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Edited by Knut A. Jacobsen

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF SOUTH ASIAN RELIGIONS

Edited by Knut A. Jacobsen

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5

REASON, *DHARMA*, AND THE DISCOVERY OF FAITH

Insights from the modes of classical Hinduism

Sthaneswar Timalisina

Two aspects of dharma

When we glean insights from Amartya Sen's *Argumentative Indian* (Sen 2006) that the civilization under consideration is inherently pluralistic, embracing since its origins dissenting voices and heterodox opinions, and combine them with Ganeri's response that Sen's work lacks historical examples, pointing out "the absence of any corresponding presentation of the range and richness of Indian conceptions of reason" (2009: 251), we come at once to recognize that the West lacks a monopoly on pluralism and secularism. Historical awareness buttresses the argument that Hinduism is inherently pluralistic. My attempt in this chapter is to ground reason in the domain of dharma by tracing classical materials in contrast to unexamined faith. I believe the openness of the systems in accounts of self-reflection, a direct consequence of reasoning, is what made Hindu culture historically pluralistic and open to change. I read this reflexivity as a sole product of rationality that confronts faith. By faith I mean the type of faith that Søren Kierkegaard (1994, [1941]) underscores in his *Fear and Trembling*, the type of faith that demands an unconditional surrender of reasoning. This chapter cannot do justice to the vast array of literature from history. We can zoom in on any specific period in history or any tradition, and we are always reminded of its foundation on rationality. Due to scope, I have selected two traditions: Mīmāṃsā and the literature on dharma that extends from the same cultural milieu and the Advaita of Śāṅkara. This choice from the plethora of literature comes under the assumption that Śāṅkara had when he wrote the preface for his commentary upon the *Bhagavadgītā*:

There are two types of dharma that the Vedas prescribe: that characterized by engagement (*pravṛtti*) and that characterized by detachment (*nivṛtti*).¹

Or what Kaṇāda had in his mind when he said:

Dharma is that through which prosperity and absolute good are attained.²

Dharma, therefore, is both the battlefield of active engagement and the forest of seclusion, an active engagement with one's desires and a critical examination and absolute censoring of the realms of desire. Grounding reasoning in the platform of dharma therefore demands that we explore at least these two domains of activism and renunciation, living with the metaphoric fire of

desire or the house of duties and the relinquishment of the fire. In the active expression of dharma, in the mode of *pravṛtti*, reason functions to explore the limits of desire and provides a method for critically examining the moral dimension of desire for both personal and collective good. Reason guides in the next domain by paving a path for individual subjects to encounter one's own inner structures of being, to recognize human fragility and mortality and transcend suffering.

Although the vocabulary of dharma centres around the quest for the self, what it constantly engages with is the other. Dharma therefore becomes the field of self-negation that opens space for the other rather than the type of faith that would determine another's destiny. It thus becomes essential that the happiness an individual seeks for himself opens the territory that constitutes the other, the dharma that determines the other (*para-dharma*). And reason becomes the torchlight for determining the course of action. Freedom in and from the world, amplified in the two modes of dharma, therefore, are the two domains where reasoning is paramount to guide human subjects. Moral judgement, in this light, is not categorically different from philosophical speculation when it comes to empirically grounding dharma. This is to say that rationality grounds the scope and limits of morality. The two domains of dharma are also two dimensions of the "truth" (*satya*), the realm of experience in which the subject is in metaphoric conflict and the inner domain of the self about which the subject is perpetually re-evaluating. The task is to explore how Hinduism as dharma grounds reasoning in these two apparently conflicting domains.

The mode of active engagement in life is governed by the rules of Dharmaśāstra, the disciplines relating dharma. Mīmāṃsā provides the philosophical platform for grounding dharma literature considering active engagement. This also strives to save the ethos and the norms gleaned from the Vedas. Collectively, these disciplines determine the scope of rituals and that of moral norms. They found moral codes and familial and social obligations. Vedānta, on the other hand, is the dharma of returning to the self, governed primarily by the thrust of liberation (*mokṣa*). These two therefore provide the minimalistic foundation for addressing dharma from the classical perspective. In both accounts, it is an encounter with freedom (*svātantrya*), freedom explored in active engagement and sought in the inner makings of freedom itself.

I argue on this foundation that the pluralism in both cultural modes of expression and the practice of norms depends on the freedom of reasoning. Stemming from universal and innate traits that constitute dharma, reason becomes the yardstick for both engagement and renunciation, in both accounts, examining what belief and faith can provide. The discovery of Hinduism as dharma in this account is therefore different from its discovery as religion or faith. Tension in the modes of dharma, in this account, reflects the fluidity inherent within reasoning itself. In contrast, tension in the domain of religion reflects the inherent contradiction between reason and faith. Encountering Hinduism as dharma therefore is different from encountering it as faith. I argue further that the domain of dharma does not conflict with the pluralism of voices or the rational inquiry of norms. In contrast, faith demands rejection of difference, as the only other within the scope of faith is the transcendental other, God. I argue at the end that the transformation of Hinduism from dharma to faith demands the sacrifice of reasoning, as this negation makes it possible not only to homogenize Hinduism from within but also to erase voices from the boundary and outside.

Reason in the domain of active engagement (*pravṛtti*)

While *nivṛtti* or disengagement seeks to actualize the absolute and pave the path to transform oneself into that absolute or recognize one's harmony with the absolute, *pravṛtti*, or active engagement, values the conventional world, conditioned by conventional norms and laws. Guided by engagement and detachment, they rely on a rational exploration of dharma in

living the life “for” dharma, adopting the laws that are guided by it, and living “in” dharma by relinquishing the individuality that separates one from the cosmic unfolding of dharma. In both accounts, the world of everyday experience is the battleground of desire as every individual is seeking to fulfil their own desire. Reason functions in the path of engagement to guide personal interest in alignment with the interest of the collective and to examine the scope of desire, seeking freedom from desire while actively seeking to fulfil those that do not counter the broader dharma parameters. This is where the conflict emerges. The beliefs and norms that guide individuals are ultimately founded upon Vedic authority, and if this authority of the Vedas were to suppress rationality, dharma would not be ultimately founded on reasoning. My argument is the authority of speech in the classical Hindu paradigm is not outside the scope of reasoning. Textual authority is not meant to trump rationality. Consequently, the ultimate parameters to outline the course of action and provide moral codes lie in reasoning and evolved on empirical grounds. In the second account or in the mode of *nivṛtti*, Upaniṣads, the ultimate sections of the Vedas, reveal the absolute reality, and the pursuit of life reverses its course, directing now towards oneself. This is where living “in” dharma comes to play, as this is the path that guides subjects to the absolute nature of dharma that seeks to expunge individual subjectivity. What makes this authority of the Vedic speech distinct from the absolute “scriptural authority” is that the domain of this speech, like any other speech, is to be guided by *pramāṇa*, veridical means of knowledge.

If founded on rationality, speech must abide within parameters that do not conflict with what is given by immediate perception. One way this has been traditionally circumvented is that if there is something to be known that does not fall within the scope of perception, the testimony of the speech stands. In other words, as far as the issue relates to something perceptible, the primacy of perception remains unchallenged. It is only regarding issues outside the scope of perception and inference that the testimony of Vedic speech stands. This mirrors the way testimony functions in the common world, making Vedic speech a subset of speech whose testimony is grounded on the system of justification, as outlined by the *pramāṇas*. As a consequence, a rational inquiry provides the foundation for the authority of Vedic speech, and its authority is not invoked based on divine authority.

To begin with, there are Vedas and not *The Veda*, and every single Veda comes with multiple recensions, not just different in tone but also in texture. These were not meant to be texts frozen in the past either, as the Vedas are supposed to be constantly unfolding and infinite (*anantā vai vedāḥ*).³ Moreover, Vedas weren’t meant to give dogmatic, historically static rules; rather, their role was to express the inherent dynamism embedded within being. Most importantly, the very concept of dharma does not describe the universal truth outside of the chain of transformation: “There are both the dynamic order and foundational truth” (*ṛtam ca satyam ca*, *Rgveda* X.190.1), says Aghamaṣaṇa. This is just one side of the story of the testimony of the Vedas. What constitutes Vedas as separate from speech is not by invoking higher authority but in their lack of fixed reference, with mantric speech always being open to interpretation and the unfolding of new meaning. This is why Vedic speech often manifests as a riddle—not a riddle filled with ambiguity suffused by ignorance but an ambiguity that questions the power of speech and that expands beyond its determined horizon, always saying more than what it can refer to. This is why we first encounter the paradox, whether in the songs, “it transforms into the manifold without actually being born” (*ajāyamāno bahudhā vijāyate* | *Śukla Yajurveda* XXXI.19) or in its content, as in identifying the fire as the grandson of waters (*apām napāt*, *Rgveda* II.35.13). It is in the context outlined previously that Vedic speech is not descriptive like common speech.

Speaking from the Mīmāṃsā perspective, Vedic speech does not invoke any external agency for its authority. It was meant to capture reality in constant dynamism, and for this reason, it could not be identical to common speech with determined meaning. In

Upaniṣadic expression, speech simply surrenders, alongside the mind, its attempts to capture the absolute (*Taittirīyopaniṣad* II.9.1). This is why the same speech can be a question and also its answer. For instance: “Whom shall we offer libation?” “We shall offer libation to ka” (*kasmai devāya haviṣā vidhema* | *Rgveda* X.121.1–9). The ambiguity regarding what we ought to do in our everyday life mirrors a quagmire of the ritual paradigm, as ritual prescriptions can be inconsistent. Riddles in the Vedas are therefore not just a pastime for the Vedic seers but an embodiment of the ever-unfolding truth that is in itself filled with riddles. It is in this inherent fluidity that dharma becomes manifold, personalized, temporalized, spatialized, ethnicized, gendered, and always changing depending on social conditions like the cultural norms forbidden for our times or physical conditions such as aging. This makes it possible in changing circumstances to eat forbidden foods or to engage in the act of violence or to kill oneself without violating dharma. For a text to be open to multiple interpretations is paramount to founding rationality, as it is only when a text surrenders itself to new circumstances, is open to interpretation, and allows reason within its fold that dharma can be grounded on rationality.

Jaimini’s statement that “Dharma is the act (*artha*) characterized by the sentences that enjoin [an agent] (*codanā*)”⁴ leaves it open as to what amounts to dharma. Vedic texts prescribe those acts that are naturally virtuous. They also prescribe non-virtuous acts such as “someone practicing black magic should sacrifice with a falcon.”⁵ The text is now open to commentary, and it is intentionally so, because the *sūtra* texts anticipate diverse and sometimes conflicting commentaries.

Hindu orthodoxy considers that the authority of the Vedic speech is absolute, in the sense that it motivates humans in the acts that cannot be subject to other epistemic means. The sentences that enjoin subjects to act are called *codanā*. Śābara explains the scope of *codanā* in the following lines:

Codanā brings to awareness entities belonging to the past, that are in the process of coming into being, or are about to happen in the future. [Their scope relates to] an entity that is very subtle, that is blocked from the sight (*vyavahita*), or that which is remote. No other [epistemic system] can [objectify this]. Nor the sensory faculties.⁶

Noteworthy here is that the force embedded within *codanā* that underlies Vedic sentences is not grounded on their extra-ordinary origins. Śābara is simply invoking the semantic power and not invoking the authority of Vedic sentences because they were revealed to a select people or because they were of divine origins or anything that would place them outside of the scope of *pramāṇa*. Śābara eventually negates the centrality of agency in semantic comprehension as his commentary moves forward. To reiterate it, the authority of the Vedas lies not in its origin but in its function of being the act of the unfolding of truth itself. To invoke the power of *codanā* on semantic grounds does have a rational exposition that what we can learn from language goes beyond what our sensory faculties can reveal.⁷

Now the issue of motivation. On the one hand, Vedic speech maintains its highest status within the Hindu orthodoxy, while on the other hand, its task is not to guide humans in living everyday life, as this task falls under Dharmaśāstra, a separate discipline. In the next paragraphs, I will address how the codes of Dharmaśāstras are subject to rational inquiry. Returning to Vedic speech itself, comprehending the injunctions rests on exegetical methods. On both accounts, with speech succumbing to reasoning, a mere comprehension of the Vedic command is insufficient to inspire human subjects, as subjects have their own will to inspire them into action.

The texts that codify action address the issue that their role is just to prescribe. This, in my opinion, recognizes the centrality of human reasoning in action. As a consequence, the conversation that started with Vedic injunction evolves into exploring the scope of *niyoga*, or motivation, and *bhāvanā*, or the operation that brings into reality what one is motivated toward. This is also where the task of reading the Vedas becomes a playground for philosophical inquiry on human motivation. The analysis of ritual goes beyond exploring rituals and engages the ritual of human life. First the spontaneous oral ritual performances become codified and textually finite. But then they themselves become subject to hermeneutics. Eventually rituals mirror human life, and the Vedic speech mediates, on the one hand, rituals and, on the other, everyday life. In other words, Mīmāṃsā domesticates the rituals and confines them within the scope of Vedic texts. Consequentially, it subtracts the primacy of rituals and interjects reasoning. Eventually it subverts archaic modes of sacrifice to commonly acceptable forms and further subverts those rituals again, transforming them into internalized rituals and visualization practices. Texts thus encode rituals and eventually circumscribe their scope, while they themselves are rendered to perplexity. The product of encoding rituals thus becomes subversion of texts, with an eventual victory of reasoning over ensnaring speech. Simple attempts to comprehend the ritual dynamics thus transform into a theatric of human motivation and a philosophical inquiry into human desire. There is no agent behind the screen monitoring human agency and human compliance to Vedic injunction. What is good and what one ought to do are completely left with human subjects to determine.

Happiness (*sukha*) as the goal of life is not shifted in the discourse of dharma. Following dharma makes it possible for subjects to experience the highest form of happiness, free of conflicts and remorse. If we expand this argument, the sense of morality is formulated within the process of making good and bad choices and facing their consequences. Our instantaneous satisfaction and consequent suffering in various physical and mental orders teach us to act morally. Since this chain of interactions could not be circumscribed within the life of a single subject, this is subject to cultural memory, hence *Smṛti*. The argument, then, is: Just as our personal activities are guided by our memory, our moral judgment and action are guided by cultural memory. *Smṛti*, translated as memory, functions in this regard as epigenetic memory, as traits carried over from experience are not personal but guide us in the course of correct action. These *Smṛti* texts are therefore supposed to be a second-hand experience, passed down over generations. Whatever the dubious status memory holds in Hindu epistemology, the *Smṛti* texts hold the same status in governing the course of action. Basically, while *Smṛtis* guide our moral life, their validity needs to be tested in conjunction with other supporting evidence, including the subject's own judgment.

The application of personal judgment culminates in human intentionality (*saṅkalpa*). Whether the commandment is to prohibit: “you shall not injure any sentient being” (*mā hiṃsyāt sarvā bhūtāni*) or to enjoin: “speak truthfully” (*satyaṃ vada*)—it comes down to human agency constituted by intentionality. It is only upon a subject's desire to act that virtuous and vicious acts are carried out, and therefore scriptural injunctions and prohibitions cannot transcend human agency. While our beliefs guide our desire, the very act of forming belief is not isolated from rational inquiry. *Manusmṛti* acknowledges the centrality of intentionality in this regard:

Desire is founded on intentionality. Ritual acts are made possible by intentionality. All the ritual observations and the laws that govern restraining observations (*yama*) are born out of intentionality. No action has ever been observed in the world by a subject devoid of desire. Whatever someone does, that all is motivated by desire.⁸

Medhātithi defines intentionality (*saṅkalpa*) as “a mental act of reflection that engenders desire and resolution in sequence.”⁹ It is this intentionality that motivates the mind to reflect, to desire, and be determined regarding the course of action. This intentionality is not a simple orientation towards an object. Neither is this wandering amid material objects. This intentionality is not a fantasy but a determination. Even the application of desire (*kāma*) needs to be read in this light, as the emergence of this desire is subsequent to intentionality (*saṅkalpa*). Someone fantasizing about a drink in a bar while in his bedroom would not therefore count as this intentionality. It is more like a thirsty person walking in the desert desiring water who rushes toward the water-hole as soon as he spots it, abandoning other acts. When it comes to the domain of dharma or is related to activities that have no visible result in this world, such as the offerings made for gods with an intent to go to heaven, Vedic speech is primary, as no perception or inference can determine the causal relationship between this worldly actions and other-worldly consequences. Here, belief is central. The domain of dharma is not, however, merely seeking heaven. The this-worldly nature of dharma always demands questioning, and the injunctions regarding this worldly dharma are always subject to change.

This brings us back to the authority of Vedic speech. As I said earlier, this is the speech that is heard (*śruti*) that requires a speaker and not a word with the Rosetta stone and absent author. What makes Vedic speech unique is something more. Following the Mīmāṃsā exegesis, Vedic speech lacks agency. It is speech that unfolds itself. In this self-presentation, the Vedic speech does not just confirm internal verification of the epistemic system of justification. It also confirms the primacy of speech and its power in constituting agency. Basically, it is the speech that constitutes the agent and not the other way around. This primacy of speech in constituting agency coincides with the autonomy given to speech, not just to represent the world but rather to constitute reality. It is not thus upon human agency to determine meaning, but it is the speech that determines its reference, of which the subject is just one of its horizons.

Rather than invoking the authority of Vedic speech on faith alone, it thus becomes a platform of hermeneutic exercise. And instead of the speech dictating the norms or prescribing what we ought to do, it opens the field for a broader consideration of correct action. The openness regarding the source of dharma as outlined in Manusmṛti explains this phenomenon. While the Smṛtis consider the Vedas the foundation of dharma, they place in the same category recollection (also referring to the Smṛti texts), the conduct of those who know the Vedas, the conduct of virtuous people (even if they are not authoritative in the Vedas), and, above all, the self-satisfaction of the agent conducting dharma.¹⁰ There are three types of agents that determine dharma: scholars, virtuous people, and the active agent. This does not just give human agency an active role in determining dharma; it makes self-evaluation crucial. What else can a subject have to guide his course of action other than reasoning, if the final prescription is his own judgment? This is not an isolated example. Yājñavalkya has a similar list when it comes to counting the source of dharma: Vedas, Smṛti, good conduct (of virtuous people), something that appeals to the active agent, and desire that is formed with due deliberation.¹¹ Rather than confining the scope of dharma, this list makes it open and keeps it fluid, so the scope of dharma remains relevant in changing times. Moreover, it consistently includes the subject's personal inclination, confirming that dharma is the natural course of action if subjects were not to be overpowered by misconceptions and deluded by passion and aversion. Virtue, along these lines, is internal and self-revealing, and the mechanisms, including Vedic speech, are only to allow the subject to see the truth for himself, to feel the guiding principle of dharma functioning from within. Rational inquiry is foremost in this light, as this is the only means left to guide one through perplexity.

Even when the subject matter of action is other-worldly, such as making sacrifices in anticipation of going to heaven, Smṛtis leave room for open inquiry. Upon the question, “What is it a man ought to do?” *Manusmṛti* (II.1) outlines that one ought to do what is:

- 1 Honoured by the learned people.
- 2 Followed by virtuous people who have overcome attachment and aversion.
- 3 Approved by the heart of the acting subject.¹²

The previous criteria for the source of dharma subordinate texts to human agency, as the course of correct action is not historically frozen, and dharma has to function by speaking in the flux. Recognizing the course of dharma, as the list suggests, requires that one rise above attachment and aversion, that one be guided not by passion but reason. When a subject rests back within his own heart, dharma reveals itself, as the text suggests. And it is in this biological and cultural conditioning that we lose sight of dharma. This underscores the ever-unfolding aspect of dharma, liberating the scope of dharma from the confinement of history. If dharma were to be equated with the truth, this needs to be recognized as not reserved to some individuals in the past. And if the basis of dharma is the truth, this should not shun reasoning nor rely on transcendental agency. On the other hand, if dharma is reserved to human judgment, there is always a threat of fallibility. This can be reconciled only by grounding dharma in reasoning. This is why Mohanty (1995) says, “the Hindu mind was constantly engaged in theorizing about practice.” The issue therefore is not about whether the codes in the Smṛtis are applicable or valid. The issue is: Can they be contested while remaining within Hindu orthodoxy? The answer is positive. This is what grounds reasoning within the domain of Dharma.

Evident from the previous conversation, there is very little to substantiate when it comes to giving an absolute mandate for moral conducts even when dharma is violated: When dharma is violated, the subject has violated upon himself and not against some higher agency. In order to conduct dharma, it is therefore mandatory that the subject be capable of moral judgment and free to make a choice. If the actions are not carried out by a free agent guided by his will, these would not be karmically liberating or binding.

The openness of the Smṛti texts is not only regarding what constitutes the outside of the norms prescribed within the Smṛtis. These very texts are diverse, and the laws that they outline are not unanimous. Just like modern laws, these texts have historically undergone change. This fluidity regarding textual authority provides open space for reason to insert itself. The argument is that the textual prescriptions are there to be followed, but only if they do not conflict with reasoning. Dharma manifests itself through this hermeneutic ambiguity and textual fluidity. No matter how rational and how reasonable, so long as a text does not open space for its other, be it other texts or reasoning, the text cannot ground rationality. And this is not to say that Smṛtis have come up with the best moral judgment. On the contrary. You may point out some of the most grotesque judgments in the texts. What makes rationality is not grounded on what they mandate but what they leave behind, the judgment for action that is upon the subject’s own evaluation and the prescription from other human agents who have chosen to live a moral life. Not that the laws that Smṛtis outline are all justifiable, but what makes them open to rationality is their willingness to open for the other, whether that other is the agent seeking moral guidance or other texts that contrast with one other. Every voice has its other, and the role of rationality is to split them apart and analyze their foundation. Matilal notes this fluidity, that “these scriptures proved to be flexible, sometimes to the point that they seemed to have meant whatever their interpreters chose to make them mean” (as cited in Ganeri 2002: 51).

Mahābhārata epitomizes the inherent tension between conflicting traits of dharma. Under-scored in the line, “even the wise ones are confused as to what is good action and what is bad action” (*Bhagavadgītā* IV.16), the text explores morality from its abyss to zenith by using history and narratives. Rather than saying what one ought to do, the text endeavours to address the conflict between different dharmic codes: the conflict between the codes of truthfulness and violence being one among them. Through the narratives, *Mahābhārata* explores the cases where stealing may not violate dharma and when a celibate ought to transgress his celibacy. The text neither prescribes new codes of conduct nor challenges existing ones: it is contesting through and through any dogmatic adherence to the codes without examining them in light of reasoning. With regard to this conflict between reason and faith, Arindam Chakrabarti (1997) says that:

Traditions and texts cannot solve them because they themselves are often in conflict with one another. That is why one needs intelligence (*buddhi*) and learning (*vidyā*), a special training in the *pramāṇas* (means of knowledge), to purify the moral knowledge derived from handed-down tradition. *Dharma* cannot afford to be intellectually blind or uncritical.

Reason in the domain of detachment (*nivṛtti*)

The polarity between this world and the other, heaven and earth, life and afterlife, does not apply when it comes to the dharma traditions. Not that they do not share similar beliefs, but the real issue is both this and that world are the realms of desire. Life and afterlife are chained with karma, and both heaven and earth are transitory stations. The real polarities here are the realm of active engagement and that of detachment, the path of desire and the path of relinquishing desires. One explores the world, the other the self. The first engages the cultural self and controls the biological self; the other explores emancipation from the cultural self while using cultural construction for its self-actualization. There are many theories regarding the self or the lack thereof, but what is widely common is that self-exploration is an empirical and rational process and that self-realization is not a product of blind faith. If our active engagement in the world with moral judgement needs to be guided by reasoning, how about our desire to be free from desire per se? The desire of freedom from desire itself is metaphorically compared with the fire that consumes itself upon consuming the fuel. This is the thrust of negation that self-negates upon negating the rest. Vedānta or the Upaniṣads stress self-actualization or liberation from the grip of passion and aversion, epitomized in the Advaita of Śaṅkara as the realization that the individual self is identical with *brahman*.

Here, again, our first focus is the status of the Upaniṣadic sentences. Is self-realization an imperative? And how should the force of the Upaniṣadic description such as “you are the *brahman*” be recognized? Is this force constituted on empirical grounds, or is this on scriptural authority that cannot be questioned? In the end, this leads to the question of whether this self-realization is achievable by means of human endeavour or if divine grace is central to such a realization. If the second is the case, absolute faith becomes inextricably essential in the course of self-realization.

Śaṅkara’s Advaita begins with the empirical basis that self-experience is always given, making it possible that human endeavours should suffice in self-recognition. However, Śaṅkara himself stresses the centrality of a text in self-realization. So, the question regarding scriptural authority is relevant when it comes to addressing self-realization. What we should not ignore, however, is that the Advaita exegesis rests on the epistemology of the pre-giveness of self-awareness, the

self-revealing nature of consciousness and of *brahman*, and the identity between empirical self and the absolute. The knowledge one acquires by comprehending the texts cannot therefore be considered an acquisition of new information, as there is no situation in which the self is not given. The status of the texts in this light is to remove ignorance, or to negate false impositions. Examples abound. “You are the tenth,” a common example to discuss the status of the texts in self-realization, exemplifies the case where a subject forgets to count oneself and grieves for the lost person. An instructor merely reminds the subject to count himself.

The act of counting oneself does not produce a new entity, as it is just the removal of ignorance. While the realization may not be unique, this removal of ignorance varies based on the types and degrees of ignorance. That is, our actualization of the truth is contingent upon our own cultural conditions, as the binding factors are not always constant. Whatever semantic force the sentence “You are the tenth” has in illuminating the person, the same is the force the “scriptures” have in the act of self-realization. What does it mean to say, “You are not what you think you are, you are not a huntsman but a prince?” There is no injunction there. There is no new information derived from the sentence. It only describes the fact. Sentences such as “You are that” are similar in the sense that they also describe the facts and don’t produce something new.

Śaṅkara distinguishes between laws that relate to the facts (*vastutantra*) and the conditions that are contingent upon agency (*puruṣatantra*) (see BSBh I.1.4). Recognizing the self is knowing the fact, and subjects have no constitutive agency in it. The primacy of semantic comprehension in Advaita needs to be read in this light, that although this is not a production but a reproduction of what is already given, this type of knowledge is not possible by other epistemic means. Since nothing new has been constituted in this type of knowledge, and therefore there is no real agency, and since there is no real agency, there is no real grace, there is no faith external to reasoning necessary for this type of realization. When there is real agency, there is freedom embedded with the agency, and the subject produces something new. There is something altered when there is real action. Knowing the self, according to Śaṅkara, therefore does not amount to action, and there lies no actual agency in self-realization. Śaṅkara says against this backdrop that:

It should not be argued that even though *brahman* is a completely ascertained fact that this nonetheless is an object of perception etc. This is because the identity of the *brahman* with the self cannot be comprehended without the scriptures such as “you are that.”¹³

He continues further,

However, cognition is a mental act. [This] is not because it is distinct. Action is where the act does not presuppose as it is and is dependent upon the operation of the cognizing subject.

(BSBh I.1.4)¹⁴

And more,

Even though meditation or contemplation is mental, it nonetheless is contingent upon the subject to act, not act, or act otherwise, because it is subjective. Knowledge is the product of the means of cognition and the means of cognition have as their object that which exists. Therefore, knowledge is not something that the subject can constitute or make not happen (*akartum*) or make otherwise. It is merely as it is. This is not contingent upon what the sentences inspire (*codanā*), and is not subjective.¹⁵

While explaining the centrality of the texts, Śaṅkara reiterates one more aspect of self-realization: that it is not an act, and there is no agency, as this is realizing a pre-given fact. It never is the case that the self is not immediately given and never the case that consciousness is not self revealing. If we were to argue that the epistemic system is to reveal new information, to give rise to a new instance of consciousness, it does not apply to recognizing the self, leading to the conclusion that even the Upaniṣads would not be the valid means of cognition. This matter, however, has already been addressed in that the means of cognition here is not in giving new information but in removing false suppositions. That the self is *brahman* is not a product of faith; neither is it something acquired by grace. As has been said, this knowledge is dependent upon the fact (*vastutantra*) and not dependent upon subject (*puruṣatantra*). It is knowing the fact by means of speech, not a type of misconception that could have been erased by other epistemic means. Rather than “revealing” the truth, providing new information, or generating new consciousness, the Vedic speech thus aims only to bestow a full return, allowing subjects to reverse their gaze that naturally flows out guided by the natural instincts:

svābhāvīkapravṛttiviśayavimukhīkaraṇārthānīti brūmah | BSBh I.1.4.

We say that [the Vedic sentences are] for turning [subjects] away from the objects of natural motivation.

It is in this primacy of the self or consciousness that reason inserts itself to the centre, as the realization of the self subverts the primacy of speech, because even in abnegation of speech, the self cannot be negated:

ātmanas ca pratyākhyātum aśakyatvāt, ya eva nirākartā tasyaivātmavāt | BSBh I.1.4

It is not possible to reject the self, as whoever is rejecting is the very self.

To reiterate the previous statement, the primacy of the self subverts the primacy of speech. Vedic speech is “for” self-realization and not due to the subjugation of the self by the text. The argument that Śaṅkara gives primacy to the text is also contextual and therefore misunderstood. Śaṅkara gives primacy to the text only at the phenomenal level and not in the absolute sense. This is to say that texts can speak only in the relational realm, so the primacy of the text collapses upon the emergent consciousness of the identity of the self and *brahman*. The objective of the sentences is merely to create a mode of consciousness which mirrors the experience of non-dual *brahman*, and even this mirroring collapses upon the emergence of real experience. Semantic comprehension, accordingly, is not expunged of concepts, and concepts cannot reveal, as it is of what is given in the first mode of consciousness. When everything else is negated, even Vedic speech needs to be silenced in order for one to merge to the state of pure being and pure consciousness.

We need to read the primacy of Vedic speech in Śaṅkara’s philosophy in light of the system of justification which comes as “the means of valid cognition” (*pramāṇa*). Since speech has the same capacity in generating knowledge as perception or inference, most philosophical systems in India accept the word as a valid means of cognition. Noteworthy here is that the validity of a system of justification is not pre-given to its production of veridical knowledge. What Advaita maintains is only that this validity is not subsequent to the production of knowledge either, as it is simultaneous. The validity of the system therefore rests on its ability to produce veridical knowledge. Since the Vedic speech is a subset of the speech or *śabda* in general, the validity of Vedic speech cannot rest on faith but on reasoning. In other words, Vedic speech is not valid for the sake of being what it is but because it produces veridical knowledge. That is to say that the

veridicality of a system cannot be circular, and veridicality is affirmed simultaneously to generating veridical knowledge. The very concept of intrinsic veridicality confirms furthermore that the validity of the Vedic speech cannot be derived on the grounds of the authority or this being the divine word. Therefore, the validity of sentences such as “You are that” rests on their ability to generate veridical knowledge. To sum up, the validity of the Vedic speech is grounded on reasoning and not on simple faith.

Speaking from within the epistemic system of Advaita, reflective thinking (*manana*) and meditation (*nididhyāsana*) are not independent means of justification to confirm what amounts to knowledge. *Śabda*, or the speech, on the other hand, is one among them. When Śaṅkara credits Vedic speech for generating self-knowledge and when Prakāśātman places its primacy over reflective thinking and meditation, this needs to be read in view of the system of justification. Prakāśātman argues along these lines:

viśiṣṭaśabdāvdhāraṇaṃ prameyāvagamam praty avyavadhānena kāraṇaṃ bhavati, pramāṇasya prameyāvagamam praty avyavadhānāt | manana-nididhyāsane tu cittasya pratyagātmapravaṇa tāsamskāraparinīṣpannatadekāgravr̥ttikāryadvāreṇaiva brahmānubhavaḥhetutām pratīpadyete, iti phalaṃ praty avyavahitasya kāraṇasya viśiṣṭaśabdā-va dhāraṇasya vyavahite manananididhyāsane tadaṅgaṃ āṅgīkriyete |.

(*Pañcapādikāvivarāṇa*, p. 288)

Ascertaining specific words is the direct means in cognizing object. It is because valid means of cognition is direct in comprehending object. Both reflection and meditation are instrumental in experiencing *brahman* by means of generating attentive state of mind that is refined with the *samskāra* of the propensity of orienting to the self. Accordingly, mediated [means of] reflection and meditation are subordinate to comprehending certain words that is the direct means in generating result.

The primacy of the Vedic speech, therefore, is not at the cost of other means of cognition. It rather is about the primacy of speech over reflection and meditation. And yes, if the subject matter is such that other means of cognition cannot produce the required knowledge, there is the primacy of the Vedic speech. When it comes to contemplative reflection and meditation, no philosophical system considers them independent means of cognition; ergo, they are subordinate to speech in producing knowledge. Their scope lies in creating appropriate conditions for the emergence of consciousness. Furthermore, reflection and meditation rest on beliefs and are subject to suspicion, as they cannot self-affirm, unlike the veridical means of cognition. Semantic comprehension, on the other hand, is not externally verified. The role belief and memory play in semantic comprehension is not considered above and beyond the role they play in perception or inference. That is, their ability in producing first-hand knowledge remains uncontested. Accordingly, it is also in censoring agency from the domain of speech that speech gains its freedom. Once reason grounds itself in this platform of freedom, it cannot ever be subject to external control. This is how the Hindu philosophers and theologians liberated reasoning from the shackles of faith, and it is in the discovery of this speech that Hinduism can survive as Hinduism.

The rise of faith and the decline of reasoning

Pennington (2005) argues that the British Raj played role in shaping Hinduism the way we know it in his sensational title, *Was Hinduism Invented?* My only argument is, this shaping or “inventing” of Hinduism cannot be credited to the British Raj alone, as equal credit goes to the

Mughal Raj. This is not to argue that Hinduism as dharma was a colonial product but only to confirm that the flavour and the mould of monotheism, besides many other elements to constitute “religion,” were a direct contribution of imperialism. No culture is bereft of blind faith, but it is by means of constituting homogenous identity based on faith that it can preside over reason. If superstitions in early Hinduism are to be considered unexamined beliefs that could be confronted with reason, the formation of “religion” makes it difficult to critically examine those beliefs as they become the “articles of faith.” In every eon, rationality has to struggle to break down the shackles of blind faith. During the colonial modes, Hinduism did not just discover itself, it discovered itself in the image of the faith of the colonizers. While shaping dharma in the mould of faith was a project that started long before East India Company landed on Indian soil, it still deserves the main credit, for it is in this era that the Hindus started organizing themselves to transform their “faith” and mobilize masses by means of faith, a factor that is uniquely prophetic. Reformist Samaj movements such as Brahmo Samaj or Arya Samaj and the political movements of Sanghs are designed in such ways that they intrinsically discredit dharma ethos and experiences and circumscribe dharma in the mould of monotheistic religions. To combine this insight with a piercing observation of Kierkegaard (p. 44):

in order to see what a tremendous paradox faith is, a paradox which is capable of transforming a murder into a holy act well-pleasing to God, a paradox which gives Isaac back to Abraham, which no thought can master, because faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off

then to analyze the history of debates and arguments in classical India, while contrasting the construction of the articles of faith and censoring of speech in modern India, we do come to two conclusions. Faith and reason cannot share the same bed and form the bedrock of dharma, and the colonial project did indeed shape Hinduism in the way that we know it today. Stepping outside of the foundational quest of self-liberation and immediate experience to ground faith, modern Hinduism has evolved into a means of mass mobilization, and this has helped shape the brands for both political and commercial reasons.

The demarcation of Hinduism as faith and Hinduism as dharma has nothing to do with a vibrant dialogue culture. This rather is about the lack of dialogue and about unconscious simulation. I do not consider something dialogue if two dialoguing agents do not accept the existence of each other. Hinduism as dharma has historically sustained dialogue. Hinduism as dharma evolved by means of dialogue, a constructive and organic dialogue, whereas Hinduism as “faith” evolved in reaction and blind mimicry. This also blurred the dialogical modes for cultural differentiation. Any construction of cultural insider and outsider is complex, and when it comes to the Hindu world, with innumerable pantheons, with each having its own cosmology and metaphysics, rituals and codes of conduct, Hinduism is always its own cultural other. The elastic thread that ties these pantheons functions both to bundle a few and to exclude some others. But what trivializes this inclusion/exclusion is there is always randomness that plays a role in which group or pantheon or deity is outside on which occasion. If we borrow the metaphor of a *maṇḍala*, this is a vibrant *maṇḍala* with deities in flux, and nobody knows when the new ones entered and the old ones got out. The open space in the boundaries has always allowed the outside to penetrate within, sometimes for order and other times for chaos. Hinduism as faith opens itself mostly to the elements that contradict rationality. In this cultural space with semi-permeable boundaries, it is very difficult to distinguish the voices from the margins, the voices from outside, and the voices from within. Oftentimes, the categories of insider and outsider become so blurred that the outsider is the real insider and the insider is merely the body with the soul and the voice of the outsider.

The meaning of modernity becomes blurred when we read it in the context of Hinduism. It is actually after the birth of a sociopolitical force driven by the zeal to create homogenous identity that Hinduism shifts from dharma to religion. What it means by modernity in this sense is culturally converse. Religion in this stage becomes a means of actualizing the collective self to mobilize society for political gain. This self-discovery by means of faith comes both from the plight and sense of weakness and consequently a hyperactivated sense of self-assurance. This shift provides the voice, creates a homogenous cultural group, and makes it possible to categorize the Hindus in the global sphere. It is in this new modification where the Hindus start equating *brahman* with God, transform ritual and contemplation-centred practices into devotional movements, and use cultural experience as a means for constructing identity. Rational inquiry succumbs to the articles of faith at this stage. This is where Hinduism as dharma surrenders and Hinduism as faith emerges.

In some accounts, this is also the project of orientalism. If we examine the articles of Arya Samaj, it rediscovers the Vedas in the mould of the Prophetic Holy Book, confronts image worship or worshipping many gods, and uses homogenous cultural identity to confront cultural imperialism. That is, it embodies what it confronts. We find similar tendencies whether we examine Brahmo Samaj or Vedanta mission. That is, Hindu self-identity fails to express itself by means of dharma and Hinduism as religion forms in this transition. Dharmic ethos become completely blurred. This is what provides the platform for the renunciates and hermits to rule the land. In this modern paradigm, norms are changed, and social aspiration is not about self-discovery or self-realization but about discovering the other within oneself. Hinduism as religion becomes a habitus to describe nationalism. The very formation of the nation state in the leadership of Gandhi or Ambedkar or in the struggles of Aurobindo speaks by means of this very newfound identity. Enchantment with history, primarily a contribution of the orientalist, takes like a fever. Simulated self-identity becomes the mechanism of rediscovering the faith that once was dharma. It is actually in this mode of self-discovery that the colonial project comes to completion.

Returning to the discovery of the absolute truth and moulding oneself in the shape of truth, this new collective self-recognition founded on the basis of faith comes in the format of bending truths and savouring perspectives, engineering and distributing perspectives for mass consumption, and benefitting from this trade of truths. This is where speech submits its primacy over the agents. This new awakening thus translates the mantras into propaganda that collectively functions to shape new faiths. The fluidity that once defined dharma now becomes a means for creating brands and distributing charisma. This entire new discovery has nothing to do with reasoning.

Before closing, I would like to invoke the narrative of Pr̥thu from the *Mahābhārata*. He is the first king of mankind on earth, with the very earth being named *pr̥thivī* or *pr̥thivī*, the lands belonging to Pr̥thu. In this myth, the project of Pr̥thu is to flatten the earth by levelling all the mountains. Whether by Hindu modernity we imagine faith in alliance with Mohandas Gandhi or with B. R. Ambedkar, the project of modern Hinduism is creating a homogenous society that can mobilize itself for its defence or in offence against the cultural other. If Hinduism is this metaphoric earth, political force is the legendary Pr̥thu that demands flattening all the mountains and slopes of Hinduism to create an organized force. The centrality of the Vedic speech in this new age needs a different reading, as this is not the primacy of the spontaneous voice of the constantly unfolding reality but the heavenly mandate, the scripture in the Biblical image.

In this new emanation, individuals become the institute, and faith becomes a commodity. In this age when charisma rules over *tapas* of the *ṛṣis* and reason is subdued, truth has its architects and owners. The message today is the messenger is the message. In this self-affirming frenzy of faith, it is reason that must be the modern-day Isaac. Rather than understanding “reason” as a path to truth, what constitutes something reasonable today is what can mobilize the masses.

In this new incarnation, religion becomes an instrument for mass hysteria and social mobilization. At this juncture, dharma becomes the sacrificial beast on the altar of politics.

Notes

- 1 *dvividho hi vedokto dharmah pravṛttilakṣaṇo nirvṛttilakṣaṇaś ca* | The commentary of Śāṅkara upon the *Bhagavadgītā*, Upakramaṇikā, p. 3 on Pansikar (1936 ed.).
- 2 *yato 'bhyudayaniḥśreyasasiddhiḥ sa dharmah* | Vaiśeṣikasūtra I.1.2.
- 3 *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* III.10.11.14.
- 4 *codanālakṣaṇo 'rtho dharma* | Jaiminīyasūtra I.1.2.
- 5 *śyenaśābharanayajeta* | Āpastambaśrautasūtra XXII.4.13.
- 6 *codanā hi bhūtaṃ bhavantaṃ bhaviṣyantaṃ sūkṣmaṃ vyavahitaṃ viprakṛṣṭam ity evaṃjāṇīyakam arthaṃ śaknoty avagamayitum nānyat kiñ ca, nendriyam* | Śābara on Mīmāṃsāsūtra I.1.2.
- 7 This also leads to the thesis of intrinsic validity of the speech. For discussion on this issue, see Taber 1992.
- 8 *saṅkalpamūlaḥ kāmo vai yajñāḥ saṅkalpasambhavaḥ* | *vratāni yamadharmaś ca sarve saṅkalpajāḥ smṛtāḥ* || *akāmasya kriyā kācid dṛśyate neha karhicit* | *yad yaddhi kurute kiñcit tattat kāmasya ceṣṭitam* || *Manusmṛti* II.3–4.
- 9 *yac cetaḥ sandarśanaṃ nāma yadanantaram prārthanādhyavasāyau krameṇa bhavataḥ* | Medātithi on *Manusmṛti* II.3.
- 10 *Vedo 'khalo dharmamūlaṃ smṛtiṣṭile ca tadvidāṃ* | *ācāraś caiva sādḥūnām ātmanas tuṣṭir eva ca* || *Manusmṛti* II.6.
- 11 *Śrutiḥ smṛtiḥ sadācāraḥ svasya ca priyam ātmanah* | *samyaksaṅkalpajāḥ kāmo dharmamūlam idaṃ smṛtam* || *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* I.7. See also Vijñāneśvara's commentary upon *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* I.7. For discussion, see Davis 2017: 507–521.
- 12 *vidvadbhiḥ sevitaḥ sadbhir nityamadveṣarāgibhiḥ* | *hṛdayeṇābhyanyujñāto yo dharmas taṃ nibodhata* || *Manusmṛti* II.1.
- 13 *na ca pariniṣṭhita vastusvarūpatve 'pi pratyakṣāddiviśayatvaṃ brahmaṇah, tattvamasīti brahmātmabhāvasya śāstram antareṇānavagamyamānatvāt* | *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* I.1.4.
- 14 *nanu jñānaṃ nāma mānaś kriyā* | *na, vailakṣaṇyāt* | *kriyā hi nāma sā yatra vastusvarūpanira-pekṣaiva codyate puruṣacittayāpārādḥīnā ca* | *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* I.1.4.
- 15 *dhyānaṃ cintanaṃ yadyapi mānaś tathāpi puruṣeṇa kartum akartum anyathā vā kartum śakyam, puruṣatantratvāt, jñānaṃ tu pramāṇajanyam* | *pramāṇaṃ ca yathābhūtavastuviśayam* | *ato jñānaṃ kartum akartum anyathā vā kartum aśakyam* | *kevalaṃ vastutantram eva tat* | *na codanātantram* | *nāpi puruṣatantram* | *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* I.1.4.

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