who played with the shepherds and lived among them. Narsinh's Krishna was often found eating with the untouchables, dining the tasted of common shepherds, sometimes even stealing the morsels of butter from the pots of Gopies in Vrundāvan. This image of a common God brought drastic change in the common man's conception of God. For the first time people started thinking of God as their companion, as the one with them and one among them. Narsinh's point of argument insisted that God is within and therefore, there is no need to do the lengthy, expensive ceremonies to achieve His benevolence.

God as Beloved

Narsinh projected the image of God as beloved. In his poems he narrated the Love of Krishna and Gopies, connotatively suggesting the age old relation of soul and the God. Gopies are indicative of souls while Krishna is representative of absolute Brahma. Narsinh sang the songs of almighty as a lover, the one that is described as Purusha (पुरुष) in the Hindu scriptures. Narsinh longed for that Brahma in the form of a woman, who is desperate to meet her beloved. Dr. Shāstri considered this relation as the supreme and the purest kind of love. Hardly these compositions create any doubt while reading, in Narsinh's conversion of gender in expression. This presentation in his creations emphasized on the guileless love and purification of heart in the path of Bhakti, at the same time maintained the charm of common man with the help of decorum, emotional touch, etc. Notable consequence was in highlighting the image of women that was marginalized in the earlier scenario.

Conclusion

Narsinh conveyed the path of worship that was very simple and it required no ceremonialism or rituals. He was of the view that, the only right way to worship almighty is simple hearted devotion. The guileless heart surmounts all other procedures that had been said so far by the Sanskritized tradition. Narsinh condemned all ceremonies i.e. sacred baths, services, idol worships, charity, smearing of ash on body, growing locks, holy pilgrimage, painning the body, chanting on bids, holy marks on forehead and body, drinking holy water of Gangā, reading Vedas and other holy scriptures, chanting holy rāgās, Darsana, and following the Varna system, etc. He believed that they are worthless without the conversion of heart. Narsinh said that, these all are mere means of earning for the upper class of society. If the devotion is not guileless, these external procedures are just mechanical, and prove as wastage of time. Narsinh repeatedly talked about such guileless and simple hearted devotion that can compel almighty to take the form for His devotee. The beauty of Narsinh's poetic genius is in the simplicity of presentation of his philosophy and the simplified humane image of God unlike the one that was propagated by the upper Sanskritized class of society.

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