

'SRUTI AND SMRTI' — THE UN-VEDIC DEMARCATION

With the growing popularity of the *Vedānta* system, few will deny that there is need for an even greater in-depth study of *Vedānta*, particularly *Vedānta* as associated with the versions of the three great giants of *Vedānta*: *Sankarācārya*, *Ramanujācārya* and *Mādhvācārya*, based on their respective interpretation of *Bādarāyana's Brahma-sūtra*, and ultimately of the *Upanisads*—but why stop there?

Now, the *Vedāntins*, mentioned above, could be said to have agreed that the world is the “manifestation” of *Brahman*, that knowledge of *Brahman* (or *Brahmajñāna*) is the *mārga* (path) which leads to liberation (*moksa*) of the otherwise bounded ‘soul’ (*jiva*), and further, that *Brahman* can be known only through the sacrosanct teachings of the scriptures. They differed, however, in what each considered to be the precise nature of *Brahman*, the manner in which *Brahman* is said to have caused the world, the status of the individual ‘soul’ and its relation to *Brahman* in the ultimate sense. These, however, are not the problems I wish to address here, I only wish to draw attention to the respective attitude of the masters towards what they regarded the “scriptures” to be.

In his predilection towards ‘*śruti*’ (that which was “heard”)

1. In *Brahma-sūtra bhāṣya*, I. iii. 28 Sankara explains that *smṛti* is called *anumāna*—inference—because it depends on other sources for its validity, while *śruti* does not: *śrutiḥ prāmāṇyaṃ-pratyaya-pekṣatvāt; anumānām smṛtiḥ, prāmāṇyaṃ prati sapekṣatvāt*. In II. i. i. Sankara argues that *smṛti* can be denied to have any scope—unless its purport appears originally in *śruti* (meaning *Vedās*). Sankarācārya does, however, regard the *Bhagavad Gītā* to be “an epitome of the essentials of the whole Vedic teaching” (P. 4 Introduction by Saṅkara to his commentary on B. G. tr. by Mahadeva Sastri; Ramaswamy Sastrulu & Sons; Madras 1972.) It is

śankara can be said to have disregarded the *smṛti* tradition (that which was ‘recollected’) altogether, despite the fact that much of the “essence” of *Vedic Dharma* and a re-assertion of *Vedic* truths and injunctions more appropriate to the era the *Vedānta* schools grew up in, is to be found distilled in the *smṛti* tradition. Scriptures such as *Purānas*, *Bhāgavatas*, *Mahābhārata Rāmāyana*, contain some very profound insights and elucidations on certain practices and truths which cannot—or ought not to be—ignored by any school which purports to represent the central thrust of *Vedic Dharma*. If scriptural authority, *śabda pramāna*, is to be a means of knowledge, it should not be confined merely to the selected exegesis of the *Upanisads* alone.

Upanisads express one perspective of the ‘revealed’ truths and they cannot be said to have succeeded in depicting the truths in any more understandable and tangible form than have the *smṛtis*. The *Upanisads* may represent a higher level of abstraction and may furnish the requisite arguments for a rational comprehension, where the *smṛti* may provide only a mythological “like-so” story which may have a better appeal to one’s intuition than to one’s intellect; still, however, that is not to say that *smṛti* works like the *Pāñcharātra* literature,² have missed the truth of *Vedic* teachings. Even if the *smṛti* tradition were to be regarded as a second-order perspective, the interpretation and appreciation they offer of *Vedic* wisdom and insight cannot be underestimated.

Why some of the learned minds have taken the *Upanisads* to be the concluding portion—*Veda-anta*—in the sense not only

intriguing that Saṅkara cared to write a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and one also on *Brahma-sūtra*, both of which since have attained the ranks almost of *śruti* amongst *advaitins*. But this attribution, especially in the case of the latter, seems somewhat arbitrary—for, if Bādarāyana could be said to have composed the *sūtras* then there are good chances that the *sūtras* were not “heard” (‘revealed’); and in the case of the former, if Sri Kṛṣṇa could be said to have sung ‘the *Gītā* to Arjuna which Sanjaya later “heard”, then it could equally be the case that Rāma spoke to Bhārata and others what Vālmīki ‘recalled’ in the *Rāmāyana*.

2. cf. *The Philosophy of Pāñcharātra—An Advaitic Approach* by Dr. S. R. Bhatt; (Ganesh & Co., Madras, 1968). Also: *Vishnu-purānam* (tr. ed.) by M.N. Dutt (Chowkhamba Publ., Varanasi; 1972). *Lakṣmi Tāntva*: (tr. ed.) Sanjukta Gupta; (ORT XV Leiden, E. G. Brill; 1972).

as the 'end-portion', but also as the 'essence-portion' is neither clear nor convincing. For instance, regarding the status of the classic *Yoga-vāsīṣṭha Rāmāyana*, S.N. Dasgupta argues that though the work may be included among the *purānas* "...it is throughout occupied with discussions of Vedāntic problems of a radically monistic type, resembling the vedāntic doctrines as interpreted by Sankara."³ The *Vedic Spirit*, truly, never died, it still has not; its purveyors have taken many a guise and it still persists in practices and forms, in ethical-codes and unwritten "*śabda*" besides the one popularly offered as representative of *Vedic Dharma* in its more doctrinal garb. Of course, the *Upanisads*, help to highlight the movement of *thought* after the *Vedic* era, but *thought*, as such, need not be taken to encapsule the whole truth of *Vedic Dharma*. The *Upanisads* represent a portion of it—in so far as *Dharma* is related to *thought* and 'thoughts' function in the fundamental inquiry for truth,—and for that reason it would be more appropriate to regard the *Upanisads* as foreshadowing the '*darśanic* perspectives' or the 'thought-schools' that flourished in the classical period as various 'views' on the teachings of the *Upanisads*.

And what of the mythologies, cosmogonies and folklores enunciated in the *Itihāsa-Purānas-Tāntras*? Do they not embrace much of the insights and intuitions of the *Vedic* "seers"? Or is their emergence to be regarded as part of an independent and distinct body of injunctions and practices evolved in a heterodox tradition betokening elements of worship and devotion which are not (except in the rare one or two instances*) to be found in the *Upanisads*? What is the significance of the shift in emphasis and almost total neglect of certain practices and rites, along with deity-veneration in the selected body of (sometimes regarded as the "Principal") *Upanisads*? Does it mean that in an increasingly degenerating era (*kali-yuga*) man could be said to attain liberation through a path steeper than the one (s) *Vedic* 'seers' themselves espoused? May it not be the case that a 'stage' in the hazardous path to enlightenment has been lifted out and given undue emphasis sufficient to give the stage an appearance of *the path*? The *Upanisadic* stage may be a necessary development to one treading the path, but that does not mean that

3. S.N. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Volume II, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975) p. 228f.

* such as *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, I. 14 & 8-17 and *Iṣa, Upaniṣad*, I. 18.

the development proceeds by the exclusion of other, equally important stages. Perhaps one would wish to argue that with the *Upanisads* a point of refinement had been reached which culminated in the doctrine of *Brahmasūtra, kārikas* of *Gaudapada, sūtras* and their multitude of commentaries that followed the major treatises in each school. Of what avail then are the *smṛti* works?

Precisely this seems to be the line of reasoning behind the advaita Vedāntin's neglect of the crucial development of literature of the *smṛti* tradition. While, on the other hand, one finds Rāmānuja making more references to the *smṛti* tradition and deducing much in the way of practice from this rich heritage than does Sankara. But the development that Sankara and his followers vouch for, if only implicitly, cannot be regarded as the definitive statement of *Vedic Dharma*, for the reasons pointed out earlier. It may be added that those who look out for the more intellectual portion within the *Vedic* (orthodox) tradition, are more generally inclined towards embracing *Advaita Vedānta*, or alternatively, *Nyāya* (or more recently *neo-Nyāya*) systems as the apex of Indian "wisdom". There is little doubt that Sankara and Gautama were perhaps two of the greatest thinkers in the *Indian* tradition but to rest content with structures ("schools of thought") built after their reflections, is to overlook the complexity of the religious-philosophical development through which the *Vedic* tradition has come to us.

Of great significance, I believe, would be an equally rigorous analysis of the works of the *smṛti* tradition, and in particular the use of *Smṛti* in works of Rāmānuja⁴ and Mādhava.⁵ The richness, from a philosophical point of view, of their work has not been fully grasped by modernity. This is the price modern thinkers have had

4. Rāmānuja regards *Pāñcharātra Āgama* to have been 'divinely-inspired' which bring to light the "essence" of the *Vedās*: *vedān...suranardura-vagāhāmscāvadhārya tadarthayathātmyavabōdhi pañcharatṛ śāstrāṇi svayameva nirmimiteti niravadhyam; vedāntesu yathā sāram sangrahya bhagavan hariḥ. bhaktānukampayā vidvān sañchipekṣa yathāsukham. Śrībhāṣya* II. ii. 42.

5. Likewise, Madhavacharya in his *bhāṣya* on *Brahma-sūtra* I. i. 3, consider the *Pāñcharātra* (presumably also other *śāstras* as *Mahābhārata, Rāmāyana*) to be on par with the *Vedās*: *vedapāñcharātrayōrekyābhīprayena pañcharatṛasyeva prāmānyamuktam.*

to pay because of their failure to appreciate the *smṛti* literature. It is, therefore, necessary that literature other than the *Upanisads* be well exploited and investigated for their philosophic worth. There is no justification for dealing with a portion of the *Vedās* and calling it *śruti par excellence*. The battle of *Vedic Dharma*—truth against ignorance—continues to be waged in the apparent folklores, legends, ‘myths’ and mythologies of *smṛti* literature and succeed as much in conveying much of the “essence” of the vehicles of *Sanātana Dharma*—as the *Vedās*.⁶ It is apt to conclude with an example that brings out the case I have argued for: In the *Rāmāyana*, Hanumān is asked to explain his relationship to Rāma. Hanumān replies that when he sees himself in terms of his body—a limited physical organism in space, moving in time—he feels very distinct from Rama, i.e. he feels there is an ocean of difference between him and Rama; the latter’s elegant pose, command and beautiful body cannot be matched by Hanumān’s. But, Hanumān continues that when he thinks of his soul,—his ‘psyche’, the inner-impulse of life,—then he feels part of Rāma, for Rāma, is the source of life, Rāma is the whole of life-impulse of Life, the Consciousness of which Hanumān is a reflection, so to speak. And yet he, Hanumān, is different from Rāma, as he is not the whole of the life-impulse, Life, Consciousness or the ‘Oversoul’ which Rāma is. Finally, Hanumān reflects, that when he sees himself beyond the life-impulse, beyond his ‘psyche’, when he beholds his “essence”, the Spirit of his being, the real ‘Self’, ātman, he finds that he is no other than Rāma Himself! He absolutely identifies himself with Rāma; the identification is so absolute that there is no Hanumān identifying—only Rāma, the identified. This is the truth of his being as Hanumān sees it—there is the *Being* of Rāma and no other. Saying this Hanumān breaks into tears and falls at the feet of Rāma. Somewhat legendary, but this clearly

6. The Sermons of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa in letter read like the *smṛti* fables, but in spirit are uniquely *Vedic*, though he tended to disparage the *Vedās* themselves, only to recast the teachings in his own way; for instance, Ramakrishna reflects: “So many religions, so many paths to reach one and the same goal”, which is identical to the *Rg-Vedic* dictum: “Truth is one, sages call it by various names”. Similarly the more recent “*vāhinīs*”, and poems—especially *Bhāgavata Vāhinī* and *Rāmakathā-Rāsa Vāhinī*—of Sri Satya Sai Baba, (illustriously) bring out very well the *Vedism* of *Smṛti* tradition.

enlightens the truth of *ānanda, cit, sat*: the triune manifestation of *Brahman* as *citta, Śvara* and ‘*ātman*’.⁷

7. Strictly speaking, however, there is no implication in Hanumān’s account that ‘*ātman*’ as such is a manifestation of *Brahman*; rather it would be more adequate to read here the *advaita dictum*: ‘*Ātman is Brahman*’, for the *Being* of *Brahman* is relationless.

Note also how Hanumān’s characterization of his ‘relationship’ to Rāma foreshadows the three ‘school-perspectives’ of classical *Vedānta*—*vīn, Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Advaita*.

I am indebted to Ian Kesarcodi-Watson and Arvind Sharma for their comments.