

REVIEWS

Śaṅkara e la Rinascita del Brāhmanesimo, : Mario Piantelli, Editrice Esperienze (Maestri di Spiritualità, sezione : Mondo orientale), Fossane, VIII+319 pp., Lire 3.500, 1974.

To the growing but uneven shelf of books on Śaṅkara, the author adds a valuable contribution. It is unusual insofar as it provides much information difficult to come by elsewhere. Its three chapters deal respectively with the life of Śaṅkara, his doctrine, and the sources concerning them. Scholars know the difficulty of ascertaining the age and the dates of Śaṅkara, the circumstances of his life, and the number of his authentic writings, not to speak of the exact content of his original teaching. To the study of these topics, the author brings forth the resources of his remarkably complete erudition and sums up the results of recent critical research without venturing into presumptuous hypotheses or too controversial assertions. Thus adopting a soundly critical attitude, he yet tempers it with an openness to examine with sympathy even very doubtful sources and to expose leasurably their alleged data, especially regarding the life-events of the great Ācārya. He is led to this by a laudable but typically Western desire to discover the man beyond the writings. But apart from these writings there are only legendary biographies, later than Śaṅkara by at least five centuries, unsupported by any discernible dependence on an authentic tradition that would link them with the early disciples, and clearly fabricated for the threefold purpose of pious edification, providing a mnemonic framework for enshrining a host of pieces of pseudo-Śaṅkarian literature, and often striving to uphold the claims of one or the other *matha* (monastic centre) over its rivals and to link Śaṅkara with a sect like Shaivism or even Tantrism.

In the beginning of his first chapter, the author sets forth in 17 lines the only data that can be considered as certain regarding the life of Śaṅkara : he lived between the end of the 7th century and the first half of the 8th; he was a Brahmin of the Atri clan; he became an itinerant saṅnyāsīn who won many disciples to his teaching and form of renunciation; the India of his time was no longer a unitary monarchy and society was in a state of confusion

regarding the duties of the different *varṇās* and *āśramas*; the places he refers to belong all to North India; none of the five *rājas* he mentions has been identified with certainty; in the course of his career, he disputed with a certain Vināyaka, probably a Buddhist scholar, and defeated him; among his disciples, two are most certain, Sureśvara and Padmapāda. That is all. In the following 100 pages, the author in a very attaching narration harmonizes the "data" of the legendary Lives, exposing fairly their mutual conflicts and sifting out manifest historical impossibilities. For this work of comparative hagiography scholars will be grateful but the question remains, will they be richer in reliable information? Piantelli himself is not inclined to dismiss these "biographies" *in toto*. "Śaṅkara's image, as alive today in the hearts of millions of Indians, cannot prescind from them, and single episodes reveal so much a character both coherent and most plausible that they cannot be discarded rashly. Śaṅkara, who in his works disappears willingly behind his arguments, appears in them with the sweetness, the strength and also the imperfections of one among us and we feel that we can understand and love him as a man and not merely as a thinker" (p. 217). While respecting and even sympathizing with this attitude we would still question character coherence and plausibility as sufficient criteria of acceptability in such matters (are they not the marks of fiction more than of real life?). Besides, there is a real danger that such an openness towards legendary materials will, in the eyes of Indian readers, appear to justify the present uncritical bias of even scholarly advaitins towards a ready acceptance not only of the Śaṅkara legends but, less harmlessly, of doctrinal works ascribed to Śaṅkara with little chance of genuineness.

Chapter III which treats of the sources deals first of all with the writings of Śaṅkara. A useful appendix lists 433 titles, 107 of which merely duplicate for another 69. 219 do not enjoy unanimous recognition by the tradition while 214 titles do. Scholars, however, reject most of them. The list of genuine and doubtful works established by S. K. Belvalkar remains a solid basis which Piantelli accepts for discussion. Regarding the *bhāṣya* on the *Bhagavadgītā*, he remains unconvinced by the arguments of the critics of its authenticity; in my opinion he is right. As to the *vivarāṇa* on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, he takes good note of its

rejection by Jacobi, Belvalkar and V. Bhattacharya but finds their arguments undecisive and counterbalanced by Anandagiri's reference to glosses on that work earlier than his own (13th cent.). Given the doctrinal importance of this *vivaraṇa* I wish he could have devoted a critical disquisition to the genuineness of this—to my mind, extremely doubtful—work. He refers to the traditional thesis that these two *bhāṣyas* (on *Gītā* and *Māṇḍūkya*) would be the earliest products of Śaṅkara's exegetical activity; for textual reasons I would accept it for the *Gītābhāṣya* but find no compelling reasons to agree with it even as a compromise solution in the case of the *Māṇḍūkyabhāṣya*. Among the minor works, the *bhāṣya* on the *Viṣṇusahasraṇāmastotra* has in his opinion some probability of being authentic. The *Dakṣiṇāmūrtistotra* which is one of the 8 hymns retained as more probably genuine by Belvalkar is singled out for translation in the closing appendix on account of its doctrinal weight. As to the *Saundaryalaharī* and the *Śhivabhujāṅga* which Belvalkar had rejected, the acceptance of the first by Radhakrishnan and Mahadevan, and of the second by Mahadevan, should have called for a serious discussion rising above the level of mere feeling on which these authors seem to have remained. There is no serious ground to doubt the authenticity of the verse part of *Upadeśasahasrī* but the prose part continues to appear apocryphal. As to the *Vivekacūḍamaṇi*, Piantelli remains rightly unconvinced by Ingalls's arguments for his rejection and calls for a new investigation which might result in saving its main core of 265 stotras in *anuṣṭubh* (apart from a few like 144, 343, 353) out of its total number of 580 stotras as already suggested by Belvalkar. He further suggests reasons for reconsidering the case of *Ātmabodha*, *Pañcikaranaprakriyā* and *Ātmānātmaviveka*.

The rest of ch. III deals quite informatively with the works of Śaṅkara's immediate disciples, the documents relating to the succession lines of the heads of the five chief Śaṅkara *mathas* (without discussing the legitimacy of their claims to have originated from the Master,) the traces of Śaṅkara's influence on the rival schools and references to him in other literary works. At this point, he usefully recalls that the dating of Śaṅkara which the majority of modern writers have unquestioningly accepted, namely 788–820, was determined on a very weak basis by the Dutch scholar

C. P. Tiele in his *Outlines of the History of Ancient Religions* (1877). Piantelli exposes the spuriousness of the sources used by Tiele and other attendant documents on pp. 213–214 after presenting, on pp. 209–210, some at least of the solid reasons for bringing back Śaṅkara to about one century earlier. A more precise dating has not yet been attained. In the same chapter, Piantelli examines also the rather scanty archaeological data and the 14 so-called biographies of the ācārya. In the closing appendix, he offers a careful translation of ch. 28 of the verse part of *Upadeśasahasrī* which is Śaṅkara's best exposition of the *mahāvākya* "Tattvamasi".

The author's outline of Śaṅkara's doctrine (ch. II, pp. 107–187) is solid, personal and uncompromising. He takes his distance from many a modern interpreter : Otto, Zaehner, Radhakrishnan, Lacombe, Hacker, Panikkar, Hoang-Sy-Quy. He studies successively (1) the human condition, (2) Reality, (3) unreality, (4) liberation and the way which leads to it. This is preceded by a brief setting forth of Śaṅkara's intention and method. What Śaṅkara intends is exclusively liberation (*mokṣa*) through recognition of the nature of Reality as revealed by the *Upaniṣads* or *Śruti*. Hence, he only claims to be an *Aupaniṣada* or *Śrutivādin*, i.e., an exegete of the *Upaniṣads* according to the tradition of *Uttara Mīmāṃsā*. Their testimony which is eternal and, hence, infallible is received as sovereign and independent, not as complementary to any other source of truth within its domain, *mokṣa*. Reliance on it gives Śaṅkara an assurance which underlies his intellectual fervour and courage, his serene objectivity in meeting opponents, and the organic unity of his thought.

The misery of man's condition in the passing world of Śaṁsāra ruled by the law of *karman* and rebirth which makes man the binder of his own shackles is a *locus communis* of Indian culture in Śaṅkara's time. Instead of simply showing that the latter endorses it, the author might profitably have introduced the reader to Śaṅkara's criticism of Jaimini's conception of *karman* in *Vedānta-sūtra Bhāṣya*, 3,2,38–41 + 2,1,34–35 and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*, 3,8,9–12. He, however, does not fail to point out Śaṅkara's high estimation of human birth : man alone is capable of intellectual knowledge and infinite desire; this capacity gives every man access to the saving knowledge even though the study of *Śruti* requires

qualifications which are the privilege of only few; but man is also free and can refuse to "cut off the tree of *samsāra*" and thus miss salvation.

The opposite of *samsāra* is Reality, i.e., the unchanging Absolute, the *Brahman-Ātman*. Its mark, indeed, is unchangeableness. Speech, being *samsāra*-bound, is radically unable to express it. Hence, Śaṅkara's apophatism is inflexible. It is rooted in the Upaniṣadic *neti-neti* which prescribes that the *Brahman* can only be attained "through elimination of all differences due to *upādhis*." *Upādhi* means finite and diversifying adjuncts or attributes or relations wrongly superimposed upon the infiniteness and simplicity of the Absolute. The author refers to this notion but without working it out. Śaṅkara's apophatism, however, is not Buddhistic. Though silence—of speech but with a mind entirely focused on the absolute Fulness—would be the most adequate attitude, the Upaniṣads themselves make use, without betraying apophatism, of positive appellations. And one of the most original and helpful contributions of Śaṅkara is his justification of this practice through recourse to the theory of *lakṣaṇā*. This theory takes into account the secondary meanings which accrue to words (and concepts) from their function in contexted sentences. Through such a *lakṣyārtha*, a word may "indicate" (*lakṣ—*) a reality beyond the area (*gocara*) of "expressive" power of its primary meaning (*mukhyārtha*). In particular, some words whose primary meaning abstract from both finiteness and infinity can contextually infinitized so that their "supreme meaning" (*paramārtha*) becomes "indicative" of the Absolute. Such, for instance, are the words *satya* (reality) and *jñāna* (knowledge) used with *ananta* (infinite), which infinitizes them, in the definition of *Brahman* provided by *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, 2,1. The author is quite aware of this feature of Śaṅkara's exegesis but does not expose its full scope. Further, in denying its affinity with the Thomistic theory of analogy, he is only half-right. This theory, indeed, is primarily a theory of the secondary meanings of terms which differs little from the theory of *lakṣṇā* especially in its Śaṅkarian application; but it is prolonged by a theory of ontological participation which is foreign to Śaṅkara.

To the positive capacity of words thus to serve as pointers to the Absolute, Piantelli rightly adds the capacity of human consciousness to discover it at the very heart of its experience : in its experience of the universe (as the internal and transcendent Cause of all,) in its awareness of ' I am ' (as the innermost Self or Ātman of everyone,) in its *cogito* (as the absolute and *per se* Light, *svayamjyoti*, Witness, *sākṣin*, Seer, *draṣṭṛ*, and Consciousness itself, *cit*, of every thinking.). Our transitory vision would be impossible without that eternal Vision or Seer. Thus, in the most elevated sense (*paramārthataḥ*) of the term *ātman*, there is but the unique *Ātman*. In *Upadeśusāhasrī*, 2,18 translated by the author, Śaṅkara explains that our finite ' I ' or *ātman* is but a mere reflection of that unique *Ātman* but Piantelli does not take up this important theory in his exposition.

This presence of Reality at the very root of consciousness relativises all the rest into unreality (or un-Reality, as I would prefer). Śaṅkara's loaded definition of these two terms, *sat* and *asat* (loaded inasmuch as it focuses only on the " supreme sense " of *sat*) in his *Gītābhāṣya* is unfortunately neglected by Piantelli who simply writes, " impermanente—e dunque irreali. " (p. 135) Unreality comprises the whole realm of multiplicity, nothing of which—neither knowers nor objects—can ever be identified with the Real. The latter, therefore, is not a distinct object and in that sense is unknowable. It is often said that for Śaṅkara " all this is *māyā* " but Piantelli is careful to recall that Śaṅkara himself (as distinct from later disciples) speaks very little in terms of *māyā* and rather in the sense of marvellous, divine power than of illusion. The term he affects is *avidyā*, nescience. All that it really implies for him would have been more relevant than the diverse theories of his followers rapidly mentioned by Piantelli. The latter, however, does not fail to quote the masterful text of *Bṛhadār. Up.*, 4,4,7 which shows that *avidyā* is eternally surmounted by the *Ātman* which sees it as *avidyā* and is thus unaffected by it. Ordinary knowledge is imbued with *avidyā* but this *does* not mean that its objects have no reality at all. Rather they are undefinable (*anirvacanīya*) in terms of ' being ' or ' non-being ' taken in their supreme sense (*sad-asad-vilakṣaṇa*). The independent reality we spontaneously attribute to them vanishes as such at the moment of our awakening to *Vidyā*. Does this mean that ultimate truth negatives all reality

apart from the Ātman ? To this question Piantelli gives, and seems to adhere simply to, the facile answer that acosmism is not justified before awakening but is imposed by it. However, the rather intricate explanations he gives (pp. 140–152) are more refined than that. They should be read carefully. What they amount to is a defence of non-dualism against any confusion with monism and any compromise with dualism. The latter would admit that cosmic reality is in some regard or at some time *per se*; the first would uphold that the aseity of the Absolute renders it incapable of any true creativity. Of these two misconceptions the first is very ably refuted by the author but the second receives no proper treatment. Whereas Śaṅkara devotes numerous stretches of his writings to the topic of creative causality, it is nowhere considered seriously in this book.

If non-dualism is true, liberation is not really an aim to be attained but an eternal fact to which man awakens. Only so long as we are under the sway of *avidyā* can we conceive of it as an end to be reached by some way or means. This way is the teaching of the Upaniṣads duly inculcated by a guide who has himself overcome *avidyā*. It proceeds along the classical three steps of audition, reflection and intense meditation. It cannot be entered without proper qualifications, especially total renunciation and desisting from secular and even sacral activity. Śaṅkara's hard polemics against all karmavādins is here recalled. The author is aware that it nullifies the very presuppositions of the whole theory of *karman*. Liberation can take place in the very course of one's life (*jīvanmukti*) since it consists in a total awakening to absolute Consciousness which is ever present. It is infinite Joy and Freedom.

Through Piantelli's book, Śaṅkara becomes alive and we are richly introduced to the profundity of his doctrine. For this and the many helps it provides including an excellent bibliography, the author deserves all our gratitude.