

The Myth of the *Prasthāna Trayī*

DAYA KRISHNA

Jaipur

The view that the roots of the Indian philosophical tradition lie in the *Upaniṣads*, the *Brahma Sūtras* and the *Gītā* is so widely accepted that it is taken to be almost axiomatically true by scholars and laymen alike. These are the primal sources from which the stream of Indian philosophy is supposed to have flown for millennia, and if we want to know the essence, we should seek their original texts and decipher the truth contained in them in order to understand the spirit of Indian philosophy. A recent book, for example, Somraj Gupta's *The Word Speaks to the Faustian Man* (1991), mentions these as '*prasthānatrayī*' on the very title page. Yet, he does not ask himself even the simple question as to what that philosophical stream is for which these three texts provide the starting point or the *prasthāna* as they call it in the tradition.

Even the blindest student of the subject knows that neither Buddhism nor Jainism ever accepted the authoritative nature of any of the texts of the Vedic tradition. Do the protagonists who regard the *prasthāna trayī* as being the foundational source of the stream of philosophizing in India wish to deny the 'Indian' character of the two philosophical traditions? In case they do, let them say so openly and not hide behind the facade of a falsity that masquerades as axiomatic truth. And even if we accept the preposterous claim that the Buddhist and Jaina traditions of philosophizing do not form an integral part of the philosophical traditions of India, would the other schools conform to the definition which has been set up by some to determine what constitutes a genuine Indian philosophical tradition?

The moment we ask this question, we are faced with the incredible fact that except for Vedānta, none of the other schools of Indian philosophy measure up to this criterion even in a *prima facie*

manner. Who would say that Nyāya or Vaiśeṣika or Sāṃkhya or Mīmāṃsā derive from these three texts in any meaningful manner? Mīmāṃsā, as everyone knows, does not accept the *Upaniṣads* and has never been concerned with them in its long history of over two millennia from the time its foundational *sūtra* text was written. As for the *Gītā*, no one in his wildest imagination would even dream of thinking that Mīmāṃsā has ever had anything to do with it.

Nyāya, which even at the *sūtra* stage tried to uphold the authority of the Vedas, explicitly rejects the notion that all reality is one, a view which one may plausibly ascribe to the *Upaniṣads*. In fact, even the defence of the Vedas by Gautama in the *Nyāya Sūtras* is extremely ambiguous as he equates it with the authority that one accords to the *Āyurveda*. As for the criticism of the Upaniṣadic view, it is explicit in the *Sūtras*.

It is true that Udayana in his *Ātmatattva Viveka*, specially in its concluding portion, shows a strong inclination towards the extreme Advaitic interpretation of the Upaniṣadic position as developed in the *Brahma Sūtras*, the *Gaudapāda Kārikā*, and Śaṅkara's commentaries on the *Upaniṣads* and the *Brahma Sūtras*. But the honeymoon, if it ever happened there, was short-lived, as the long debate on Śaṅkara Miśra's *Bhedaratnāma* showed. The reality of difference became the central bone of contention between the Advaitins and the non-Advaitins even though it is not clear how the Naiyāyika will accommodate this reality in his conception of *mokṣa*, or the state of liberation.

As for the *Brahma Sūtras* and the *Gītā*, no Naiyāyika seems to have paid much attention to them, except the great Vācaspati Miśra I, whose case is unique as he not only wrote authoritatively on Nyāya, but also on Vedānta and Sāṃkhya giving us new directions for their interpretation. He is perhaps the first person to exemplify the trend in the Indian philosophical tradition of thinkers who write on a number of different philosophical schools and contribute to their development. Yet, though this has been the case with many a thinker, no one has cared to see the inter-relationship between their different works or evaluate the arguments that they have given in support of each of them. Many of these arguments must have been opposed to one another as they were in support of radically different positions. In any case, no Naiyāyika, except Vācaspati Miśra I, has ever written, even individually, on the *Brahma Sūtra*, or the *Gītā* or the *Upaniṣads* or accepted their authority in any sense of the term.

As for Vaiśeṣika, it is well known that it does not accept the authority of *śabda prāmāṇya* and hence cannot be suspected of recognizing any of the texts in the Vedic or non-Vedic tradition as authoritative. The *prasthāna trayī*, therefore, is totally irrelevant to it, as it has been for Sāṃkhya which is supposed to have an independent origin and has continued to lead an autonomous life of its own. The philosophical system known as Yoga in the Indian tradition has generally been regarded as allied to Sāṃkhya as far as the epistemological and metaphysical aspects were concerned, and while its methodology of spiritual praxis may have something to do with the various *upāsanās* mentioned in the *Upaniṣads*, it is basically independent and pursues a line of *sādhanā* which is different from the one prescribed either in the *Upaniṣads* or the *Gītā*. It should be remembered in this connection that the *upāsanās* prescribed in the former are rejected by Śaṅkara in the sense that, according to him, they do not lead to *mokṣa*, and that the paths prescribed in the *Gītā* are very different from those that are prescribed in the *Upaniṣads*. Thus none of the five major non-śramaṇic traditions in Indian philosophy have anything to do with the so-called '*prasthāna trayī*' texts which have been loudly proclaimed to be the source of all philosophies in India.

The same is true of all the āgamic traditions of India. We have already mentioned Buddhism and Jainism. The non-śramaṇic āgamic traditions such as the Pāśupata, the Pāñcarātra, the Śaiva Siddhānta, the Vira Śaiva and the Kāśmīra Śaivism or the Pratyabhijña have the same attitude with respect to the *prasthāna trayī* texts as do the non-Vedāntic traditions which, at least nominally, began to accept the authority of the Vedas at some period in their long history. Some of the āgamic schools, such as Vira Śaivism, are openly hostile and reject the Vedic tradition of which the *prasthāna trayī* texts are supposed to be an integral part. Others have independent texts of their own which they regard as authoritative.

It is true that sometimes some important person in these traditions has written on one of the *prasthāna trayī* texts. The most well-known example is that of Abhinava Gupta who wrote on the *Gītā*. But, as is obvious in his case, they do not regard the text they write upon as authoritative in the same sense as those which belong to their own tradition.

In fact, the question of the independent authority of non-śramaṇic āgamic texts was raised by Yāmunācārya, the first non-Advaitic

Vedāntic ācārya in his *Āgama Prāmāṇya* in the eleventh century, a clear indication that even those who wanted to ally themselves with the Vedic tradition were not satisfied with its claim to being the *sole* authority on the tradition, *excluding* all other sources which were highly regarded in the tradition. Śaṅkara's inclusion of the *Gītā* amongst the basic texts was already an evidence of this, though it has never been seen as such. In fact, the attempt by some well-meaning persons to include it amongst the *Upaniṣads* had been rejected by the tradition and it enjoyed only the stature of a *smyti* and never a *śruti* in the Indian tradition. Thus, even though it was regarded as the word of God by many people, it was never given the status accorded to those texts which were regarded as 'Vedic' in the tradition.

Yāmunācārya, it seems, wanted to widen this notion of the basic authoritative texts of the tradition even though, for some strange reason, the *Gītā* has never, as far as I know, been recognized as an *āgama* in the Indian tradition. The other great non-Advaitic ācāryas continued what Yāmuna had begun, but adopted a strategy which was different. On the one hand, they accepted the authority of all or at least some of the texts included in the *prasthāna trayī* but interpreted them in a way that was radically different from the one given by Śaṅkara. On the other hand, they included texts other than the ones regarded as belonging to the *prasthāna trayī* group and treated them as *equally* authoritative. This was specially the case with the *Śrīmadbhāgavad* which, in fact, became the main text for them and the interpretations of both the *Upaniṣads* and the *Brahma Sūtras* had to accord with it.

Yāmunācārya had commented on the *Gītā*, but had left the *Brahma Sūtras* and the *Upaniṣads* aside. Rāmānuja, on the other hand, faced the challenge directly and wrote the famous commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras* treating Śaṅkara's interpretation as a *pūrvapakṣa*. Thus began the long debate between the Advaitins and the non-Advaitins regarding the interpretation of the *prasthāna trayī* texts; but none of the non-Advaitic ācāryas confined themselves to these texts alone, or commented on all of them, all the time.

Rāmānuja did not write any independent commentary on the *Upaniṣads* as Śaṅkara had done, even though, like him, he wrote on the *Gītā*. In fact, except for Madhva, none of the non-Advaitic ācāryas wrote separately on the *Upaniṣads* as perhaps they thought that a successful non-Advaitic interpretation of the *Brahma Sūtras*

was sufficient, as the latter was supposed to contain the essence of the former.

All of them, of course, wrote on the *Brahma Sūtras* and some of them also on the *Gītā*. But there were ācāryas like Nimbārka who wrote only on the *Brahma Sūtras* and left the *Gītā* and the *Upaniṣads* alone. But what is even more interesting is the inclusion of the *Śrīmadbhāgavad* as an independent text, first by Madhva and then by Vallabha and still later, by the followers of Caitanya who gave up the whole *prasthāna trayī* tradition altogether. Madhva according to B.N.K. Sharma, the well-known authority on Dvaita Vedānta, had written a work entitled the *Bhāgavattātparya Nirṇaya* on which two *vyākhyās* were written by Yadupati (AD 1630) and Śrīnivāsa Tīrtha (AD 1640), respectively, the manuscripts of which are available at Udupi and Mysore.

Vallabha, of course, wrote both on the *Brahma Sūtras* and the *Gītā*, but he laid an even greater emphasis on the *Śrīmadbhāgavad*. Caitanya did not write anything, but his disciples, Rūpa Goswāmi and Jīva Goswāmi, gave up even the practice of writing on the *Brahma Sūtras* and concentrated only on the *Śrīmadbhāgavad*.

Thus the only text which may possibly claim to be a '*prasthāna*' text for the pre-Caitanya Vedāntic tradition of philosophy in India is the *Brahma Sūtras* and not the *Upaniṣad* and the *Gītā* along with it, as is generally claimed. But this will be *true* only of the pre-Caitanya Vedāntic tradition and not for any of the other schools of Indian philosophy, whether Vedic or non-Vedic. The *āgamic* traditions of India have never accepted them, nor have those non-Vedāntic schools which have, mistakenly, been ascribed to the Vedic tradition. There has been nothing like *one* '*prasthāna*' in the Indian tradition, as has been evident time and again in its long history. Even such a late thinker as Śwāmi Nārāyaṇa, the founder of the sect by that name sometime in the late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century in Gujarat, for example, accepted the Vedas and the *Brahma Sūtras* as authoritative texts but also added to them, texts such as the *Viṣṇusahasranāmā* which no one had even thought of as an authoritative basic text before. In fact, his list is quite perplexing as it includes, besides *Vidurāñī*, *Vāsudeva Māhātmya* and the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*.

The inclusion of *Vāsudeva Māhātmya* is strange, but stranger still is the inclusion of *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* and *Vidura Nīti* by him. Does it indicate that spiritual leaders at this time were becoming aware of

the importance of legal and political-cum-social texts for guidance in the changing situation that was developing all around? Further, there is the added question as to why Swāmi Nārāyaṇa chose the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* instead of the *Manusmṛti* which one would expect he would do. Perhaps the former served his purpose better. In that case, the differences between these two basic texts of the Dharma Śāstra tradition in India will have to be explored in this light.

A more radical departure seems to have occurred in the writings and practice of Nārāyaṇa Guru who came from Kerala and lived during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century. Not only did he not write on the *Brahma Sūtras* or the *Gītā* but he built temples without any idol in them. This was in that true Advaitic tradition which ultimately believes only in the formless and the nameless one. It is also reminiscent of Dayānanda Sarasvatī who also completely gave up the worship of images, as a result of his return to the origins and acceptance of the Vedas as the only authoritative source for the tradition.

The idea that there was some sort of '*prasthāna*' for all of the diverse philosophical traditions of India is not found in the ancient texts. Perhaps, the idea arose sometime in the seventeenth century when Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, the well-known Advaita thinker, wrote his *Prasthāna Bheda*. But those who have derived inspiration from the title have not carefully read the contents of this work as its main contention is that the differences in the various philosophical traditions of India derived from the differences in their *prasthāna bheda*, which is their starting point. This would imply that the uniqueness of Vedānta lies in its starting point, or in the basic texts which it treats as authoritative, and not in the compelling nature of the arguments which are given in support of its position. This, to a certain extent, parallels the Jain position that it is the *dṛṣṭi bheda* which accounts for the differences between the different traditions of philosophy in the country. But how far such a contention accords with Madhusūdana's position in *Advaita Siddhi*, is difficult to say. *Prima facie*, there seems to be an apparent contradiction, as the latter work is justly famous for its arguments against Vyāsatīrtha II given in his *Nyāyāmṛta*.

Whatever is the origin of the idea that the *prasthāna trayī* texts have been the source of all philosophical traditions in India, is a myth and should be recognized as such. It is sustained neither by evidence nor argument. It is *not* true even of those schools which

are generally considered as 'Vedāntic' in the tradition. Only the *Brahma Sūtras* may be said to provide the basis for this claim to a great extent, but neither Yāmuna nor the post-Vallabha masters wrote on it. And, many of them *openly* advocated the authority of other texts not included in the *prasthāna trayī* texts. It is time that the myth be buried and forgotten by all those who are more in favour of intellectual honesty than of their own private prejudices and predilections, or the particular school of philosophy they may happen to love or espouse in the Indian tradition.