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Buddhist Philosophical Pantheon And Sankarachary – A Complex Relationship

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Abstract-

India is the land of discourse and therefore it has cherished different philosophies throughout the centuries. Buddhist philosophy emerged on the foundations of the then prevalent philosophies for example Vaisesika and Nyaya. Buddhist philosophy reached its peak at the times of Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu and Asanga while pre-existing philosophies suffered relative decline. Sankarachary revived the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta and popularise the more ancient Vedic tradition. There is a very close proximity between the Buddhist philosophy and the philosophy of Sankarachary. The present article is an effort to study and analyse this complex relationship.

Important terms- Parmanas, Epistemology , Ontology

Introduction-

Since ancient times India has had six schools of philosophy known as Vaishesika, Nyaya , Samkhya ,Yoga ,Purva Mimansa and Vedanta (Uttara Mimansa). These philosophical schools searched for knowledge on the basis of Pramana (means to knowledge) which are the core concepts of Indian epistemology. Different schools of Indian philosophy differ as far as the reliability of these pramanas are concerned in the search of truth.¹ Therefore exchanges between Buddhism and Vedanta philosophy have to be seen in the background of these pre-existing philosophical schools of India. Nagarjuna is one of the biggest Buddhist philosophers who propounded the principle of Negation and Sankaracharya represents one of the highest culminations of Indian Hindu philosophy. Buddhism is based on the philosophy of Negation of God and therefore negation of any verses and texts which claims to represent God. Buddha was a person who rejected all the pre-existing paths to ultimate reality and searched for a new path of negation to reach the ultimate reality. Buddha has reached enlightenment without following the vedic ritualistic tradition and schools. Buddha started a new school of religion with his monks and which itself culminated into the creation of a new school which gave birth to great scholars like Nagarjuna. Shankara is one of the prominent scholars of vedanta philosophy. According to Gavin Dennis Flood Vedanta tradition contains extensive discussions on ontology, soteriology and epistemology with difference of opinion among the different schools within it.² Vedanta philosophy is based on the three texts - the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita. Advaita Vedanta and Neo- Vedanta do not confirm the dominant vaishnava trait of this philosophy. Advaita Vedanta of Shankar focuses on Knowledge over the theistic devotion to Vishnu for the attainment of moksha. Hajime

¹ P Bilimoria (1993) , Pramana epistemology ; Some recent developments in Asian Philosophy - Volume 7 , Springer. Pages 137-154.

²Flood, Gavin Dennis (1996) An Introduction to Hinduism , Cambridge University Press.

Nakamura asserts that Sankar was not an original thinker; rather his greatness lies in synthetization of Advaita-vada which existed before him.³

Sankara's Criticism of Vaibhasikas and Sautrantika schools of Buddhism -

In Brahma Sutra Bhasya it is evident that Sankaracharya criticised both Vaibhasikas and Sautrantika under the name of Sarvastivada which represents Hinayana Buddhist philosophy. Vaibhashika represents the message of Buddha in people's language (Pali) and accepts the existence of all the existing things of the world which are created by five Skandha (aggregates) . This acceptance of physical existence of the things as real becomes Sankaracharya's basis of criticism of this philosophy. Sautrantika rejects Abhidharma texts and accepts Sutta Pitaka as the basis of their philosophy and they reject Vaibhasikas assertion that past, present and future phenomena have their own existence because this doctrine of Adhidharma rejects the Buddha's doctrine of impermanence. Sankaracharya also criticised them under Sarvastivada School of philosophy because both the schools accept the existence of the phenomenal world as real. Vasudhau and Asanga developed the philosophy of the Vijnanavada or Yogacara of Mahayana Buddhism. This school rejected the existence of the perceptible and external world because they believed it to be based on the mind or citta. This rejection of physical existence led to the philosophy of negation of the practical world.

In criticising the stand of Vijnanvada of Dinnaga, Sankaracharya had **Alabama-Pariksha** in his mind which deals with the examination of the object of consciousness. Dinnaga student of Vasubandu believed in Citta-matra which believes only in the existence of mind. He was author of the great work the **Pramana-samuccaya** which is a foundational text of Buddhist logic.⁴ Dharmakirti subsequently worked upon the work of Dignaga and became much more influential in Buddhist logic via his work **Pramanavarttika**. Whereas Dharmakirti asserts that there are only two types of knowledge: perception and inference, while Sankaracharya takes his epistemology from Nyaya school of Indian philosophy which has four Parmanas ; perception, inference , comparison and testimony of past reliable experts.⁵

Sankarya Criticism of Sunyavada-

Sankarya assumes Sunyavada with the popular connotations of the word **sunya** (zero) and he condemns Sunyavada as a form of Nihilism. He argues that a philosophical position which pictures the empirical world as a transitory show without any underlying reality. This appears to be a self-defeating proposition which cannot be defended by any instrument of valid cognition. Nagarjuna and his subsequent followers do not assume Sunyavada to be nothingness or Nihilism. **Madhyamika** philosophy does not consider this world as meaningless, actually it was Shakara 's misinterpretation of Madhyamika philosophy. Nagarujna has used the word Sunya with two simultaneous meanings, one pointing towards the phenomenal world and the other towards the transphenomenal reality. The philosophical world is assumed to be sunya because it does not contain any meaning on its own; rather it presents diverse and often conflicting perspectives. For example predators devouring their prey or predators starving to death while preys survive and this circle keeps on repeating on and on. Constant change and flow of life which makes it impossible to contrive any logical meaning out of life. These constant changes which are being witnessed by the senses and living beings cannot cognize the Supreme Being. World is sunya because every aspect and part of it is mutually dependent on the other and it exists in this cyclic nature. The very act of separating any atom or species from it makes the ultimate reality more difficult to comprehend. According to Stcherbatsky, Truth of this ever changing empirical reality lies in the Absolute which is described as Nirvana. Nirvana is not separate or far

³Hajime , Nakamura (2004) ,A History of Early Vedanta Philosophy .Part Two,Delhi; Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

⁴ wisdomlib.org

⁵ Kenneth Liberman (2007). Dialectical Practice in Tibetan Philosophical Culture ; An Ethnomethodological Inquiry into Formal Reasoning , Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. P. 52.

from samsara(World) ; rather it is the exhaustion of the rational cognitive capacity of the mind or submission to the existence which is rationally incomprehensible which enables human consciousness to transcend itself to feel the divine. The one and the same Reality when viewed through casual condition, is declared to be the world and when these are not depending or not appropriating or relative , it is called Nirvana.⁶

Similarities between Sunya of Nagarjuna and Maya of Sankara -

Sankara's concept of maya is very similar to the concept of sunya of Nagarjuna and Nagarjuna being predecessor to him there is a very strong possibility that Sankara has indirectly imbibed some insight of then prevalent dominant philosophy of Madhyamik. Like Nagarjuna's concept of **sunya** Sanakara's idea of **maya** is used for describing the physical world and more importantly Sanakara's share with Nagarjuna belief that this world(maya) cannot be understood through the empirical knowledge. Because this knowledge system is dependent on dividing the things into is and is-not (bhava and abhava). Sanakara is pointing at the problem of language which has to divide the reality or existence into the Subject and Predicate. Sanakra asserts that this empirical or physical world is maya which is inherently indeterminate in nature which makes maya neither real nor unreal.⁷ World is real for Sankara because it contains physical and sensory experience which cannot be denied , but the world is unreal because it cannot stand the test of Brahman which is **trikalabaditha** - the one which stands in past - present and future. Sanakara accepts the relative existence of the world rather than denying its existence. Sanakara stresses on the need to see through the maya the ultimate reality which is Brahma. Nagarjuna's sunya is also pointing in the same direction. Therefore Sankaraya commits a mistake in comparing Nagarjuna's sunya to nihilism.⁸

The Buddha told his disciples that truth exists in Madhyama pratipada ,he rejects Uchedada and Sarvastivada. The middle path of Nagarjunian philosophy is not a mechanical combination or a meeting point of two extreme ideologies as is the case with Aristotle's Golden Mean. Middle path of Nagarjuna philosophy points out the need to see the things as they exist and there is no need to promote any path to reach the truth. Nagarjuna 's not path doctrine helps in stabilisation of human consciousness to witness the true and never changing reality of the world. He defines it as Nirvana which is similar to Sanakara's concept of Brahma. Difference only lies in the method of reaching the same destination with two diametrically opposite directions of negation and accommodation. According to S.N.Dasgupta, "Sankara's Brahman was very much like the Sunya of Nagarjuna .It is difficult indeed to distinguish between pure being and pure non- being as a category."⁹

According to Sanghamitra Dasgupta and Dilip Kumar Mohanta **Madhyamikas** and **Sankara** has absolutist system of philosophy the only difference is that Sankara explains ontologically the existence of the Brahma while for Madhyamik the epistemological understanding of the Nirvana is more important. They assert that both of these schools are pointing towards the same truth but their manner of expression is different. For the description of the worldly truth or conventional truth both schools use terms sounding very similar. Chandrakirti uses the term **alokasamvrti** while **advaita vedanta** uses the term **pratibhasika** for the conventional truth, similarly **lokasamvrit** corresponds to **vyavaharika** term used by the Advaitins. For the Advaita Vedanta world is false (mithiya) and it can only be understood after the realisation of Brahma. Sankara asserts that apparent reality and practical reality lose their significance once ultimate reality is

⁶ The Stcherbatsky ; the Concept of Buddhist Nirvana, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass,1977,p 43.

⁷ Sanghamitra Dasgupta; Is Maya the material cause of the world ? The Vedanta Kesari.vol.83, August 1996,p.305)

⁸ Sanghamitra Dasgupta & Dilip Kumar Mohanta Some Reflections on The Relation Between Sankara and Buddhism. , Indian Philosophical Quarterly , Vol.XXV No.3 July 1998.

⁹ Surendranath Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy ,Cambridge University Press, 1969.

realised.¹⁰The Absolute truth of both Vedanta and Madhyamika is very same in nature, tathata or sunyata which is the ultimate truth of the Madhyamika is non-conventional, non-conceptual, uncontradicted for eternity as is the Brahman or Paramatha satta of Advata.

Gaudapada - Sankara's Paramaguru-

Gaudapada has written the famous work **Mandukya Karika / Gaudapada Karika**. Karl H.Potter doubts that Gaudapada Karika was written by one author. This work presents a systematic analysis which justifies the advaita doctrine, the greatest philosophy to understand the truth. The Mandukya Karika is the earliest extant treatise on Advaita Vedanta according to C.Sharma .¹¹ Hajime Nakamura points out that there are much older texts available on the Advaita Vedanta. Hajime further points out that Gaudapada Karika is revered not only in the Advaita tradition but also respected in Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita Vedanta schools of Hinduism as well.¹²

Scholars are divided a lot on the question of the Buddhist doctrinal influences upon the philosophy of Gaudapada. According to Karl.H. Potter most recent scholars are pointing towards the Buddhist influences but all of them concur on the fact that Gaudapada was a Vedantin.¹³ TRV Murti points out that Gaudapada a Vedanta philosopher tried to develop an advaitic interpretation of Vedanta in the light of Madhyamika and Yogacara doctrines.¹⁴ Richard King and Murti believed that the fourth chapter of Gaudapadakarika was not authored by Gaudapada himself and there is greater probability that it has been written subsequently by other scholars. King and Murti further points out that not even a single later Vedanta scholar has quoted from the chapter four and they only quote from the first three chapters of the Karika which are indisputably Vadic in nature. This further substantiate their claim that the last chapter of Gaudapada's Karika must have been written subsequently by another scholar.¹⁵ TVR Murti asserts Gaudapada was fully aware of the Mahayana School and therefore he may have written as tribute to the leading philosophy of his times but he never denied his proclivity towards Vadic philosophy. TVR Murti explains beautifully that the Vadic philosophy and Mahayana buddhist philosophy of Madhyamika represent two different sides of the same coin. The Vedantins stake everything on Atman (Brahman) and accept the authority of the Upanishads. While Buddhist reject the sanctity of any text and they put faith in the concept of **Nair-atmaya** which is total negation of the concept of **Atman** endowed with the traits of permanence and universality.¹⁶ Japanese scholar Sengaku Mayeda asserts that Shankara is responsible for reinvigorating the upanishadic spirit into the **Mandukya Karika** by following the line of Vedanta school. If someone is to be labelled as pseudo-buddhist it can be his paramaguru or other predecessor but not Shankara.¹⁷

Conclusion-

According to Eliot Deustch and Rohit Dalvi, **In any event a close relationship between the Mahayana schools and Vedanta did exist with the latter borrowing some of the dialectical techniques if not specific doctrines of the former much like early Buddhism adopted Upanishadic terminology and**

¹⁰ Sanghamitra Dasgupta's "Is Maya the material cause of the World"" The Vedanta Kesari Vol.83 august ,1996.

¹¹ (1997) A critical survey of Indian Philosophy , delhi; Motilal Banarsidass , p, 239.

¹² (Nakamura, Hajime(2004), A History of Early Vedanta Philosophy . Part Two, Delhi; Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited.

¹³ Karl.H.Potter, Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies (volume-3) Advaita Vedanta Up to Samkra and His Pupils,2015

¹⁴ (TRV Murti (1955) , The Central philosophy of Buddhism ,Routledge(2008 Reprint) pages 114-115.

¹⁵ (Gaudapada- Devanathan Jagannathan, University of Toronto, IEP.)

Chandradhar Sharma (2007) The Advaita Tradition in Indian Philosophy , Motilal Banarsidass–

¹⁶ TVR.Murti (1995) page 116.

¹⁷ Mayeda, Sengaku (23 may 2012) , Shankaracharya and Buddhism.

borrowed its doctrines to Buddhist goals ; both used pre-existing concepts and ideas to convey new meanings.”¹⁸ There has been a tradition of sharing and learning about philosophical perspectives of different schools in India. Chandrakirti’s assertion that Buddha has defined suffering as the creation of mind so that people could alleviate themselves from the hardships of life. He warns the Buddha’s statement that all is mind should not be taken ontologically to assume consciousness is real, rather it was a tool adopted by Buddha to help people to understand the reason for their suffering . Chandrakirti asserts that this suffering and as well as the mind both are ultimately unreal and only truth is the void or emptiness. On the other hand, Sankara ‘s assertion that Pratibhashika (perceptible) and Vyavaharika (Practical) reality lies beneath the Paramarthika (absolute) reality which encompasses everything in this world. It can easily be discerned that Buddhist are pointing towards the dark side of the same coin while Vadentins are pointing towards the bright side of the same coin. Both of these philosophies are pointing towards the same ultimate truth.



¹⁸ Deutsch ,Eliot , Dalvi Rohit (2004), The Essential Vedanta ; A New Source Book of Advaita Vedanta, World Wisdom Inc.