

Outlines



OF

Indian Philosophy.



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Section VI. *The Bhagavadgītā.*

It has been already pointed out that the *Bhagavadgītā* * was an early attempt to weld together the Vedānta, the Sāṅkhya and the Āgama points of view. † Two passages have already been quoted (p. 72-3) describing the conscious supreme Brahma—the one real cosmic ultimate of the Vedāntis. In other passages Krishna propounds the sharp distinction between Purusha and Prakṛiti deliberately using the Sāṅkhya technical terms. “Know Prakṛiti and also Purusha to be both without a beginning; know that changes of form and guṇas spring from Prakṛiti. The origin of the making of causes and effects is Prakṛiti; Purusha is the experience, of pleasure and pain. Purusha, established in Prakṛiti, experiences the qualities

• This name has been translated ‘the song celestial’, ‘the Lord’s song’, etc., though there is absolutely no lyrical touch in it. This translation is perhaps due to reminiscences of ‘the song of Solomon’, and the early life of the boy Krishna and his flute-playing described in the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* and the *Gītāgovinda*. The *Bhagavadgītā* is the ‘divine poem’; or rather ‘the proclamation, in verse, by the Lord.’

† Hence it has lent itself to the tortures of the Bhāshyakāras who have commented on it each from only one point of view. All existing translations, too, have been done consciously or unconsciously only from the point of view of one of the three great modern sects—Śāṅkara, Rāmānujīya and Mādhva.

born of Prakṛiti; his attachment to guṇas is the cause (of his birth) in good and bad wombs. Onlooker and permitter, lord, experiencer, the great lord, and the supreme self (paramātmā), too, is he called, Puruṣha, who is supreme here (in this body)". (xiii. 19-22) "O mighty-armed, learn from me the five causes declared in the Sāṅkhya system (as necessary) for the accomplishment of all actions; the body, the agent, the several organs, the various kinds of several activities, and the presiding deities, the fifth; whatever action man does by his body, speech and mind, right or wrong these five are the causes thereof. That being so, he who from imperfect understanding sees the lone self to be the actor, verily that fool sees not" (xviii. 13-16).

The Āgama analysis of the Universe into three factors is also expounded. "Īṣvara dwells in the heart-region of all beings, O Arjuna, causing, by his wonder-working power, all beings to revolve as if mounted on a machine" (xviii. 61.) "Another,* indeed, is the Supreme Puruṣha, called Paramātmā, who, having entered the three worlds* sustains (them), the changeless Īṣvara." (xv. 17.)

In the previous Stanza, Krishna has been speaking of the mortal and immortal Puruṣhas, "loke," which word may mean either "in this world," or as in xv. 18, in the Śāstras not based on the Veda, as the rationalistic Yoga or Nyaya.

In various passages Kṛiṣṇa claims to be that **Īṣvara**. "I am unborn, the changeless **Ātmā**, the lord of beings" (iv. 6), "I am the origin and the end of the whole universe. Nothing exists higher than I, O **Dhanañjaya**. All this is strung on me as rows of gems on a thread." (vii. 6-7). The other two **tattvas** are the two **Prakṛitis** of **Īṣvara**. "The discrete **Prakṛiti**, that is mine, is eight-fold, Earth, water, fire, **Vāyu**, **Ākāṣa**, **Manas**, **Buddhi** and **Ahañkāra**" (vii. 4.) "The great elements, **Ahañkāra**, **Buddhi**, **Avyakta**, the organs ten and one, the five ranges of the (sense) organs, desire, hate, pleasure, pain, the (bodily) whole, intelligence, constancy, this is the field (**kshetra**) described briefly along with its modifications." (xiii. 5-6). This is the lower **Prakṛiti**, corresponding to the **Idamṭā** of the **Śāktas**, **Aṣuddhamāya** of the **Śaivas**, **Achit** of the **Vaiṣṇavas**. "Know my other **Prakṛiti**, higher than this, who becomes living (**Jīva**), O mighty-armed, (and) by whom this Universe is upheld." (vii. 5). "Being a portion of myself, it becomes in the world of the living an eternal living being and attracts to itself the sense-organs of which **Manas** is the sixth". (xv. 7.) This category is called in the **Āgamas** **Tejas** or **Ojas** and these words occur in xv. 12-14. "What **Tejas** (light-energy) in the sun brightens up the world, what in the moon, and what

in fire, that Tejas know to be mine. I enter the Earth and support life by my Ojas (energy); becoming Soma, the essence, I nourish all plants. Becoming Vaiṣvânara (the fire of life), I enter the bodies of breathing beings and united with Prâṇa and Apâna (two kinds of winds on which the vital fire is carried), digest the four kinds of food."

These three systems Kṛishṇa, in other passages, tries to transcend and he indicates a Supreme Reality, higher than the conscious One Brahma of the Vedântis, the dual Puruṣa and Prakṛiti of the Sâṅkhyas and the triple Îṣvara, Chit and Achit of the Āgamikas. This is called 'Brahma-tat' (vii. 29.), 'Aksharam Brahma paramam' (viii. 3.), 'my supreme abode' (viii. 21.), 'the supreme seat' (viii. 28.). Kṛishṇa calls himself "the pratishṭhâ of Brahma, the undying, the changeless, the eternal, the Dharma, the unending bliss" (xiv. 27). Pratishṭhâ means pedestal, and hence vehicle. As Kṛishṇa's acknowledging a higher entity than himself goes against the grain of all schools of Vedânta, every commentator, from Śaṅkara onwards has expended a good deal of ingenuity in explaining away the obvious meaning of this passage. §

§ The various interpretations of this sloka are discussed in my forthcoming *Study of the Bhagavadgîta*.

This 'Supreme abode' which Kṛishṇa differentiates so carefully from himself, the Puruṣhotama, and also from a Puruṣha, higher than himself, whom he seems to refer to by the adjectives Kavi, Puraṇa, etc. in viii-9., and by the name Ādi Puruṣha in xv. 4, is frequently called 'Padam' or, *Gati*, path. "Verily there exists higher than that Avyakta (i. e. Mūlaprakṛiti) another Avyakta (undifferentiated, noumenon) eternal, which is not destroyed, when all beings are destroyed. It is called Avyakta (the absolute), Akshara (the unchanging); they call it the Supreme Path. Having reached it, no one returns. That is my Supreme abode." (viii-20-21). "There* the sun does not shine, nor the moon, nor fire; having gone there they return not; that is my Supreme abode." (xv. 6.) In this "Supreme abode" the author of the *Bhagavad Gītā* finds the one noumenon into which the ultimate tattvas of the other schools merge. This is the foundation of all that is; on which are established Puruṣhas from the lowest to the highest, out of which rise all the elements of the evolved world. It is not conscious being nor is it unconscious being but "that beyond," 'the knower and the known and the Supreme fixed dwelling place' (xi-38.)

* In opposition to the world supported by the Īṣvara referred to in xv. 12.

This Supreme Reality as Kṛishṇa conceives it is different from the Nirguṇa Brahma of Śaṅkara. This latter is the Saguṇa Brahma or conscious Universal Being shorn of 'name and form' used for purposes of meditation; when these distinctions are negated, it is the higher. (*Ved. Sū. Bhāsh.* iv. iii. 4.) Beginningless Avidyā (ignorance) according to Śaṅkara leads us to attribute 'name and form' to that which is not thus limited and this, according to Śaṅkara, is the Param (higher) Brahma, which is Sat, and opposed to Avidyā which is Asat. This doctrine of Avidyā being the cause of 'name and form' is not found in the *Bhagavad Gītā*; nor again the doctrine of Māyā, which Śaṅkara's later followers have elaborated, by which they conceived that the Param Brahma, the one without attributes, who is Sat, Chit, and Ānanda becomes in some inexplicable way entangled in Māyā which is neither existent nor non-existent and thus evolves or rather degenerates into the Saguṇa Brahma or Īṣvara and begins to weave the universe out of nothing. This doctrine is a travesty of the attempt of the early thinkers to find the common noumenon of Sat and Asat.

Rāmānuja on the other hand tries to whittle down all the passages where Krishna describes this supreme noumenon, "whence speech

returns along with mind, being unable to reach" this high level thought. He interprets paramdhâma as a locality, a region of space which Nârâyana has delimited as his special province where he holds his court seated on his serpent throne, the hoods of the serpent acting as his royal umbrella and to which he admits his 'elect' as a matter of favour!

The teachings of the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* have suffered more than those of any other Indian book from the hands of the Commentator.* It is not cryptic in style like the Sûtras; but yet, from the great veneration paid to it on account of its supposed authorship and on account of its real superiority to every other scripture, Indian or non-Indian, so many Bhâshyakâras have attempted to use it for buttressing up their special theories and expended their tender mercies on it. Its teachings and its locutions, technical or otherwise have been violently tampered with by the commentators who did not possess what we call a 'literary conscience'. The commentator did not aim to discover what exactly his author thought or attempted to express, but used the text for supporting his own special theories. If any passages were inconveniently opposed to the commentator's theories, they were to be explained away

* e. g., ii. 16. has been so done to death that it is impossible to discover what its author meant thereby.

by utilizing grammatical and etymological tricks. Thus the *Svetāśvatara Upanishad* is indispensable to the Vaishṇavas; but it sings the praises of Rudra and not Viṣṇu. Hence Rudra is explained by Raṅgarāmānuja, * as *Samsāra rujo drāvayati*, who drives away the disease of saṃsāra. (*Svet. Up. Bhāsh* iii. 2). In the *Chhândogya Upanishad*, Janaśruti who learns the Saṃvarga Vidya from Raikva is called a Śûdra (*Ib.* iv. 2. 3). Since the Śûdra is unfit for Brahma Vidya, Śaṅkara explains that the word Śûdra can be etymologised as *śuchādravaṇa*, the rushing of grief. (*Ved. Sût. Bhāsh.* I. iii. 4.). *Bhagavad Gîtâ* xiv. 27 is explained in two possible ways by Śaṅkara. Everywhere it is a case of how inconvenient passages can be explained away and not what the original author thought. The more ingenuity displayed by the commentator, though in violation of what we nowadays regard as laws of evidence, the greater is the admiration of the devout follower. Even European scholars have quietly succumbed to the spell of Śaṅkara's verbal gymnastics so much so that Max Müller, Deussen and Gough in translating passages from the Upanishads put into them matter found not in the

* A recent Vaishṇava commentator of the Upanishads who slavishly follows Śaṅkara, except where Viśiṣṭādvaita points have to be driven in. Rānānuja did not comment on the Upanishads.

text but only in *Śaṅkara Bhāṣya*. No interpreter of other people's thoughts, especially the thoughts of the ancients can escape reading some of his own thoughts into his author's book, but we might at least honestly strive to minimize this tendency and strenuously avoid reading a third man's thoughts also therein.

Besides this one fruitful source of confusion, another more potent one has also been operative. These different schools of Vedānta have in modern India all become orthodox revealed religion. The Vedānta being orthodox, it was felt that the other schools ought to be assimilated to it and hence the commentator has felt it necessary to furnish the Sāṅkhya, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā and Vaiśeṣika schools with a God for whom Kapila, Jaimini and Kaṇāda had no place or need in their systems; to mix up the Īṣvara of Yoga, the Paramātmā of Nyāya and Brahma of Vedānta; to confuse the non-committal word Puruṣa of Sāṅkhya with the Jīvātmā of the *Upaniṣad*; to identify Brahma, Paramātmā, Puruṣottama and Īṣvara wherever they occur in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

This spirit has in recent times been further complicated by the necessity for extolling the Advaita at the expense of the other schools. Hence has been invented the extraordinary theory of the temporary validity of the other schools as

steps leading to the *A d v a i t a*, which Madhusūdana Sarasvati propounded in his *Prasthāna bheda* and Vijñāna Bhikshu in his *Sāṅkhya pravachana Bhāṣya*. (*Vide* Muir's Original Sanskrit texts iii. pp. 194-202). The immediate reality of which every one can be certain is the momentary experiences of changing states of consciousness, the kaleidoscopic changes of *Chittavṛitti*. Metaphysics is the attempt to classify them, pigeon-hole them under general categories which will systematize them, reduce the chaos of immediate experience into an intelligible cosmos. These cosmic ultimates must necessarily be concepts of the mind and not objective realities independent of the mind. The mind analyses its own experiences for the purpose of guiding its own function in ordered ways, so as not to be a helpless waif in the buffeting of the waves of experiences and memories. The fact that different minds are attracted by different methods of metaphysical analysis indicates that minds themselves are coloured by different temperaments and hence each self-consistent metaphysical system, if it explains all the experiences of the inquiring mind is as valid as the others. Cosmic ultimates are not material, objective realities that can be reached or acquired. There cannot possibly be any merit in devoutly believing in the 'correctness' or orthodoxy of any particular system. But

each mind has to find out what system attracts it, what method of analysis appeals to it and following that method, analyse its experiences, train to distinguish its place in the cosmos, so that the enlightening consciousness bound up with it might 'free' itself from the mind in which it is involved and soar to its own levels wherefrom there is no return to bondage.