

## The Devotional Metaphysics of Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568):

### The Advaitic Brahman as the Beloved Friend

Compared to the rich literature that exists on the classical triumvirate of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva, as well as the ongoing modernised transformations of these Vedāntic streams, the body of scholarly works on the metaphysical and theological reformulations of the Vedāntic sources in the late medieval centuries remains relatively insignificant. Certain contemporary readings of the Vedāntic traditions present the interiorised apprehension of the transcendental self (*jñāna*) and the devotional love of the supremely personal Lord (*bhakti*) as sharply opposed. However, as we will see, various forms of Advaita Vedānta as well as devotional Vedānta developed during the medieval centuries diverse hermeneutic strategies of positioning and repositioning *jñāna* and *bhakti* in their own conceptual-soteriological systems. These Vedāntic systems do not place *jñāna* and *bhakti* in hermetically sealed compartments but interweave them from within their distinctive metaphysical structures. Our discussion of the Assamese poet-saint Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568) will highlight these broader themes in the reception histories of the Vedāntic materials. Śaṅkaradeva developed a distinctive pattern of devotional metaphysics rooted primarily in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, where the ultimate reality, which is indicated with highly characteristic Advaitic analogies, is also repeatedly described as the beloved friend who lovingly protects the devotees and who even becomes subservient to them. Perhaps not surprisingly, a major point of contention in the contemporary literature on Śaṅkaradeva, in Assamese, Bengali, and Hindi, relates to whether he should be classified as an Advaitin or as a follower of Rāmānuja's theological system.

Śaṅkaradeva remains a figure of great cultural and religious significance in Assam, for his contributions to the diverse fields of poetry, music, theatre, dance, monastic organization, and so on (Das 2006; Chaliha 1978; Goswami 1982). He produced the new literary forms of devotional songs (*Bargīta*) and one-act plays (*Aṅkiyā-nāṭa*) in the Brajāwālī, language, which is an interlayering of old Assamese and Maithili. His *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, a collection of hymns celebrating the glories of Kṛṣṇa, and his creative retellings of certain sections of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, form part of the scriptural foundations of Assamese Vaiṣṇavism, which is often encapsulated in the phrase *eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma*, the *dharma* of single refuge in the name alone which is recited through singing (Neog 1963:23). While Śaṅkaradeva refers to the divine reality with various names, such as Nārāyaṇa, Viṣṇu, and others, Kṛṣṇa (Mādhava, Keśava, Govinda) is for him the supreme divinity above all gods, and a leitmotif of his writings is that human beings should cease from their entanglements in worldly concerns and surrender themselves with loving devotion to Kṛṣṇa's feet. Śaṅkaradeva's Assamese retelling of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (henceforth *Bh*) exhorts the devotees of Kṛṣṇa not to worship other gods and goddesses, eat their *prasāda*, look at their images, or enter their temples, for otherwise pure devotion will be vitiated (*byabhicāra*) (*Bh* II, 1341: 381). At the same time, like many of his contemporaries such as Guru Nānak, Mīrābāī, Caitanya, and others, Śaṅkaradeva too was not a 'systematic theologian', and his religious thought has to be

gleaned from a broad range of writings, which in H. Dutta Barua's edition, published as *Śrī-Śaṅkara Bākyamṛta*, runs into about eleven hundred pages. Śaṅkaradeva can be situated on the broader horizons of medieval Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*, aspects of which he would have become intimately familiar with during his pilgrimages to places such as Purī, Dvārakā, and others (Granoff 2003). His philosophical and theological thought is expressed primarily through the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*; the *Bargītas*; the *Bhakti-pradīpa*, which is his narration of the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna; the *Bhakti-ratnākara*, which is his only composition in Sanskrit; and his transpositions into Assamese of several cantos of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. Since these texts can range from passionately devotional songs where the cowherd women (*gopīs*) express their intense loss, agony, and yearning, to Advaitically-inflected paraphrases of certain sections of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, to exquisitely lyrical descriptions of the wondrous sports of the infant Kṛṣṇa (*śiśu-līlā*), the question of whether, and to what extent, Śaṅkaradeva's thought is structured by Advaita remains a matter of intense scholarly debate.

### The Devotional Metaphysics of Śaṅkaradeva

We begin by examining some strands from Śaṅkaradeva's varied corpus, where Advaitic tropes and devotional imageries are sometimes mutually interfused. Consider the following verses from the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* which are based on the episode in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* VIII.12 where Śiva is deluded by the *māyā* of Viṣṇu. Śiva arrives at Viṣṇu's city, and praises Viṣṇu in these terms:

‘You are the supreme self (*paramātmā*) of the world, the one true Lord,  
There is nothing real that is distinct from you (*eka vastu nāhike tomāra byatireka*).  
You are the cause and effect, and all the moving and non-moving beings,  
Just as there is no difference between gold and its ornaments.  
You are the beasts, birds, gods and demons, trees and herbs,  
People, because of their ignorance (*ajñānata*), see these as different (*bhinna bhinna*).  
They are deluded by your *māyā* at all times,  
And do not see you as the self (*ātmā*)’. (KIR 520–522: 118. All translations are mine.)

We encounter here some of the standard themes of the classical Advaita of Śaṅkara: distinct from the supreme self there is no substantial reality (*vastu*), even though people attribute differences to it under the influence of ignorance. The theme of the transcendental self which appears as diversified into names and forms because of *māyā* is repeated in the following verses from the tenth chapter of Śaṅkaradeva's *Bhāgavata*:

‘The eternal, pure, and luminous self (*svapṛakāśa ātmā*) is one  
And it seems to be diversified through adjuncts (*upādhi*) of *māyā*.  
All forms (*ākṛti*) are productions of *māyā*  
Knowing this, keep your vision (*dṛṣṭi*) focussed only on Brahman.  
There is in essence only one form (*ākāra*) of earth, which we see as different pots.  
Thus the one non-dual self (*advaita ātmabuddha*)  
Appears as many through adjuncts of *māyā*.  
Reject all the names and forms (*nāmarūpa*) which are constituted of *māyā*  
And see me alone, the Lord who is the inner controller (*antaryāmī mai īśvaraka mātra dekhā*). (Bh X, 511–512: 803–804)

However, as we turn to some of Śaṅkaradeva’s *Bargītas*, we are transported at once from the realm of Advaita-resonant metaphysics to the agonised lamentations by the *gopīs* on their great loss, and their intense devotional yearning to see their beloved Kṛṣṇa again. The leitmotif of many of the *Bargītas* is the unbearable agony of the *gopīs* whose lives wither away in their excruciating separation (*biraha*) from Kṛṣṇa who is seemingly indifferent to their misery. The *Bargītas* are suffused with the sentiment of devotional servitude (*dāśya*), and Śaṅkaradeva often ends them, as in the following three instances, with the description of himself as the servant (*kiṅkara*) of Kṛṣṇa, the Lord.

[The *gopīs* sing:] ‘Without Mādhava, our consciousness slips away  
And life becomes unbearable.  
Without Keśava, the moon, sandal-paste and the soft Malaya breeze  
Rain poison on our bodies.  
Madana shoots, again and again, his five arrows of love  
The cuckoo coos, only to draw away our life.  
Lotus leaves and cool water have become our enemies  
Swarms of bees shower affliction on us.  
At such moments, the Lord, our dearest life, stays away in Madhupuri!  
Such is the *rasa* that Śaṅkara, the servant of Kṛṣṇa, sings’. (Bar 33.3: 271)

‘O sinful mind (*pāmaru mana*), be attached to the feet of Rāma.  
Life is transitory.

Take the name of Rāma-Mādhava, as your weapon against death ...  
From the prison of the world, there is no rescuer  
Other than devotion to him.  
I worship devoutly the great Lord Rāma,  
May he reside in my heart lotus,  
This servant of Kṛṣṇa sings: may the greatest treasure (*parama dhana*) of Rāma,  
Leave him not to death's grip'. (*Bar* 19: 266)

'The Lord Hari resides within my lotus-heart (*hṛdaya kamala*), and yet I do not meditate on his feet,  
I throw away nectar and consume poison.  
This great fool knows not devotion (*bhakti*) to Mādhava,  
Save (*tārahu*) your slave of slaves, thus entreats Śaṅkara'. (*Bar* 14: 264)

Again, throughout the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* one encounters refrains (*ghoṣā*) where the compassionate Lord Kṛṣṇa is entreated to rescue human beings sunk in the transmigratory world. Only by generating devotional love of the feet of Kṛṣṇa can they traverse the ocean of the world, and they should not tarry in returning to Kṛṣṇa, who is the supreme self as well as their dearest friend (*bandhu*) in this dreadful age of Kali.

'Friend! O Mādhava,  
Other than you I have no liberator (*tāraka*)  
Friend! O Mādhava'. (*KIR, ghoṣā* 141: 214)

'Merciful Gopala, protect me, Lord (*bāpa*).  
I die in the ocean of sin (*pāpa*).  
I did not have devotion (*bhakti*) to you even in this life, Lord.  
How can I, a sinner (*pātakī*), be delivered?' (*KIR, ghoṣā* 103: 177)

Given these Advaitic as well as devotional strands, which are interspersed throughout the texts, scholars have arrived at divergent conclusions about Śaṅkaradeva's Vedāntic affiliations to the classical masters. While H. Das (1945:50) and H.V.S. Murthy (1973) highlight certain parallels in the philosophical and religious teachings of Śaṅkaradeva and

Rāmānuja, B. Chetia (1999), A. Bhattacharya (2004: 173), and M. Haloi (2014) argue that Śaṅkaradeva’s philosophical presuppositions are Advaita. Several scholars note that even though Śaṅkaradeva frequently employs the theme of *māyā*, his understanding of *māyā* does not follow that of Śaṅkara in all respects (Mahanta 1987; Prasada 1976: 141). Most commentators have concluded that, in fact, aspects of the thought of both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja can be discerned in Śaṅkaradeva’s texts. G. Barua (1998: 210) argues in this vein that Śaṅkaradeva’s views cannot be classified, strictly speaking, either as Advaita or as Viśiṣṭādvaita. According to B.G. Barua (2001:3), while Śaṅkaradeva’s philosophical position can be characterised as *Advaita-bhagavad-vāda*, because it resembles Śaṅkara’s standpoint on *māyā* and Brahman in some respects, Śaṅkaradeva has developed an intensely devotional approach to Kṛṣṇa on the basis of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*.

This divergence of scholarly views stems from the dense interlayering of two strands of texts in Śaṅkaradeva’s compositions: one, couched in Advaitic vocabularies, which speaks of the world as rooted in Viṣṇu, and, another, elaborated through the imageries of devotion, which exhorts individuals to seek refuge (*śaraṇa*) at the feet of Viṣṇu and sing his glories. The co-presence of these layers, in some cases in the same verse, is a characteristic feature also of Śaṅkaradeva’s root-text, the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* itself, which, according to D.P. Sheridan (1986:16), has ‘non-dualism in the background and devotion to Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa in the foreground’. While its vision of the divine is rooted in non-dualism, it employs Sāṃkhya categories to outline the evolution of the world from the singular principle, such that devotion to Kṛṣṇa ‘provides a driving force for the vigor of this qualified non-dualism’. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* is a dense network of yogic practices, Sāṃkhya concepts, and devotional meditation, all of which are directed towards the ‘Advaitic theism’ of apprehending the Lord as the inner self. Even though the universe is grounded in a form of non-duality, it is not viewed as metaphysically unreal. Rather the universe and the finite self have a ‘degree of reality derived from Brahman with whom they are not different’ (1986: 41). While certain verses in the second, the third, and the eleventh cantos speak of meditative absorption into Brahman, the tenth canto develops the vocabulary of ecstatic love (*preman*) for the Lord and the torment of separation from the Lord. The text thus weaves together both these forms of devotion in a ‘vision of non-dualism with qualities (*saviśeṣādvaita*)’, where one form emphasises the relative nothingness of the devotee in face of the Lord and the other the devotional involvement of the Lord with his devotees (1986: 116–17).

### **The Lord as the Advaitic Brahman**

Śaṅkaradeva’s understanding of the divine reality is developed against the scriptural backdrop of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, with its distinctive overlaps of the themes of non-dualism and passionate devotion, and his texts too therefore interweave Advaitic turns of phrase with songs of loving devotion (Neog 1965: 243). Thus, several verses in the eleventh canto and the twelfth canto of his Assamese *Bhāgavata* employ Advaitic terminologies to speak of the world as produced out of the supreme self, and liberation (*mukuti*) in terms of dissolution (*līna*) into the supreme self, while the verses in the tenth canto portray mother Yaśodā as

overwhelmed with anxious love for her son Kṛṣṇa, and the *gopīs* as mortally grief-stricken and unable to live in the absence of their life-friend (*prāṇa-bāndhawa*), the beloved Lord. As we will see, even in verses which are infused with Advaitic terms, the supreme self is indicated not quite as the utterly ineffable *nirguṇa* Brahman, but as the transcendently perfect Lord Kṛṣṇa.

The strongest case for a reading of Śaṅkaradeva's corpus entirely, or primarily, through an Advaitic lens is based on extracts where the world seems to be regarded as metaphysically unreal, because it is grounded in the ultimate which is the only substantial reality. For instance, as Kṛṣṇa prepares to leave for his transcendental abode of Vaikuṅṭha, after having performed his earthly sport of relieving the world of its burden, he advises his dearest friend Uddhava in these terms:

‘Everything that you see and hear, everything that you consider in your mind

All this is constituted of *māyā*, and is like a dream (*svapna sama*).

Know certainly that the Lord Hari indwells the whole world

And cast out the errors (*bhrama*) of your intellect’. (*KIR* 1815: 224)

Uddhava bows to Kṛṣṇa, and speaks reverentially to him:

‘I know that you alone are true (*tumisi sacā*), and everything else is false (*michā*)

Yet attachment and illusion (*mohamāyā*) are difficult to overcome’. (*KIR* 1816: 224)

Because of *māyā* diversity is perceived, while there is essentially (*svarūpata*) no difference in the Lord who is one, universal, consciousness, and pure. Only the ignorant speak of him as dual (*dvaita*) (*KIR* 2101: 245). The *Veda-stuti* in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, based on *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* X.87, too strikes this note of the unreality of the *samsāric* world which is rooted in the Lord. The Vedas sing a hymn of praise to the compassionate Viṣṇu who is the Lord of the universe. Wherever his devotees dwell, meditating on his feet, that place becomes a site of pilgrimage (*tīrtha-sthāna*). By drinking the nectar of his glorious deeds (*kathā*), they overcome the distresses of the world. Then the Vedas state:

‘The unreal world has emerged out of you (*asanta jagatakhāna tomāto udbhava bhaila*)

And it appears always as real (*santa hena prakāśai sadāya*)’. (*KIR* 1669: 213)

Śaṅkaradeva's retellings of the tenth canto and the twelfth canto of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* often repeat the theme that the world, which is unreal (*michā*) and constituted of *māyā*, is produced, maintained, and destroyed in the Lord. A particularly dense succession of Advaitic themes occurs in a description of the four kinds of dissolutions: the *nitya*, the *naimittika*, the *prākṛta*, and the *ātyantika*. Śaṅkaradeva describes liberation (*mokṣa*) as the *ātyantika* dissolution, where the realised individual sees the world as constituted of Brahman, and there is nothing that is distinct (*pr̥thaka*) from Brahman. Whatever is regarded as different (*byatireka*) from Brahman is false (*michā*), like the perception of the serpent in the rope (*Bh XII*, 170–171: 928). Invoking a set of stock Advaita metaphors, Śaṅkaradeva writes that the one Brahman is present in different bodies, just as the same sky is seemingly contained in different pots. Just as the same sun appears to be many in different bodies of water, Brahman remains without any distinctions (*Bh XII*, 174: 928). Just as the clouds which are produced by the sun cover the sun from the eye which is itself a part of the sun, the ego (*ahaṁkāra*), though it is essentially Brahman, covers the *jīva* which is a part (*amśa*) of Brahman. Once the clouds disappear, the eye is able to see the sun, and with the removal of egoism the *jīva* sees Brahman (*Bh XII*, 176–177: 929). With the dissolution of egoism, *māyā* disappears, and the misconceptions of the intellect are removed. The individual experiences supreme bliss (*parama ānanda*) in the heart, and directly sees the fullness of the self. Since Brahman is perceived everywhere, even the body is not seen (*dehako nedekhe jīve*), and this is the dissolution of absolute oneness (*ātyantika laya*) (*Bh XII*, 177–179: 929).

At the same time, Advaitically-charged verses in Śaṅkaradeva are often succeeded by a devotional turn. The description of *ātyantika laya*, for instance, goes on to say that while the liberated individual sees Brahman as present everywhere (*brahmamaya*), and becomes liberated in life (*jīvante mukuta*), if they have not developed devotion to the Lord they can be caught by *māyā* again (*dunāi māyā āsi dharai*). Their knowledge (*jñāna*) of Brahman is lost, and they return to the world (*Bh XII*, 180: 929). A similar set of crisscrossing layers of Advaitic terminologies and devotional themes appears in a series of verses from the *Nimi-Navasiddha-saṁvāda*, which is based on the eleventh canto of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. Śaṅkaradeva begins by pointing out that at the time of deep sleep, when the senses, along with the ego, are dissolved in the *ātman*, the *ātman* remains as the witness. Although at this state the individual self (*jīva*) experiences the *ātman*, and not the external sense objects, it does not become liberated, because even here ignorance (*avidyā*) remains present and it consequently returns to the world. Shifting to a devotional register, Śaṅkaradeva notes that final liberation is possible only with the falling of the subtle body, and this dissolution is effected through delight (*rati*) in service to the feet of Keśava. Śaṅkaradeva concludes on a note with Advaitic resonances: through devotional service the mind is purified, one directly (*sākṣāte*) sees the Lord, becomes free from illusions (*moha*), and does not regard oneself as distinct (*bhinna*) from the Lord (*NNS* 196–201: 896).

The interplays between stock Advaita themes and exhortations to take the name of the Lord and seek refuge in the Lord recur throughout the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*. The following verses begin with a classic Advaitic notion and end on a distinctly devotional note.

‘We, all beings, are a part (*aṁśa*) of you.

We are kept in bondage by your *māyā*.

Give us instruction so that we may worship your feet (*bhajo tomāra śaraṇe*)

And destroy the bonds of *māyā* through listening and singing about you’. (*KIR* 1656: 211)

‘May my mind be immersed in your nondual form (*advaita rūpa*), which is supreme bliss.

I am the servant of servants (*dāsara dāsa*), O Lord Narahari,

Never leave us.

Just as crowns and ornaments are not different from gold, but are merely names and forms which are false (*michā mātra nāma rūpa*),

The ego and the five elements are not different from you, Lord, in the metaphysical view (*paramārtha bicārata*).

With your sideways glance, *māyā* springs to a dance, and crushes my head.

I seek refuge (*śaraṇa*) in you in great distress

Dispel *māyā*, Lord’. (*KIR* 1669–1670: 213)

‘All the world is illusory (*māyāmaya*) like a dream (*svapnamaya*), and death catches you by the hair.

Having been born in Bhārata, let there be no delay (*bilamba*), in uttering the name of Hari’. (*KIR* 627: 127–128)

‘I bow to the feet of Kṛṣṇa

The supreme devotees

Meditate on him in the heart

And easily cross the ocean of the world.

By resorting to *māyā* composed of three *guṇas*

He produces in himself (*ātmāta*) all beings

And himself produces and sustains them

Yet remaining untouched by any defects of the *guṇas*.

By hearing about your transcendental qualities and acts



People are purified in a way

That they cannot be through

The practice of knowledge, donations, austerities and Vedic study'. (*KIR* 1791–1793; 222)

The Lord himself is indicated with a dense intermixture of Advaitic and personalist vocabularies. The Lord (*īśvara*), who is *nirguṇa* and without birth, regulates *prakṛti*, and with the *guṇas* produces and maintains the world (*Bh* X, 2308: 751). The Lord is not apprehensible through the senses, mind or intellect. Just as sparks separated from a fire cannot illuminate the source, the mind and other senses, though originated from Brahman, cannot directly know Brahman due to the influence of *māyā*. Even the Vedas are not able to fully measure Brahman, and only indicate Brahman through the negative way (*niṣedhara śeṣa buli prakāre kahaya*) (*NNS* 181–183: 895). Thus Akrūra says to Kṛṣṇa: ‘How shall I know your *nirguṇa* form? All insentient objects fail to comprehend you’ (*Bh* X, 1829: 712). At some places, however, the Lord is described more positively as the seat of countless powers, and, in particular, the one who rules over *māyā* in the production of the world. The Lord Nārāyaṇa, with incomprehensible powers (*acintya śakati*), is the cause of all causes, the uncaused one (*akāraṇa*) who is not divisible into beginning, middle, and end (*Bh* X, 649: 616). The Lord is the beginningless *puruṣa*, who has produced, through *māyā*, the elements (*bhūtas*) and the various entities for the worldly enjoyment of the finite selves (*jīva*). Having produced endless beings through the instrumentality of *māyā*, he enters into them as their inner controller (*NNS* 108–109: 889). At one place, Śaṅkaradeva moves towards a standpoint of *bhedābheda* when he states that between the Lord and *māyā* there is neither difference nor non-difference (*nāhi bhinnābhinna*), and yet *māyā* is subordinate (*hīna*) to the Lord in the sense that at the time of cosmic dissolution it dissolves into him (*AP* 49–50: 398). The subtle point in these textual layers – although the world is not metaphysically other to the Lord, there is some measure of distinction between the world and the Lord – is repeated in the following verse from Śaṅkaradeva’s *Bhāgavata*:

‘Even (*yadyapi*) though the *jīva* is not different (*bhinna*) from you

Yet, Lord, we are subordinate (*adhīna*) to you’. (*Bh* X, 1695: 702)

The key question in Advaitic contexts, of course, relates to what measure, metaphorically speaking, of reality the world possesses. Śaṅkaradeva’s texts are, as we noted earlier, not systematic treatises in Vedāntic metaphysics, and our answer to this question depends on how we read his statement that the world is not different from the Lord in the ‘metaphysical consideration’ (*paramārtha bicārata*). On the one hand, certain verses seem to suggest that the world, as a product of *māyā*, is a metaphysical nullity. Śaṅkaradeva is inclined towards this standpoint in his translations of the third canto of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, titled *Anādi-pātana* (‘the beginning of the beginningless’). Before the production of the world, there is the Lord alone, with the fourteen worlds in him. He produces them with the wish: ‘Let all living beings come out from my body’ (*AP* 41–43; 397). The supreme *puruṣa*, the Lord, produces

*māyā* from himself (*puruṣara parā mahāmāyā bhaila bāja*) (AP 45: 398), and commands *māyā* to produce a *māyā* world (*kariyo māyā jagata prakāśa*) where he may sport (AP 51: 398). Even more clearly, all worldly possessions are said to be insubstantial (*abastu*), without the slightest amount of essence (*sāra*) in them (KIR 380: 107). The Lord alone is true (*satya*), and everything else is false (*michā*) (KIR 523: 118). The Lord is the eternal Brahman, and the production of the world is false (*michā jagata srajanā*). However, through his *māyā* it is imagined in him (Bh X, 488: 802). The world is born of Kṛṣṇa, and is properly understood not to be different from Kṛṣṇa (*īśvarata kari bhinna nuhi bicārata*), just as gold ornaments are understood to be mere names (*nāma mātra*) which are substantially gold (Bh II, 1300: 377).

On the other hand, at various places in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* and the *Bhāgavata*, Śaṅkaradeva also seems to suggest that the world is not an utter nothingness, but possesses some form of metaphysical independence, so that the true devotee seeks not dissolution into Kṛṣṇa but unswerving devotion to his feet. All finite selves (*jīvas*) are the servants (*kiṅkara*) of Kṛṣṇa, the inner controller who causes worldly transformations (Bh XI, 79: 819). Thus the king Bali prays to Kṛṣṇa to dispel the bonds of illusion (*moha pāśa*), and have mercy on him so that he remains, in birth after birth, the servant of the servant (*dāsa*) of Kṛṣṇa (KIR 1630: 209). Those who receive the dust of the feet of the Lord do not desire worldly sovereignty, the heavens, yogic powers, or even liberation (*mokṣato abhilāṣa nāhi*) (KIR 791–792: 140). The true devotees do not seek worldly enjoyments or liberation (*mukuti*), but ask only that they always have devotion (*bhakati*) to Kṛṣṇa’s feet. They seek the grace (*prasāda*) of Kṛṣṇa so that they always take Kṛṣṇa’s name and hear Kṛṣṇa’s name, Kṛṣṇa’s lotus-feet forever stays in their heart, and they constantly remain in the company of the saintly devotees (*sajjanara saṅga*) (KIR 523–524: 118). These distinctions between the devotee and the Lord are accentuated in the following verse which starts on an Advaitic note but concludes with an affirmation of loving servitude to the Lord:

‘You are alone are true (*satya*), everything is false (*michā*)

Thus the wise ones meditate in their hearts.

I do not ask for happiness, nor for liberation (*mukuti*),

I only ask that I have devotion (*bhakati*) for your feet’. (KIR 523: 118)

The distinction is affirmed more firmly in the following verses, where devotion to the feet of the Lord is viewed as a goal superior even to Advaitic dissolution:

‘My eyes are blinded and I have treated you with disrespect.

I am distinct (*bhinna*), yet I have regarded myself as the Lord (*mai bhinna īśvara mānilo āpunāka*).

Forgive the fault of an ignorant person (*ajñā*), O abode of the world (*jagata nibāsa*)

Be merciful to me so that I regard myself as your servant (*dāsa*)'. (*KIR* 749: 137)

‘I do not seek the liberation of dissolution (*līna*)

Where I cannot serve the lotus feet of the Lord’. (*KIR* 114: 84)

One of the clearest outlines of the distinction occurs in the *Bhakti-ratnākara* which states that while the eternal *īśvara* is embraced by blissful consciousness, the *jīva* is enveloped by *avidyā* and is full of afflictions, and herein lies the difference (*bheda*) between *īśvara* and the finite self. While the Lord is pure, immutable (*kuṭastha*), and the controller of the three *guṇas*, the finite self is impure, changeable, and dependent (*BR, Māhātmya* 22: 126). The supreme devotees do not seek any heavenly regions, worldly powers, or even liberation (*apunarbhava*), for they seek the Lord alone (*BR, Māhātmya* 16: 98). Just as fire burns away the impurities of gold, the service of the Lord alone (*tatsevayaiva*), and not penances, sacrifices, and others, purify the mind of devotees (*BR, Māhātmya* 10: 73). The Lord himself is easily pleased by the cultivation of the company of the holy devotees, and not by the eight-limbed yoga, the Sāṃkhya enquiry into reality, *dharma* such as non-violence, study of the Vedas, penances, donations, sacrifices, public works, vows, worship of gods, the utterance of sacred mantras, and so on (*BR, Māhātmya* 3: 15).

### **The Lord as the Beloved Friend**

If some of the texts we have considered alternate between Advaitic turns of phrase and devotional motifs, Śaṅkaradeva can also strike, much more unambiguously, the notes of devotional intimacy where some measure of duality between devotees and the Lord, their truest friend, is foregrounded. The metaphysical question of difference or non-difference between the world and the ultimate is only implicit in these textual layers; rather, the theme of a loving communion based on divine-human friendship is highlighted. Supremely dear (*paramapriya*) to the Lord are his devotee friends, and for the devotees their Lord is the great friend (*mahā suhrda*) (*Bh* VI, 398: 451). The Lord is the Self (*ātmā*), and the friend (*bandhu*), and with his name one can cross the ocean of the world (*KIR, ghoṣā* 86: 158). For the devotees, the Lord is their true friend (*bandhu*) who is concerned for them. Having found a protector in him, they have no fear (*KIR* 2116: 247). ‘Kṛṣṇa is my friend, having him with me I have no fear’, those who know this truth are alone the supremely wise (*mahājñānī*) (*Bh* I, 950: 346). Thus, the devotees who have accepted Kṛṣṇa alone as the Self (*ātmā*), and as the Lord (*īśvara*), will also regard him as the supreme friend (*parama bāndhawa*) (*NNS* 157: 892).

On the one hand, this is friendship not with a human being but with the supreme person Kṛṣṇa, who can grant liberation to his dearest friend (*mahā mitra*) Arjuna (BP 102: 59). Remembering occasions when he had engaged in friendly jest with Kṛṣṇa, not knowing him to be the supreme Lord, Arjuna's heart is filled with terror. He places his head on Kṛṣṇa's feet, and begins to weep, overwhelmed with love (*premabhāve*) (BP 279–281: 72–73). The Lord tells Arjuna that sacrifices, knowledge, and donations are merely *guṇas* whereas devotion to him is *nirguṇa*. Knowing this truth, his friend (*suhṛda*) Arjuna should always meditate on him (BP 300: 74). By chanting the names of the Lord, one attains the fruits of austerities, repetitions of the names, sacrifices, donations, pilgrimages, and so on. The name is wealth, one's dearest friend and one's saviour (*gati dātā*) (Bh X, 563–564: 609). Śāṅkaradeva repeatedly exhorts devotees to remember that life is transient like a flash of lightning, and to meditate on Kṛṣṇa, the friend of their life (*prāṇabandhu*) (Bh I, 865: 340). The archetypal devotees, the *gopīs*, say to Kṛṣṇa, who removes the suffering of the afflicted (*dīna dukhahārī*), that they have abandoned home and family, regarding them as insignificant like straw, and come to him to serve him (Bh X, 1260: 665). Just as without the sun there is no light in the daytime, and without the moon the night is not illuminated, without Kṛṣṇa there are no festivities for the people of Braja, who burn with the fire of separation (*biraha agani*) (Bh X, 2139: 737). The transcendental supremacy of the Kṛṣṇa whom people consider to be a mere human being is highlighted in some of mother Yaśodā's exasperated remarks as she puts up with his childhood antics. Śāṅkaradeva contemplates the marvel that the Lord whom even the *yogīs* do not see with a purified mind is furiously chased by his mother Yaśodā (Bh X, 287: 587). He highlights Yaśodā's maternal intimacy to the sovereign Lord of the universe by recording her lament when she fears that Kṛṣṇa has been killed by the serpent Kāliya: 'Who will play on the flute in the evening? Who will call out to me 'Mother!''? (Bh X, 617: 613).

On the other hand, the Lord himself becomes subservient (*baśya*) to his devotees who have abandoned the world for his sake (KIR 935: 151). He became agitated (*bihbala*) when he saw the devotional love (*saprema bhakati*) of the *gopīs*, and his mind melted with love. The Lord, who cannot bear the distress of his devotees, manifested himself amongst them in his supremely adorable form (*parama mohana mūrti*) (Bh X, 1410–1411: 678). Kṛṣṇa tells Uddhava that he has no friend (*sakhi*) equal to a devotee, and that he runs after his supreme devotees (Bh XI, 156: 825). He tells Arjuna that he follows those who remember him lovingly, crying out 'Oh Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa!' He follows with reverence those who have bound him with the cord of his name. He is sold to those whose bodies are thrilled (*romāñcita*), eyes brim with tears, and hearts melt in the bliss of devotion (BP 235–236: 70). He holds Arjuna's hands, and tells Arjuna that he has become subservient (*baśya*) to him because of his devotion, and reveals the deep secret (*rahasya*) that Arjuna is his dearest (*priyatama*) and supreme friend (*bāndhawa parama*). Arjuna should abandon all *dharmic* injunctions, and with firm trust bring to mind (*sudṛḍha biśvāse smarā*) the name of Kṛṣṇa (BP 282–284: 73). For Kṛṣṇa, his devotees are his very heart, and he is himself the breath of his devotees. Just as his devotees do not think of anything other than Kṛṣṇa (*mai bine bhakate niścinte āna*), he too pays his whole attention to his devotees (KIR 125–126: 85). The 'divine subservience' is also highlighted in the narrative of the meeting of the poor Dāmodara, a schoolmate of Kṛṣṇa, with his old friend, Kṛṣṇa. As Dāmodara arrives at Dvārakā, Kṛṣṇa embraces him and sheds

tears of joy. He washes the feet of Dāmodara, rubs fragrant sandalwood on his body, and worships him (*pujilā*) with lights and incense (*KIR* 1586: 203).

The emphases on turning to Kṛṣṇa in this human birth, which is rarely attained, throwing oneself at Kṛṣṇa's feet, and cultivating devotion to Kṛṣṇa are brought together in the following verses from the *Nama-ghoṣā* of Śaṅkaradeva's principal disciple, Mādhavadeva (1489–1596):

‘Again and again, having received a human body, I have abandoned you  
O friend of the poor (*dīnabandhu*), Dāmodara,  
O Hari, I have moved through innumerable worlds  
O friend of the poor, many a times I have traversed birth and death.  
This time, O Lord of mercy, I have become your servant (*kiṅkara*)  
O friend of the poor, Dāmodara,  
O Hari, may my delight (*rati*) in you remain steady.  
O my life-friend (*prāṇa-bandhu*), I bow to your feet’. (*NG* 759: 763–64)

Mādhavadeva alternates between expressions of self-censure, where he reproaches himself for having strayed away from Kṛṣṇa, and appeals to Kṛṣṇa to rescue him, reminding Kṛṣṇa that he is known to the whole world as the Lord of mercy (*dāyāra thākura*) (Hazarika 2007). Holding on to Kṛṣṇa's feet, he beseeches Kṛṣṇa not to abandon him who is without a protector (*anātha*) (*NG* 799: 771). Pointing out to Kṛṣṇa that he shows his favour (*anugraha*) even to ignorant birds and beasts, Mādhavadeva protests that abandoning his devotees is not becoming of Kṛṣṇa (*ucita nayā*) (*NG* 803: 771–72).

‘By not acknowledging you to be the supreme Lord, O Hari  
We have, in great pride (*ahamkāra*), rebelled against you (*droha ācarilo*).  
I seek refuge at your feet, O Hari  
Forgive the offence (*doṣa*) of this rebel, O Lord’. (*NG* 811: 773)

‘O merciful (*dāyāsīla*) Lord, Dāmodara  
This is my plea at your feet:  
If you take me as your servant (*dāśa*), O Lord  
Tell me, O merciful, what loss is it to you (*tomāra ki haya hāni*)?

O Yadupati, you are supremely merciful

For what offence (*aparādha*) of mine do you abandon me, your servant?

Even the scriptures declare, O Hari

That those who take your name even unconsciously (*ajñānato*)

You consider to be yours'. (NG 801–802: 771)

Śaṅkaradeva often interweaves this theme of utter servitude to the adorable feet of the Lord into stock Advaitic terminologies. The supreme devotees are said to be immersed in the *rasa* of Hari, and they forget all worldly associations. They see the world as false (*michā*), and seeking only to serve the feet of Kṛṣṇa, they have no desire even for liberation (*mukuti*) (NNS 167–169: 894). The vision of the supremely beautiful Kṛṣṇa dispels all affliction, and gives more happiness than even that of liberation (*mokṣa*) (*Bh* I, 1050: 355). The soteriological superiority of devotional worship to an Advaitically-tinged *mukti* is highlighted in one of the most widely sung verses in the religious history of Assamese Vaiṣṇavism, the famous opening lines of the *Nāma-ghoṣā*:

‘I bow to the devotee who is indifferent (*niṣpr̥ha*) even to liberation (*muktitu*).

I pray for the devotion (*bhakti*) which is full of *rasa*.

I worship Lord Yadupati, who is the crowning jewel, and who is subservient (*baśya*) to his own devotees.

His name ‘Rāma- Kṛṣṇa’ is the boat with which all sinners (*pāpī*) cross the river of the world, and attain the supreme goal (*parampada*).

I always (*sadā*) worship him, the Lord Kṛṣṇa, the supremely blissful (*sadānanda*) and the eternal (*sanātana*), in my heart’. (NG 1–2; 595–96)

### **The Lord as the Goal of Devotional Knowledge**

The dense intermix between Advaita and *bhakti* motifs that we have noted in Śaṅkaradeva’s theology appears also in his understanding of the individual’s return to the ultimate. The spiritual pathway is an interfusion of *jñāna* and *bhakti* into the liberative power of devotional knowledge, where *jñāna* of the Lord and *bhakti* directed to the Lord are closely interrelated spirals. The fundamental error lies in the self’s misconception of the body, constituted of *māyā*, as the true self (*ātmā buli māne māyāmaya śarīraka*). Subject to deep illusion (*mahā moha*), it is devoid of knowledge (*jñāna śūnya*), and engages in various virtuous and vicious deeds (NNS 110: 889). The illusion (*māyā*) that envelops the individual, so that one forgets to turn to the Lord, is itself the power of the Lord. The *māyā* of the Lord cannot be comprehended (*tarkita*), and it deludes the finite self (*jīva*), which is a part (*aṁśa*) of the Lord

(*Bh XII*, 276: 936). Śaṅkaradeva often emphasises that it is through devotion to the Lord that one is able to overcome this delusory power. All *jīvas* are asleep in the *māyā* of Viṣṇu, and only those who wake up through the grace (*prasāda*) of Viṣṇu are able to escape the cycles of rebirths (*BR*, *Māhātmya* 36: 181). Those who practise *jñānayoga* which is not suffused with *bhakti* do not receive any fruits, but undergo suffering (*BP* 18: 52). Knowledge itself is said to be contained within devotion (*bhakatira māje*), so that by developing devotion there automatically arises knowledge (*āpuni upajai jñāna*) (*Bh XI*, 199: 828). Devotion alone, independent of *jñāna* and *karma*, liberates, whereas without the assistance of devotion, *jñāna* and *karma* cannot achieve anything (*Bh VI*, 78: 426). Therefore, the essential truth of Vedānta is that *jñāna* and *karma* which are devoid of devotion are fruitless (*byartha*) (*Bh I*, 837: 338).

Occasionally, however, Śaṅkaradeva seems to dispense altogether with *jñāna* on the spiritual path. The essential truth of the four Vedas is that there is no *dharma* higher than devotion (*KIR* 1008: 157). Devotion is superior to *jñāna* and *karma*, and of the various forms of devotion, listening to (*śravaṇa*) and singing about (*kīrtana*) the Lord are the highest (*Bh XII*, 527: 956). Through *śravaṇa* and *kīrtana* of the manifold sports of Kṛṣṇa, one goes to Vaikuṅṭha, and receives all *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa* (*KIR* 1675: 214). The Lord is not attained by renunciation or by the practice of knowledge (*jñāna abhyāse*), but becomes subservient to his devotees alone (*KIR* 138: 86). The devotees who abandon the path of *jñāna* and serve the Lord, in body, speech, and mind, are able to win over even the Lord who is unvanquished (*ajīta*) in the three worlds (*KIR* 745–746: 137). Thus, if the mind remains bound to the feet of the Lord, through his grace (*krpā*) everything is achieved, even without the practice of knowledge (*KIR* 1666:212). Even by practising *jñānayoga* for crores of births, people are not capable of knowing the Lord, who can be attained only through devotion (*BP* 22–23: 52). The supreme means (*parama upāya*) to overcome the agonies of *saṁsāra* is always to worship the Lord, knowing that he resides in the hearts of all beings as the supremely beautiful (*parama sundara*) inner controller (*BP* 146–147: 63).

At various places in his *Bhāgavata*, Śaṅkaradeva describes the supreme devotees of Kṛṣṇa as enraptured by devotional love, and oblivious to the world. As one remembers (*sumarante*) the Lord, one's beloved, one develops supreme love (*parama anurāga*). All the limbs become thrilled, the heart melts, and tears stream from the eyes. Full of love, the devotee utters 'Oh, Kṛṣṇa, my soul!', and rolls on the ground. Some are filled with the *rasa* of love, and forgetting themselves, they embrace their neck, uttering 'my soul, Kṛṣṇa'. Some cry out in grief, considering that they have spent a long time without knowing Mādhava. Some stand up in great joy, and cry 'Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa!' Some fall at his feet, and entreat him, as their friend, to have mercy on them and not to leave them. Those who are seized by the shark of Kṛṣṇa, as it were, do not think of the world. Their thoughts are always turned to Kṛṣṇa, and they are greatly intoxicated (*matta*) in the *rasa* of the Lord. They see Kṛṣṇa everywhere, and they regard the sky, earth, water, wind, and trees as not distinct (*bhinna*), but as his body (*śarīra*) (*NNS* 63–67: 886). Among such devotees are the *gopīs* who seek to see the feet of the Lord so that they may live again. They waste away by not seeing his lotus-eyes, and yearn for his nectarine words which will revive them (*KIR* 894; 897: 148).

Śaṅkaradeva's emphasis on devotional love as the pathway to the ultimate is elaborated against the cosmology of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, according to which in this age of Kali one can attain the Lord by dwelling amidst the holy devotees, and taking the names of the Lord and singing the glories of the Lord. Firstly, the liberation that could be attained in the Satya age through meditation, in the Treta age through sacrifices, and in the Dvāpara through worship, can be attained in the Kali age through singing (*KIR* 73–75: 81). The people who move away from the Lord and remain immersed in sensory enjoyments have abandoned a gem for mere glass (*BP* 64: 56). Therefore, the Lord tells Arjuna that having attained a birth in the land of Bhārata he should not fritter away this life (*BP* 116: 60). Secondly, the name of Kṛṣṇa is the *dharma* for the age of Kali, and by listening to it one's sins (*pāpa*) are dissolved (*BP* 41: 54). The greatest of sins, such as stealing, regicide, parricide, and so on are dissolved by the power of the name of Kṛṣṇa (*BP* 186–189: 65). Just as a thunderbolt reduces a mountain to dust, the name destroys all sins. The Lord says that he is himself not able to ascertain its true strength (*BP* 242–243: 70). Such is the spiritual power of the name that the Lord himself reverentially worships as his guru the devotee who knows the greatness (*mahata*) of the name of Kṛṣṇa. By taking the name of this devotee, most beloved (*priyatama*) of Kṛṣṇa, the whole world can be liberated, and this devotee is superior to all the pilgrimages and the gods (*BP* 244–245: 70). Even they who take the name of the Lord carelessly (*pramādata*) overcome the sorrows of the world, just as medicine which is consumed without knowledge of its true nature cures diseases (*KIR* 187: 90). Thirdly, the association with the holy devotees is superior to pilgrimages, worship of images of gods, and so on (*BR, Māhātmya* 3: 14). The Lord is attained not through yoga, sacrifices, donations, mantras, thousands of crores of pilgrimages, observances, and supreme renunciation, but in the company of the devotees (*bhakatara saṅga*). The association with holy sages (*sādhu*) is superior even to liberation (*mokṣa*), and gives incomparably greater happiness than heaven (*Bh* XI, 174–176: 826). Therefore, after one has obtained the company of the supreme devotees of the Lord, one regards *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa* as equal to a straw (*KIR* 1657: 211). The greatness (*mahimā*) of the saintly Vaiṣṇavas is such that even animals and birds, not to mention human beings, are liberated in their company. These holy individuals are the friends (*suhṛda*) of the whole world (*Bh* II, 1399: 386).

### **Between Knowledge and Devotion in Medieval Vedānta**

After moving through the textual territories of Śaṅkaradeva, we return to the theme indicated at the beginning of the essay: the intertwinings between *jñāna* and *bhakti* in medieval Vedāntic writings. To begin with, Tulsī Dāsa, Śaṅkaradeva's contemporary, often alternates between the motifs of *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* in his *Rāmacaritamānasa*, his retelling of the *Rāmāyāna*. F. Whaling (1980: 323) argues that Tulsī Dāsa holds on to the depictions of Rāma's human nature in the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyāna*, while also integrating into these descriptions of Rāma's human relationships and kingships, the characterisations in the *Adhyātma-Rāmāyāna* of Rāma's *nirguṇa* nature. The interfusion of Advaitic and devotional motifs is evident in one of the opening *ślokas*: 'Homage to Rāma, to whose *māyā* is subject the whole



universe, because of whose true being the unreal world appears as true (*yat sattvād mṛṣaiva bhāti sakalam*), as a rope which is thought to be a snake; whose feet are the only boat for those who seek to cross the ocean of the world, the first cause beyond all causes' (*RCM*, 55). Stringing together a range of Advaitic and devotional descriptors, Tulsī Dāsa writes that the Lord (*Bhagavān*), who is one, desireless, without name and form, unborn, true being, consciousness and bliss, transcendental spirit, all-pervading, and universal, has assumed bodily form and performed various works, to do good to his servants, as a lord of supreme compassion (*parama kṛpālu*) who loves the suppliant people (*pranata anurāgī*) (*RCM*, 70).

Thus the Vedas sing the praises of the Lord:

‘Let those who meditate on Brahman, eternal and without a second, ungraspable by the mind, speak and know about it.

We, Lord, will sing the glories of your *saguṇa* form.

You are the treasure of compassion (*karuṇāyatana*), the source of all good qualities (*sadguṇākara*), O Lord, we ask you for the boon that we may constantly be devoted to your feet in thought, word, and deed'. (*RCM*, 850)

Further, when Garuḍa asks the crow Bhuṣuṇḍi to teach him the difference between knowledge and devotion, Bhuṣuṇḍi responds that there is no real difference (*bheda*), for both bring an end to the miseries of the world (*RCM*, 940). The way of knowledge is like the edge of a sword, and those who manage to walk on this path by surpassing obstacles attain the highest state of liberation (*kaivalya*). However, by the worship of Rāma, this liberation (*mukuti*) arrives spontaneously, even without being asked for (*anicchita*) by the devotee. As soon as one has devotion, ignorance, which is the cause of rebirth, is destroyed without any effort or exertion (*vinu jatana prayāsā*) (*RCM*, 944). Therefore, F.R. Allchin (1976: 88) concludes that for Tulsī Dāsa *jñāna* and *bhakti* are not antithetical but are ‘different, interpenetrating aspects of a single process, of a single path, in which the various stages of *jñāna* are invalidated without the presence of *bhakti*, and the latter, even though it can stand by itself, naturally conduces to the development of the former’.

Several themes that we have encountered in Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva resonate throughout the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, the parallels extending at times to the precise metaphors and turns of phrase, as the following verses indicate. The first and the second are from Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva respectively, and the third and the fourth are from Tulsī Dāsa.

‘There is none in the world who is a greater sinner (*mahāpāpī*) than I. There is none other than you who is a greater deliverer (*pāpahara*) of sinners’. (*Bh* II, 1319: 379)

‘Make me your servant, Hari, and buy me, buy me!

I desire no other wealth than the wealth of your Name’. (NG 541: 713)

‘There is none as wretched (*dīna*) as I am, and there is none, O Raghubīr, who is as helpful to the wretched as you are’. (RCM, 958)

Rāma tells Bhuṣuṅḍi: ‘This is the truth that I declare to you again and again – there is none who is as dear (*priya*) to me as my servant’. (RCM, 907)

The theme of devotional servitude is elaborated in the *Rāmacaritamānasa* along various routes. Those who have gained a human birth and yet do not worship Hari but seek worldly pleasures have thrown away the philosopher’s stone from their hands, and exchanged it for pieces of glass (RCM, 947). Even if people were to attain knowledge through great effort, they are not dear (*priya*) to Rāma if they lack devotion. While devotion is independent of other means to liberation, and blissful, it cannot be attained without the fellowship of saints (*satsaṅg*) (RCM, 876). The loving devotion to the feet of Rāma is the fruit of prayer, penance, sacrifice, self-control, vows, almsgiving, detachment (*virati*), discernment (*viveka*), yoga, and knowledge (*vijñāna*), and without such devotion one does not receive peace (RCM, 915). Aspirants (*sādhaka*), the perfected (*siddha*), the liberated (*vimukta*), ascetics, poets, scholars, renouncers, yogis, heroes, and the wise (*jñānī*) do not find liberation unless they worship Rāma (RCM, 952).

The intersections between *jñāna* and *bhakti* that we have examined in Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, and Tulsī Dāsa, can be traced back to the classical commentators, such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. While texts clustered under ‘Advaita Vedānta’ and ‘Vaiṣṇava Vedānta’ speak of soteriological goals which sometimes radically diverge, they are also often marked by mutual overlaps, intersections, and appropriations of concepts, styles of argumentation, and allegories. Paul Hacker pointed out that we encounter the concept of the personal Lord (*īśvara*) in Śaṅkara’s texts in contexts where we would have expected to find the concept of the highest Self (*parambrahma*), and vice versa, given his distinction between empirical and metaphysical reality, (Halbfass 1995:91). Further, Śaṅkara does not entirely reject spiritual practices involving meditative devotion, but points them towards Advaitic realization. He views Nārāyaṇa as the highest self who, as the *avatāric* form of Kṛṣṇa, instructs human beings about their non-duality with the self (Hirst 1993: 140). C. Ram-Prasad (2013) therefore reads Śaṅkara’s commentary on the *Bhagavad-gītā* as situating devotion in pedagogical contexts where the aspirant for Advaitic liberation moves through the devotional worship of Kṛṣṇa to a trans-metaphysics of being (*brahman*). Rāmānuja, on the other hand, often employs the key term *jñāna* as synonymous with the loving devotion (*bhakti*) towards the supreme Lord Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa on the part of the devotees who have realised that their true goal is to serve him as parts of his cosmic body. As A.H. Overzee (1992:131) notes: ‘In the case of Rāmānuja, loving devotion (*bhakti*) is divine knowledge and a form of meditation

(*upāsana*). This spiritual practice or *sādhanā* is a form of *bhakti-yoga*; a discipline integrating devotion, knowledge and meditation in the context of worship of the Lord’.

Given the conceptual fluidity of *jñāna* and *bhakti*, we can see how an Advaitin ascetic, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (c. 1600 CE) was able to compose the *Bhaktirasāyana* and his commentary on the *Bhagavad-gītā*, the *Gūḍhārthadīpikā* for two distinct audiences. L.E. Nelson (1988: 85) argues that Madhusūdana wrote the first to promote Advaitic standpoints among devotees outside the traditional Śāṅkara lineages, and the second to recommend devotion to his fellow Advaitic ascetics. Whereas the former text outlines devotion as an independent path to liberation and as the highest goal of life (*paramapurusaārtha*), in the latter text devotion is ultimately subordinated to knowledge which is attained through the Advaitic forms of scriptural meditation. These interpositions between *jñāna* and *bhakti* shape the exegetical traditions also of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, where Jīva Gosvāmī had to chart a course through the Advaitically-inflected readings of Śrīdhara Svāmī who had argued that *bhakti* is the most effective means toward the attainment of Advaitic realisation. The city of Navadvīpa, where Caitanya was born, had a small Vaiṣṇava community, whose worship seems to have received encouragement from Mādhavendra Purī, an Advaitin of the Purī order, and his important disciple, Advaita Ācārya, who was a friend of the Caitanya family. Śrīdhara too was a *sannyāsin* of the Purī order, and the devotional brand of Advaita in his texts could have influenced the Purī Advaita lineage (Elkman 1986: 17). Caitanya himself is said to have had the highest regard for Śrīdhara, and rejected a commentary on the *Bhāgavata* by a certain Vallabha Bhaṭṭa because it departed from Śrīdhara’s interpretations (De 1961: 20). Therefore, as Jīva shaped his system, he had to grapple with the commentary of Śrīdhara whose readings of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* could not always be readily accommodated into Vaiṣṇava horizons. At such junctures, as R.M. Gupta (2007: 84) notes, Jīva reads the Advaita themes through the prism of *bhedābheda* so that he is able to arrive at the same conclusion as Śrīdhara. Jīva often quotes Śrīdhara verbatim in his own exegeses of the *Bhāgavata*, and on a few occasions when Śrīdhara is the source of the *prima facie* view being rejected, he only notes the ideas without quoting Śrīdhara.

The somewhat enigmatic figure of Śrīdhara is an important element in the conceptual puzzle of whether Śāṅkaradeva should be regarded as an Advaitin. Śāṅkaradeva’s translations of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* into Assamese are informed by the commentary of Śrīdhara where Advaita has been infused with the *rasa* of devotion. The interplay between the strands of *jñāna* and *bhakti* produces texts with two distinctive types of emphases: in one, the spiritual disciplines of devotion undergird the deepening insight into the *advaita* at the heart of reality, and in another, Advaitic forms of self-realisation are propaedeutic to a maddening infusion of the divine love. The former is reflected in verses which state that as Arjuna meditated on Kṛṣṇa, *māyā* lost its force, his subtle body was dissolved, and he placed his self in the supreme self (*ātmā paramātmāte ṭhāpila*). Through the force of *bhakti* Arjuna attained *nirguṇa* knowledge, and became liberated in life (*KIR* 1955–1956: 234–35). While all mobile and immobile beings always consist of the Lord (*harimaya*), and are not distinct (*prṭhaka*) from the Lord, those who are devoid of devotion see the Lord as different, deluded as they are by the *māyā* of the Lord (*Bh* VIII, 729: 511). The latter resonates through the prayers of the devotees that wherever they receive a birth, in accordance with their *karma*, they may always have sincere devotion to the feet of the Lord (*KIR* 2118: 247). The essence (*sāra*) of

all the *śāstras* is that in the age of Kali there is no deliverance (*nistāra*) from the ocean of sins other than by singing the names of Kṛṣṇa (*Bh* II, 1276: 376). Through *śravana* and *kīrtana* one is purified, and becomes free from the web of *māyā*, and without delay attains the supreme state (*parama pada*) of Kṛṣṇa (*Bh* II, 1239: 372). The passionate intensity of *bhakti* is palpable in the following verses:

‘O Hari, O Hṛṣīkeśa, ocean of compassion, remove my miseries

O Mādhava, I am immersed in the ocean of *māyā*

Rescue me’. (*KIR* 139: 211)

[The *gopīs* who are searching for Kṛṣṇa cry out:] ‘Alas, we will not see you again, life of our lives, Banamālī. Where did you go, Gopāla, setting our hearts on fire?’ (*KIR, ghoṣā* 14: 146)

Notwithstanding these depictions of ecstatic devotion, Śaṅkaradeva’s Vaiṣṇavism, unlike Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, does not exalt Rādhā or any particular *gopī* to the status of divinity (Barua 1960: 13). The true relationship between human devotees and the Lord is *madhura* for Caitanya, and *dāsya* for Śaṅkaradeva, so that, according to Das (1945:58), the ideal devotee is Rādhā for Caitanya, and Uddhava for Śaṅkaradeva. The two layers of *jñāna* and *bhakti* are not always neatly separable in Śaṅkaradeva, and Advaitic and devotional templates are often run together in the same verse, and even the same phrase. For instance, the Lord tells Uddhava that he should reject *jñāna* and *karma* as they are all based on the *guṇas*, and instead cultivate *nirguṇa* devotion to cross over the world (*Bh* XI, 233: 831). He tells Uddhava that all that people can see and hear is constituted of *māyā*, and is like a dream (*svapnasama*). Uddhava, however, should see everything as constituted of the Lord (*harimaya*) and overcome his illusions (*bhrama*). Devotion is the supreme path (*uttama gati*) among knowledge and action, and devotion alone makes the Lord subservient to (*baśya*) his devotees (*Bh* XI, 140–141: 824). The city of the Lord, Vaikuṅṭha, lies beyond the world which is a production (*srajanā*) of *māyā* and which is destructible, and it cannot be attained through *jñāna*, *karma*, yoga, sacrifice, and austerities (*Bh* II, 1297–1299: 377).

## Conclusion

The varying emphases on *jñāna* and *bhakti* in Śaṅkaradeva’s texts are partly explicable in terms of the canto of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* which is being recomposed into Assamese. For instance, the *Haramohana* section in his *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* is based on *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* VIII.12.8, where Śiva tells Viṣṇu that in Viṣṇu there is no duality (*advaya*), just as gold ornaments are not substantially distinct (*bastubheda*) from gold. Through ignorance, however, people perceive differences in him who is beyond all qualities. Elsewhere, following *Bhāgatava-purāṇa* III.25.32–33, Śaṅkaradeva says that the supreme *bhāgavatī bhakti* is superior even to *mokṣa* and can bring about the destruction of the subtle body (*BR*,

*Māhātmya* 11: 79). The loving devotion (*sapremabhakti*) is elaborated with the vocabulary of *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* XI.2.40, where a devotee, by chanting the names of the Lord, is suffused with the love of the Lord, and with melted heart, laughs, cries, shouts, sings, and dances (*BR*, *Māhātmya* 14: 89).

The question, then, of whether or not Śaṅkaradeva should be classified as an Advaitin applies more broadly also to various other medieval figures such as Tulsī Dāsa, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, Śrīdhara, and others. The metaphysical commitments of these medieval figures, who straddle the divisions between Advaita Vedānta, on the one hand, and forms of Vedānta grounded in *bhakti*, on the other hand, are not always easily discernible on purely *textual* grounds. Consider, for instance, the view that Śaṅkaradeva should be regarded primarily as an Advaitin because his writings were based on the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* which is influenced by Advaitic ideas, and, secondly, his translations of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* into Assamese are informed by the commentary of Śrīdhara (Sarma 2004: 103–104). However, as we have seen, figures such as Jīva Gosvāmī, who are accepted unequivocally as Vaiṣṇava, too have configured their theological visions by grappling with the same textual materials. Therefore, textual affiliations to or borrowings from scriptures such as the *Bhagavad-gītā*, the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, and others are compatible with diverse positions on a fine-grained continuum stretching from ‘pure’ Advaita to *bhakti*-inflected Advaita to ‘pure’ *bhakti* universes. We could instead point to the *reception histories* of these figures in their respective traditions in addressing the question of their contested adherence to *bhakti* or to Advaita: thus Madhusūdana, a devotee of Kṛṣṇa, is, *qua* member of the SarasvatīAdvaita lineage, an Advaitin; Śrīdhara, as received through Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, is a Vaiṣṇava; Tulsī Dāsa, traditionally regarded as a reincarnation of Vālmīki, is a devotee of Rāma as the supreme divinity; and so on. Following this track, one can point to the fact that Śaṅkaradeva has been ‘received’ in the Assamese Hindu devotional traditions as a Vaiṣṇava teacher, who emerged in the age of Kali to announce that the *dharma* of the name is the essence of all the Vedic *dharmas*, and the supreme means to the abode of Kṛṣṇa. The numerous Vaiṣṇava monastic communities (*satra*) across Assam, which often also include householders, remain vibrant centres of devotional worship, dance, and music. These historical and sociological points do not, of course, conclusively settle the metaphysical debates, for, as we have seen, Kṛṣṇa is sometimes depicted by Śaṅkaradeva in highly Advaitically-charged terminologies as non-dual with the world. On the one hand, the world is said to be constituted of *māyā*, which is the power of Kṛṣṇa shrouding the *jīva*, and, on the other hand, only through devotional love of Kṛṣṇa can the *jīva* overcome transmigratory existence and reach Vaikuṅṭha, Kṛṣṇa’s transcendental abode. The differing emphases on one or the other of *jñāna* and *bhakti* are partly shaped by the differences of genre in the root Sanskrit texts – while certain chapters of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* are infused with Advaitic themes, Śaṅkaradeva’s retelling of the dialogue in the *Bhagavad-gītā* between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna strikes strong devotional notes, which are repeated throughout his numerous *Bargītas* which speak of the unbearable agony of the devotees in their separation from their beloved Lord. Therefore, the complexities relating to debates over the Vedāntic affiliations of figures such as Śaṅkaradeva highlight the point that the intersections, overlaps, and disjunctions between *jñāna* and *bhakti* are far more subtle than are suggested by certain presentations of the distinctions between the metaphysical-theological constructions of the classical and the medieval Vedāntic teachers.

## Appendix

The following sample of *Bargītas* (translations from the Brajāwalī are mine) reflects some of the distinctive motifs of *bhakti* in Śaṅkaradeva's writings which we have explored in the essay. They encompass the themes of self-censure and trust in the Lord who is the dearest friend of his devotees, the soteriological efficacy of the name of Kṛṣṇa in a transient world, the superiority of *bhakti* to *jñāna*, and the passionate yearning of the *gopīs* for their Kṛṣṇa.

### 1. *Bargīta* 6 (262)

Refrain:

Śāraṅgāpāṇi, save me, I am of sinful thoughts.

Rescue me from hell,

My Lord, I do not ask for anything else other than the shelter of your feet.

Verses:

Old age and death are upon me,

My body will fall at any time,

My life has passed by in sinful deeds,

I have no devotion to your feet.

Reflect on this – the body weakens, day after day

Anxiety and illness torment me,

You are my support at the time of death, my Kamalāpati

Thus, Śaṅkara bows to you.

### 2. *Bargīta* 8 (262)

Refrain:

Take the name of Rāma, the name alone is the source of salvation,

The boat across the world-river, the easy way,

Nothing can equal the name of Rāma.

Verses:

At the sound of the lion-name, the elephant-like sins flee in terror.

By uttering and hearing the name, countless people are liberated.

The name is immutable.

Take the name, and receive effortlessly *dharama*, *aratha*, *kāma* and *mukuti*.

The name is the dearest friend of all,

With it dissolves the terror of death.

Nārada and the sage Śuka say

That other than the name of Rāma

There is no refuge.

This servant of Kṛṣṇa says:

Give up this world full of *māyā*

For Rāma is the supreme truth.

3. *Bargīta* 9 (263)

Refrain:

There is truly none other than Rāma

Who delivers you from the distress of the world.

My mind worships the lotus feet of the supremely blissful Lord.

Verses:

Pilgrimages, vows, penances, chanting, sacrifices, yoga, reasoning,

Mantras, *dharama*, and *karama*

None of these will liberate you.

Mother, father, wife, and children  
Know that all of these are bound to die.  
Deluded mind, give up all worldly concerns  
Hold fast to the feet of Hari.

The servant of Kṛṣṇa, Śaṅkara, says:  
Give up worldly pleasures  
Surrender to the feet of Rāma, and take the name of Govinda.

#### 4. *Bargīta* 10 (263)

Refrain:  
He alone is my Lord, Hari who shines forth  
I am his servant, who recites his name and meditates on his form.

Verses:  
The pundit merely repeats the scriptures, it is the devotee who receives their essence,  
Just as the bee drinks the nectar of the lotus which blooms on the water.

Where there is devotion, there alone lies liberation, the devotee knows this great truth  
Just as a merchant with the wish-fulfilling stone extols its qualities.

Thus Śaṅkara, the servant of Kṛṣṇa, says:  
Worship the feet of Govinda,  
They alone are the pundits, they alone are the esteemed, who sing the glories of the Lord.

#### 5. *Bargīta* 13 (264)

Refrain:  
O scholar, why do you not perceive the straight path?



Millions of *karama* do not take you to Hari  
You fall, again and again, to this world.

Verses:

You have muttered incantations, performed penances, and visited holy places,  
You have lived in Gayā and Kāśī,  
Thus have your years passed by.  
You are accomplished in yoga and logic,  
And yet your mind is deluded,  
For there is no liberation without devotion.

The name of Rāma alone contains all virtue  
This is the essential teaching of the scriptures.  
The name of Hari is the supreme *dharama* of the age of Kali  
You have heard this truth, yet you do not grasp it.

The servant of Kṛṣṇa says:

The body remains but for a moment  
A human birth is not easily gained,  
Cast aside all the vanity of rituals,  
Immerse your mind in the feet of Hari.

6. *Bargīta* 14 (264)

Refrain:

Lord Rāma, I am a vile sinner, with no thoughts of you, Hari.  
I have frittered away the wish-fulfilling gem of this birth,  
And exchanged it for cheap glass.

Verses:

My days are wasted in worldly anxieties, and my nights in sleep.

The deluded mind seeks wealth, and receives not your mercy.

You, Lord, are seated in my heart-lotus, and yet I think not of your feet,

Alas, I have consumed poison, forsaking ambrosia.

Supremely ignorant am I, Mādhava, I do not know how to offer devotion to you.

Śaṅkara sings: I am your servant of servants, save me.

### 7. *Bargīta* 26 (268)

Refrain:

Uddhava, go to Gokula.

There, in my absence, the *gopīs* wither away

Even a moment is as painfully long as an aeon.

Verses:

I am their mind and wealth at all times,

Thus they meditate on me,

They barely live, separated from me.

With me as their hope the *gopīs* live:

‘Our Kṛṣṇa will return to us, we will see him again’.

Says this servant of Kṛṣṇa:

O people, worship the Lord Hari

For Hari is the dearest friend.

8. *Bargīta* 27 (268)

Refrain:

Tell me, O Uddhava, dearest friend

When will Kṛṣṇa, our very life, return?

Thus ask the *gopīs*, anxious with love, consciousness slipping away from their bodies.

Verses:

When we hear the sound of the flute, when we see cows and calves,

O friend Uddhava, our bodies are set on fire!

When we see the river Kālindī, our hearts are rent asunder

For here we had once sported with the moon-faced Hari, pleasing to the eyes.

Even Birindābana has become a source of misery,

We cannot forget our sports with Gopāla.

We see the signs of the lotus-feet of the Lord, and there we cry,

We roll on the ground, and sing the glories of the Lord.

Without the sun of Kṛṣṇa, Braja is steeped in darkness,

We see no end to this great misery.

When again will we see Gopāla, our life?

The servant of Kṛṣṇa, Śaṅkara, sings:

Know Hari in your heart.

## Abbreviations

|            |                                |
|------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>AP</i>  | <i>Anādi-pātana</i>            |
| <i>Bar</i> | <i>Bargīta</i>                 |
| <i>Bh</i>  | <i>Bhāgavata-purāṇa</i>        |
| <i>BP</i>  | <i>Bhakti-pradīpa</i>          |
| <i>BR</i>  | <i>Bhakti-ratnākara</i>        |
| <i>KIR</i> | <i>Kīrtana-ghoṣā</i>           |
| <i>NG</i>  | <i>Nāma-ghoṣā</i>              |
| <i>NNS</i> | <i>Nimi-Navasiddha-saṁvāda</i> |
| <i>RCM</i> | <i>Rāmacaritamānasa</i>        |

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