

Discerning The Latest School Of Advaita Vedanta.

Swami Vedarthananda

Research Scholar, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute, Belur Math, West Bengal, India.

Abstract : Satchidanandendra Saraswati Swami (1880-1975) spearheaded a new exegetical system to interpret the commentaries of Shankara Bhagavatpada (circa 788-820), based on the famous axiom of Advaita Vedanta: Brahman is expounded by means of *adhyaropa* and *apavada*. For the Swami outrightly rejected anything that went against what was evidently stated by the Commentator. According to the Swami *Bhamati*, *Vivarana* and such traditional schools of interpretation did not represent the true teachings of Shankara Bhagavatpada. Therefore he propagated his own school of interpretation known as the *Shuddhashankaravada* which means “the school that expounds the pure form of Shankara's philosophy”. *Shuddhashankaravada* is based on two primary conclusions: firstly, there is no material cause called *Mulavidya*, for the the *adhyasa* to happen. Secondly, the original method of teaching Brahman is *adhyaropa* and *apavada* and this is the method followed by Shankara Bhagavatpada throughout his commentaries on the *prasthanatrayi*. The results emanating from these conclusions drawn by the Swami are very far-reaching and revolutionary.

IndexTerms - Advaita, Vedanta, Shankara, Satchidanandendra, Bhagavatpada, Commentator, Shuddhashankaravada, Adhyaropa, Apavada, Krishnaswami Iyer, Bhashyashanti, Prakriya, Avasthatraya, Truth, Sarvatrika-purnanubhava, Mulavidya, Avidya, Adhyasa, Brahman, Atman, Upanishad, Naishkarmyasiddhi, Vyavahara, Mithya, Satya, Siddhanta, Bhashyam, Material cause, Original methodology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Satchidanandendra Saraswati Swami¹ (1880-1975) was certainly one of the greatest Advaitins in recent times. He spearheaded a new exegetical system to interpret the commentaries of Shankara Bhagavatpada (circa 788-820), based on the famous axiom of Advaita Vedanta quoted by the Commentator Himself: Brahman is expounded by means of *adhyaropa* and *apavada*². For the Swami, the commentaries of Shankara Bhagavatpada on the *prasthanatrayi* formed the epitome of the Advaita doctrine and therefore he outright rejected anything that went against what was evidently stated by the Commentator. *Bhamati*, *Vivarana* and such traditional schools could never present any stumbling block in his endeavours, because the nature of debate in front of him was “Shankara versus a thousand years' tradition”. The Swami unhesitatingly took side with the former. Aptly is his school of interpretation came to be known as the *Shuddhashankaravada* which means “the school that expounds the pure form of Shankara's philosophy.”

II. DISCERNING THE MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF THE SWAMI.

II.1. Origin Of The Shuddhashankaravada.

The pre-monastic name of the Swami was Yellambalasi Subbaraya³. Born in a poor but pious Brahmin family, he showed special interest in Advaita Vedanta even while he was a student. He was formally initiated into the study of Shankara Bhagavatpada's commentaries in a ceremony called *bhashyashanti* by His Holiness the Shankaracharya of Shringeri. He came in

1 Hereafter mostly referred to as “the Swami.”

2 "अध्यारोपापवादाभ्यां निष्पन्नम् प्रपञ्चते" – *Bhagavadgita-bhashyam* of Shri Shankara Bhagavatpada, 13.13

3. In the English works by the Swami, his pre-monastic name is shown either as Y. Subbaraya or as Y. Subba Rao. *Subba* is the Kannada equivalent of the Sanskrit word *Subrahmanya*.

contact with many great Vedantins of the time – Shri K. A. Krishnaswami Iyer, Mahamahopadhyaya Hanagal Virupaksha Shastri and others. Kurtakoti Mahabhadgavata, Gondavalekar Brahmachaitanya Maharaj and many others became his spiritual guides.

He dedicated his life for the cause of Shankara Vedanta even when he was a youth. He endeavored to formulate “the true methodology” of Advaita Vedanta followed by Shri Gaudapada, Shankara Bhagavatpada and Sureshwara Bhagavatpada. According to the Swami the true methodology of Vedanta was lost in the post-Shankara era of polemics and its distorted form negatively influenced the Vedantins. In order to propagate the true *prakriya* (methodology) of Shankara Bhagavatpada, as he understood it, the Swami founded Adhyatmaprakasha Karyalaya in Bangalore in the year 1920. In 1937, he shifted the institution to Holenarsipur. He had his *sannyasa* vows on 10th June 1948 in Holenarsipur. For the remaining part of his life, the Swami led a simple and secluded life in Holenarsipur and engaged himself in writing and publishing a large number of Vedanta works. The Swami studied the original works of Shankara Bhagavatpada repeatedly for a long time and produced over 200 books in Kannada, Sanskrit and English. He published many scholarly articles too in the *Adhyatmaprakasha* magazine. His Kannada translation of the commentaries of Shankara Bhagavatpada on the three *prasthanas* of the Vedanta, is hailed as the best of the kind in that language. Having been reverentially hailed as Abhinava Shankara, the Swami attained *mahasamadhi* on 5th August 1975.

Among the Swami's works, *Mulavidyanirasa* (Published in 1929) earned him great critical acclaim. This work is the basis of the *Shuddhashankara* school, as the views of the Swami are known today among the Advaitins. The Swami published *Mulavidyanirasa* in his pre-monasitic life as per the directions of his teacher Shri K. A. Krishnaswami Iyer who told the young Subbaraya: “Present-day Vedantins hold that there is a *mulavidya*, causal ignorance which constitutes the material cause of *adhyasa* (superimposition) and the same continues in the form of seed in deep sleep and dissolution (of the world) and a trace of it remains in the *Jnanis*, the enlightened ones. This theory being totally opposite to Shankara’s *siddhanta* (teaching) and reason, it is very much necessary to write a book called *Mulavidya-Kuthara* in order to refute it”⁴ Regarding the publication of *Mulavidyanirasa*, D. B. Gangolli writes: “He had literally stirred up a hornet’s nest.”⁵

II.2. The Pramanas Used By The Swami In His Approach To The Original Commentaries.

The main *pramana* (means of knowledge) for the Swami in analysing the commentaries of Shankara Bhagavatpada was the *sarvatrikapurnanubhava* (Universal and Absolute Intuitive Experience).

This understanding is arrived at through *avasthatrayapariksha*. K. A. Krishnaswami Iyer always held that the *avasthatrayapariksha* (or *avasthatrayaviveka* as it is sometimes referred to) is the most effective form of the true methodology of Advaita Vedanta and this is the reason why Advaita Vedanta excels all other philosophies in the world.

Before examining the authenticity of *mulavidya*, the Swami goes into a convincing description of the superiority of the *Sarvatrika-purnanubhava*.⁶ The Swami insists that nothing that contradicts with the universal absolute experience should be accepted just based on some statement, however authoritative that may be. Truth (*tattvam*) is that which is known through any means of knowledge that doesn't contradict this experience. And there cannot be any contradiction regarding this experience since the experience accepted here is the one which is universally acceptable to one and all. The Swami calls this experience further as *sakshyanubhava*. The experience (*anubhava*) which is never contradicted in anybody's knowledge at any state of mind is accepted here as the *Universal and Absolute Experience* which is the most authoritative knowledge according to the Swami.

The Swami accepts inference etc. as different means of knowledge only if they conform to this universal absolute experience. He argues that even the Upanishadic Rishis accepted reason as true only if it was supported by this experience. He writes:

4. Swamiji's Autobiography in Kannada. p.309. The portion quoted here is based on the English translation given in the Publisher's Note to the *Mulavidyanirasa* (Edition 2009).

5. Sri Satchidanandendra Saraswati Swamiji – An Advent of Adi Sankaracharya in Our Own Times. P.18

6. *Mulavidyanirasa*, P.12-17

“They seem to have felt the futility of merely analyzing the faculty of reason, for it can only examine, but can never create facts. Its one insistent demand is consistency everywhere and consistency may not always characterize facts. Reason is perfectly justified in demanding self-consistency from a proposed theory and it has the right to counsel us to throw away any hypothesis which exhibits inconsistencies in its make-up. But when a fact universally recognized as such discloses any inconsistencies, reason must simply bear with them. The only function then open to it, will be to seek an explanation.”⁷

II.3. The Twofold Result Of His Studies.

The outcome of the independent studies the Swami conducted in the commentaries of Shankara Bhagavatpada, mainly based on the method of *avasthatrayavichara* was twofold: First, according to the Commentator, *adhyasa* has no positive material cause known among the Advaitins as *mulavidya*. Second, *adhyaropa* followed by *apavada* is the original method of teaching Brahman. Along with this, the Swami also holds that the method of *adhyaropa* and *apavada* occurs in the Vedantic scriptures in a variety of forms.

III. ADHYASA WITHOUT A MATERIAL CAUSE.

Satchidanandendra Saraswati considers *adhyasa* as a phenomenon without a material cause.

How can *adhyasa* be ever doubted to have a material cause? This question is answered thus: *adhyasa* is defined as the superimposition of the unreal over the Real. For this to happen, the unreal has to be perceived inspite of its unreality. A thing must have at least 'some kind of' existence to be perceived. The unreal too is perceived in *adhyasa*. Therefore the unreal must have an origin just like all the things that exist and can thus be perceived. Any origin needs a material cause. Therefore the unreal has to have a material cause. The material cause of the unreal is the material cause of *adhyasa* as well, since *adhyasa* is the very perception of the unreal over the real.

This kind of reasoning is almost laughed at by Satchidanandendra. According to him, the unreal needn't necessarily have an origin if the very perception of the unreal is called *adhyasa*, because the very reason for *adhyasa* can serve as the reason for the perception of the unreal. The reason of *adhyasa* is *aviveka* – nondiscrimination of the real and the unreal.

One may say: Satchidanandendra Saraswati seems to be correct so far as goes his assertion that the reason for the *adhyasa* can very well be the reason for the perception of the unreal. But he probably erred while pointing out the reason for the *adhyasa*. It is not nondiscrimination that causes the *adhyasa*, but noncomprehension. Nondiscrimination presupposes two things – a condition which, even according to Satchidanandendra, is caused by *adhyasa*. No such difficulty arises with noncomprehension. And again this is in integrity with what the author of the *Vartikam* said in the opening statements of the *Naishkarmyasiddhi*.

This criticism can be countered on two grounds: one is that if noncomprehension be the cause of *adhyasa*, then *adhyasa* must exist even in *sushupti*. But in that case there would not be an *avastha* called *sushupti* as we experience it. In order to come out of this difficulty, *sushupti* should be accepted as the very cause of *adhyasa*, but Satchidanandendra is not ready to accept any cause-effect relation between two *avasthas*. This is the other ground on which the above criticism can be countered.

But it may be that Satchidanandendra intentionally held that *adhyasa* is caused by nondiscrimination, in order to show that no reasoning regarding the nature of *adhyasa* is free from that very error – there will always be another *adhyasa* lurking in the background.

7. Mandukyarahasyavivriti, Introduction, P.49

IV. *ADHYAROPA* AND *APAVADA* – THE ORIGINAL METHOD OF TEACHING THE BRAHMAN.

Most of the scholars belonging to the tradition of Advaita Vedanta now believe in the diversity of the method in teaching the Upanishadic Truth called Brahman. Since *vyavahara* is *mithya*, they argue, an Advaitin needn't strictly adhere to any particular *prakriya*. This argument was famously postulated by Appayya Dikshita (16th century) in the beginning of his famous work *Siddhantaleshasangraha*, and subsequently it found much fervour among the Advaita scholars for mainly two reasons: firstly because it granted a kind of exoneration to Advaita Vedanta by providing a philosophical support to the many disagreements among the Advaitins themselves and secondly because it exemplified an exegetical application of the *satya-mithya* paradigm which was central to their school of Uttara Mimamsa.

The Swami defines the *vedantaprakriya* as “the method adopted in the Upanishads to impart the *brahmavidya*.”⁸ According to him there is only one method to teach Brahman: the method of *adhyaropa* and *apavada*. Any method that the Upanishads appear to have employed in teaching Brahman can in fact be understood as the very *adhyaropapavadaprakriya*, if we care to discern them in the light of the Commentator's views. The Swami outrightly rejects the idea that the *adhyaropapavadaprakriya* is one among the many methods of Vedanta. To him, it is the only true *prakriya* which appears in various names and forms in the Vedanta treatises.

One of the most powerful argument the Swami employs to support his aforesaid contention is that the very purpose Shankara Bhagavatpada had in composing his commentaries on the *prasthanatrayi* is to teach the Advaitic Truth through the proper method of Vedanta. And that method is the method of *adhyaropa* and *apavada*, and it is very much evident throughout his works. It is further supported by the fact that the Advaitic interpretation of the Upanishads existed even before Shankara Bhagavatpada and his real contribution is not teaching Advaita *per se*, but teaching it through the proper method. And according to the Swami that proper method is undoubtedly the method of *adhyaropa* and *apavada*, declared as such by Bhagavan Bhashyakara in the *GitaBhashyam*.⁹

V. CONCLUSION.

Through his exegetical arguments, Satchidanandendra Saraswati diverted the attention of the Advaita scholars back to the commentaries of Shankara Bhagavatpada. When great deviations taken by the established schools of Advaita while interpreting the *bhashyas*, were clearly pointed out by the Swami, many of the criticisms directed against the Commentator by non-Advaitins for more almost a thousand years, were rendered just meaningless, because, if what the Swami said is correct, they based their reprovals on the misrepresentations of the Commentator's philosophy. It is this far-reaching sequel of the Swami's works that makes him today a subject of serious study by the students of Vedanta.

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8. Vedantaprakriyapratyabhijna, p.1

9. "अध्यारोपापवादार्थ्यां निष्प्रपञ्चम् प्रपञ्चते" – Bhagavadgita-Bhashyam of Shri Shankara Bhagavatpada, 13.13