

21. This is the basic point of the theory of communicative practices. For details see R. Sundara Rajan, *Towards A Critique of Cultural Reason and Studies in Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*, ch. 2.
22. Dilthey's distinction between explanation and understanding is an aspect of this.
23. For the natural history of the human, see R. Sundara Rajan, "Philosophy as Geophilia: Towards Recovery of the Idea of the Earth", *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. xxii, no. 4, Oct. 1995.

Vedānta in the First Millennium AD:
The Case Study of a Retrospective Illusion
Imposed by the Historiography of
Indian Philosophy

DAYA KRISHNA

Vedānta is supposed to be the most dominant and distinctive philosophy of India, accepted and propagated as such by innumerable writers on Indian philosophy. And yet, if one searches for its presence in the first millennium AD, one is surprised to find very little evidence of its presence before Śaṅkara and even for quite some time after him. The Upaniṣads that are supposed to be the source of Vedāntic philosophy had flourished sometime during the later half of the first millennium BC or even some centuries earlier than that. It is commonly supposed that as the Upaniṣads form the last part of the Vedic corpus, the term Vedānta is applied to them, literally meaning the end of the Vedas or the concluding portion thereof and the thought propounded therein. This, of course, is a myth as many of the Upaniṣads do not form the concluding portion of the Vedic corpus and also continued to be composed till as late as the thirteenth century, that is, a long time after Śaṅkara wrote his commentaries on them. As we argued in an article written some time ago entitled 'The Upaniṣads—What are They?' many of the major Upaniṣads do not occur as a last part of the Vedic corpus, that is, the Saṁhitās, the Brāhmaṇas or the Āraṇyakas but rather in the middle followed by other portions which are sometimes regarded as separate Upaniṣads with a different content, or, what is the case many a time, are regarded as not Upaniṣads at all. It is well known, for example, that the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* consists of chapters 4, 5 and 6 of the second *adhyāya* of the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, excluding the third *adhyāya*, even though it explicitly proclaims itself as a Upaniṣad.¹

However, in any discussion of Vedānta in the first millennium AD the status of the Upaniṣads and of the thought propounded by them in the

philosophical scene of those times is a secondary matter as what is of relevance in the assessment of the position of Vedānta in the first millennium AD is the attempt at a coherent, unified presentation of their thought by Bādrāyaṇa in his *Brahmasūtras* (50 AD). The presence of Vedānta in the first millennium AD thus can only be understood in terms of what happens to the *Brahmasūtras*, and the attention they aroused in the philosophical world of India after they were composed. Normally, the impact of the foundational sūtra literature of the various schools of Indian philosophy is known by the commentaries that they generated and by the discussions and refutations they met at the hands of their opponents. Surprisingly, the *Brahmasūtras* remained entirely unnoticed until the appearance of Śaṅkara who wrote his commentary on them along with the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagvadgītā* which resulted in the famous myth of the *Prasthāna Trayi*, that is, the view that the source of Indian Philosophy lies in these three texts when even the so-called different schools of Vedānta do not treat them in this way, as except for Śaṅkara and Madhva, no one else has commented on all the three so as to establish his position as to what Vedānta really means.

Before Śaṅkara, the only thinkers who are mentioned in connection with the *Brahmasūtra* in Potter's new Bibliography are Bodhāyana (350 AD), Dramiḍācārya (525 AD), Bhartṛprapañca (550 AD), Viśvarūpadeva (600 AD), and Brahmadata (660 AD). As for Bodhāyana, it is doubtful whether he wrote anything on the *Brahmasūtra*, though there is sufficient evidence that he wrote on the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra*, particularly on the Śaṅkaraṣaṇa-Kāṇḍa, according to Nakamura in his work on early Vedānta philosophy.²

Dramiḍācārya, mentioned after Bodhāyana in Potter's bibliography, finds no mention in Nakamura and Potter's work only says that he wrote a Bhāṣya which exists in manuscript form which has neither been seen nor published by any one. Also, it appears that the work has not been referred to by subsequent thinkers in the tradition.

As for Bhartṛprapañca, he is supposed to be an exception to the general position held by most Vedāntins that Brahman cannot be known by reasoning, and that it can only be known through the *Śrūti* or perhaps even through intuition. As for Viśvarūpadeva he is not mentioned by Nakamura in his comprehensive work on early Vedānta, though he is mentioned in Potter's bibliography and is supposed to have written a work called *Vivekāmāraṇḍa*.

As for Brahmadata, he is supposed to have held a position regarding the relations between self and Brahman as both identical and different,

a position held by thinkers who have been referred to in the *Brahmasūtras*, and generally not supported by it.

The earlier thinkers referred to in the *Brahmasūtras* are, as is well known, Kārṣṇājini, Kāśakṛtsna, Ātreya, Auḍulomi, Āśamarthya, Bādari and Jaimini.

Besides the five thinkers who have been mentioned in Potter's *Bibliography* between Bādrāyana and Śaṅkara, there is the independent work of Gauḍapāda who occurs in 600 AD (new) and 550 AD (old) and whose *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā* is a well-known work in the tradition of Advaita Vedānta strongly influenced by Buddhism and is by common consent supposed to have influenced Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Brahmasūtras* in a significant manner. However, his is an independent work which has nothing to do with the *Brahmasūtra* and thus is an independent source of Vedāntic thinking in later times. In fact, Nakamura mentions him along with Bādarāyaṇa and Bhartṛhari as precursors of Śaṅkara and specifically assigns the strong advaitic position to him rather than to Bādarāyaṇa.³

Thus in the pre-Śaṅkara period the total presence of thinkers who could even be remotely designated as Vedāntins is not only negligible but many of them have to be included just because they have been mentioned by some one else or because their work has a marginal reference in the tradition. As for the notice of the Vedāntic thought being taken seriously by others, that seems to be even less for, according to Nakamura, we find direct references only in the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* where the Vedāntic position is supposed to be refuted twice and while, according to him, there is no mention of it in the *Nyāya-Sūtras*, it is referred to in Vātsyāyana's *Bhāṣya* on the *Nyāya-Sūtras* and by Udyotakara in his *Vārtika* on the *Bhāṣya*.⁴

The situation does not seem to improve much even after Śaṅkara for, if we exclude his immediate disciples, he does not seem to have made as much of an impact as is made out by his admirers and the author of the *Śaṅkaradigvijaya*. In fact, there is little evidence of the so-called *Digvijaya* as it is the philosophers of the other schools who continue to outnumber the Vedāntins in the centuries after Śaṅkara. Not only this, even the Buddhists are ahead of the Vedāntins, both in quantity and quality, thus nullifying the myth that they were defeated by Śaṅkara. Hastāmalaka, Troṭaka, Padmapāda and Sureśvara are the well known disciples of Śaṅkara and Maṇḍana Mīśra, the author of *Brahmasiddhi* can be regarded as almost half his disciple. If we exclude these, then in the post-Śaṅkara period, we have, besides Bhāskara, who has written an independent Bhāṣya on the *Brahmasūtras*, Gopālāśrama

(780 AD), Jñānaghana (900 AD), Jñānottama Bhaṭṭāraka (930 AD), Vimuktātman (960 AD), Vācaspati Miśra (960 AD), Prakāśātmana (975 AD) and Jñānottama Miśra (980 AD). Thus we have only eight Vedāntins listed in the post-Śaṅkara period in the first millennium AD, if we exclude his disciples and Maṇḍana Miśra. Within almost the same period we have 117 Buddhist thinkers and 27 Jain thinkers. As for the so-called orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika number about 13 (9+4).

The first serious notice of the advaita position seems to have been taken by Jayanta Bhaṭṭa in his explicit refutation of that position in *Nyāyamañjarī*. But he does not refer to Śaṅkara by name. As his date is supposed to be 870 AD, it can be assumed that the presence of Śaṅkara and his disciples on the philosophical scene had established the advaitic position as one of the philosophical positions to be taken into account. Udayana, whose date is supposed to be around 984 AD is another example of this as he not only refutes the Vedānta position but also seems to give the Vedāntic realization of non-difference a position just below the Naiyayika realization of mokṣa. However, he is supposed to have referred only to Bhāskara and not to Śaṅkara, thus suggesting that Śaṅkara's preeminence was not established by that time.⁵ In fact, it appears that Udayana in his *Āmatattvaviveka* has given six stages of realization of the self in ascending order and at least two of which are ascribed to advaita-Vedānta. The first stage is characterized by the appearance of object in consciousness wherein it alone is treated as real. This, according to him, is the stage of Cārvāka and Mīmāṃsā thought in philosophy which treats action for the satisfaction of oneself through the acquisition of objects alone, as *real* and meaningful. The second stage is characterized by the appearance in consciousness of the meanings of objects and is associated, according to him, with the Yogācāra school of Buddhism where it is not objects but their meanings which alone are considered as real. The third stage is supposed to be characterized by a realization of the unreality of all meanings by consciousness and is closely related to the position of Śūnyavāda Buddhism on the one hand and advaita-vedānta on the other. The fourth stage is the arising of a discriminatory consciousness where the consciousness becomes aware of its radical distinction from the object. This stage he attributes to Sāṅkhya. The fifth stage of realization is where the focus of consciousness shifts from the discriminatory awareness and centres on the self luminosity of consciousness itself. This, according to him, is also the state of advaitic realization, though it is different from the advaitic realization of the third stage. The last stage of realization

goes beyond this where the self is not aware even of its own self and abides completely in its own reality. This, according to him, is the highest stage and is characterized by the realization which Nyāya postulates for the self at its highest level.⁶

There seem however some problems regarding the delineation of these stages and the association of the third and the fifth with advaita Vedānta. It is not clear to whom the third position is being ascribed. As for the fifth stage it is difficult to say that it is the exact position held by Bhāskara as it seems to describe more correctly Śaṅkara's position. In any case, it seems from all this that the positions of Vedānta are only vaguely known and not in the sharp, focal manner in which they were formulated by the advaitins in the second millennium AD.

We thus have to divide the question regarding the presence of Vedānta in the first millennium AD in two parts, the first relating to the period after the *Brahmasūtra* and before Śaṅkara's Bhāṣya on it in the early eighth century AD and the second after Śaṅkara, that is, roughly from 700-1000 AD. There can be little doubt that the *Brahmasūtras* had little impact on the philosophical scene in India after their composition and in fact were practically absent from the philosophical scene if we compare them with the influence exercised by the other sūtras, particularly those relating to Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika. Even the impact of Sāṅkhya, which may be regarded as independent from the traditions deriving from the Vedic corpus, was far, far greater in the period than that of the *Brahmasūtras*. We have, for example, between 50-750 AD ten Sāṅkhyan thinkers, many of whom have written independent works of their own. In fact, if we take *Ṣaṣṭitantra* as the first important Sāṅkhyan work, then we have in the first millennium AD not only the *Sāṅkhyakārikā* around 350 AD but Svārṇasaptati, 655 AD and other works totalling eight in number before Vācaspati Miśra's work on Sāṅkhya.⁷

The situation is no different if we try to find the presence of the *Brahmasūtras* in non-Vedic traditions of philosophizing such as those of the Buddhists and the Jains. Nāgārjuna who occurs around 150 AD and is the first great thinker belonging to the Mādhyamika School of Buddhism shows hardly any awareness of Vedānta as propounded in the *Brahmasūtras*, even though more than 100 years had elapsed since its composition. The situation does not seem to improve later as his disciple Āryadeva (180 AD) shows no awareness either. The Yogācāra School which seems to start with Maitreya-nātha (270-350 AD) and develops through Asaṅga (360 AD) and Vasubandhu (360 AD) also does not show any awareness of the *Brahmasūtras*. This is specially significant

as they do discuss other schools of Indian philosophy such as Nyāya. The first clear cut reference to Vedānta as a distinctive school of philosophy occurs in the work of Bhavya or *Bhāvavivēka*⁸ in 550 AD, that is, more than five hundred years after the composition of the *Brahmasūtras* and about 150 years before Śaṅkara appears on the scene. However, in his presentation, the elements of the Vedāntic doctrine of the Ātman seem to be inexplicably intermixed with the doctrine of the Puruṣa which finds no place either in the *Brahmasūtras* or in Gaudapāda or Śaṅkara. Also, though he is aware of the distinction between the Jīva and the Ātman or the embodied self and the liberated self, and treats the distinction between the two as analogous to the way the infinite space is limited by adjuncts such as a pot etc., he is still not aware either of the doctrines of *Avidyā* or *Māyā* which were later to play such an important role in Śaṅkara's thought. In fact, the situation does not seem to improve even with Śāntarākṣita who occurs a little later than Śaṅkara, though he discusses both *puruṣa* and *Ātman* he hardly refers to Śaṅkara. The same seems to be the case with Kamalaśīla who has written a prose commentary on Śāntarākṣita's *Tattvasaṅgraha*.⁹

It seems that the composition of the *Brahmasūtras* had hardly any effect on the philosophical scene of India as it remained unnoticed at least till five hundred years after its composition. And even after that its major attempt to present in a unified manner the conflicting positions of the Upaniṣads and to give a Brahman-centric interpretation of it was not clearly grasped in the philosophical world of India.

The non-existence of Vedānta as a significant philosophical force in the first millennium AD will become even more clear if we notice the fact that Haribhadra Surī, the great Jain thinker belonging to 750 AD, who wrote perhaps the first survey work on the various schools of Indian philosophy, did not even mention Vedānta as a separate, distinctive school of Indian philosophy, even though he mentions not only Buddhism but also Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika and Sāṅkhya explicitly and even Lokāyata which certainly was not regarded as a major school of philosophy by anybody in India. As both Śāntarākṣita and Kamalaśīla belong to this very period, it appears that the influence of Śaṅkara and his disciples had not permeated the philosophical atmosphere as is usually alleged by those who regard *Śaṅkara Digvijaya* as an authentic work descriptive of his triumph over all other philosophical schools of India. However, as the millennium moves towards its closure there seems some evidence of the spread of the influence of Śaṅkara's thought as one finds, for example, in Udayana's *Ātmatattvavivēka* in which there seems to be a distinctive attempt to come to terms with the

Advaitic position as regards ultimate realization. Within the Nyāya framework, particularly the one relating to the denial of the self-luminosity of the Ātman. Udayana's work comes closest to an advaitin position even though it does not declare itself to be such. But even if one does not accept such a characterization of Udayana's work, there can hardly be a debate about the presence of powerful advaitic leanings in that work. The whole work in fact closes with a recommendation to meditate on the self and suggests the gradual stages of realization which would occur during the course of the meditation. It is interesting to note in this connection that the Mīmāṃsā position is equated almost with that of the Cārvāka and that the Sāṅkhya position of discrimination between the self and the object is placed very high in the scale of meditational realization on the self. The millennium which had shown, during most of its course, no signs of Vedānta closes with signs of its impending dominance in the forthcoming millennium where it establishes its supremacy, particularly after the disappearance of Buddhism in east India with the destruction of Nālandā. The only rival that it has in the second millennium AD is Nyāya on the one hand, which repudiates Udayana's attempt of advaitising the Nyāya position and Rāmānuja and Madhva Vedānta on the other. There is thus practically no Vedānta in the first millennium AD and the idea of its dominant presence there is a super-imposition by the historiography of Indian philosophy due to its being dazzled by the picture in the second millennium AD. The propounders of the theory of Adhyāsa have perhaps themselves imposed one on the history of philosophy in India.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See on this whole point my article 'The Upaniṣads—What are They?' in *Indian Philosophy—A Counter Perspective*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991.
2. Upavaṣa who occurred around 150 AD is sometimes mentioned in this connection. However, according to Potter he is only supposed to have written a *Ṛtti* on the Mīmāṃsā Sūtra while according to Nakamura he has also written on the Śaṅkarāṇakaṇḍa.
3. Hajime Nakamura, *History of Early Vedānta Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1983, p. 127.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 330-56.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
6. *Ātmatattvavivēka*, Translation, Explanation and Analytical critical summary by N.S. Dravid, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1995, pp. 455-58.
7. *Ibid.*, see p. 335.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 226-29.

ISSN 0970-7794

*Journal of
Indian Council
of Philosophical
Research*

JICPR

SPECIAL ISSUE

Historiography of Civilizations

1996

EDITORS

D. P. Chattopadhyaya

Daya Krishna