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Śankara as 'Prachanna Bauddha'

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This paper highlights philosophical dimensions of the assessment of Śankara's Māyāvāda as being influenced by the Buddhist doctrine of Śūnyavāda, propounded by Nāgārjuna. In doing so, points of convergence and appropriation are highlighted along with textual evidence to map Śankara's ascension to scholastic greatness and the calculated manner of destabilizing and weakening Buddhism from its philosophical prominence in medieval India. The systematically created dominance of Advaita Vedanta is analyzed in the backdrop of metaphysics and historical conjunctions from ancient through medieval India. Keywords: Śūnyavāda, Advaita Vedanta, Māyāvāda

In ancient Indian philosophy, the name of Śankara is most well known as the powerful critic of Buddhism, whose scholasticism helped establish advaita Vedanta as the most acceptable philosophy in India. The counter to the popularization of Buddhism and the institutionalization of philosophy with the establishment of mathas (monasteries) across the country are the hallmarks of Śankara's enterprise. This paper offers textual and argumentative critiques of Śankara's māyāvāda for its dependence on Buddhism and its ironical refutation of the same.

Śankara (8th c.) was the proponent of Advaita Vedanta, one of the six Vedanta schools of thought in India. Śankara's advaita thought has remained very popular in both metaphysical and political dimensions of philosophy in India. Śankara's philosophy emerged as a rival school of thought to challenge the domination of Buddhism in medieval India. Vedanta scholars like Ramanuja (in *Sribhasya*) have found Śankara's advaita to be inspired by Buddhist philosophy, referring to him as *Pracchanna Baudhha* literally meaning 'Crypto Buddhist'.

Buddhism, by the time of Śankara had emerged as the most powerful school

of thought with followers outnumbering those of any other darśana. Buddhist philosophy recognizes four major schools- Sautrāntika, Vaibhashika, Vigyanavada, and Śūnyavāda. Amongst these, Śūnyavāda as propounded by Nāgārjuna appeared as the most popular school. Acharya Nāgārjuna (2nd-3rd c) in his seminal work *Mūlamādhyamikakārikā* as well as other works like *Yuktisastikā*, *Shūnyatū Saptati*, *Vigrahavyāvartanī* expounded the teachings of Buddha (Sarvam Śūnyam Śūnyam) as the theory of Śūnyavāda. Important Buddhist thinkers like Bhavaviveka in *Tarkajwalā*, Chandrakirti in *Prasannapadā*, Buddhapālita in *Buddhaālitavrittī* and Nāgārjuna in *Akutobhayavrittī* developed on the theory on Śūnyavāda. Nāgārjuna's Śūnyavāda emerged as a major challenge to the six principal schools of Vedic theology. Śankara in his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (2.2.31-32) has critiqued Śūnyavāda directly and in *Chāndogyopanishadaṣāṅkarabhāṣya* (Chapters 6 and 7), *Bṛihadāraṇyakopaniṣadaṣāṅkarabhāṣya* and *Gītāṣāṅkarabhāṣya*, he has presented Śūnyavāda as the purvapakasha (that theory which is refuted in its entirety as a counter) of his theology. We shall begin by examining some principle doctrines of Śankara in the view of Nāgārjuna's Śūnyavāda.

Śankara's critiques

Śankara has been critiqued by various philosophers. Some of them have been critiqued by him, while there are others who haven't been critiqued by Śankara. Of the second category belong thinkers like Yamunāchārya. Yamunāchārya (973 A.D) in his *Siddhitraya* has critiqued Śankara's Māyāvāda. Ramānuja (11th c), the proponent of Vishishtadvaita in his *Sṛībhāṣya* has referred to Śankara as *Vedvādacchadmaprachannabauddha* meaning "Veda and debate are merely tricks while Śankara in reality is using Buddhist arguments". *Yādavaprakāsha* (11th c) has said "Yūyam ca Baudhhāshchaya Samānasansadah" meaning you and Baudhdha are members of the same clan/group. Bhaskaracharya in *Bhaskarabhāṣya* has argued that Śankara has borrowed his arguments from Mahayana Buddhists and presented them as his own in his philosophy. He said kecittu... mähāyānika bauddha gāthitam māyāvādam vyāvarṇayanto lokān vyāmohayanti... ye tu bauddhamatāvalambino māyāvādinah te api anenaiva nyāyena sūtrakāreṇ nirastā veditavyāh (*BrahmasūtrŚābhāṅkarabhāṣya* 1-4-45) meaning Śankara has expounded the principles of Mahayana Buddhism from Buddhist legends and, by taking recourse to Vedic references, he has shown them as his own, while denying their origin from Buddhism.

Udayanāchārya (984 A.D) in *Nyāyakusumānjali* has argued that there is no difference between the concepts of Brahma in Śankara's Māyāvāda and śūnya in Nāgārjuna's Śūnyavāda. He says:

Yanmāyāvādinō Brahma yatcchunyam shūnyavādinah/
Na hi Swarūpabhedoasti Svataśiddhatvatatastayoh//
Ananadātirtha, the proponent of Dvaitavad has said:
Yacchūnyāvādinah shūnyam tadev brahma māyinah/
Na hi lakṣaṇabhedoasti nirviśeshastvatatastayoh//

Meaning Śankara's Brahma and Nāgārjuna's Shunya are the same concepts, and there is not the slightest difference between their characteristics.

Krishnamishra (11th c) in *Prabodha Chandrodaya* says vedāntā yadi sāstrāṇi bauddhaiḥ kimaparādhye? meaning "when you (Śankara) have assimilated the principles of Buddhism in your advaita Vedanta and you call it śāstra, then why do you critique Buddhism"?

Bhimacharya has referred to Śankara as being nāstik ie non Vedic and his philosophy as non-Vedic ultimately. He says māyāivedāntyapi nāstika eva paryavasāne sampadyate.

Parthasarthi Mishra (900 AD) has concluded that the Māyāvāda of Śankara is far inferior to the Buddhist Mahāyāna philosophy. He says tasmād varamasmāt māyāvādānmāhāyānikavādah.

Venkatanath (13th-14th c), known as Vedantadesika has listed some hundred faults in the argument of Śankara in his treatise *śatdūṣaṇī*.

Vyāstīrtha (15th c) in *Nyāyāmṛita* critiqued advaita Vedanta in such an effective manner that Madhusudan Saraswati composed *Advaitasiddhi* to refute the critique. To refute the refutation, Ramāchārya composed *Taraṅgiṇī* and strengthened the arguments against Śankara.

In the sixteenth century, Vadiraj in *Nyāyaratnāvalī* has strongly critiqued Śankara's advaitavād. Purnānand Chakravarty in *Tātvamuktāvalī* has critiqued māyāvād in hundred ways, so it came to be named *Māyāvādaśatdūṣaṇī*. Another scholar from Bengal, Mādhavamukunda in *Parvapakshagirivraj* has critiqued advaitavād at length.

Nāgārjuna and Gaudapāda.

The work of Gaudapāda, most well known as Śankara's guru's guru, reveals influences of Nāgārjuna's Śūnyavād. In *Śankarabhāṣya*, Śankara establishes all other schools of Indian philosophy viz. Sankhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsa, Nyāya, Vaisheshika, Jaina, Bauddha and Chārvaka as the pūrvapakshas to advaita and critiques them at length. Textual inquiry shows that Śankara does not adequately critique Śūnyavāda, while he critiques the other Buddhist schools at length.

In *Gītāsānkarabhāṣya*, Śankara argues that the reality of an entity cannot be ascertained by imposing attributes due to a-vidyā (not-knowledge) and neither can it be known due to knowledge that arises out of māyā. Keeping Buddhist thought as the pūrvaapaksha, Śankara in his bhāṣya on *Kathopaniṣada* maintains that any entity, whether atomic or big, severed from its ātmā (soul), is asatya (not true). Śankara posits a fundamental question: Śūnyameva Tarhi Tat, meaning, in the context of Brahma — Is Brahma Śūnya? To this, he answers: Na. Mithyakalpasya Nirnimittatvanupapatte meaning even things that are mithya ie not-true, need some base for their origin. That base, according to Śankara, is Brahma. In *Chandogya ŚankaraBhasya* 8.1.1, Śankara says: “Digdesha Guna Gati Phalbheda Śūnyam hi Parmartha Parmarthatasat Advayam Brahma Mandabuddhinama asat Eva Pratibhāti” meaning for those who have less intellect, Śūnya that is free of the constraints of direction, place, attributes, motion and effect can appear as Brahma. In this statement, Śankara implicitly accepts the similarity between the concepts of Śūnya and Brahma while seeming to refute the former. To Śankara, the concept of Śūnya is not tenable only because of one reservation. He argues that even that which is not-real should have some basis. To establish his argument, Śankara posits Brahma as the basis for the world as we know it. He argues that while the Buddhist arguments emphasize the non –reality of the world as asat-not true, they fail to conceptualise its purvaapaksha-its counter argument, and he [Śankara] presents it in the form of Brahma.

Śankara elaborates these arguments against Śūnyavād in *Māndūkyakārikābhāṣya* which is his exposition of the arguments posited by Gaudpāda in *Mandukyakarika*. Gaudpāda hailed from Gauda (Bengal) and was the proponent of advaita Vedanta. He was the guru of Govind Bhāgwatpujyapāda who was the guru of Śankara. In his *Mandukyakarikabhāṣya*, Śankara calls Gaudpāda Tam Pujyabhipujyam Paramgurum natoasmi meaning “you are the guru of my guru, the most revered.” *Māndūkyakārikā* is essentially a commentary on Mandukya Upanishad. It is divided into four sections, with the first one dedicated to *Māndūkyakopaniṣad*, while the other three are independent sections. The four sections are Āgam prakaraṇa, Vaithathya prakarana, Advaita prakarana and Ālāta-Śānti prakaraṇa. Gaudpāda, while revering Buddha as parmārthadarśī, the one who knows the essential truths and enlightens all, points out that Buddha had remained silent on the concepts of turīya and ātmā. Śankara, while expounding on Gaudpāda’s commentary, interprets Buddha’s silence in his own ways. He misinterprets the meaning of the word Tāyinaḥ etymologically as tāyī-meaning expanse, while in Buddhist literature prior to Śankara the word ‘tāyinaḥ’ has been used to denote Buddha-the one who found the right path due to his purusārtha. Shāntideva in

Bodhicharyāvatar has said tāyinam svadhigatamargadeshakanam meaning “tāyī” is the preacher who finds the path on his own. Āchārya Dingnāga has also referred to Buddha as “tāyī Buddha”. Śankara has argued that the silence of Buddha is due to the fact that those concepts are already present in Upanishads, and therefore Buddha’s silence is an affirmation and acceptance of Vedantic ideas. It is important to remember that Buddhist scholars like Nagasena and Nāgārjuna have also commented on Buddha’s silence. They have argued that Buddha’s silence is due to the fact that Buddha did not consider these concepts worth discussing.

Bharatsingh Upādhyāya has proposed that Gaudapāda can be called Āchārya of ‘Buddha Vedānta’, with the disclaimer if such a term can be coined. He has quoted Dr. Radhakrishnan as accepting the influence of Buddhist philosophy on Gaudapāda. Radhakrishnan says: “He [Gaudapāda] seems to have been conscious of the similarity of his system to some phases of Buddhist thought. He therefore protests, rather over much, that his view is not Buddhism. Towards the end of his book, he says ‘This was not spoken by the Buddha’”.

Darling has argued for Buddhist influences, particularly of the Mādhyamika School on Gaudapāda’s *Māndūkyakārikā* (*gaudapāda-kārikā*). He discusses verse 4 of the fourth prakaraṇa where there is affinity with Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamādhyamakārikā*.

bhūtaṃ na jāyate kinñcid adbhūtaṃ naiva jāyate/
Vivadanto ‘dvayā hy evam ajātiṃ khyāpayanti te//

The existent is not born; whatever is non-existent is not born.

For, disputing thus the adherents of not-two (advaya) proclaim the non-common origin.

According to Vidushekhara Bhattācharya, the first part of this kārikā is based on kārikā I.6 of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamādhyamikakārikā*.

naivāsato naiva satah pratyayo ‘rthasya yujyate/
Asatah pratyaya kasya sataśca pratyayena kiṃ//

Neither of an object-entity existing nor of an object-entity not existing is a condition applicable.

In connection with the non-existing, whose is the condition?

In connection with the existing, why by means of a condition?

Vidushekhara Bhattāchārya in *The Āgamsāstra* of Gaudapāda has noted the use of the word ‘advaya’ by Gaudapāda in the sense of the middle path (madhyama pratipad) that avoids two extremes (atyanta). Gaudapāda has referred to the Buddha

as Advayavādin.

Sankara's digvijaya

Śankara's advaitavād came to be established in the colonial period from sixteenth to seventeenth century as the most popular of Vedic philosophies. Owing to orientalist translations and interpretations, it soon became the most well known Indian metaphysical system, positing māyavād as a powerful counter to materialism of the West. In the historiography of Indian philosophy, one notices a gradual decline of Buddhist philosophy, while advaitavād of Śankara gains prominence as Hindū metaphysics. The consolidation of a Hindu identity and propagation of Brahmanism in the colonial period have sought māyāvāda as an epistemological ally to explain hierarchy in the lived domain. By referring to the Vedic authority of Upanishads and smritis, Śankara, in his own words, gives credence to inequality between people. Śankara, while expositing the sutras of *Brahmasutra* (1-3-38) of *Vadrayana*, says in *Brahmasutra Śānkarabhāṣya*:

Etaśca na Śūdrasyādhikarah yadasya smrteh śravaṇādhyayanārthapraṭiṣṭhobhavati, vedaśravaṇapraṭiṣṭhedho vedādhyayanapraṭiṣṭhastadarthajyānuṣṭhānayoṣca praṭiṣṭdhah śūdrasya smaryate. Śravanapraṭiṣṭhastvāt 'athāśya vedāmupaśrīṇavatastrapujatubhāyām śrotrapraṭipuraṇam' iti, padyu ha vā etacmaśānaṃ yachhūdasamīpenādhyayetavayaṃ itica. ata evadhyayanapraṭiṣṭdhahyasyahisamīpe api nādhyetavyaṃ bhavati sa kathamaśrutamadhīyata. Bhavati ca vedoccāraṇe jīvhāchedo dhāraṇe śarīrabhede iti. Ata eva cārthadarthajyānānuṣṭhānayoḥ praṭiṣṭhob vedapūrvakastu nāstyadhikārah śūdrāṇāmiti sthitam.

This means: Śūdra does not have the right to read, listen to or understand the Vedas. In Manusmriti, a Śūdra is barred from reading, listening to, understanding or practicing rites and sacrifice as per the Vedas. If a Śūdra listens to the Vedas, it is said that "molten lead should be poured into his ears". It is also said that "a Śūdra is like a mobile crematorium; therefore Vedas should not be read in the vicinity of a Śūdra. If a Śūdra utters the Vedas, his tongue should be chopped off. If he remembers the Vedas, his body should be ripped apart. This is why a Śūdra is barred from practicing Vedic rituals. He should not be given any knowledge of the Vedas for this reason. In the smritis, the learning of Vedas, sacrifice (yagya) and charity (dān) are reserved for the three varnas-brahmaṇ, kshatriyas and vaiśyas who have undergone upanayan sanskāra and are reborn as dwija.

In *Śankara Digvijaya* of Madhavāchārya (14th c), one finds references to Kumarilabhata provoking King Sudhanvā to decimate all Buddhists on sight. In *Śankaradigvijaya* (1.93), the king orders his soldiers thus: "From Himalaya to

Rameshwar, every young boy or old man who is a Buddhist should be killed or else the soldier will have to pay with his own life.” It is reported that when Śankara went on his digvijaya, literally, conquering all directions, King Sudhanvā with his army accompanied him. In *Shankardigvijaya*, it is described how all those who disagreed with Śankara’s views were imprisoned, beaten up (15/170), some were forced to do menial jobs, and some were even killed (15/173). Buddhism being the primary purvapaksha of māyāvāda, it is evident how there are even textual references to the planned, fascist attack on Buddhism: “Durbhiksham svaparai-kataphalgatam durbhikshusampaditam (15/172).” The villainous Buddha had unleashed a dance of misery on this earth.

Following Śankara’s death in 820 A.D, scholars like Vachaspati Mishra (900 A.D), Jayanta Bhatta (1000 A.D.), Sridhar (1000 A.D.), Sānkhyasūtra (14th c), Aniruddha (1500 A.D), Vigyanabhikshu (1600 A.D) carried on the tradition of critiquing Buddhism.

Śankara’s militant scholasticism led to concerted assault on Buddhism which was to find sustenance in Asian countries outside of India. The metaphysics of Śankara’s advaita Vedanta, coupled with high polemic and state support was successful in attacking the dominance of Buddhism and the varied philosophical schools and traditions of Charvaka, Jaina, Sankhya, Yoga, Nath Siddha, Tantra. This philosophy also sought to explain discrimination arising out of material and cultural conditions in the epistemic framework of non-duality. The difference in conditions of being between people was explained away in metaphysical terminologies of advaita and brahma. Buddhism, by its very negation of a supreme reality, and its insistence on cause and effect was successful in creating a discourse of rights and duties and in proposing structures of egalitarianism and accountability that threaten the foundations of any absolutist discourse.

This article has sought to focus on the argumentative lineage of Śankara’s māyāvāda and its political and historical power dynamics in relation to other philosophies. An attempt has been made to highlight the mechanism by which high polemic obliterates argumentation and political patronage uses scholasticism to establish and exercise absolute power.

Notes

1. See Ingalls, Daniel H.H., ‘Samkara’s Arguments Against the Buddhists’, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol.III, Number 4, January 1954, p.304 and ‘the Study of Śankaracharya’, *Annals of the Bhandarkar oriental Research Institute*, Vol.XXXIII, 1952.
2. Gregory J Darling in *An Evaluation of the Vedantic Critique of Buddhism*

has pointed out that Śankara's Vedanta and Buddhism have parallels in the doctrine of avidya (nescience), and the doctrine of the two truths (paramartha and vyavahara).

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