

Ācārya Śaṅkara and His Brahma-Sūtra: A Realistic Approach

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Abstract

Ācārya Śaṅkara was a great philosopher of ancient India. He was most renowned exponent of the Advaita Vedānta School of philosophy, from whose doctrines the main currents of modern Indian thought are derived. He has propagated Advaita Vedānta. According to Ācārya Śaṅkara, there is one Absolute Brahman, who is known as *Sat-Cit-Ānanda*-- who is of an absolutely homogeneous nature. The appearance of this World is due to *Māyā* -- the illusory power of Brahman which is neither *Sat* (true) nor *Asat* (false). This World is also unreal. Ācārya Śaṅkara travelled widely in India and preached his Advaita philosophy wherever he went. He taught that supreme Brahman is *Nirguṇa* (without the guṇas), *Nirākāra* (formless), *Nirviśeṣa* (without attributes) and *Akartā* (non-agent). Brahman is above all needs and desires. This paper will highlight all about the Vedāntic Philosophy of Śaṅkara as described in his Brahma Sūtra.

Keywords : Brahma Sūtra, Vedāntic thoughts, Ultimate Reality,

The word Vedānta literally means ‘**the end of the Vedas**’. Primarily, the word understood for the Upaniṣads, though afterwards its denotation widened to include all thoughts developed out of the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads may be regarded as the end of the Vedas in different senses, *viz.* firstly, the Upaniṣads were the last literary products of the Vedic period. Three kinds of literature of this period can be broadly classified: the earliest being the Vedic *mantras*, the next being the Brāhmaṇas, which guiding and encouraging the Vedic rituals and the last, the Upaniṣads, which clearly discuss the philosophical *tattvas* or matters in a comprehensive way. In a broad sense these were called the Śrutis or Vedas. Secondly, in respect of study also, the Upanishads come last. As a rule, a man should study the Vedic Saṁhitās first, with the help of Brāhmaṇas and Vedāngas. But finally, he should read the Upaniṣads, as these texts help him to understand the real meaning of life and the life after death. These spiritual texts teach the man the mystery of life as well as the universe in a right way. Thirdly, the Upaniṣads may be regarded as the end of the Vedas, also in the sense that they mark the culmination of the Vedic speculation. Generally, the word Upaniṣads means ‘what destroys the ignorance and gets man near or closer to the God,’ or ‘what gets the man near to the teacher’. However, the Upaniṣads were regarded as the inner or secret meanings of the Vedas; hence, their teachings were sometimes called *Vedopaniṣad* or the mystery of the Vedas (Taittirīya Upaniṣad, I.11).

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Hence, Vedānta or Uttara Mīmāṃsā is the standard and the characteristic Philosophy of India. It is based on the oldest spiritual intuitions of the Upaniṣads, developed, systematized and updated by an unbroken tradition of great sages and Ācharyas. Though the name of Vedānta does not occur in the old Upaniṣads, we can hardly doubt that it was the Vedāntic thoughts, contained in the Upaniṣads, which gave the first impulse to more systematic philosophical speculations in India. Several scholars have tried to prove that Sāṃkhya ideas prevailed in India at an earlier time than the Vedāntic ideas. But though there certainly are germs of Sāṃkhya theory in the Upaniṣads, they are but few and far between while the strictly Vedāntic concepts meet us at every step in the hymns, the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas and in the Sūtras. Vedānta is clearly the native philosophy of India. It is true that this philosophy is not yet treated systematically in the Upaniṣads, but neither is the Sāṃkhya. To us, who care only for the growth of philosophical thought on the ancient soil of India, Vedānta is clearly the first growth; and the question whether Kapila lived before Bādarāyaṇa, or whether the systematic treatment of the Sāṃkhya took place before that of Vedānta can hardly arise.

However, there is no doubt that the Upaniṣads are the abstract of all Vedas and it contains the mystery of all sacred knowledge, which may help a man to get the liberation. In fact, the Upaniṣads were many in number and developed in the different Vedic Schools at different times and places. The problems discussed and solutions offered presented differences in spite of a unity of general outlook. The need was felt, therefore, in course of time for systematizing the different teachings so as to bring out the harmony underlying them. Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahma-Sūtras* or Śāṅkara Sūtras or Vedānta Sūtras or Uttara Mīmāṃsā, undertakes this task.

The Brahma Sūtras attempt to reconcile the seemingly contradictory and diverse statements of the various Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā, by placing each teaching in a doctrinal context. The word “*sūtra*” means “thread”, and the Brahma Sūtras literally stitch together the various Vedānta teachings into a logical and self-consistent whole. However, the Brahma Sūtras are so terse that not only are they capable of being interpreted in multiple ways, but they are often incomprehensible without the aid of the various commentaries handed down in the main schools of Vedānta thought. The Vedānta Sūtras supply ample evidence that at a very early time, i.e. a period before their own final composition, there were differences of opinion among the various interpreters of the Vedānta. These sūtras systematize the Jñānakāṇḍa (path of wisdom, as opposed to Karmakāṇḍa, the path of action) of the Veda, by combining the two tasks of concisely stating the teaching of the Veda and argumentatively establishing the specific interpretation of the Veda adopted in the sūtras. The sūtras also discuss the role of karma and God and critically address the various doctrines associated with Buddhism, Jainism, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Śaiva, Śākta, Atheism, and Sāṃkhya Philosophies.

In the canon of Vedānta literature, the Brahma Sūtra occupies a unique position as the oldest systematic commentary on the Upaniṣads. It defines the thread of Life Force (*prāṇa*) by which all of the universal objects are bound together. The Brahma Sūtras also constitute the *Nyāya-prasthāna*, the logical starting point of the Vedānta

philosophy (Nyāya = logic/order). No study of Vedānta is considered complete without a close examination of the *Prasthāna Traya*, the texts that stand as the three starting points. While the Upaniṣads (*Śrutiprasthāna*, the starting point of revelation) and the Bhagavad-Gītā (*Smṛti-prasthāna*), the starting point of remembered tradition) are the basic source texts of Vedānta, it is in the Brahma Sūtras that the teachings of Vedānta are set forth in a systematic and logical order.

The Brahma Sūtras consist of four Chapters (Adhyāyas). Each Chapter (Adhyāya) is divided into four *pādas* (parts) and each *pāda* consists of single or several groups of Sūtras called Adhikaraṇas. There are total 191 Adhikaraṇas containing 555 Sūtras, (aphorisms) in the Brahma -Sūtras.

The First Chapter explains that all the Vedānta texts talk of Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, which is the goal of life. There are thirty-nine Adhikaraṇas and one hundred thirty-four Sūtras in this Chapter. First *pāda* contain eleven Adhikaraṇas with thirty-one Sūtras, second *pāda* contain seven Adhikaraṇas with thirty-two Sūtras, third *pāda* contain thirteen Adhikaraṇas with forty-three Sūtras, and fourth *pāda* contain eight Adhikaraṇas with twenty-eight Sūtras.

The Second Chapter discusses and refutes the possible objections to Vedānta philosophy. There are forty-seven Adhikaraṇas and one hundred fifty-seven Sūtras in this Adhyāya. First *pāda* contain thirteen Adhikaraṇas with thirty-seven Sūtras, second *pāda* contain eight Adhikaraṇas with forty-five Sūtras, third *pāda* contain seventeen Adhikaraṇas with fifty-three Sūtras, and fourth *pāda* contain nine Adhikaraṇas with twenty-two Sūtras.

The Third Chapter describes the process by which Ultimate Emancipation can be achieved. There are sixty-seven Adhikaraṇas and one hundred eighty-six Sūtras in this Chapter. First *pāda* contain six Adhikaraṇas with twenty-seven Sūtras, second *pāda* contain eight Adhikaraṇas with forty-one Sūtras, third *pāda* contain thirty-six Adhikaraṇas with sixty-six Sūtras, and fourth *pāda* contain seventeen Adhikaraṇas with fifty-two Sūtras.

The Fourth Chapter elaborates the state that is achieved in Final Emancipation. There are thirty-eight Adhikaraṇas and Seventy-eight Sūtras in this Chapter. The first *pāda* contain fourteen Adhikaraṇas with nineteen Sūtras. The second *pāda* contain eleven Adhikaraṇas with twenty-one Sūtras. The Third *pāda* contain has six Adhikaraṇas with sixteen Sūtras. The fourth *pāda* contain seven Adhikaraṇas with twenty-two Sūtras.

However, in short, it can be said that the First Chapter exclusively elaborates that all the Vedānta texts talk of Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, which is the goal of life. The very first Sūtra offers an indication into the nature of the subject matter of Brahma Sūtra (I.1.1 athāto brahma jijñāsā-- Now: therefore the inquiry (into the Real Nature) of Brahman. The whole Brahma Sūtra very clearly explains in detail the True Nature and Form of Brahman. Second Chapter discusses and refutes the possible objections to Vedānta Philosophy. Third Chapter specifies the process by which Ultimate Emancipation (mokṣa) can be achieved. Fourth Chapter talks of the state that is achieved in Final Liberation or mokṣa.

Many Commentaries have been written on the Brahma Sūtra. It is known that there were more than fourteen commentaries on this text. Śrī Appaya Dikṣita rendered the commentary of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya more clearly by his Parimala, Śrī Vāchaspati Mishra by his work Bhāmatī and Śrī Amalananda Sarasvati by his Kalpataru, the earliest extant one being the one by Ādi Śaṅkara *Bhagavatpāda*. His commentary set forth the non-dualistic (Advaita) interpretation of the Vedānta, and was commented upon by Vācaspati and *Padmapāda*. These sub-commentaries, in turn, inspired other derivative texts in the Advaita School. Śrī Rāmānūjācārya also wrote a commentary on Brahma Sūtras, called, Śrī Bhāṣya, which lays foundations to the Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition. In this, he firmly refutes the Advaita view as proposed by Ādi Śaṅkara in his commentary. Other Commentators on the Brahma Sūtras, belonging to other Schools of Vedānta, include Bhāskara, Yādavaprakāśa, Keśava, Nīlakaṇṭha, Mādhva, Vallabha, Vijñānabhikṣu, Nimbārka, and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa. In the 12-13th Century, Śrī Madhvācārya wrote commentaries on Brahma Sūtras, which describe the Supremacy of Lord Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa. Thus, he laid out the foundation for Tatvavāda or Dvaita tradition of Vedānta refuting all the previous commentaries on Brahma Sūtras. Śrī Madhvācārya's four commentaries on Brahma Sūtras are: 1. Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya, 2. Nyāya Vivaraṇa, 3. Anuvyākhyāna, 4. Brahma Sūtras Anubhāṣya. Śrī Jayatīrtha wrote an extant sub-commentary to Mādhvācārya's Anuvyākhyāna called Nyāya Sudhā (Nectar of Logic) which is considered as magnum opus in Madhvācārya's School. Of the commentaries on the Brahma Sūtras, Ādi Śaṅkara's commentary stands pre-eminent in elaborating Advaita Vedānta according to his tradition. Whilst there is doubt regarding authorship of some of the works attributed to Ādi Śaṅkara, there is universal agreement in the tradition that the Commentary on Brahma Sūtra was composed by. This is evidenced by the fact that the genesis of Post Śaṅkara Schools arises from sub-commentaries on primarily his Brahma Sūtras Bhāṣya. In these sub-commentaries (of which the so-called Bhāmatī and Vivaraṇa Schools are most recognized), the authors profess to be elaborating on Śaṅkara's system of Advaita, and clearly identify Ādi Śaṅkara as the author of the commentary of Brahma Sūtra.

However, the five great Ācāryas: Śrī Śaṅkara the exponent of Kevala Advaita or uncompromising monism, Śrī Rāmānūja the exponent of Viśiṣṭādvaita or qualified monism, Śrī Nimbārka the exponent of Bhedābheda-vāda, Śrī Madhva the exponent of strict Dvaitism or Dvaita-vāda and Śrī Vallabha the exponent of Śuddhādvaita-vāda or pure monism agree that Brahman is the cause of this world and that knowledge of Brahman leads to Liberation or mokṣa or the Final Emancipation, which is the goal of life. They also emphatically declared that Brahman can be known only through the scriptures and not through mere reasoning. But they differ amongst themselves as to the nature of this Brahman, the relation of the individual soul to Brahman, the state of the soul in the state of Final Emancipation, the means of attaining it and its causality with reference to this universe.

According to Śrī Rāmānūja, Brahman is with attributes. He is not intelligence itself. Intelligence is his chief attribute. He contains within Himself whatever exists.

World and individual souls are essential real constituents of Brahman's nature. Matter (Acit) and soul (Cit) form the body of the Lord, i.e. Lord Nārāyaṇa, who is the Inner Ruler (Antaryāmin). Matter and souls are called modes of Him (Prakāra). The individual souls will never be entirely resolved in Brahman. According to Śrī Rāmānūja, Brahman is not absolutely one and homogeneous. The individual souls undergo a state of Saṅkoca (contraction) during Pralaya. They expand (Vikāsa) during creation. Śrī Rāmānūja's Brahman is a Personal God with attributes. The individual soul of Śrī Rāmānūja is really individual. It will remain a personality forever. The soul remains in Vaikuṅṭha, i.e. in the Abode of Lord Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa forever in a state of Bliss and enjoys the Divine Aiśvarya of Lord Nārāyaṇa. Bhakti is the chief means to final emancipation and not Jñāna. Śrī Rāmānūja follows in his commentary the authority of Bodhāyana.

According to Śrī Nimbarkacharya, Brahman is considered as both the efficient and material cause of the world. Brahman is both Nirguṇa and Saguṇa. The universe is not unreal or illusory but is a true manifestation or Parīṅāma of Brahman. (Śrī Rāmānūja also holds this view. He says "Just as milk is transformed into curd, so also Brahman has transformed Himself as this universe"). This world is identical with and at the same time different from Brahman just as the wave or bubble is the same and at the same time different from water. The individual souls are parts of the Supreme Self. They are controlled by the Supreme Being. The Final Salvation or mokṣa, lies in realizing the true nature of one's own soul. This can be achieved by Bhakti (devotion). The individuality of the Finite Self (Jīvātman) is not dissolved even in the state of Final Emancipation. Śrī Rāmānūja also holds that the Jīva assumes the Divine Body of Śrī Nārāyaṇa with four hands and enjoys in Vaikuntha, or the Divine Abode of Lord Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa or the Divine Aiśvarya of the Lord Lord Viṣṇu.

Ācārya Śaṅkara is one of the greatest philosophers, India has ever produced and also the greatest exponent of Advaita philosophy. He is worshipped as an incarnation of Lord Śiva. Ācārya Śaṅkara's vision of India regarding Hindu philosophy is unique and outstanding. His works in Sanskrit establish the doctrine of Advaita, the unity of the Ātman and Nirguṇa Brahman "Brahman without attributes". His works elaborate on ideas found in the Upaniṣads. He wrote copious commentaries on the Vedic canon (Brahma Sūtras, Principal Upaniṣads and Bhagavad Gītā) in support of his thesis. The main opponent in his work is the Mīmāṃsā School of thought, though he also offers arguments against the views of some other schools like Sāṅkhya and certain schools of Buddhism.

Ācārya Śaṅkara travelled across the Indian subcontinent to propagate his philosophy through discourses and debates with other thinkers. He established the importance of monastic life as sanctioned in the Upaniṣads and Brahma Sūtras, in a time when the Mīmāṃsā School established strict ritualism and ridiculed monasticism. He is reputed to have founded four Maṭhas (monasteries), which helped in the historical development, revival and spread of Advaita Vedānta of which he is known as the greatest revivalist.

Ācārya Śaṅkara organized the Hindu monks of these ten sects or names under four Maṭhas (monasteries), with the headquarters at Dvārakā in the West, Jagannātha

Puri in the East, Śrīngerī the South and Badrikāśrama in the North. Each Maṭha was headed by one of his four main disciples, who each continue the Vedānta Saśpradāya.

Ācārya Śaṅkara's works deal with logically establishing the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta as he saw it in the Upaniṣads. He formulates the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta by validating his arguments on the basis of quotations from the Vedas and other Hindu scriptures. He gives a high priority to svānubhava (personal experience) of the student. His works are largely polemical in nature. He directs his polemics mostly against the Sāśkhya, Bauddha, Jaina, Vaiśeṣika and other non-Vedāntic Philosophies. Traditionally, his works are classified under Bhāṣya (commentary), Prakaraṇa-grantha (philosophical treatise) and Stotra (devotional hymn). The commentaries serve to provide a consistent interpretation of the scriptural texts from the perspective of Advaita Vedānta. The philosophical treatises provide various methodologies to the student to understand the doctrine. The devotional hymns are rich in poetry and piety, serving to highlight the relationship between the devotee and the deity. Ācārya Śaṅkara wrote commentaries on the ten major Upaniṣads, the Brahma Sūtras and the Bhagavad Gītā. Ācārya Śaṅkara's is the earliest extant commentary on the Brahma Sūtras. However, he mentions older commentaries like those of Draviḍa, Bhartṅprapañca and others.

Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya is the oldest of all commentaries. It upholds Śuddha-Para-Brahman or the Supreme Self of the Upaniṣads as something superior to other divine beings. It propounds a very bold philosophy and declares emphatically that the individual soul is identical with the Supreme Self. Ācārya Śaṅkara's philosophical view accurately represents the meaning of Bādarāyaṇa. His explanations only faithfully render the intended meaning of Śrī Vyāsa. This is beyond doubt and dispute.

Students of Kevalādvaita School of Philosophy should study the Śārīraka-Bhāṣya of Ācārya Śaṅkara which is profound, subtle and unique. It is an authority which leads to the right understanding of the Brahma Sūtra. The best thinkers of India, Germany, America and England belong to this school. It occupies a high rank in books on philosophy. Advaita philosophy is the most sublime and the grandest philosophy of the Hindus.

According to Ācārya Śaṅkara, there is one Absolute Brahman who is Sat-Cit-Ānanda, who is of an absolutely homogeneous nature. The appearance of this world is due to Māyā-- the illusory power of Brahman which is neither Sat nor Asat. This world is unreal. This world is a Vivarta or apparent modification through Māyā. The Brahman appears as this universe through Māyā. Brahman is the only reality. The individual soul has limited himself through Avidyā and identification with the body and other vehicles. Through his selfish actions he enjoys the fruits of his actions. He becomes the actor and enjoyer. He regards himself as atomic and as an agent on account of Avidyā or the limiting Antaṅkaraṇa. The individual soul becomes identical with Brahman when his Avidyā is destroyed. In reality Jīva is all-pervading and identical with Brahman. Īśvara or Saḡuṇa Brahman is a product of Māyā. Worship of Īśvara leads to KramaMukti. The pious devotees (the knower's of Saḡuṇa Brahman) go to Brahmaloḡa and attain final release through highest knowledge. They do not return to this world. They attain the

Nirguṇa Brahman at the end of the cycle. Knowledge of Nirguṇa Brahman is the only means of liberation. The knower's of Nirguṇa Brahman attain immediate final release or Sadyomukti. They need not go by the path of gods or the path of Devayāna. They merge themselves in Para Brahman. They do not go to any Loka or World. Ācārya Śaṅkara's Brahman is Nirviśeṣa Brahman (Impersonal Absolute) without attributes. In summarizing, Ācārya Śaṅkara, restates the basic nature of Adhyāsa, and, more importantly that this Avidyā is the only obstacle to true knowledge. Therefore, he declares, the purpose of all the Vedānta texts is simply to remove this Avidyā, and establish Atman or Brahman as the only reality. As such the Śāstra's are called the Ultimate Pramāṇa (Reason) (antyapramāṇam), because they remove misconceptions that come from Ignorance. For, once these misconceptions are removed, Ātman will shine of its accord, and there will be nothing more to be done.

In fine, Ācārya Śaṅkara tells us the reason we cannot attain enlightenment. It is because it is in our nature to mix up the real and not real and therefore perceive a world of duality with multiple knower's subjects and things to be known objects. In particular, we falsely confuse the eternal Atman, which is our innermost self and is the Witness with no role in empirical life, to be acting as an agent. This confusion is innate to us, and is a matter of common experience requiring no proof. It is beginning less and endless in the sphere of the empirical universe. This confusion or superimposition is the basic ignorance that results in this world of duality. The world of duality fashioned by Avidyā is termed to be Māyā, or illusion, as it can only be perceived once this basic superimposition has occurred. And all activities were including the secular and Vedic fall into the field of ignorance as they must presuppose a distinct doer. The purpose of the Vedānta texts is to point out this ignorance as essentially the nature of a false mental notion, and remove all misconceptions, to reveal the nature of Ātman. A thorough understanding of Adhyāśabhāṣyam, therefore, is vital to understanding the texts of Vedānta and Ācārya Śaṅkara's bhāṣyas in particular. It is for this reason that this text is held in such high regard, and deserves to be studied by all serious students of Vedānta.

Conclusion

The teachings of Śaṅkara can be summed up in half a verse: “**Brahma Satyaṁ Jagat Mithyā Jīvo Brahmaiva nā paraḥ** (20th verse of *Viveka Chudamani* written by Śaṅkara) —Brahman (the Absolute) is alone real; this world is unreal; and the Jīva or the individual soul is non-different from Brahman.” However, Ācārya Śaṅkara's commentary on Brahma Sūtra is really an excellent work on Vedānta Philosophy. It contains more authentic Vedic as well as Upaniṣadic textual references for the clear understanding of the students & researchers of Indian Philosophy. So, this work may be helpful for the readers of Indian Philosophy in general and the students of Advaita Vedānta in particular.

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