

THE PROBLEMATIC OF SACRED KNOWLEDGE
FORBIDDEN OUTSIDE THE CIRCLE OF ORTHODOXY
IN THE LIGHT OF MĪMĀMSĀ AND VEDĀNTA

All twice-born men are entitled to the study of the Vedic scriptures. However, only the *brāhmaṇa* is allowed to teach. *Śūdras* or serfs are excluded from this privilege to learn the sacred lore. This is so at least in theory. There have been cases in which *śūdras* were raised to the state of clergymen by virtue of their impeccable character and innate wisdom. The story of the youth Satyakāma, who could not even name his father, is one such example.

Although incomprehensible to the modern mind, this formal exclusion of the *śūdras* from the religious life has its philosophical justification in the theory of moral retribution (*karman*): A person is born a *brāhmaṇa* or a serf on the strength of his volition in a previous existence. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the doctrine of *karman* also implies that a serf need not be born a serf in a subsequent incarnation. Infallible observation of the moral code pertaining to his own caste will secure for him a birth as a twice-born, perhaps even as a *brāhmaṇa*. This sounds like empty promises designed to hold the proletariat in leading-strings. Perhaps in later times it became just that. After all, throughout the ages economic exploitation of the less favoured groups in society has been practised all over the world through the introduction of hypnotic religious ideals. Yet originally this esoteric teaching of *karman* and successive rebirths was free of any political motives. It was introduced into the Āryan community by ascetics who had 'seen', and it was certainly not the result of theoretical deliberations on the part of the ruling sacerdotal

class. Religious and social life was still spontaneous and far removed from the rigidity and aridity of the later Hindu culture¹.

Perhaps once spelt out, the matter we are going to consider may seem to possess some virtue as topic of discussion. It is an aspect of orthodoxy, to be sure. But although many aspects of orthodoxy have been studied thoroughly and minutely, we may not be wrong in assuming, the particular issues we have in mind have not yet come within the purview of scholars.

Some preliminary clarifications are needed. We are going to consider sacred knowledge, open only to those who are within the legitimate, orthodox community, tradition and discipline but forbidden to be cultivated outside them, by those who are outsiders to them. This kind of knowledge is to be distinguished from *esoteric* knowledge with which the students of the phenomena of religion have some acquaintance. On this more later.

Another important clarification: this paper is not conceived as a general, scientific inquiry into the existence of such a phenomenon as knowledge forbidden in the way described, or of its ascertainable characteristics. We are only pointing to a concrete place among the religious traditions of man where it actually exists. One here thinks of Hindu orthodoxy as such, where it is located. But as soon as we come to its specific aspects, it makes one raise the kind of question we are raising. To continue this particular clarification: while we want to avoid getting into any general so-called phenomenological inquiry into the matter, we will want to make some observations of a problematic nature. The problematic consideration will simply mean this: now that we know it exists and where it exists, we will want to know also how to take it, what to do with it, in other words, how to regard it philosophically.

We must hasten to add a last clarification. There are several words we have used here, like 'orthodoxy', 'community', 'legitimate' etc., words which, along with the problem itself, might give the impression that we are trying to say something sociological. So we must clearly

1. GEORGE FEUERSTEIN, *Introduction to the Bhagavad Gītā: Its Philosophy and Cultural Setting*, London, Rider & Company, 1974, p. 118-119.

state that in dealing with the problem we have set up we have not the slightest intention of doing it in terms of sociology of religion or any other sociology. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, we do not want to talk even about the need for problematic study and thought in any general way, although we think they are inescapable and should be the next phase into which we move in our investigations of religion. However, as we want to avoid all things general as far as possible and confine ourselves to very concrete things we will focus on Hindu orthodoxy alone.

Two ways in which Hinduism has been generally studied are (1) descriptive, and (2) evaluational or even value-judgmental. Often they also interpenetrate. The disciplinary angles from which these studies have been made might be historical, sociological or theological (sometimes metaphysical). But consider the matter we are envisaging for discussion: "sacred knowledge forbidden outside the circle of orthodoxy". It has been approached either historically or sociologically or theologically by both Indian and non-Indian scholars for the purpose of description alone or evaluation and value-judgment or both. But those who have something to say about it which is neither descriptive nor evaluational are seldom heard. What we are proposing to do is to give some of them and ourselves a chance to speak up. We might formulate a problematic which will have philosophical use.

This is how, in a preliminary way, we have set forth what we want to study and what we want to study it for. We said that we want to investigate a phenomenon viz., sacred knowledge being forbidden outside the circle of orthodoxy, concretely located in Hinduism. We have also said that we want to study it problematically. In respect to the problematic we have said that we are not going to do it phenomenologically or sociologically, and that we are not going to adopt the customary ways of approaching this particular phenomenon (or similar phenomena) descriptively or evaluationally. We want to do it in such a way as to help us to formulate a problematic, which will eventually be useful in metaphysics.

We now turn to the concrete location of the phenomenon in Hinduism. In doing so we will confine ourselves further to the specific understanding of it in the common *mīmāṃsā* tradition, moving more particularly into the Vedānta of the *Uttara-mīmāṃsā*. This will help put us on our way.

The Presuppositions of Sacredness in the Mīmāṃsā Tradition

The sacred is manifested through the concretely sacred: sacred order (*dharma*), sacred speech (*vāc*), sacred act (*karma*) and sacred knowledge (*vidyā*). To talk about the sacred as abstract would be against its nature. Historically, the forms of sacredness, as *dharma*, *vāc*, *karma* and *vidyā* came to the Hindu tradition from the greatest antiquity, from the Vedas themselves, and metaphysically from the nature of the cosmos. The idea of the sacred order (*dharma*) as concrete order of "caste" and stages of life (*varnāśrama-dharma*) was the definitive contribution of the *dharma-śāstra*, more particularly Manu's *Dharma-śāstra*. *Dharma* itself was set forth by the *dharma-śāstras* as the sacred cosmic mansion in which all the other sacred things such as speech, act and knowledge were properly housed.

Such is the background in which the *mīmāṃsā* came to be articulated. To the extent that they are primarily ways of viewing (*darśanas*) the ways of living, which *dharma* essentially signified, had to be backed up by philosophy, and even transcended (at least as far as the Vedānta is concerned). The limitations of the ways of living, sacred living, issued from the empirical denotation of *dharma* as *varnāśrama-dharma*, reflected to some extent on the ways of viewing, because viewing had to observe fidelity to living. This is the condition which primarily sets up our problem.

But the object to be viewed is always universally open in principle. And the limitations themselves, such as were transferred from living to viewing, are established by public discussion, in which those who are excluded are as much the audience as those who are included. For this reason there is no *esoteric* character to it. Neither *mīmāṃsā* is esoteric in the slightest degree. In the Indian tradition Kashmir Śaivism is esoteric, the *tāntric* cults are esoteric, but the *mīmāṃsā* is not esoteric. Sometimes the word *parā-vidyā* (the higher sacred knowledge) of the Vedānta is unfortunately translated as esoteric, for instance by Paul Deussen in his excellent treatise on the System of Vedānta. But even in *parā-vidyā* there is nothing esoteric. The restrictions placed on the learning and practice of sacred knowledge (*vidyā*) are due to the limitations of life in the sacred order, and these limitations are always publicly expressed and not secretly main-

tained or cultivated. There are of course words like *guhyam*, *rahasyam*, etc. used in the Upaniṣads. But they refer to the teachings themselves, not their subject-matter of utterance. The sacred is also secret in the sense of communication through words, not in the sense of cultic secrecy. In this communication the word (*vāc*) is supreme. As the word hides in itself its coming out of that hiding is regarded as the sacredness of utterance. Each phenomenon has its own way of sacredness. Hiding and coming out of hiding are the way of the sacredness of language. Only in language is secrecy sacred. That does not amount to anything like the esoteric. Besides, this kind of secrecy or sacredness of language is itself a subject-matter for philosophy, an area in which the *mīmāṃsā* have contributed mightily.

The Sacred and the Two Mīmāṃsās

The two *mīmāṃsās* are built on the commonly inherited foundation of sacredness, meaning the sacred order, sacred act, sacred word and sacred knowledge. The *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* (*Karma-mīmāṃsā*) chose *dharma* (sacred) order as the all-important sacred reality to be contemplated. Hence Jaimini begins his work with the aphorism, *athāto dharma-jijñāsā* (now, therefore, the desire for *dharma*-knowledge). The *Uttara-mīmāṃsā* (Vedānta) chose Brahman in the place of *dharma*; hence Bādarāyaṇa begins his work with the aphorism, *athāto brahma-jijñāsā* (now, therefore, the desire for Brahman-knowledge).

The *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā*, however, chose *karma* as the principal means by which to define the sacred order and as the only link between Reality (as the sacred order) and thought. The act turned towards man is thought, turned towards Reality is ritual. The sacredness of the act means its potency to generate thought in man and fruition into results (for man) in the realm of Reality. Thought, therefore, is the extension of the act and ritual action is the return movement from thought. Sacred speech and sacred knowledge must serve the ends of ritual as the sacred act.

The *Uttara-mīmāṃsā* was also reared on the same ground of the sacred on which the other *mīmāṃsā* was reared. And they share much in common, not to speak of their origin and their concern for the

sacred. But the *uttara* used the Vedic texts (the *jñānakāṇḍa* or Upaniṣads) to criticize the circumscribed boundaries of the *pūrva-mīmāṃsā* and to go beyond the bounds of the sacred chained to the sacred order and to the sacred act. For that purpose it used *vidyā* or sacred knowledge in a new way. It regarded the sacred not as ultimate Reality that should command man's supreme attention, and the sacred act as not self-fulfilling. Thought is stirred by the words about Brahman, coming to us via the Upaniṣads; it is mere receptivity to the knowledge or rather the desire for knowledge thus brought to us. Rituals must only serve us and support us in our walking in the path of Brahman-knowledge.

But the *Uttara-mīmāṃsā* does accept to a considerable extent the definitions of sacredness in particular and individual ways that the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* gave, although it does not accept its philosophy *in toto*. While in ultimate metaphysical questions it would go far beyond the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā*, in matters of practical living in the realm of sacred order, by use of the ritual activities, it is still very much at one with it. In the early times it was always understood that a student studied both the systems together. The tradition has continued in the same way to some extent.

There are many implicit and explicit references in the Vedānta texts themselves of the interrelation and interdependence of the two "systems". The most explicit reference is in Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Vedānta-Sūtra*, III.3.53, where he clearly speaks of the *pūrva-mīmāṃsā* as the chief science (*śāstra-pramukha*), the first philosophy (*prathamatantra*) and speaks of the two systems together as the whole philosophy (*kr̥tsna-śāstra*). Similarly, the greatest of all *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* writers, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, speaks from his end of the complementarity of the systems. In the context of elaborating the idea that the knowledge of the self is of two legitimate kinds, one leading to *mokṣa* through contemplation of Brahman, and the other leading to heaven (*svarga*), which takes on the form of knowledge of action, Kumārila states as follows:

Nor can it be rightly urged that, because the Self is laid down as the object of knowledge, it cannot have any connection with actions. Because the duties, necessary as well as occasional, relating to the

various castes and conditions of life, have got to be performed for the double purpose of destroying the evil effects of former sins, and the removal of all chance of the appearance of the sin that would follow from the non-performance of the necessary duties. And inasmuch as these duties on the one hand, and the knowledge of the Self on the other, have distinct purposes to fulfill, and proceed on two entirely different lines, they cannot be said either to reject each other, or to be accepted as optional alternatives, or to form parts of one another ².

In this same context Kumārila explicitly recognizes the authenticity of the realm to which the Vedānta belongs. This he writes: "In all cases knowledge is always found to be a means of purifying, and as such auxiliary to something else; with the sole exception of the knowledge of the Self". And the theme of the knowledge of the Self he then goes on to develop in an almost Vedantic way. The most remarkable statement on this is made by Kumārila at the end of the *Ātmavāda* in the *Ślokavārtika* in the following words: "Thus has the author of the *Bhāṣya* (by Śabara on the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtras*), with a view to establish atheism, established by means of reasonings, the existence of Ātman: conviction regarding this becomes strengthened by a careful study of the *Vedānta*" ³.

Now before we proceed any further a great difficulty has to be resolved. But it will be shown to be a problem for interpretation (*mīmāṃsā* itself). As is well known, Bādarāyaṇa begins with the *sūtra*, "Now, therefore, the desire for the knowledge of Brahman" (*athāto brahmajijñāsā*). The radical character of Śaṅkara's interpretation hinges on the link he forges between the terms "now", "therefore", and "the desire for the knowledge of Brahman". There he repudiates the pre-condition that competency (*adhikāra*) for the inquiry into Brahman has to be earned by the due performance of ritualistic actions (which is the ostensible theme of the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā*). In this Śaṅkara seems to reject the claims of Jaimini and Śabara and their followers. Many scholars have understood this in the sense that Śaṅkara

2. GANGANATH JHA, tr., *Tantravārtika* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1983) p. 321.

3. GANGANATH JHA, tr., *Ślokavārtika* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1983).

undercuts the entire basis of the earlier, that is ritualistic, *mīmāṃsā*. But is that really the case? Close scrutiny of Śaṅkara's words show that what he rejects is the supposed serial order between the desire to know *dharma* (duty) and desire to know Brahman (hence, *na dharmajijñāsāyāḥ prāgapi adhīta-vedāntasya brahmajijñāsā-upapattēḥ*). The desire for the knowledge of Brahman is not a *product* of the accomplished knowledge of *dharma*. Rather it is directly generated by the Vedānta texts. If anything it may even be argued, Śaṅkara contends, that the desire for knowledge of Brahman may arise from the study of the texts in advance of the desire for knowledge of *dharma* itself. But there must be also an interior disposition in the student of the Vedānta created by the practice of the four *sādhanas* or spiritual perfections (viz., discrimination between things eternal and transitory; distaste for the enjoyment of worldly as well as heavenly objects; attainment of serenity, self-restraint etc.; and a complete inclination towards *mokṣa*).

But does Śaṅkara regard the knowledge of *dharma* (or the desire for it, to be more exact) as useless or necessary? No, he does not. Rather he argues that the desire for all other desirable things like *dharma* is included in the desire for the knowledge of Brahman. In that connection, exegeting the grammatical form of the term *brahmajijñāsā* (*brahmaṇah* as being *karmaṇi* genitive rather than *śeṣe* genitive – the details of which let us omit here), he declares: "Brahman being the most desirable thing to be realized by knowledge, is of course the principal thing. When that principal thing is once accepted as the object of the desire to know, all those other (secondary) things, without desiring to know which Brahman cannot be properly desired to be known, are necessarily implied, and need not be separately mentioned in the *sūtra*. For when say 'the King is passing by' it implies the passing by of the king along with his retinue"⁴.

The desire for the knowledge of Brahman is not caused by the performance of any other activity. It is solely grounded in Brahman, occasioned in the human minds (or hearts) by the study of the Vedānta

4. V.M. APTE, tr., *Brahma-Sūtra Śhāṅkara-Bhāṣhya* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1960) pp. 7-8.

texts, and initially appropriated by means of the *sādhana*s or spiritual perfections. Śaṅkara distinguished between knowledge and action radically; knowledge is knowledge and action is action, and the one cannot pass its properties on to the other. The twain do not meet. Now, although knowledge as such is defined in this rigorous manner, that is with no admixture of the stuff of action in it, nevertheless, there is a kind of action on the part of man pertaining to the acquirement of knowledge, action in the most minimal sense, which is what study (*svādhyāya*) is. And study is possible only in the context of the observance of *dharma* and the practice of purifying rituals.

No doubt, in all the multitude of places where Śaṅkara weighs knowledge against action, he never concedes their equality in any manner whatsoever. Now, it will be recalled that a few moments ago we stressed the fact that he has totally rejected the notion that there is a serial order of priority according to which the desire for the knowledge of *dharma* arises before the desire for Brahman-knowledge and is even a pre-condition. This is based on his comment on the very first *sūtra* of all. But this declaration is made in order, from the start, to establish ideally the absolute independence of the Vedānta (*jñāna-kāṇḍa*) in relation to the ritualistic portions (*karma-kāṇḍa*) of the Veda. In fact what Śaṅkara is doing here is to help the student decide between two ways (as well as objects) of knowledge, or one might say two philosophies. One of them is the way of pure knowledge of Brahman, leading to *mokṣa*. The other is a way where knowledge first of all leads to action and action leads to the fulfillment of its goals, namely heaven (*svarga*). In the leading works of the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* like those of Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, an alternative and more excellent route to *mokṣa*, by contemplation of Brahman is recommended as a higher option which need not necessarily move towards the literal attainment of *svarga*. But even here contemplation of the sacred order (*dharma*) and its attendant execution of actions (*karma*) are regarded as an indispensable prerequisite. What Śaṅkara is really objecting to is the implication of necessary delay in the arising of the desire for Brahman-knowledge implied in the prescription to contemplate the *dharmic* order and interiorize its essence first, if not being diverted to the worse alternative of awaiting, to whatever degree, the fruition or the promise of fruition of actions directed to worldly and heavenly goals. Śaṅkara argues that the

origination of the desire for Brahman-knowledge does not need to depend upon any such thing. Rather, he sees a perilous waste of effort in following the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* prescription.

The *dharmic* order and its attendant ritual activities Śāṅkara clearly accepts as the sacred context for the immediate and direct origination of the desire for Brahman-knowledge. But he not only rejects the prior obligation imposed by the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* to contemplate and interiorize the essence of the *dharmic* order but also vigorously criticises its directing *karma* to external goals whether this-worldly or other-worldly. He no doubt accepts the sacred order expressed by *dharma* and *karma*. But he rejects the prior obligation to make the *dharmic* order the essential object of contemplation. As for *karma*, he would accept its importance but also the view that it is directed to something, but he would clarify that something no longer consists of external fruits. (Hence one must cultivate distaste for enjoyment of worldly and heavenly objects). Fruits there will be, but fruits of an internal dispositional nature, which prepares a person to receive the stirrings of the desire for Brahman-knowledge. In this he would further repudiate the implication in the opposite position that either the Brahman-knowledge or its intimation in the disposition of desire towards it can ever be the result of deliberate making on the part of man through other devices. Ritual actions properly undertaken, Śāṅkara feels, prepare thought to receive Brahman knowledge, thought being receptivity. It is in the light of this that we must understand his endorsement, nay prescription of ritual actions. They purify, make sacred, and thus enable thought to receive.

Śāṅkara's comments on *Vedānta-sūtra* III.4.25 and 26 and 27 are particularly noteworthy. In *sūtra* 25 he raises the question whether a person totally dedicated to (or shall we say, called?) to the path of pure knowledge (*vidyā*) has any further need to observe *āśrama dharma* (duties of the stages of life, such as lighting the sacred fire), and gives a decisive 'no' as the answer. But the theme is carried on further in the next two *sūtras*, making distinctions between external acts and internal acts, and then distinctions between their fruits, and finally suggesting the manner in which external acts can bear internal fruits. What is more, external acts are even prescribed as necessary for the origination of knowledge. Comments on *sūtra* 27 conclude with these words:

Therefore religious actions such as sacrifices etc., as also calmness and control over sense-organs as prescribed for the different orders of life, are all to be considered as necessary for the generation of knowledge. Even then it should be well understood with due discrimination, that as between them (i.e., sacrifices etc. and calmness and control over sense-organs), in the expression "One who knows it to be so", because of their connection with knowledge, calmness and control over the sense-organs are the proximate i.e., inward means of the knowledge (of the Self), while sacrifices etc., because of their being connected with desire of a man who knows thus, are the external means ⁵.

In all that Śaṅkara says, somehow, we cannot get away from the picture of a double origin of knowledge, firstly from the Vedānta directly, and secondly by way of (1) internal actions and (2) by internalized fruits of even external actions. Moreover, the way or ways of the origin of knowledge are also the way or ways of its cultivation. In both, actions have a certain, so to say catalytic, role to play, although not essential in any way.

Origin and cultivation are basically the same. But there is something that is radically different from the continuum of origin and cultivation. That something is fulfillment or attainment of the goal of knowledge. In *sūtra* 26 there is a simile of a horse, exegeting which Śaṅkara states: "Just as a horse, considering its dignity, is not employed for the dragging of a plough, but is used for a chariot, even so religious actions are not needed by the knowledge (of the Self) for the attainment of its own result (viz. Final Release) but they are needed by the knowledge (of the Self) for its own generation" ⁶. The word used for fulfillment or attainment of goal is *phalāsiddhi*, the word for origin is *utpatti*. Further, it is clear that to the extent that in this passage, as also elsewhere, actions are understood as *āśramakarmāṇi*, *utpatti* stands for the origination-cultivation continuum. But *phalāsiddhi* represents a total break. This means that the genuine, transphenomenal character of knowledge is revealed not in the way it originates (and is continuously cultivated) but in the way it fulfills itself. Origination of

5. *Ibid.*, p. 752.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

knowledge is of a piece with the origination of speech, *mantra*, sacrifice etc. But in the fulfillment of knowledge they may be means; they are not essentially partners.

Śaṅkara repeatedly argues that *karma* is valid but it is to be used only for the purpose of purification (of the mind, heart, soul). One must restrain oneself from using it for other purposes. Using of *karma* for any other purpose would be paralleled by using *vibhūti* of the *Yoga* for any purpose other than to aid in the reaching of *samādhi*. To deflect *karma* or *vibhūti* from its real goal would be unspiritual. In the same *sūtra* 26 mentioned a little while ago, Śaṅkara quotes an interesting *Smṛti* passage: *kaṣāyapakṭiḥ karmāṇi jñānam tu paramā gatih; kaṣāye karmabhiḥ pakve tato jñānam pravartate*. (G. Thibaut's trans.: Works are the washing away of uncleanness, but knowledge is the highest way. When the impurity has been removed knowledge begins to act". Apte's trans.: Religious actions cook up or digest uncleanness, and knowledge [of the Self] is the highest goal. Knowledge supervenes from actions, after such actions have purified uncleanness.). There is definite talk of cooking or boiling (*pakṭiḥ, pakve*). What is cooked is the stuff of impurity or *kaṣāya*; one that should be particularly included is what prevails in *Āyurveda* (medical treatise), namely a decoction brewed by boiling certain herbs with water. There are any number of *kaṣāyas*. The same process is used in ritual. What is implied is sacralizing actions. Particular attention has to be paid to the word *pravartate*, meaning, 'acts', 'operated', 'comes into effect' etc., etc. The stress on the word *tato* (then) should also be noted.

In summary, we must say that Śaṅkara does not reject the great concern with the sacred order and sacred action which have been the special province of the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* to define and elaborate. But he does *re-define* them, and indeed the entire realm of the sacred, in such a way as to show that they all exist so that in order through them Brahman-knowledge manifests itself. Because of that, all that are sacred meet in the *sacredness* of knowledge (*vidyā*). They do not meet knowledge itself, but they meet the sacredness of knowledge. The sacredness of knowledge is their sacredness. It is only that knowledge appears by way of the sacred. Sacredness is *a path* (and speaking from within the framework of the sacred, *the path*) for the appearing of knowledge.

Knowledge conforms to the distinctions (and restrictions) of the sacred only for its appearing. Its own being is above it. Insofar as when we are talking of Brahman we recognize the identity of the knower, knowledge and the known (*jnāna-jñeya-jñātṛ-bhedarahitāṃ pāramārthika-satyattvam*). So in reality Brahman is *sarva-dharma-viśeṣa-varjita* (free from all *dharma*s and attributes, Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Praśna Upaniṣad*, v. 2). It is *niratiśaya* (transcendent, *ibid.*, v. 7); *sarva-prapañca-vivarjita* (free from all phenomena, *loc. cit.*) etc., etc. All these are various ways of expressing *Nirguṇa Brahman*. What is true of *Nirguṇa Brahman* is also true of knowledge. But when we speak of knowledge of Brahman it has certain *saḡuṇa* characteristics. It conforms to the dialectics of the Sacred insofar as knowledge appears. Appearing means the way of its coming to us. "Sacred" applied to knowledge signifies the way of coming, the appearing. It does not signify *what* appears in the appearing. Śaṅkara is absolutely clear that if there is any "dialectics" between what appears and the appearing it is only in the appearing, because what appears is known only in its non-appearing, hence *neti, neti*. The sacred order, sacred act, sacred words are vehicles for the appearing of knowledge, which is called *vidyā*. This is *one of* the important truths about Śaṅkara's critique of the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā*. But Śaṅkara is also clear that cultivation of knowledge can also take place only within the sphere of appearing, the sacred.

The Exclusion of the Śūdras

Now we have been carried to the very centre of the problem. The sacred has divided those within from those without. In the light of the foregoing discussion we no longer ask, "how could the sacred make this kind of division?" We rather ask, "how can it not?" It is in the very nature of the sacred to divide thus. Some might, nevertheless say, "well, the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* might be expected to do this. But the Vedānta?, that is unbelievable". But Vedānta does too. So we must turn to the exclusion of *śūdras* of the Vedānta called *apaśūdrādhikaraṇam* (*Vedānta-sūtra* I.3.34-38).

But before we come to this section of the Vedantic text, we shall try to see briefly the logic of exclusion of the *śūdras* from participa-

tion in sacrifices developed by the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtras* of Jaimini. VI.1125-38 and the commentary on it by Śābara. The final decision is stated in the following words: "It is not possible that the *Shudra* would acquire the requisite knowledge (for performing sacrifice). Because such learning has been actually forbidden for the *Shudra* – 'The *Shudra*' shall not read the *Veda*'. Under the circumstances if he were to read, such rading would be absolutely useless; in fact he would incur sin. – Thus then it is *impossible for the Shudra to acquire the knowledge*, and hence it becomes established that *he can have no title to the performances of sacrifices*"⁷. Śābara's comments on *sūtra* 38 also show that the desire (*arthitva*) for heaven does not of itself confer competency (*adhikāra*) upon any one. Even Prabhākara, the author of the *Bṛhatī* (representing a less rigid school of the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā*), agrees with this verdict.

From the context of the discusison in both the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsā-sūtras* and the *Vedānta-sūtras*, from the fact that they are both refuting opponents to the restriction, it is clear that their views were by no means generally accepted. They and their commentators, Śābara and Śāṅkara, had to defend the case of orthodoxy.

There are two conspicuous recorded cases in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (IV.1-3; and IV.4), where Jānaśruti, presumedly a *śūdra* and Satyakāma Jābāla, a boy of unknown ancestry, respectively were given instruction about Brahman. Śāṅkara goes to enormous trouble to explain away both these cases. With regard to Jānaśruti he tries to prove that he is a Kṣatriya, and with regard to Satyakāma that he was a Brāhmaṇa lad. As far as our interest is concerned, whether Śāṅkara's explanations are correct is quite immaterial – and we can sympathize with several critics in feeling that they may not be. The length to which he goes in his explanation is more important. It is noteworthy that even for the word *śūdra*, specifically applied in the *Upaniṣad* reference to Jānaśruti, he rejects the accepted meaning; accordingly, *śucā dudrāva* (one who had run from sorrow) is *śūdra*, strictly in the Jānaśruti reference, as he had run to the sage Raikva for instruction, and it has nothing to do with the caste *śūdra*. However, it

7. GANGANATH JHA, tr., *Śābarabhāṣya* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1973) p. 1001.

is not a fanciful derivation. The Vedantic tradition has accepted it. Rāmānuja makes it even clearer. (There is a numbering discrepancy which must be reckoned with I.3.34, where this reference occurs in Śāṅkara is I.3.33 in Rāmānuja: this goes all the way back). Rāmānuja shows that the root *śuc*, to grieve, takes on the suffix *ra* (*Uṇādi Sūtras* II.2), and the root becoming elongated, thus *śūdra*. Hence sorrowfulness alone is indicated by the *śūdra* in this instance. It may be mentioned that Śāṅkara did not invent the derivation, as it is based on the *Uṇādi Sūtras* which the *Śruta-prakāśikā* rates as second only to Pāṇini in authority. However, the accepted meaning (*rūḍhārtha*) of the word *śūdra* based on the *Nirukta* of Yāska is *śrūtāt dūrah*, meaning, far from the Vedas, which itself is interpretive.

The *śūdra* is excluded from the learning of Brahman-knowledge, because he is not allowed to study the Veda (*na śūdrasya adbhikārah, vedādhyayanābhāvāt*) and he cannot be initiated. The reason for exclusion is lack of eligibility, competency. Śāṅkara clearly states that it has nothing to do with secular considerations; it does not come from the world but solely by reason of *adbhikāra* (*sāmarthyam api na laukikam kevalam adbhikāra-kāraṇam bhavati*) – obviously this is a rejection of the secular, democratic conception of capability, already advanced against the exclusion. In the comments on *sūtra* 38, he repeats the traditional prohibition against the *śūdra* even hearing the Veda being read.

From this what must appear to be an obscurantist position, later Vedantins, Advaitins and non-Advaitans alike, have tried to move towards a slightly more liberal stand. It is the Veda which constitutes the core of sacred tradition. But then also from times immemorial there have been the Epics and the Purāṇas. They too contained in different places the same saving knowledge as the Vedas, it was believed in the tradition. Śāṅkara allowed their study by the *śūdras*. Rāmānuja, who generally shared Śāṅkara's reservations on the *śūdras* studying the Vedas, however, went further in accommodating the *śūdras* to the pursuit of Brahman-knowledge, by elevating the Epics and the Purāṇas to near-equality with the Vedas. In other words, he provided a double path of nearly the same efficacy. In this way the *śūdras* have a perfect right to Brahman-knowledge (*śūdrādīnām eva brahma-vidyādbhikārah su-śobhanah*). The knowledge of the true nature of things (*vastu-*

yāthātmya-jñāna) is open to the *śūdra* too. And of course for Rāmānuja the great leveller was *bhakti*. The Advaitin Appayya Dīkṣita would also see room, based on Śaṅkara's own mandate, for recognizing a competency for knowledge through study of the Epics and Purāṇas alongside of the competency study of the Vedas. Even the argument that desire (*arthitva*) generated a kind of competence, refuted by Śaṅkara, is partially defended by Appayya in the following words: "It (the exclusion section) cannot negate the *śūdra's* desire for the Attributeless, since that desire is prompted by the attractiveness of the subject; and in the case of what is not prescribed there is no possibility of competency (therefore), other than the desire for it" ⁸. Now, even in these relaxed interpretations, the utmost that we come to is that the *śūdra* is not forbidden to know about Brahman as long as he does not try to know through a study of the Veda. So what is really forbidden is not the knowledge but the way of acquiring it, which is by participation in a certain sphere of sacredness reserved for the insiders.

The Problematic

The problem arise only when we think of Brahman-knowledge as saving knowledge, as the tradition did and does think. If we are considering only the purely theoretical aspect of Vedānta metaphysics then we have no problem. It is too absurd to talk about that being forbidden or permitted. That knowledge is part and parcel of all that is knowledge and is open to all. The traditional concepts of *adhikāra*, *arthitva* and even *sāmarthya* do not refer to that kind of knowledge. They operate in the context of participation in the sacred.

Nevertheless one can understand the repugnance that even the most sympathetic students of the Vedānta feel towards such an exclusion. Paul Deussen than whom a more sympathetic scholar cannot be found, while irked by it, dismisses it as "accommodation to national prejudice". Radhakrishnan states: "The different methods of gaining

8. S.S.S. SASTRI, ed., *Siddhāntaleśasamgraha* (Madras: Madras University Philosophical Department Publications, 1935) Vol. 1, p. 344.

salvation, meditation, devotion which lead to *Brahma*-knowledge are open to all. The restrictions with regard to *Vedic* study cannot be defended. If we take our stand on the potential divinity of all human beings, whatever be their caste or class, race or religion, sex or occupation, methods of gaining release should be open to all”⁹.

We would find it naturally distressing that the ways of pursuing Brahman-knowledge should have got enmeshed with the *varṇāśrama-dharma*, and with its consequent “caste system”. From our present point of view it looks like a misfortune, but the Brahman-knowledge could have come in no other way. When something has come the way it has come and no other we should call that sacred. There is no other possible definition for “sacred” that is applicable here. We are not talking only of the historical circumstances of its coming but also of the manner of its perpetual coming. But what is called the “caste system” has itself no relevance at all here. It is at best an outreach of the sacred and at worst a distortion. Contemporary consciousness is entirely right in feeling the revulsion it does towards the caste system, and the Indian constitution has rightly abolished its public practice.

But we cannot deny that a great tradition has acted as if it could preserve the sacred only in what seems to be a highly arbitrary way. But the question is, as I put it in the beginning, how to deal with this problem, how to take it. But then we must not miss seeing the real problem. It is (the caste system aside) not sociological in nature calling for either interpretation of history or for reform. The problem is purely philosophical, something for thought. There have been many literary enterprises in India to interpret the Veda and other texts in such a way as to remove scriptural sanction for the caste system. One particularly thinks of Swami Dayananda Sarasvati’s *Veda-Bhāṣya*, a notable and scholarly effort. One can think of many other works. As for reform we will leave it to the reformers.

The problem is of a philosophical nature. But then again we cannot be meaning here philosophy in the sense of perpetual beginning taking place in the mind of the philosopher who needs no other right to

9. S. RADHAKRISHNAN, ed., *The Brahma Sūtra: The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968) p. 309.

own everything that comes into his purview than the fact that he can learn them and think of them. That of course is applicable to the theoretical aspect of the Vedānta metaphysics which is open to all. In this sense it is not different from Aristotle, or German idealism, or British empiricism. It is there for everyone who can learn it. We are talking about the *fact* that a certain extremely attractive philosophical way of life had been by definition closed to outsiders, indeed about *the fact* that it created an *essential* division between those inside and those outside. The problem further is whether that kind of particularity belongs to philosophy. That is a problem *for* philosophy. Why it has happened has already been answered at length. The final question is how to take it, how to deal with it. One answer is that this kind of particularity is inalienable from the sacred, which does not mean that the exclusion must be observed either in the letter or the spirit. What the exclusion projects is a particularity of the sharpest kind like the sharp blade of a knife, and he who can stop the blade by grabbing hold of its sharp edge is alone qualified to think about the exclusive particularity.

To think is not to evade, but to take truly to heart. It is very easy for modern man to dismiss a traditional exclusion formula like this in the name of the freedom of thought, in the name of the privilege and the right to know all that is there to be known, an assumption that modern man has inherited, but we are talking about the deep convictions of a certain tradition of knowledge, where knowledge was jealously guarded in impregnable vaults protected by ritual prohibitions.

We can approach this phenomenon only through thought. But our "we" must not imply any superiority of attitude or condescension on the part of the freedom and power of thought which we cherish. That would be another particularity, a more offensive one. We can establish contact with the phenomenon through thought, but we must discover the ways in which it is already coming to us on its own. But then we must realize that what we seek as phenomenon has not been a *mere* phenomenon, a *mere* appearing, in the mind of the tradition, rather, it has been what both held and withheld saving knowledge. The points of view of those for whom the knowledge was held and of those from whom it was withheld are for thought to become complementary, and in a sense the one serves the other. In that way, the excluded ones too participate in what they are excluded from. For exclusion is visualized

as an indirect participation of the most vital kind. The *mīmāṃsās* too have not forgotten that. However, modern man cannot pretend to stand in the place of the excluded, but neither can he understand what he is seeking if he does not want to understand what being excluded means both negatively and positively.

To some extent the tradition itself points the way in a practical, religious manner, as Rāmānuja does when he lays hold of *bhakti* (devotion) as the ultimate leveller, thought too provides the way for modern man, perhaps the only way. Here we are not thinking of the perpetual beginning taking place in the mind of the philosopher who needs no other right to own everything that comes into his purview than the fact that he can learn them and think of them. This is, however, both good and necessary. We are talking specifically of thought as receptivity to all that both holds and withholds truth, however, mysteriously. Withholding is also revelation. And to be the withheld from is a kind of privilege too. This too is a beginning, but different from the perpetual beginning, which also is ours. We can do no more than come to beginning with regard to both these beginnings.

The Resolution

At this point a useful distinction may be drawn *sacred knowledge* and *soteriological knowledge*. The knowledge considered orthodox here, the knowledge which belongs to the provenance of the Vedas is *sacred knowledge*. It is also saving knowledge. But while all sacred knowledge may be soteriological knowledge, not all saving knowledge has to be sacred in the sense the word has been used here. Thus one may acquire spiritual knowledge from non-Vedic texts and such knowledge might possess salvific power, as also the path of *bhakti*.

This distinction enables one to posit three patterns of relationship between sacred knowledge and soteriological knowledge: (1) that only sacred knowledge is truly soteriological, that the two realms coincide; (2) that soteriological knowledge is not identical with sacred knowledge and may spill beyond it. However, in such a case it is derivative of sacred knowledge even when not identical with it. The relationship of identity is replaced one of asymmetry. All sacred

knowledge is soteriological but all soteriological knowledge need not be sacred as defined here; (3) that soteriological knowledge which lies outside the bounds of sacred knowledge saves on its own and not by virtue of being derivative of sacred knowledge as understood here. The model here is neither one of identity (case one), or of asymmetry (case two) but one of coincidental congruence. Thus both sacred and trans-sacred knowledge save on their own. In this case the distinction between orthodoxy and nonorthodoxy becomes purely formal and ceases to be soteriological.

This in turn suggests three models of participation between the in-group and the out-group: (1) exclusive participation, which is consistent with the first model; (2) inclusive participation, which is consistent with the second model and (3) equal participation, which is consistent with the third model.

In this manner, by turning the key of the problematic lock of forbidden knowledge in *mīmāṃsā* one opens the door into how this problematic is housed within Hinduism itself.