

ADVAITA PHILOSOPHY IN KARNATAKA- A STUDY

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Shankara was one of the great philosophers that the world has seen; but he was not merely a philosopher. His personality had many other facets which, however, are generally ignored and neglected. The dazzling brilliance of his bold metaphysical speculation has blinded the eyes even of his most fervent devotees to the other aspects of his mind and activity. It is a pity that this should have happened and that he should be unjustifiably denounced as a dreamer, an acosmist, and a mere Nayavadin who had no sympathy for the sufferings of the people in this world. This is an irritating and erroneous conception wrongly allowed to be developed by his followers and actively canvassed by his detractors. An impartial estimate of the life and activities of this teacher is bound to dispute this misconception.

Pandit Nehru, who cannot be said to be partial to Shankara characterizes him as a “man amazing energy and vasy activity.” He points out that “in a brief life of thirty-two years he did the work of many long lives.” And “played a more vital part in India’s life than all the kings and Emperors.” In another place he says “Shankara was no escapist retiring into his shell or into a corner of the forest, seeking his own individual perfection and oblivious of what happened to others.”

Shankara’s greatness can be properly evaluated only against the historical background of the most extraordinary times in which he was born. It is now generally agreed that he was born in 788 A.D. and gave up his body in 820 A.D. History tells us that the India of his times was in chaotic welter. Politically, the country was divided into a great number of small states. There was no one central, unifying and sufficiently strong political power. The jealousies, rivalries and parochialism of the different kingdoms had weakened the country to such an extent that the adventurous and greedy foreigner was easily tempted to invade it. Cultural too, the land was torn asunder by the centuries-old conflicting claims of the Vedic and non-vedic ideals of life. Even among the followers of the atmosphere was filled with the dust of innumerable verbal wrangling and confusion, when great scholars were thus found sharply divided among themselves about the interpretation and meaning of life, we can easily imagine the state of mind of the ordinary men; literally, they were confounded and disappointed. They did not know what to do.

Under such circumstances India was almost waiting for the advent of this illustrious son of hers-Shankara. The country was preparing itself for his coming. Indian religion, Indian culture and Indian philosophy were in search of an advocate who could vindicate them before the bar of world opinion and criticism. Shankara more than fulfilled all these exceptions and mission in life was to eliminate the forces of disunity and disruption that divided India in a thousand ways, and make her culturally a unified and strong nation.

For this purpose he had to carry on an incessant fight often against very heavy odds. But be it said to his credit, he achieved what was evidently a miracle. He found India weak and divided, but left her unified and strong enough to face the continuous onslaughts and the despotic rule of the Muslims and Europeans during the several centuries that followed. It is no exaggeration, to say that Hinduism today owes its existence to Shankara. The ancient culture of India forms the basis of Indian life even today, and his continuity was made possible by the herculean and unceasing efforts of Shankara.

Shankara seems to have been fully conscious of the work for which he was born, even from his childhood. He left his home at the tender age of eight, sought illumination at the feet of the guru, wrote his famous works, and dedicated his life to the conquest of the disruptive forces and reconstitution of Indian society. The establishment of the four monasteries at the farthest points of the four sides of the country, throw sufficient light on the vision of this great man. India was to him culturally an indivisible unit.

Shankar, however, was not to be satisfied merely by the temporary reformation of society. He was far more concerned with the maintenance and continuity of the ideal society which he envisaged. This is revealed in some of the rules which he prescribed for the conduct of the monasteries founded by him. Therein he clearly lays down that the usual tendency of social movement is towards absence of righteousness; in spite of the laws people are naturally selfish and disturb the social harmony; therefore the responsibility of the Acharayas occupying the pontifical seats of their monasteries is very great; they should be always on the alert; should spare no pains to remove the forces of evil; they should never stay in one place, but should always be moving about within their decays, society is doomed to destruction. It should be noted that Shankara further lays down if any occupant of the religious seat fails to carry out the duties prescribed for him, he should be removed from his office, and a better one installed.

It will be thus seen that Shankara spent his whole life in trying to realize his one dream of establishing and maintaining a well-organized, strongly knit, and unified society. His ideal society would be prosperous and flourishing, and there would be no exploitation of any individual or group of individuals by other individuals or group of individuals. All persons in it would be self-reliant and self-conscious. They would know their own abilities, aptitudes and capabilities. They would try to serve the society of which they are members in the best possible way. They would contribute their special excellences to the furthering of the interests of their societies. They would follow the rules of the four varnas and Ashramas which, however, need not mean water-tight compartments of individuals.

Every man in society would know that he had to realize himself and be absolutely free. Whatever occupation he might be following or whatever duty he might be discharging at the moment, in his heart of hearts he would know that everything he did was to realize that one distant event, namely, realization or freedom. Human life is a pursuit of goods; and the goods may be either intrinsic or instrumental. Individual perfection is the ultimate intrinsic good, and all other goods are instrumental to it. Every individual is always concerned with one or both of these goods. Social law and social restrictions should make it possible to give freedom to everybody to pursue the goods of his own choice. That society is ideal where every opportunity and scope is given to all individuals to develop themselves to the fullest possible extent. It should be possible for everyone progressively to go through the different goods and ultimately reach the highest perfection. This can only be secured by maintaining the strict rule of dharma or law or social justice. Hence dharma must be preserved at all costs.

Obviously, planned society is unthinkable without a system of philosophy according to which it can be planned. Shankara, therefore, had to write down his philosophy so as to form a solid foundation for an ideal society. The society that accepts Shankara's philosophy and tries to live up to it, should know no failure, no disappointment and no disaster. It is applicable to smaller units of society, to one vast country, and even to modern idea of a world state. Regardless of territorial extent, the principles of his philosophy are sufficient to point out the path that all must follow if prosperity and plenty should reign. Different individuals are bound to have different tastes, different religious susceptibilities, and different attitudes. All of them can find a place on the society guided by the light of Shankara's thought. Multiplicity is compatible with unity. Different individuals can follow different sadhanas, worship

different deities and yet live in harmony and advance towards the same goal.

We may now proceed to consider some of the most fundamental questions that exercise the minds of social theorists today and see how Shankara's philosophy can help us solve them. This will prove the adequacy of the Advaita philosophy in meeting the requirements for the modern mind. In the field of politics, social philosophy, ethics, religion and science-everywhere we shall see how Shankara can be of substantial help to us. In this section we shall briefly review the contribution made by Karnataka to the development of the Advaita philosophy. Space forbids us to take note of all the Advaita writers in Karnataka. We shall select some representative writers and point out their contributions.

Geographically, Karnataka does not represent the southernmost part of India. Consistently with the choice of other places for the establishment of his monastic seats, Shankara should have chosen Rameshwar of some other place near it. Shringeri, where the present Math is situated, is at a considerable distance for the southernmost point of India. It cannot be said that Shankara had not gone to these more southern parts. How then can we account for the selection of Shringeri by Shankara as his pontifical seat. Why did Shankara prefer Shringeri, a part of Karnataka, to many other places of the south? Is there any special reason for it?

Tradition tells us that Shringeri attracted the attention of the great teacher because of its holy and peaceful air. Even natural enemies in the kingdom of animals forgot their inborn hatred and lived there in brotherhood. The spot near the Shringeri Mutt revealed to Shankara, when he was wandering in search of a place suitable for his southern Mutt the wonderful spectacle of a serpent tending a frog with affection. This unusual sight immediately appealed to Shankara. He also found that place was formerly the place of penance of the famous sage of Ramayana, Rishyashringa. Shankara's philosophy was that of non-dualism and the Advaitin has no enemies at all, everyone ultimately being his own Atman. He could find no place better than this to teach and propagate the Advaita philosophy.

Karnataka has always been a land of devotional mystics, though it is not altogether lacking in metaphysicians as well. As far back as the composition of the Bhagavata Purana, this was recognized. A famous verse in the Bhagavata Mahatmya clearly points out: "I (devotion) was born in the Dravida country and brought up in Karnataka; Maharashtra gave me some shelter here and there, but Gujarat made me old and worn out." It was Karnataka which gave birth to Sri Madhva and his Vaishnavism is still flourishing here. Shri Basav and others of the Veerashaiva cult were born here

and Karnataka is the land of Veerashaiva. Both these cults are devotional in outlook and attitude. Even the Shri Vaishnavism of Shri Ramanjua found a fertile ground in Karnataka. All these schools of Vedanta stress Bhakti rather than jnana as a means to liberation, though this statement will have to be taken with a little caution in the case of the Shaiva saints. Karnatak was thus chosen by Shankara because it was hallowed by the long and living presence of devotees of God.

Madhava's or Vidyaranya's is the first name that springs to our lips when we turn to Advaita teachers in Karnataka. What is said of Aristotle among the ancients and Leibnitz among the moderns in the West, may be said of Vidyaranya in the East. He knew everything that was worth knowing at his time. There was not a branch of learning or object of study which he did not know and to the advancement of which he did not make substantial contribution. To the Vedantic literature especially he has made important additions.

He wrote several works which cannot be ignored by students of Advaita. The most important among them are the Panchadashi, the VivaranaPrameyaSangraha and Jeevanmuki-Viveka. In the worlds of Radhakrishnan, "The panchadashi is a classic of later Advaita." And SureswaraVidyaranya though they all belong to the same general type of thinking, have something fresh to say, and reflect some facet of the meaning of absolute idealism not seen before with the same intensity. While they employ the same method and expound the same view, they yet manage to maintain their own individualities." In another respect also Vidyaranya's name has become immortal. In his youth he had forts dedicated himself to the study and pursuit of religion. But when he gave up his study and devoted himself to the founding of a kingdom which without doubt stemmed the tide of Islam in the south. This outlook of his has found eloquent expression in his Panchadashi. "Action is not repugnant to a jnani; though he is not bound to do it, still, if he so desires, he may carry on, with great success, even such an enormous worldly duty as the carrying on of the administration of the country." It is said that he not only meant it but actually translated it into action. Moreover Vidyaranya was the first man under whose superintendence all the ancient Shastras were interpreted from the Advaita standpoint.

Among the Veerashaiva saints two names of considerable importance must be mentioned. One

was the great AllamaPrabhu who enjoyed the position of guru and leader at the time of Basava in the twelfth century. AllamaPrabhu was a Jeewanmukta and mystic of a very high order. But excepting a few Vachanas he wrote no systematic treatise on Vedanta. It is therefore not possible to say anything more than barely mention his name. The other Veerashaiva saint, NijagunaShivayogi, wrote several systematic books on the Vedanta both in Kannada and in Sankrit. Fortunately the Kannada writings have come down to us though the Sanskrit works are still to be recovered. His writings wield considerable influence on the minds of masses even today. They are read everywhere and propounded at great length. The main philosophical standpoint of this saint is the same as that of Shankara but the way in which he expounds and develops it is very stimulating and original. Probably he belonged to the sixteenth century A.D. Both these saints rendered a great service to the Advaita philosophy by making it acceptable to a considerable number of Veerashaivas. Devotion to Shiva was reconciled with the Advaiticjanan.

The last work which we may notice in this article is Anubhavamrita written in metric form in Kannada. It is a very popular book and is studied almost in every-household. Its author is known to be Rangnatha or Mahalinga-Ranga. He probably lived in the Seventeenth Century. He shows considerable originality and subtlety of thinking. His work immediately attracted so much attention that a sanyasin named BalakrishnaBrahmananda thought it worth his while to translate it into Sankrit. The translation was made in ShalivahanaShaka 1735 or 1813 A.D. it is in the form of a talk between Vyasa and Shuka, his son.

On the whole it may be said that the contribution of the Kannadigas to the development of the Advaita philosophy is considerable, though not revolutionary or epoch-making. The Kannada genius has readapted it according to its own requirements. This is an achievement of which Karnataka can very well be proud.

Notes & References

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