

Brahma sutras or Vedanta Sutras
Adi Shankaracharyas commentary
translated by George Thibaut

The essence of the Upanishads and the Hindu philosophy is captured by the great Vedavyasa, also called Badarayana, in this great scripture. Vedavyasa is also the one who wrote the epic Mahabharata and he also compiled and re-wrote the Vedas, the Bhagavata Puranana and several other puranas.

Introduction

To the sacred literature of the Brahmans, in the strict sense of the term, i.e. to the Veda, there belongs a certain number of complementary works without whose assistance the student is, according to Hindu notions, unable to do more than commit the sacred texts to memory. In the first place all Vedic texts must, in order to be understood, be read together with running commentaries such as Sâyana's commentaries on the Samhitâs and Brâhmanas, and the Bhâshyas ascribed to Sankara on the chief Upanishads. But these commentaries do not by themselves conduce to a full comprehension of the contents of the sacred texts, since they confine themselves to explaining the meaning of each detached passage without investigating its relation to other passages, and the whole of which they form part; considerations of the latter kind are at any rate introduced occasionally only. The task of taking a comprehensive view of the contents of the Vedic writings as a whole, of systematising what they present in an unsystematical form, of showing the mutual co-ordination or subordination of single passages and sections, and of reconciling contradictions--which, according to the view of the orthodox commentators, can be apparent only--is allotted to a separate sâstra or body of doctrine which is termed Mîmâmsâ, i.e. the investigation or enquiry, viz. the enquiry into the connected meaning of the sacred texts.

Of this Mîmâmsâ two branches have to be distinguished, the so-called earlier (pûrva) Mîmâmsâ, and the later (uttara) Mîmâmsâ. The former undertakes to systematise the karmakânda, i.e. that entire portion of the Veda which is concerned with action, pre-eminently sacrificial action, and which comprises the Samhitâs and the Brâhmanas exclusive of the Âranyaka portions; the latter performs the same service with regard to the so-called gñânakânda, i.e. that part of the Vedic writings which includes the Âranyaka portions of the Brâhmanas, and a number of detached treatises called Upanishads. Its subject is not action but knowledge, viz. the knowledge of Brahman.

At what period these two sâstras first assumed a definite form, we are unable to ascertain. Discussions of the nature of those which constitute the subject-matter of the Pûrva Mîmâmsâ must have arisen at a very early period, and the word Mîmâmsâ itself together with its derivatives is already employed in the Brâhmanas to denote the doubts and discussions connected with certain contested points of ritual. The want of a body of definite rules prescribing how to act, i.e. how to perform the various sacrifices in full accordance with the teaching of the Veda, was indeed an urgent one, because it was an altogether practical want, continually pressing itself on the adhvaryus engaged in ritualistic duties. And the task of establishing such rules was moreover a comparatively limited and feasible one; for the members of a certain

Vedic sâkhâ or school had to do no more than to digest thoroughly their own brâhmana and samhitâ, without being under any obligation of reconciling with the teaching of their own books the occasionally conflicting rules implied in the texts of other sâkhâs. It was assumed that action, as being something which depends on the will and choice of man, admits of alternatives, so that a certain sacrifice may be performed in different ways by members of different Vedic schools, or even by the followers of one and the same sâkhâ.

The Uttara Mîmâmsâ-sâstra may be supposed to have originated considerably later than the Pûrva Mîmâmsâ. In the first place, the texts with which it is concerned doubtless constitute the latest branch of Vedic literature. And in the second place, the subject-matter of those texts did not call for a systematical treatment with equal urgency, as it was in no way connected with practice; the mental attitude of the authors of the Upanishads, who in their lucubrations on Brahman and the soul aim at nothing less than at definiteness and coherence, may have perpetuated itself through many generations without any great inconvenience resulting therefrom.

But in the long run two causes must have acted with ever-increasing force, to give an impulse to the systematic working up of the teaching of the Upanishads also. The followers of the different Vedic sâkhâs no doubt recognised already at an early period the truth that, while conflicting statements regarding the details of a sacrifice can be got over by the assumption of a vikalpa, i.e. an optional proceeding, it is not so with regard to such topics as the nature of Brahman, the relation to it of the human soul, the origin of the physical universe, and the like. Concerning them, one opinion only can be the true one, and it therefore becomes absolutely incumbent on those, who look on the whole body of the Upanishads as revealed truth, to demonstrate that their teaching forms a consistent whole free from all contradictions. In addition there supervened the external motive that, while the karma-kânda of the Veda concerned only the higher castes of brahmanically constituted society, on which it enjoins certain sacrificial performances connected with certain rewards, the gñânakânda, as propounding a certain theory of the world, towards which any reflecting person inside or outside the pale of the orthodox community could not but take up a definite position, must soon have become the object of criticism on the part of those who held different views on religious and philosophic things, and hence stood in need of systematic defence.

At present there exists a vast literature connected with the two branches of the Mîmâmsâ. We have, on the one hand, all those works which constitute the Pûrva Mîmâmsâ-sâstra or as it is often, shortly but not accurately, termed, the Mîmâmsâ-sâstra and, on the other hand, all those works which are commonly comprised under the name Vedânta-sâstra. At the head of this extensive literature there stand two collections of Sûtras (i. e. short aphorisms constituting in their totality a complete body of doctrine upon some subject), whose reputed authors are Gaimini and Bâdarâyana. There can, however, be no doubt that the composition of those two collections of Sûtras was preceded by a long series of preparatory literary efforts of which they merely represent the highly condensed outcome. This is rendered probable by the analogy of other sâstras, as well as by the exhaustive thoroughness with which the Sûtras perform their task of systematizing the teaching of the Veda, and is further

proved by the frequent references which the Sûtras make to the views of earlier teachers. If we consider merely the preserved monuments of Indian literature, the Sûtras (of the two Mîmâmsâs as well as of other sâstras) mark the beginning; if we, however, take into account what once existed, although it is at present irretrievably lost, we observe that they occupy a strictly central position, summarising, on the one hand, a series of early literary essays extending over many generations, and forming, on the other hand, the head spring of an ever broadening activity of commentators as well as virtually independent writers, which reaches down to our days, and may yet have some future before itself.

The general scope of the two Mîmâmsâ-sûtras and their relation to the Veda have been indicated in what precedes. A difference of some importance between the two has, however, to be noted in this connexion. The systematisation of the karmakânda of the Veda led to the elaboration of two classes of works, viz. the Kalpa-sûtras on the one hand, and the Pûrva Mîmâmsâ-sûtras on the other hand. The former give nothing but a description as concise as possible of the sacrifices enjoined in the Brâhmanas; while the latter discuss and establish the general principles which the author of a Kalpa-sûtra has to follow, if he wishes to render his rules strictly conformable to the teaching of the Veda. The gñânakânda of the Veda, on the other hand, is systematised in a single work, viz. the Uttara Mîmâmsâ or Vedânta-sûtras, which combine the two tasks of concisely stating the teaching of the Veda, and of argumentatively establishing the special interpretation of the Veda adopted in the Sûtras. This difference may be accounted for by two reasons. In the first place, the contents of the karmakânda, as being of an entirely practical nature, called for summaries such as the Kalpa-sûtras, from which all burdensome discussions of method are excluded; while there was no similar reason for the separation of the two topics in the case of the purely theoretical science of Brahman. And, in the second place, the Vedânta-sûtras throughout presuppose the Pûrva Mîmâmsâ-sûtras, and may therefore dispense with the discussion of general principles and methods already established in the latter.

The time at which the two Mîmâmsâ-sûtras were composed we are at present unable to fix with any certainty; a few remarks on the subject will, however, be made later on. Their outward form is that common to all the so-called Sûtras which aims at condensing a given body of doctrine in a number of concise aphoristic sentences, and often even mere detached words in lieu of sentences. Besides the Mîmâmsâ-sûtras this literary form is common to the fundamental works on the other philosophic systems, on the Vedic sacrifices, on domestic ceremonies, on sacred law, on grammar, and on metres. The two Mîmâmsâ-sûtras occupy, however, an altogether exceptional position in point of style. All Sûtras aim at conciseness; that is clearly the reason to which this whole species of literary composition owes its existence. This their aim they reach by the rigid exclusion of all words which can possibly be spared, by the careful avoidance of all unnecessary repetitions, and, as in the case of the grammatical Sûtras, by the employment of an arbitrarily coined terminology which substitutes single syllables for entire words or combination of words. At the same time the manifest intention of the Sûtra writers is to express themselves with as much clearness as the conciseness affected by them admits of. The aphorisms are indeed

often concise to excess, but not otherwise intrinsically obscure, the manifest care of the writers being to retain what is essential in a given phrase, and to sacrifice only what can be supplied, although perhaps not without difficulty, and an irksome strain of memory and reflection. Hence the possibility of understanding without a commentary a very considerable portion at any rate of the ordinary Sûtras. Altogether different is the case of the two Mîmâmsâ-sûtras. There scarcely one single Sûtra is intelligible without a commentary. The most essential words are habitually dispensed with; nothing is, for instance, more common than the simple omission of the subject or predicate of a sentence. And when here and there a Sûtra occurs whose words construe without anything having to be supplied, the phraseology is so eminently vague and obscure that without the help derived from a commentary we should be unable to make out to what subject the Sûtra refers. When undertaking to translate either of the Mîmâmsâ-sutras we therefore depend altogether on commentaries; and hence the question arises which of the numerous commentaries extant is to be accepted as a guide to their right understanding.

The commentary here selected for translation, together with Bâdarâyana's Sûtras 1 (to which we shall henceforth confine our attention to the exclusion of Gaimini's Pûrva Mîmâmsâ-sutras), is the one composed by the celebrated theologian Sankara or, as he is commonly called, Sankarâkârya. There are obvious reasons for this selection. In the first place, the Sankara-bhâshya represents the so-called orthodox side of Brahmanical theology which strictly upholds the Brahman or highest Self of the Upanishads as something different from, and in fact immensely superior to, the divine beings such as Vishnu or Siva, which, for many centuries, have been the chief objects of popular worship in India. In the second place, the doctrine advocated by Sankara is, from a purely philosophical point of view and apart from all theological considerations, the most important and interesting one which has arisen on Indian soil; neither those forms of the Vedânta which diverge from the view represented by Sankara nor any of the non-Vedântic systems can be compared with the so-called orthodox Vedânta in boldness, depth, and subtlety of speculation. In the third place, Sankara's bhâshya is, as far as we know, the oldest of the extant commentaries, and relative antiquity is at any rate one of the circumstances which have to be taken into account, although, it must be admitted, too much weight may easily be attached to it. The Sankara-bhâshya further is the authority most generally deferred to in India as to the right understanding of the Vedânta-sûtras, and ever since Sankara's time the majority of the best thinkers of India have been men belonging to his school. If in addition to all this we take into consideration the intrinsic merits of Sankara's work which, as a piece of philosophical argumentation and theological apologetics, undoubtedly occupies a high rank, the preference here given to it will be easily understood.

But to the European--or, generally, modern--translator of the Vedânta-sûtras with Sankara's commentary another question will of course suggest itself at once, viz. whether or not Sankara's explanations faithfully render the intended meaning of the author of the Sûtras. To the Indian Pandit of Sankara's school this question has become an indifferent one, or, to state the case more accurately, he objects to its being raised, as he looks on Sankara's authority as standing above doubt and

dispute. When pressed to make good his position he will, moreover, most probably not enter into any detailed comparison of Sankara's comments with the text of Bâdarâyana's Sûtras, but will rather endeavour to show on speculative grounds that Sankara's philosophical view is the only true one, whence it of course follows that it accurately represents the meaning of Bâdarâyana, who himself must necessarily be assured to have taught the true doctrine. But on the modern investigator, who neither can consider himself bound by the authority of a name however great, nor is likely to look to any Indian system of thought for the satisfaction of his speculative wants, it is clearly incumbent not to acquiesce from the outset in the interpretations given of the Vedânta-sûtras--and the Upanishads--by Sankara and his school, but to submit them, as far as that can be done, to a critical investigation.

This is a task which would have to be undertaken even if Sankara's views as to the true meaning of the Sûtras and Upanishads had never been called into doubt on Indian soil, although in that case it could perhaps hardly be entered upon with much hope of success; but it becomes much more urgent, and at the same time more feasible, when we meet in India itself with systems claiming to be Vedântic and based on interpretations of the Sûtras and Upanishads more or less differing from those of Sankara. The claims of those systems to be in the possession of the right understanding of the fundamental authorities of the Vedânta must at any rate be examined, even if we should finally be compelled to reject them.

It appears that already at a very early period the Vedânta-sûtras had come to be looked upon as an authoritative work, not to be neglected by any who wished to affiliate their own doctrines to the Veda. At present, at any rate, there are very few Hindu sects not interested in showing that their distinctive tenets are countenanced by Bâdarâyana's teaching. Owing to this the commentaries on the Sûtras have in the course of time become very numerous, and it is at present impossible to give a full and accurate enumeration even of those actually existing, much less of those referred to and quoted. Mr. Fitz-Edward Hall, in his Bibliographical Index, mentions fourteen commentaries, copies of which had been inspected by himself. Some among these (as, for instance, Râmânuga's Vedânta-sâra, No. XXXV) are indeed not commentaries in the strict sense of the word, but rather systematic expositions of the doctrine supposed to be propounded in the Sûtras; but, on the other hand, there are in existence several true commentaries which had not been accessible to Fitz-Edward Hall. It would hardly be practical--and certainly not feasible in this place--to submit all the existing bhâshyas to a critical enquiry at once. All we can do here is to single out one or a few of the more important ones, and to compare their interpretations with those given by Sankara, and with the text of the Sûtras themselves.

The bhâshya, which in this connexion is the first to press itself upon our attention, is the one composed by the famous Vaishnava theologian and philosopher Râmânuga, who is supposed to have lived in the twelfth century. The Râmânuga or, as it is often called, the Srî-bhâshya appears to be

the oldest commentary extant next to Sankara's. It is further to be noted that the sect of the Râmânugas occupies a pre-eminent position among the Vaishnava, sects which themselves, in their totality, may claim to be considered the most important among all Hindu sects. The intrinsic value of the Srî-bhâshya moreover is--as every

student acquainted with it will be ready to acknowledge--a very high one; it strikes one throughout as a very solid performance due to a writer of extensive learning and great power of argumentation, and in its polemic parts, directed chiefly against the school of Sankara, it not unfrequently deserves to be called brilliant even. And in addition to all this it shows evident traces of being not the mere outcome of Râmânuga's individual views, but of resting on an old and weighty tradition.

This latter point is clearly of the greatest importance. If it could be demonstrated or even rendered probable only that the oldest bhâshya which we possess, i. e. the Sankara-bhâshya, represents an uninterrupted and uniform tradition bridging over the interval between Bâdarâyana, the reputed author of the Sûtras, and Sankara; and if, on the other hand, it could be shown that the more modern bhâshyas are not supported by old tradition, but are nothing more than bold attempts of clever sectarians to force an old work of generally recognised authority into the service of their individual tenets; there would certainly be no reason for us to raise the question whether the later bhâshyas can help us in making out the true meaning of the Sûtras. All we should have to do in that case would be to accept Sankara's interpretations as they stand, or at the utmost to attempt to make out, if at all possible, by a careful comparison of Sankara's bhâshya with the text of the Sûtras, whether the former in all cases faithfully represents the purport of the latter.

In the most recent book of note which at all enters into the question as to how far we have to accept Sankara as a guide to the right understanding of the Sûtras (Mr. A. Gough's Philosophy of the Upanishads) the view is maintained (pp. 239 ff.) that Sankara is the generally recognised expositor

of true Vedânta doctrine, that that doctrine was handed down by an unbroken series of teachers intervening between him and the Sûtrakâra, and that there existed from the beginning only one Vedânta doctrine, agreeing in all essential points with the doctrine known to us from Sankara's writings. Mr. Gough undertakes to prove this view, firstly, by a comparison of Sankara's system with the teaching of the Upanishads themselves; and, secondly, by a comparison of the purport of the Sûtras--as far as that can be made out independently of the commentaries--with the interpretations given of them by Sankara. To both these points we shall revert later on. Meanwhile, I only wish to remark concerning the former point that, even if we could show with certainty that all the Upanishads propound one and the same doctrine, there yet remains the undeniable fact of our being confronted by a considerable number of essentially differing theories, all of which claim to be founded on the Upanishads. And with regard to the latter point I have to say for the present that, as long as we have only Sankara's bhâshya before us, we are naturally inclined to find in the Sûtras--which, taken by themselves, are for the greater part unintelligible--the meaning which Sankara ascribes to them; while a reference to other bhâshyas may not impossibly change our views at once.--Meanwhile, we will consider the question as to the unbroken uniformity of Vedântic tradition from another point or view, viz. by enquiring whether or not the Sûtras themselves, and the Sankara-bhâshya, furnish any indications of there having existed already at an early time essentially different Vedântic systems or lines of Vedântic speculation.

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