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PRISTINE USE OF LANGUAGE – SANSKRIT STOTRAS
V. V. B. Rama Rao, Ph.D.

Pristine Use of Language - Sanskrit Stotras

V. V. B. Rama Rao, Ph.D.

What in me is dark
Illumin(e), what is low raise and support;...
-- John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I

PRAISE, SUPPLICATION AND INVOCATION

Students of English Literature would readily identify these lines as forming a part of Milton's invocation to the Divine Muse or God at the beginning of his epic. That a work of sustained high seriousness should begin with a praise and supplication is not unique to English. Much, much earlier, this has been the tradition in Sanskrit literature, as it has been in Latin and Greek literatures, much later. Going by this invocation alone, Milton's epic can be viewed basically as a devotional or religious work.



PRAYER

Prayer is a universal category applicable to all climes and all regions and even the oldest of civilizations knew that there is a Supreme Being and the Being can be propitiated by prayer though there might have been several different other ways too.

Prayer comes from Faith and Devotion. Fortunately these are not related to the devotee's societal status, riches or any other accomplishments. But for this, Faith could not have sustained itself down the millennia. But for this the scriptures in any religion would not have stood the ravages of time. Sometimes one is struck with the devotion of the poorest of the poor. Religion and faith draw perhaps the unlettered ones more than those of the upper strata.



IN PRAISE OF SHIVA – AN OFFERING FROM ADI SANKARA

Before taking up for a rapid overview devotional compositions, permit me to introduce the topic with a unique composition, which brings out the eminence of superb intellectuality in Sanskrit devotional compositions. In fact this is the trait of the Supreme Being and shared by Man's realized soul. This composition is a sestet (composition of six stanzas) entitled *Nirvanashatkam*. First, a transliterated text and then a rough and ready rendering.

Nirvanashatkam

mano buddhyahankaara cittaani naaham
na ca shrotra jihvE na ca ghraaNa na nEtrE
na ca vyOma bhoomir na tEjo na vaayoo
cidaananda roopah shivOham shivOham

na ca praaNasamjnO na vai pancha vaayoo
na vaa saptadhaatoo na vaa pancakOshaa
na vaakpaaNipaadam na cOpastapaayoo

cidaananda roopah shivOham shivOham

na mE dvEsharaagau na mE naiva maatsareya bhaavaah
na dharmO na caarthO na kaamO na mOkshah
cidaananda roopah shivOham shivOham

na puNyam na paapam na saukhyam na duKham
na mantrO na teerthO na yajnaah
aham bhOjanam naiva bhOjyam na bhOktaa
cidaananda roopah shivOham shivOham

na mE mrtyuur nashankaa na mEjaati bhedah
pita naiva maata naiva na janmaa
na bandhur na mitram gururnaiva shishya
cidaananda roopah shivOham shivOham

aham nirvikalpO niraakaara roopO
vibhutvaacca sarvatra sarvEndriyaaNaam
na va bandhanam naiva muktir na bandhah
cidaananda roopah shivOham shivOham

Not I the mind-heart, intellect, ego-sense, or perception; no ears, speech., nose or ears have I, not I the elements space, earth, light or air, I am the form of Supreme Bliss perceived, ever the pristine, ever auspicious. I am Shiva.

Not I the vital life-force not I the five winds, not I the seven body materials, not I the five pouches, five organs; I am the form of Supreme Bliss perceived, ever the pristine, ever auspicious. I am Shiva.

(Five winds - *pancha vaayus* are *praana*, *apaana*, *vyaana*, *udaana*, *samaana* in the body. Five Pouches, (*koshas*) are *annamaya*, *praaNa maya*, *manOmaya*, *vijnaanamaya* and *anandamaya koshas*. Seven body materials are marrow, bone, fat, flesh, blood, inner skin and outer skin. Five organs are mouth, hands, legs, genitals and anus.)

No likes, desires or dislikes have I, no greed no miserliness, no arrogance no jealousy: no objectives of life (like those of the holy order, riches, desire or salvation), I am the form of Supreme Bliss perceived, ever the pristine, ever auspicious. I am Shiva.

(Four objectives of life are *dharma*, *artha*, *kaama* and *moksha*. Holy order, riches, desires and salvation)

No sin, no merit, no comfort no grief, no incantation, no pilgrimage, no fire ritual for me; no meal, no eater, no eatable for Me, I am the form of Supreme Bliss perceived, ever the pristine, ever auspicious. I am Shiva.

No fear of death, no distinction of species or caste, no father, no mother, no birth for Me, no relations, no friends, no preceptor or disciple for Me, I am the form of Supreme Bliss perceived, ever the pristine, ever auspicious. I am Shiva.

No thought, no form have I; free lord I am of all organs: no attachment no detachment for Me, no bondage and no liberation for Me, I am the form of Supreme Bliss perceived, ever the pristine, ever auspicious. I am Shiva.

THE NATURE OF SANSKRIT PRAISE SONGS – STOTRAS

This sestet, the unique composition of Adi Sankara, defies all labelling; this is not a prayer, not self-praise either. This is a thunderous declaration of the Supreme Being negating everything; the highest of abstract power and glory, which is in no way different from Supreme Bliss.

Stotras in Sanskrit are devotional compositions like hymns. Their main purpose is offering prayer to the deity. These are composed in a language that is euphonious, elevated and devout. They reflect deep sincerity and dedication to the godhead. Like hymns they offer worship by high praise. These compositions are by diverse hands in diverse prosodic systems. The Hindu pantheon is by far the most numerous for it is said there are as many as thirty million deities, both male and female, animate and inanimate.

The stotras contain elaborate adulatory descriptions of the deity, exhaustive in epithets, words of supplication, lists of the various attributes (*gunas*), descriptions of the physical forms (*roopa*) besides an extensive enumeration of the myriad appellations by which the deity has come to be known.

STOTRAS ARE OFFERED DAILY EVEN NOW BY MILLIONS

The greatness of these compositions lies in the fact that millions of people use these both in temples and their homesteads where usually a small room or even a simple corner is used to worship deities privately. *Poojagruh* and some images before which lamps are lit are a common sight in every devout home, small or big. Even the poor man's hut is no exception to this. It is believed that these stotras have a power and efficacy similar to mantra, or an incantation.

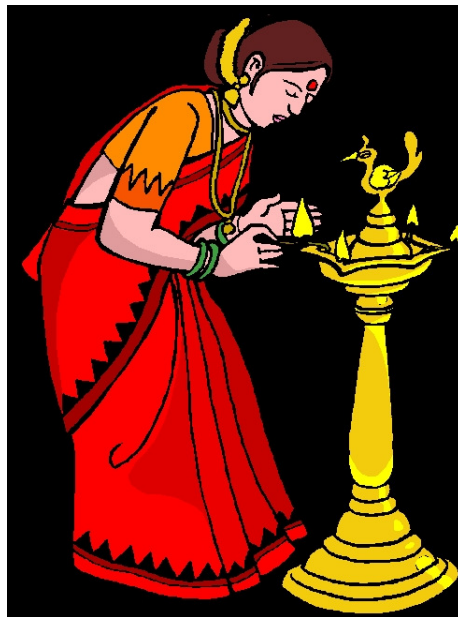
PANTHEISM IS AT THE ROOT OF ORIENTAL CULTURE AND BELIEF



Pantheism is at the root of oriental culture and belief. The mountain, the river, land and air, man, bird and beast, are all suffused with the divine. The Vedas, the earliest scriptures of divine origin and hence unwritten by man held the elements in veneration. The Vedic incantations were the beginning of worship in a systematic form. *Stotras* seem to have emerged much later. We give here the blanket name of stotra for several types of compositions by diverse hands in diverse prosodic schemes. These are both incantations and propitiatory verses to invoke the grace of the deity addressed to.



INCANTATIONS AND PROPITIATORY VERSES



A few are listed with brief examples.

Panchaka (unit of five) or *pancharatna* (five diamonds). Eg., *Ganesha Panchakam*

Ashtakam (unit of eight). Eg., *Lingashthakam*, *Mathuraashtakam*

Dwaadasha (unit of twelve) *Naama Stotram*. Eg *Sri Ganesha Stotram*,
Sri Saraswati Dwaadasha naama

Stotras: Elaborate hymns or compositions of high praise. Eg., *Sree Dakshinamurty Stotram*, *Lakshmi Nrisimha Stotram*

Sahasranaama (thousand appellation) *stotra*. Eg., *Sree Vishnusahasranaama stotra*, *Sree Lalitasahasranaama stotra*.

THE STRUCTURE OF PROPITIATORY VERSES

All these compositions have a similar, if not identical structure. There are five aspects to be noted:

1. Conceptualization
2. Compactness of the composition
3. Concretization of the Abstract for the benefit of the lay but devout
4. Crystallization to give the essence in a small capsule
5. Usually mentioning the fruit of the repetition/rendering or reading the stotra in terms of earthly benefits. This part is referred to as *Phalasahruti*.

MODES OF UTTERING PROPITIATORY VERSES



These stotras could be uttered within silently with a measure of concentration or loudly orchestrated. While the silent rendition is said to cleanse the mind, the latter mode has efficacy in cleansing the surroundings also. This is so because of the incantatory nature of the stotras. The sounds used in the utterance are supposed to have great healing effect like that of a benediction, since *naada*, the articulated sound is an aspect of the Supreme Being, the Divine. The meanings of these stotras relate the earthly and the divine. By way of an example we will look into *Sree Dakshinamoortya stotram*, choosing it for its harmony with *Nirvana Shatkam*,

*om viswam darpaNa drushyamaana nagareetulyam nijantargatam
pasyannatmani maayaya bahirivodbhutam yadha nidrayaa
yassaakshatkurute prabodhasamaye swatmana mevadwayam
tasmai sri gurumoortaye nama idam sri dakshinaamoortaye*

Salutations to you, the one who experiences the whole universe that appears as a reflection in a mirror within Himself; the one who appears to be covered by illusion as in sleep, and the one in the wakeful, professing mood, realizes in Himself the non-duality of the soul and the Supreme Being, Lord Dakshinaamoorty!

*beejasyantarivaankuro jagadidam pragnirviklapam punar
maaya kalpita desa kala kalanaa vaichityra chitreekrutam
maayaaveeva vijrumbhayatyapi mahaa yogeeva yaswechchyaa
tasmai sree gurumoortaye nama idam sridakshinaamoortaye*

Salutations to You, to the one who creates with his powers of creating illusion becoming a great seer and sage the wondrous things and the universe again as a little sprout from the seed, to such a one, Lord Dakshinaamoorty!

*yasyaiva sphuraNam sadaaatmakam asat kalpardhakam bhaasate
saakshaat tatwa maseeti veda vachasaa yo bodhayatyaashritaan
yas sakshatkaraNabhavenna punaraavrittim bhavaambhonidhau*

tasmai sri gurumoortaye nama idam sri dakshinaamoortaye

Salutations to You, the one the mere thought of whom makes the world and its affairs shine, the one in whom inheres apparently the Vedic maxim That Thou Art, the one with whose manifestation freedom from the cycle of birth and death is overcome, Lord Dakshinaamoorty!

*nanaa chchidra ghatodarastitha mahaa deepa prabhaa bhaaswaram
jnaanam yasyatu chakshuraadi karaNadwaara bahispandate
jaanameeti tameva bhaantamanubhaatyanta spurantham sadaa
tasmai sri gurumoortaye nama idam sri dakshinaamoortaye*

Salutations to You, the one seen as radiance from the lamp in a pot with many holes, the one whose knowledge flashes out through all the sense organs, the one who radiates the effulgence of Supreme Being to the inner mind, Lord Dakshinaamoorty!

*deha praaNa mapeendriyaanyapi chalaam budhhincha soonyam viduh
stree baalaandhajadopamasthwahamiti bhrantaabhrusam vaadinah
maaya sakti vilaasa kalpita mahaa vyaamoha samharine
tasmai sri gurumoortaye nama idam sri dakshinaamoortaye*

Salutations to You, the one who destroys the delusion under *maaya* as in women, children the stupid and the blind that 'I' is the body, life breath, senses, Lord Dakshinaamoorty!

*raahugrastha diwakarendu sadruso maaya samaachchdanaath
sanmaatrah karaNopa samhuraNa to yo bhut sushupth pumaan
pragaswaasamiti prabhodha samayeh yah pratyabhijnayate
tasmai sri gurumoortaye nama idam sri dakshinaamoortaye*

Salutations to You, the one who folds up all functions and enters the state of sleep and becomes a veil like *maaya*, as when the Sun or Moon eclipsed, and the one who waking up realizes it as illusion having gone to sleep, Lord Dakshinaamoorty!

*baalyadishaypi jagradaadishu tadha sarwa swawastswapi
vyavrutta swanu vartamaanamaham ityantha spurantham sadaa
swatmaanam prakateekarothi bhajataam yo mudrayaa bhadrayaa
tasmai sri gurumoortaye nama idam sri dakshinaamoortaye*

Salutations to You, the one who shows always to all devotees the *chinmudra* the reassuring gesture of being in everyone in all stages of childhood, youth and age, Lord Dakshinaamoorty!

*viswam pasyathi kaarya kaarana ta ya swaswami sambhanditah
sishyaacharya tadaa tadhaiva pitruputraadyatmanaa bhedatah
swapne jagrutivaa ya yesha purusho maaya pari bhraamitah
tasmai sri gurumoortaye nama idam sri dakshinaamoortaye*

Salutations to You, the one Divine Teacher who sees in himself the world of cause and effect and all diversity as the possessor-possession, father-son, teacher-taught, asleep-and fully awake, Lord Dakshinaamoorty!

*bhoorambhaasyanilo nilonalombara maharnaatho himamshuh puman
itya bhaati charaacharaatmakamidam yastyaiiva mooryashtakam
naanyatkinchinavidyate vimrusathaam yasmaat parasmaat vibho
tasmai sri gurumoortaye nama idam sri dakshinaamoortaye*

Salutations to You, the one whose eight-fold form appearing diversely as the elements, the sun, moon and jeeva, to the one beyond whom there exists nothing for anyone enquiring, Salutations to You Lord Dakshinaamoorty!

*sarwatma twamiti sphuteekrutamidam yasmaadmushmin stawe
tenaasya sravanntaat tadardha mananaat dhyanascha sankeertanaath
sarwaatmatwa mahaa vibhooti sahitam syadeeswaratwam swatah
siddheth tatpuranashthadha parinatham aishwaryamavyahatam*

That THAT THOU ART is described in the hymn. By listening to it, by reflecting and meditating on it, by repeatedly reciting it, one will attain the state of divinity and be endowed with the glory of AATMA along with the eight-fold powers of the Divine.

(This is the *phalashruti*, the fruit of listening etc. of the hymn. Usually all hymns and stotras end with lines called *phalashruti*.)

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