

**SREEKRISHNAPURAM V.T. BHATTATHIRIPAD COLLEGE**

**SEMINAR ON ADI SANKARA – 24<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 2003**

**PAPER PRESENTED BY P.Govinda Pillai**

ADI SANKARA AND HIS PHILOSOPHY:  
THE SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The exact date and place of birth of Adi Sankara are still matters of dispute among scholars. But there has emerged a working consensus, which is sufficient for our purpose. According to this working consensus the great Acharya flourished towards the last quarter of eighth century and first quarter of the ninth and by the same token, he was born in a Namboodiri family at Kalady on the banks of the river Periyar.

Socially and politically these one or two closing centuries of the first millennium after Christ marked many significant turns in the history of India. The Muslim and Arab intrusion from the northwest was then round the corner. The first phase of Indian Feudalism (AC 300-750) was giving way to what Ram Saran Sharma designates “The Heyday of Political Feudalism” (AC1000-1200). In the south the early phase coincided with: the era of three kingdoms - the MOOVARASARS including Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras. In place of the empires of Powerful Guptas and then Harsha, smaller Principalities and kingdoms like those of Palas, Rastrakutas, Chalukyas and Rajaputhras, were rising all over the country. Big centralized states were cracking up and all-India trade routes, which spanned out from Pataliputhra, Varanasi and Kanchi were in ruins. Kings vied with highway robbers and adventurers in the conquest of pelf and power. Anarchy was creeping in and new land and State system was taking shape with widespread phenomenon of land grants and grabs which benefited the temples, Brahmins, Kshatrias and the new landed aristocracy. Historians designate it as feudalism. Unlike in Europe, in India feudalism was built from top and not from the bottom, as was the case at the time of decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

## **The Sway of Manu**

The social thrust of this new economic and political formation was a new consolidation of the caste hierarchy with Brahmins at the top and Shudras at the bottom. MANUSMRITHI was in existence from the 2nd Century A.C. but its virulence and cruelty took an unprecedented dimension during this rise of feudalism. Sankara's frequent, though strange, resorts to MANUSMRITHI to buttress his philosophic and social principles show the unchallenged position of the Brahmin Law Giver during Sankara's reliance on Manu and his obnoxious code for establishing his theories in truly astonishing and even intriguing. Take for example such an outstanding philosopher like Kapila, the reputed founder of the magnificent philosophical edifice of "Sakhya". Even Krishna, to prove his intellectual Prowess to Arjuna compares himself with Kapila: "Among the great Siddhas I am Kapila" he says. See now Sankara dismisses such an outstanding thinker and his system by a simple reference to Manu in his BRAHMA SUTRA BHASHYA:

"Manu himself, where he glorifies the seeing of everything, implicitly blames the doctrine of Kapila... The system of Kapila contradicts the Veda and doctrine of Manu, who follows the Veda" (ii 1.2)

Sankara quotes and underlines the famous or rather the infamous old Brahmanical adage "Whatever Manu said is medicine". Even a modern scholar like P.V. Kane, who is a vedantin himself, finds it difficult to explain away this blatant reliance on Manu. He admits in his classical four volumes HISOTRY OF DHARMA SASTRAS:

"Sankaracharya in his Vedanta Bhasya quotes Manusmriti very frequently. In his Bhasya on Brihadaranyaka Upanishad he quotes Manu dozens of times. He looks upon Manusmriti as one of the authorities on which the author of the Vedanta Sutra relies" (1. 145)

Manu's rabid condemnation of the Shudras and his severe strictures against them and the oppressive social system he prescribed are all too well known to warrant any quotations here. All what is relevant here is the supreme position sought to be accorded to Manu in those centuries and the infallibility attributed to him by even such a keen intellect like that of Sankara. Even

philosophical disputes are sought to be settled by quoting “Penal and civil codes”.

### **The Land and Varna**

The resurgence of Varnasrama and caste oppression during the second half of the first millennium A.C. is directly related to and is natural off-shoot of the new land tenure and centrifugal political system that began to overtake India from the time of the decline of Guptas. Communal ownership of land was giving way to big private landed estates. Land grants and endowments were robbing the rights of Peasants and tying them stiff to feudal estates and vassals. Though it was a change from the older status of being “common helots”, the oppression and exploitation’ of the toilers were more severe. R.S. Sharma explains:

“The socio-economic aspect of feudalism in India was intimately connected with the transformation of the Shudras, who were treated as the common helots of the three higher Varnas, into Peasants from the Gupta period onwards. In the older settled areas Shudra labourers seem to have been provided with land. In the backward areas number of tribal peasantry was annexed to the Brahmanical system through land grants and they were called Shudras. The subjection of Indian Peasantry in early medieval times, tie. The 2nd half of the 1st millennium), especially in older settled regions, was a second striking development connected with the socio-economic dimensions of feudalism. It can be explained by several factors, the most important of which was the increase in the burden of taxation on the villagers. The Gahadavala grants mention as many as eleven taxes in the villages: if all these were extracted by the state, we doubt whether peasants were left with even a bare subsistence. In addition to transfers of these taxes, in many cases the donees were given the right to fixed and fixed, proper and improper taxes”. (Indian Feudalism, 1980, p.271)

### **Decadent Buddhism**

The Scientific sociology and the sociology of philosophy do not permit us to divorce this new land and political system from the Aviate of Sankara. So the

criticism that Sankara sought to reinforce Varnasrama system is not altogether unfounded. But there are certain other historical factors, which deter us from a simplistic black and white evaluation.

If this was the social and political backdrop of the rise of Sankara and his philosophy, what were the alternate systems of philosophy and faith against which Sankara fought? It is generally known that he fought against two streams simultaneously: One was his fight against the extremely corrupt and decadent aspects of Hindu rituals, Yajnas and the Tantric orgies. Though his Theory of the irreconcilability of Jnana and Karma was certainly misused to drive a feudal wedge between the elite and toilers, the original concept had much to do with Sankara's fight against the barbarian rituals and Yajna Karmas. The other was his war against what is known as Buddhist and Jainist theories and practices. Sankara's fierce battles against Buddhism and Jainism is famous in Indian History and he is credited with dealing the final blows which lead to their virtual eclipse in the land of their birth. Hindu revivalists exult in this claim. The critics of Sankara point this out as the final proof of the reactionary service rendered by him for the revival of the inequitable Brahmanical system. This line of argument is not quite unjust. But these critics often overlook certain other facts of history.

What do they overlook? They overlook the total disarray and decadence of the Buddhist Culture in ~7th, 8th and 9th Centuries after Christ, that is the era of Sankara, his predecessor Gaudapada and his immediate followers and interpreters. Actually the seeds of Buddhist decline were sown long before and they were seen sprouting all over by the famous pilgrim-scholars of China, viz. Fa-hien, Song Yun, Husan Tsang and I-tsing who visited India during fifth, sixth and seventh centuries. They saw progressive reduction of Buddhist population and they witnessed the famous viharas afflicted by creeping decay and ruins. This process reached its climax in the seventh and eighth centuries, not only organizationally but in the very faith, rituals and practices of Buddhism.

Dr. Lalmani Joshi, a fervent supporter of the Buddhist cause and hence a severe critic of Sankara has this to say in his *Studies in the Buddhist Culture of India during the 7th and 8th Centuries AD*:

“Moral Degradation: Degeneration in moral and spiritual attainments of the Buddhist monks and nuns during the seventh and eighth centuries is reflected in the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims and clearly alluded to in the contemporary Indian Literature. Hsuan Tsang refers to the careless moral conduct of the Buddhist monks of Bolore or Balti and says that they were without any definite learning. Of the wordily life and indisciplined ways of Sammitya monks in Sindha, Hsuan Tsang gives graphic description. They were indolent, worthless persons given to debauchery. Though they wore the monastic dress, yet killed animals, reared cattle and maintained wives and children (p.305)

This killing of animals, which on the face of it is totally abhorrent to Buddhist precepts, doesn't seem to be just an aberration or isolated exception. The great 12th Century historian of Buddhism, Varanatha, gives us the shocking information that he had found in many Buddhist monasteries and Vihars professors called “Bali Acharya”. The Bali Acharyas were entrusted with the task of teaching the pupils and inmates the art and craft of killing animals and possibly humans for ritual purposes. A strange nemesis to the apostle of Ahimsa! Besides these, tantric sexual orgies, casteist divisions and feudal aggrandizement and wallowing in vulgar luxury made the once pure viharas stink in the nostrils of the nation. All that were grotesque and obnoxious in Hindu Society became step-by-step part and parcel of the Mahayana Buddhism of the first millennium. Therefore the struggle of Sankara against the vulgar and costly Yajnas of Brahmins was also a struggle against decadent Mahayana rituals. Hence one is led to wonder whether there were also strong renaissance and reformatory streaks in Sankara along with the undoubted revivalist trends. Renaissance connotes progress while revivalism means reaction.

### **Pracchanna Bouddha**

This line of thinking is also encouraged by the thousand-year old charge that, in spite of Sankara vociferous remonstrance to the country, he was actually a “Pracchanna Bouddha” ie. A concealed Buddhist. It is said that Sankara has borrowed liberally from Buddhism both organizationally and theoretically. Organizationally the concept of celebrates Sanyasins for the spread of the faith was clearly a Buddhist innovation in Indian history. Sankara was the

first Brahmin Acharya to adopt it and build it into a Hindu institution. What little we know of Sankaras monastic order only confirms that he kept it at the level of the pristine purity of Sakyamuni's "Sangha". No one has found fault with them on moral or other grounds as was done in the case of the latter-day Buddha Bhikshus. Sankara's deep debt to Buddhists in the formulation of his theories may sound fantastic to those not initiated into the intricacies of medieval Indian thought. Here I only wish to quote Dr. S.N. Dasgupta from his five-volume magnum opus, A History of Indian Philosophy. Dr Dasgupta was an assiduous Vedantin and worshipper of Sankara. Still he could not close his eyes to what emerges undeniably from the texts. He concludes his first volume thus.

“Sankara and his followers borrowed much of their dialectic form of criticism from the Buddhists. His Brahmin was very much like the Sunya of Nagarjuna. It is difficult indeed to distinguish between pure being and pure non-being as category. The debts of Sankara to the self-luminosity of the Vijnanavada Buddhism can hardly be over-estimated. There seems to be much truth in the accusation against Sankara by Vijnana Bhikshu and others that he was a hidden Buddhist himself. I am led to think that Sankara's philosophy is largely a compound of Vijnanavada and Sunyavada Buddhism with the Upanishad notion of the permanence of self superadded”. (1975 Edn.p.494)

D.D. Kosambi says that without Buddhism the 18 slokas of the 2nd Chapter of Gita (55-72) would be impossible. These series of 18 slokas begin and end with casting of desires for knowledge, tranquility and liberation (Myth and Reality. 1962, P.16). Buddha was also elevated later by Hindus as an incarnation of their Vishnu. The Buddhists returned the compliment by accepting Hindu Gods and Goddesses like Ganesh, Tara, Kali, Chamuda, Saraswati, etc, into their fold. This list of the reciprocal give-and-take between Buddhism and Hinduism can be stretched further. This shows not only the flexibility of Sankara's Advaita, but also a dual character of Sankara's non-dual theory.

In modern times this dualism of non-dualism was exemplified in the life and work of religious and social reformers like Swamy Vivekananda, Sree Narayana Guru and Chattambi Swamikal. All of them were devout advaitins, but they steered clear of the Manusmriti cult of Badarayana and Sankara and

made advaita a power- full intellectual weapon in their fight against casteism and for renaissance. While Vivekananda and Narayana Guru almost turned a Nelson's eye to the Varnasrama Prejudices in the acharya (Once or twice Vivekananda made some critical references to it) it was left to Chattambi Swamigal to openly take cudgels against Badarayana's and Sankara's anti Shudra strictures. In his explosive "Vedadhikara Nirupanam" Chattambi Swamigal tears into smithereens the "Apasudradhikaana" of Brahmasutra and Sankara's ingenious defence of it. It is in this notorious section that Shudras were banned from learning Vedas and condemned to eternal damnation.

It all proves again that philosophical constructs and cultural phenomena are oft wrapped in mysterious shells, which may be amenable to multiple interpretations. Philosophies and theories are often what they do in society rather than what they mean verbally. Any theory or principle divorced from its specific historical social background and impact may lead us astray. Adi Sankara and his advaita also need more detailed examination on these lines. Such an examination may lead to some new revelations, which may not be the same as were conventionally conceived and believed.

*(Amended version of the paper presented during Sri Sankaracharya's 1200<sup>th</sup> Birth day celebrations at Sri Ramakrishna Ashram, Kalady on April 1989)*