

Alexander PEREVERZEV*

SUREŚVARA AS A COMMENTATOR OF THE ADVAITA VEDĀNTA TRADITION

– Abstract –

Sureśvara was a direct disciple of the Advaita Vedānta luminary, Śaṅkara, and a celebrated commentator on some of his works. He authored *Naiṣkarmya Siddhi*, an independent work, and two vārtikas: on Śaṅkara's *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya* and *Taittirīyopaniṣad-bhāṣya*. It appears from his works that he was a thorough and consistent Śaṅkarite who scarcely allowed diversion from the line of his master. Throughout his career Sureśvara debated with Mīmāṃsakas, both the Bhāṭṭas and the Prābhākaras. He also confronted the followers of Maṇḍana Miśra, a famous non-Śaṅkarite Vedantin. One of the major topics of debate that is found in each and every of his works is vindication of the insight into the nature of self (*jñāna*) as the sole means of achieving liberation. In his works he proves a seasoned polemicist and a scholar of tremendous erudition. Sureśvara also acted as a valuable link between Śaṅkara and the later Advaita tradition.

Keywords: Indian Philosophy; Advaita Vedānta; Sureśvara; Śaṅkara; *Naiṣkarmya Siddhi*.

Introduction

The present paper aims at providing an outline of the literary career of the remarkable representative of the Advaita Vedānta school of Indian philosophy – Sureśvara. It analyses his contribution to the said tradition as a commentator and thinker. It studies his differences from his avowed master Śaṅkara, reconstructs his view of the Vedantic method of attaining liberation, and provides a glimpse of his life story based on traditional sources. It also attempts to evaluate his role in the

* Auroville, India (alikusundara@yahoo.co.in).

history of Advaita Vedānta and situate him in the broader Indian philosophical context.

Sureśvara is one of the direct disciples of Śaṅkara, which fact is known from the tradition and is amply corroborated by the evidence from Sureśvara's own writings. There is some evidence that Sureśvara was probably the younger contemporary of Kumārila and the elder contemporary of Vimuktātman and Sarvajñātman. This allows us to fix Sureśvara's dates between 720-770 A.D., while Śaṅkara would have been active somewhere between 700-750 A.D.

There are several reasons why the figure of Sureśvara should attract particular attention. His temporal proximity to, as well as being a direct disciple of, Śaṅkara immediately suggest not only faithfulness in letter and spirit to his master but also, more importantly, his acute awareness of the contemporary philosophical setting and his being awake to the nuances of Śaṅkara's stance and precise context of each polemics. Sureśvara will only gain in importance if we recall that he was a contemporary and co-student of Padmapāda, the celebrated founder of Vivaraṇa, one of the two sub-schools of Advaita Vedānta. There is an ample scope for the discussion as regards the exact extent and nature of their influence on one another and the role they played in each other's career. Last, although it may well have been mentioned first, the sheer quantity of Sureśvara's contribution to the literary history of Advaita is so extensive that it makes impossible for a student of the tradition to overlook it. Taken together, Sureśvara's authentic works extend to some twelve thousand verses, which makes him a figure to reckon with not only in the circle of Śaṅkara's students, among whom he was the most prolific writer, but in the entire tradition of Advaita.

This notwithstanding, Sureśvara remains one of the most understudied representatives of Advaita Vedānta. There may be several reasons for that, and one of them would be the fact that Sureśvara himself did not father any sub-tradition within Advaita. True, he is often recognized and honoured as the first pontiff of Kanchi, one of the four religious centers or *Maṭhas* believed to have been founded by his master Śaṅkara around the Indian subcontinent. However, the academic surveys of the tradition of Advaita usually do not contain much material on him and his contribution to this school. Though he does get a reference, he hardly receives a thorough scrutiny. The only exception from this unfortunate rule would be the little known work by Sri Markandeya Shastri titled *Sureśvara's Contribution to Advaita*. Over the years, there have been published a considerable number of articles attempting to investigate the question of Sureśvara's identity but, not unexpectedly, they do not touch on his contribution as commentator and thinker.

Most of Sureśvara's output is exegetical. Throughout his career he commented exclusively on the works of his master, Śaṅkara. He must have deemed it his duty to forward with maximum efficiency Śaṅkara's message and propagate his views. This makes him a significant link, a middleman between Śaṅkara and the later Advaita tradition, valuable not only for Advaitins but also their opponents, who may have found his works useful to clarify Śaṅkara's position before attempting to undermine it.

One of the most significant problems that Sureśvara, following his master, discussed in elaborate detail was the pathway to liberation (*mokṣa*). That it is a question of utmost importance in Indian philosophical milieu is obvious: liberation being the highest goal of human existence in Indian view, it is necessary to establish the number of ways of attaining it and to find out the most effective way if there are more than one. Much of philosophical debate in India revolved around the conception of liberation and the method of realizing it. In the writings of the thinkers of Advaita beginning with Śaṅkara and Sureśvara it involved vindication of *jñāna* (insight into the nature of the self).

The opponents Sureśvara had to face were mainly Mīmāṃsakas of different schools and persuasions who supported orthodox Vedic ritualism and argued for the indispensability of rites/actions (*karma*) in this process. The debate started centuries before Sureśvara as is evident from the castigation of ritualism already in the *Bhagavad-gītā* and even the Upaniṣads. It did not end with Sureśvara either, extending well into the late Advaita tradition. Thus, it covers around two millennia and may be considered one of the longest not only in Indian but world philosophy. As such, it is comparable to another debate contemporary to it – that between Advaita and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. It is of great importance to explore the extent of the interrelation between these two greatest controversies in the Hindu thought. They are certainly connected considering the fact that they overlap in time and the agreement between Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika on crucial metaphysical questions.

The dichotomy between what can be generalized as the paths of knowledge and action is not restricted to the *āstika* (Vedic) systems of thought, extending to *nāstika* (non-Vedic) schools as well, for example Buddhism, although it is not accompanied by a vigorous debate there. In contrast to Hinduism, early Buddhism did not emphasize ritual observance. Salvation religion as it was, it stressed the acquisition of insight into the Four Noble Truths and other cornerstone doctrines, their direct experience by the practitioner as a necessary link to liberation. Morality and meditation, that can be interpreted here as physical and mental actions or

disciplines, were harnessed in the early Buddhism as methods and prerequisites of acquiring this insight. However, with a passage of time, particularly in the Theravāda branch of Buddhism, the focus shifted to the acquisition of merit which now was viewed instrumental not only to the attainment of the better position in the world of transmigratory existence but even of liberation from it. Meditation was reinterpreted as a merit-making technique employed as an enhancement of or even alternative to the other such techniques: morality (keeping Buddhist precepts) and donation (*dāna*) viewed mainly as a variety of charitable works aimed at supporting Buddhist religion and monastic community. Spiro characterizes early Buddhism and its later development as Nibbanic and Kammatic Buddhism respectively. He also describes the former as religion of radical salvation (through knowledge) and the latter as that of proximate salvation (through action).¹ It should be stressed once more that what is meant by action here is considerably different from what Mīmāṃsā means by karma, despite the etymological identity of the terms. Typologically, however, the position of Kammatic Buddhism vis-à-vis action closely resembles that of Mīmāṃsā.

It is worthy of note in this context that Kammatic Buddhism presupposes also a soteriological shift. It offers either a modified conception of *nirvāṇa* – as a superparadise – or a new goal altogether, the goal Nibbanic Buddhism would certainly frown upon – heavenly existence construed as conducive to or at least non-contradictory to the attainment of the ultimate goal, *nirvāṇa*. That this orientation is recognizably Mīmāṃsā needs no stressing. These two varieties of the Theravāda Buddhism are not known to have indulged in debate, or at least there are no textual records of such. On the contrary, in the Theravāda Buddhist societies, including modern ones, the Nibbanic and Kammatic models coexist rather peacefully in spite of their blatant contradictions, the former being favoured by the learned monastic elite, while the latter – by the relatively unsophisticated laity.

If for a moment we abstract from the Indic meaning of *jñāna* and interpret it, rather generally, as a genuine religious experience, we will see that perhaps every religious tradition has witnessed at one or another stage of its development some amount of tension between the paths of knowledge and action ranging from open conflict to inner friction and mutual suspicion. Particularly striking are similarities between the Advaita-Mīmāṃsā controversy and the disagreement between the two luminaries of Neoplatonism, Plotinus and Iamblichus, with Plotinus holding position close to Advaitic and Iamblichus displaying closeness to Mīmāṃsā. The similarities

¹ Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society; A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, 2nd ed., University of California Press, 1980, pp. 31-139.

even extend to the sphere of metaphysics as Plotinus regards the world and the descent of soul into it unreal, while Iamblichus insists both are real.

Literary Works Ascribed to Sureśvara

In total, six works go by the name of Sureśvara. The attribution of three of them, *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, *Taittirīyopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* and *Brhadāranyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, causes no doubt.

The first of them is a treatise, which was written as the tradition goes² and as Sureśvara himself confesses at the behest of Sureśvara's preceptor Śaṅkara for the purpose of elucidation of the doctrine of Advaita: “*jñānaṃ vyāhṛtam apy anyaiḥ vakṣye gurvanuśikṣayā.*”³

It is both metrical and prosaic with the metrical portion being more extensive than the prosaic one. The prosaic portion is termed “*Sambandhokti*” or “*Prasaṅga*”. The mixture of prose and poetry is not entirely uncommon in Sanskrit literature in general (*Campūs*, for example) and in philosophical literature in particular (*Vedāntasāra*, *Vedānta-paribhāṣā*). It is believed that in the case of *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* prose and poetry were written at different times, the metrical part being older and constituting an independent whole. *Sambandhokti* may have originally been an auto-commentary that later came to be counted as part of the text. The combination appears to be haphazard as we find a number of philosophical arguments and even literary expressions (like in I.18) repeated in both portions to the extent of being tautological. In the commentaries on *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* we find a claim that Śaṅkara ordered Sureśvara to explain his views in *Sambandhokti* after the poetic part was completed. This makes the prosaic part a sort of self-commentary on the poetic portion.

The work is divided into four parts. The first containing 100 verses deals with *mokṣa* and *jñāna* as means thereto. The second (119 verses) centres on the distinction between self and non-self with the special emphasis on the *anvaya-vyatireka* method. The third and the longest (126 verses) elucidates the meaning of the Upaniṣadic saying “Thou art that” (*Tat tvam asi*). In the closing part Sureśvara draws on relevant sources of the Advaita tradition and discusses the problem of *jīvanmukti* (liberation while in body).

² See the opening portion of *Candrikā* and also *Vidyāsurabhi*, *The Naiṣkarmyasiddhi of Sureśvarācārya with the Candrikā of Jñānottama*, edited by M.H. Hirianna, Bombay Sanskrit and Prakrit Series, XXXVIII, Bombay, 1925, p. xxxi.

³ *Ibidem*, p. xxx.

The title of the treatise is highly significant. The term “*naiṣkarmya*” is found in *Bhagavadgītā* (XVIII.49): “*Asakta-buddhiḥ sarvatra jīvātmā vigata-spr̥haḥ/ naiṣkarmya-siddhiṃ paramāṃ sannyāsenādhigacchati.*” In the commentary on this verse Śāṅkara attempts to develop it into a concept, making it synonymous with renunciation: “*Naiṣkarmyasya vā niṣkriyātma-rūpāvasthāna-lakṣaṇasya siddhiḥ niṣpattiḥ*” (The attainment of *naiṣkarmya*, the state in which one remains as the actionless self).⁴ On the whole, *naiṣkarmya* stands for the state of freedom from action and its consequences (*vipāka*).

Sureśvara’s treatise falls into the tradition of Siddhi literature. The starting point of this tradition within the fold of Advaita was most probably Maṇḍana Mīśra’s *Brahmasiddhi* to which Suresvara’s *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* must have been a fitting reply. Together with two others – *Iṣṭasiddhi* of Vimuktātman and *Advaita-siddhi* of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī – they form a corpus of the highly authoritative Siddhi texts of the Advaita tradition. Madhusūdana Sarasvatī himself, not without pride at his own achievement, put them on the same plane: “*Siddhīnām iṣṭa-naiṣkarmya-brahma-gaṇam iyam cirāt/ advaita-siddhir adhunā caturthī samajāyata.*”⁵

This list does not exhaust the Siddhi literature of the Advaita school. To complete it, we must add *Advaita-brahmasiddhi* of Sadānanda, *Svārājya-siddhi* of Gaṅgādharendra Sarasvatī and *Jñāna-siddhi* of Jñānottama.

The above mentioned four major Siddhis of Advaita Vedānta appear to bear logical connection with one another. As Kuppuswami Sastri observes: “Viewed in correlation with the opening sūtra of the *Brahma-mīmāṃsā*, the *Brahmasiddhi* may be said to devote itself mainly to the definition (*lakṣaṇa*) and testimony (*pramāṇa*) of Brahman referred to in the expression *Brahma-jijñāsā* – the what of *Brahma-jijñāsā*; the *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* may be regarded as paying particular attention to the meaning of the words “*Atha*” and “*Atah*” as understood by Śāṅkara – the how of the *Brahma-jijñāsā*; the *Iṣṭa-siddhi* may be made out as dealing chiefly with the nature and cause of erroneous superimposition (*Adhyāsa*), according to Śāṅkara – the why of the *Brahma-jijñāsā* – *adhyāsa* being the basic topic on which the *Brahma-jijñāsā* hinges; and the *Advaita-siddhi* sums up all the ideas coming under *Brahma-jijñāsā*.”⁶ He further points out that roughly speaking *Brahma-siddhi* comprises the

⁴ *Naiṣkarmyasiddhi of Śrī Sureśvarācārya*, edited and translated by Prof. S.S. Raghavachar, Prasaranga, University of Mysore, 1965, 1985, p. v.

⁵ *Advaitasiddhi of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī with the Commentaries*, edited by N.S. Ananta Krishna Sastri, Nirnayasagar Press, Bombay, 1937, p. 900.

⁶ *Brahmasiddhi, with Commentary by Śāṅkhaṇi*, edited by S. Kuppuswami Sastri, Madras Government Oriental Series, 4, Madras Government Press, 1937, p. xxiii.

ontology of Advaita Vedānta, the *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* discusses its ethology, *Iṣṭa-siddhi* deals with its epistemology and *Advaita-siddhi* surveys its metaphysics.⁷ This division is not absolute as all four works tried to cover all the above philosophical disciplines. This is particularly true in the case of *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* that manages to convey lots of philosophical sense in a small space.

The composition of the Siddhis within the framework of Advaita has multiple parallels in the other schools of Indian philosophy. One can list here a number of Siddhis – *Vijñaptimātratā-siddhi* of Vasubandhu (which has a distinction of being one of the few Siddhis predating the Vedāntic ones), *Sphoṭa-siddhi* of Maṇḍana Miśra, *Apoḥasiddhi* and *Kṣaṇabhaṅga-siddhi* of Ratnakīrti, *Prabodha-siddhi* of Udayanācārya, *Advaya-siddhi* of Śrīdhara; *Ātma-siddhi*, *Samvit-siddhi* and *Īśvara-siddhi* by Yamunācārya, *Sarvārtha-siddhi* of Vedāntadeśika and an anonymous *Nyāya-siddhi*, a commentary on *Prakaraṇa-pañcikā* of Śālikanātha. As it was mentioned above, *Brahma-siddhi* of Maṇḍana is the root of Vedāntic (and many other) Siddhis and Sureśvara's Siddhi follows it chronologically almost immediately. The term “*siddhi*” reveals the nature of all these treatises, which consists in the exercise of confuting the views of multiple opponents. To quote Sastri once again, “... it stands for conclusive ascertainment as a result of careful investigation; and it presupposes discussion of a polemical nature, in many cases.”⁸

Sureśvara admits that it was not on his own initiative that he undertook to write a treatise on Śaṅkara's doctrine; he did it on his command even though the tenets of Advaita had already been expounded by the savants of more weight and authority. The story of Śaṅkara's assigning the work to Sureśvara is narrated in Mādhava's *Śaṅkara-digvijaya* and may well be authentic. It is said that Śaṅkara's idea was to get a subcommentary on his *bhāṣya* on the *Brahma Sūtras* written by one of his disciples. His choice fell on Sureśvara, which caused bitter jealousy among others. Mādhava's text then draws a picture of Śaṅkara's disciples gnawed by jealousy and entreating their master to reconsider the case pointing to Sureśvara's limited skills and questionable loyalty. Śaṅkara lent ear to their request and agreed on a compromise. He offered to check Sureśvara's abilities by ordering him to first compose a treatise of independent nature.

As the title itself suggests the work in question centres on the antagonism of knowledge (*jñāna*) and action (*karma*), discarding the latter as the means to liberation. Yet to accomplish the debate Sureśvara is compelled to discuss almost all major topics of the contemporary Advaita tradition. The conceptual framework of

⁷ Loc. Cit.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. xxii.

Advaita being quite closely knit, treating one of its salient features unavoidably entails treating almost all of them. And, needless to say, Sureśvara succeeds in it brilliantly. With justified pride he declares that his treatise is “*aśeṣa-vedānta-saṃgraha-prakaraṇa*”, a compilation of all essential Vedānta topics.⁹ He also mentions that it is an introduction to entire Vedānta, *Vedāntārtha-praveśika*. Even though his treatise from the very beginning was meant to be an introduction, it is a worthy debut portending the advent of a seasoned philosopher.

Another of Sureśvara’s works is *Taittirīyopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, a sub-commentary on the Śāṅkara’s commentary on the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. This was written exclusively in verse. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* is of great importance for the Advaita tradition. Śāṅkara is known to have quoted from it 147 times while commenting on *Brahma Sūtras*.

This work is more voluminous than *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*: it contains 1027 verses. The chapterization of the *Vārtika* follows that of the *Bhāṣya* and the *Upaniṣad* itself. It consists of three *vallīs* or chapters: *Śikṣāvallī* (also known as the *Sāṃhitī Upaniṣad*) called so because its second section deals with phonetics (*śikṣā*), *Brahmāvallī* (also *Ānandavallī* or *Brahmānandavallī*) and *Bhṛguvallī*. The first contains 186 verses, the second 750, the third 91. *Śikṣāvallī* discusses at considerable length meditation on various aspects of conditioned Brahman (*Saguṇa-vidyā*) apart from the correlation of action and knowledge. *Brahmavallī*, as the title makes it clear, centres on Brahman in its unconditioned state, dwells on its identity with Ātman, the inward self and stresses its difference from the five sheaths (*kośa*). In other words, it contains *Nirguṇa-vidyā*. *Bhṛguvallī* explains the meaning of the dialogue between Bhṛgu and Varuṇa and discusses the topic of *jīvanmukti* in its final section.

The next *Vārtika* of Sureśvarācārya we are going to discuss here is *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*. It is truly the acme of Sureśvara’s philosophical thought and beyond any doubt his Opus Magnum. This *Vārtika*, as is well known, is one of the most voluminous works on Indian philosophy, its present size running to some 11.151 stanzas, almost half of the length of the *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*. With reliance on the stanza from the original (*Iti dvādaśa-sahasra-vārtikāmṛtam īritam/kaṇvāraṇyaka-bhāṣyasya Śāṅkarasya samāsatas*)¹⁰ an opinion

⁹ *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, I.1, *Sambandha*.

¹⁰ *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, VI. 5.1.

was expressed that the original length of the treatise was 12,000 verses¹¹ but it is quite possible that Sureśvara simply rounded the figure to maintain the metre.

It is this treatise that earned Sureśvara, in the opinion of some, the title “Vārtika-kāra.”¹² The introductory portion of the *Vārtika* goes by the name *Sambandha-vārtika* and owing to its rich content could easily stand as a separate treatise.

This *Vārtika* held a considerable number of post-Śaṅkara Advaitins under its sway and even inspired an adaptation by Vidyāraṇya. His *Vārtika-sāra* is but a further explanation and elaboration of Sureśvara’s *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* – a rare example of the abstract of the commentary.

The above-mentioned works are believed to be from the pen of Sureśvara, and there is little disagreement on their authenticity as well as the profundity of their impact on the Advaita tradition. It was once mentioned that “All three amply represent his [Sureśvara’s] enormous and deep study, richness of faculties, firm expression and strong conviction.”¹³ Traditional accounts inform us that all three were composed at the behest of Śaṅkara himself. Tradition also holds that the order of composition was as follows – *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, *Taittirīyopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* and *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*.¹⁴

Whether we accept the popular tradition or not, it is likely that *Taittirīyopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* was composed to honour Śaṅkara who belonged to the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda tradition of which the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* is a part. Significantly, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* belongs to the Śukla Yajurveda corpus of texts and Sureśvara is of this very lineage. It appears that *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* is, indeed, the earliest work of Sureśvara, the reason being that its characteristic feature (mixture of prose and poetry) is not found elsewhere in his works and its style betrays more the zeal of a neophyte than a measured flow of thought of a ripe philosopher. In *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, Sureśvara sounds quite emotional. He goes on abusing his opponents and passing remarks full of bitter sarcasm: “*vidhi-pratiṣedha-codanā-saṃdaśopadaṣṭāḥ*” (I.41) (i.e. pressed by the tongs of Vedic injunctions and prohibitions), “*aho prajñā’tmavādinām*” (I.78) (i.e. see the wisdom of the Ātmavādins!), “*svamanoratha-saṅkḷpta-prajñādhamāta-dhiyām ataḥ*” (I.100) (the

¹¹ S.A. Nachane, *A Survey of Post-Śaṅkara Advaita Vedānta*, edited by R.K.Panda, Eastern Book Linkers, Delhi, 2000.

¹² *Ibidem*, p 37.

¹³ Sri Markandeya Shastri, *Sureśvara’s Contribution to Advaita*, Sundari Saṃskṛta Vidyālaya, date not mentioned.

¹⁴ *Śaṅkara-digvijaya*, *The Traditional Life of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya* by Mādhava Vidyāraṇya, translated by Swami Tapasyananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 2002, pp. 148-150.

Mīmāṃsakas whose intelligence is shrouded in the smoke of the sacrificial fires), “*tarka-jvara-bhṛśātūrāḥ*” (II.59) (i.e. gripped by the fever of arguments), “*tārkika-śvabhiḥ*” (II.84-85) (i.e. the hounds-logicians). It is not that some such expressions are entirely absent in his other works but their frequency seems to be reduced. In his last work, for example, Sureśvara is seen to be not downright abusive but mockingly regardful while analysing the exegesis of *Bhartṛprapañca*, a teacher of great repute although not belonging to Śāṅkara’s line.¹⁵

Another reason for the suggestion that *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* is the earliest work of Sureśvara is the very nature of the text. It is an introduction to the system of thought and is supposed to be succinct, lucid and textbook-like. No doubt, introduction to the philosophical system calls for its more than superficial understanding, but it is nevertheless easier to write an independent work than a commentary on someone else’s text as one has a freedom of arranging the material and the advantage of employing means and arguments of one’s choice.

Three more works are ascribed to Sureśvara, but reservations are usually expressed as regards their authenticity. The first among them is *Pañcīkaraṇa-vārtika*, a commentary on Śāṅkara’s *Pañcīkaraṇa*. It is a short text comprising mere 64 verses. Its authenticity is even more questionable since *Pañcīkaraṇa*, being a minor work is not universally recognized as a creation of Śāṅkara. Since it describes meditation on “*Om*” it also goes by the name of *Praṇava-vārtika*. It is a mini-compendium of Advaita whose subject matter (deliberation on the symbolism of “*Om*”) is quite close to Śāṅkara’s commentary on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. However, the author seems to believe in the crucial role of meditation in the process of gaining liberation, which distinguishes him from Sureśvara as known to us from *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* and the *Vārtikas*.

Mānasollāsa is yet another commentarial work ascribed to Sureśvara – on the *Dakṣiṇamūrti-stotra* of Śāṅkara. After some scrutiny, Amarnath Ray attributed the *stotra* and the *Vārtika* thereon to Abhinavagupta and one of his disciples respectively, since in his view they were closer to Kashmir Śaivism than to Śāṅkara’s Advaita.¹⁶ Others, however, countered Ray’s arguments and tried to prove the Advaitic nature of both the works.¹⁷ Whatever the philosophical orientation of

¹⁵ *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, II.3.90; *Śrī Sureśvarācārya’s Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtikam, with the Commentary Śāstraprakāśikā of Shri Ānandagiri Āchārya*, edited by Shri S. Subrahmanya Shastri, Mahesh Research Institute, Varanasi, Vol. I – 1982, Vol. II – 1990.

¹⁶ Amarnath Ray, *The Dakṣiṇamūrti Hymn and the Mānasollāsa*, “Journal of Oriental Research”, Madras, April-June, 1932.

¹⁷ Shastri, Sri Markandeya, *op.cit.*, pp. 12-14.

the *stotra* might be, it is not usually held to be Śaṅkara's work, save by the tradition, and that puts a question mark on Sureśvara's authorship. *Mānasollāsa* runs into 357 verses.

The last text going by the name of Sureśvara is *Kāśī-mṛtyu-mokṣa-vicāra/Kāśī-mokṣa-nirṇaya*. As is clear from the title, the treatise extols death in Benares as the way to liberation. The author clarifies at the very outset that this method is not for Advaitins, and this makes Sureśvara's authorship hardly plausible. A consistent Advaitin like Sureśvara could not have even conceived of the alternative path to liberation. What makes Sureśvara's authorship even more dubious is the quotation from the decidedly later text, *Samkṣepa-śārīraka* of Sarvajñātman¹⁸, who, according to the tradition, was Sureśvara's disciple.

A number of defects in Sureśvara's style have been highlighted by various scholars, even as all of them are unanimous that his writings are a tremendous success as philosophical treatises. Markandeya Sastri points out the defect of *duravaya* saying that Sureśvara's works, compared to Śaṅkara's are anything but lucid which makes it often difficult to follow his line of reasoning.¹⁹ The foremost among the defects and shortcomings of his style would perhaps be the repetitiousness as regards logical patterns, which Hiriyanā explains as a hallmark of anxiety of a scholar not truly proficient in writing.²⁰ Sureśvara is not entirely unaware of this blemish and attempts to justify himself by saying that short text results in but a limited understanding, "*Ityādi punaḥ punar ucyate grantha-lāghavād buddhi-lāghavaṃ prayojakam iti.*"²¹

Another point that has been held against Sureśvara is his not so rare usage of ungrammatical forms. In *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* itself, which is comparatively short, the editors located some dozen forms militating against Pāṇiniyan grammar, which makes for a very high incidence. These are found in both prose and verse parts and therefore cannot be explained as liberties taken to maintain the metre. Double *sandhi*, a rather archaic trait, is also occasionally found in Sureśvara.²²

It is very likely that *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* and, perhaps, the *Taittirīya-vārtika* were completed in Śaṅkara's lifetime and received his approval. The sheer magnitude of the last *Vārtika* as well as the fact that it was composed to honour Sureśvara's own tradition (*Śākhā*) may well point to its having been composed in the post-Śaṅkara period of Sureśvara's career. It is noteworthy, besides, that it

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

²⁰ Hiriyanā, *op.cit.*, p. xxxi.

²¹ *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, III 23, *Sambandha*.

²² *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, I.3.290.

contains a number of points of difference from Śaṅkara. Such points are not really found in *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, where Sureśvara follows his master's line of thinking very closely. The first instance of his disagreement with Śaṅkara is recorded in the *Taittirīya-vārtika* and pertains to the textual interpretation. Sureśvara is extremely cautious about expressing his opinion and therefore firstly quotes that of his master.²³ But in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* we find a considerable number of opinions that are at odds with Śaṅkara's. The boldness of Sureśvara's assertions and his insistence in some places on the correctness of his interpretation alone²⁴ may be attributed to the fact that by the time the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* had been composed Śaṅkara was no more around. The instances of Sureśvara's disagreement stand in marked opposition to his tone in his other two works; Śaṅkara may have still been around at the time of their composition.

Sureśvara's Life According to Traditional Sources

With the materials we have at our disposal it is utterly impossible to attempt a full-scale reconstruction of Sureśvara's life-story. If we are to base our research on legends, temple chronicles and Śaṅkara's hagiographies the result will contain plenty of "ifs." Yet in the absence of more trustworthy sources we may collect and arrange in a more or less coherent story whatever little is known about the life of Sureśvara, treating it with a great degree of caution and criticism.

Even traditional sources are silent on the early life of Sureśvara. In most of Śaṅkara's hagiographies the earliest incident in his life is his debate with Śaṅkara. The debate of Śaṅkara with Mīmāṃsaka Viśvarūpa/Maṇḍana, who went on to become an Advaitin and Śaṅkara's student, finds its reflection in all hagiographies of Śaṅkara and is presented as one of the most crucial episodes of Śaṅkara's life. By comparison, Śaṅkara's having established the four *Mathas* is testified to by only two of his hagiographies.²⁵ Whether it was a really decisive debate or simply the hagiographical tradition tried to make it a case of decisive victory over Mīmāṃsā in general and triumphant vindication of the doctrine of non-dualism, we do not know.

Viśvarūpa is described as greater in learning than even his alleged preceptor Kumārila. He is said to have resided in Mahiṣmatī (*Śaṅkara-digvijaya* of Mādhava Vidyāraṇya, III.1) or in Vidyālaya/Vijilabindu (according to two different

²³ *Taittirīyopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, II.540-542.

²⁴ *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, I.5.16-17.

²⁵ Jonathan Bader, *Conquest of the Four Quarters. Traditional Accounts of the Life of Śaṅkara*, Aditya Prakashan, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 74-75.

recensions of Anantānandagiri's *Śaṅkaravijaya*). The exact location of these places is hard to determine (if at all they are historical) but Mādhava says that Śaṅkara left for the debate with Maṇḍana/Viśvarūpa from Prayāga.

Many a hagiographical text punctuates the luxury of his mansion, which besides purely material stuff is literally saturated with learning. Even parrots there utter postulates from different sciences, which seems to be a homage paid to the poetic convention of the day.

The attitude of Viśvarūpa to his opponent is not unambiguous. In some texts he receives him with due respects while according to others he welcomes him with abuses. Finally both decide to hold a debate on very categorical terms: the loser will have to adopt the life-style of the winner. Thus, it is made out to be more than a philosophical controversy – a clash of life-styles that result from consistent following of opposing philosophical doctrines.

Both sides welcome the host's wife Bhāratī to adjudicate the debate, which lasts for an unnaturally long time: from six to one hundred days depending on the text. The polemics covers a wide range of subjects, starting with the Vedas. Mādhava's hagiography is one of the few that offer us an idea of the contents of the debate. The topics discussed may give us a glimpse of the contents of the debates Śaṅkara held during his journey around the peninsula as well as what may have really transpired between him and Viśvarūpa.

The disputants start with the interpretation of the salutary Upaniṣadic identity statement (*mahāvākya*) "*Tat tvam asi*" (the apple of discord between Advaita and Mīmāṃsā, at that time) and immediately bring forward their differences. Maṇḍana/Viśvarūpa is depicted as a hard-boiled Mīmāṃsaka. Relying on the multiple Vedic passages, he argues that the *Mahāvākya* contains an injunction of meditative practice, precisely the position reflected in Maṇḍana Miśra's Brahmasiddhi. Facing Śaṅkara's counter-argumentation he modifies his tack: *Mahāvākya* can at the most be an assertion of similarity (but not identity) between *jīva* and *Īśvara*. Furthermore, the monism sponsored by Śaṅkara is not supported by *pramāṇas* like perception, inference etc. Again, the two clashed over the Vedic passages teaching the difference between *jīva* and *Īśvara* offering diametrically opposite interpretations. What ends the debate according to Mādhava's *Śaṅkara-digvijaya* is the statement made by Śaṅkara about the self-validity of Veda as *pramāṇa*, which makes the monistic passages of the Upaniṣads infallible. Viśvarūpa then joins Śaṅkara although his ex-wife continues to debate on his behalf. Having found himself defeated Viśvarūpa accepts renunciation and gets a new name – Sureśvara.

Heretofore the chief disciple of Śaṅkara was Padmapāda (alias Sanandana) judging by the authoritative tone in which he addresses his co-students. He is portrayed as particularly close to Śaṅkara. His dexterity in killing the *kāpālika* who was preparing to chop off Śaṅkara's head is worth mentioning in this context.²⁶ It is interesting to note that Sureśvara is not counted among the closest twelve disciples of Śaṅkara in the possibly oldest Śaṅkara hagiography. By contrast, the list includes Padmapāda and Hastāmalaka.²⁷ Therefore, it may be right to suggest that it took Sureśvara some time to get a prominent place in Śaṅkara's group and to overshadow the popularity of Padmapāda. It is also rather curious that Śaṅkara, having ordained Sureśvara, did not consider it proper to take him on his tour of the South but instead ordered him to stay on the banks of the Narmada where the latter spent "many days" presumably left behind by his master.²⁸ It sounds even more suspicious if we consider that the master is more likely than not to take his newly ordained raw disciple wherever he travels. It was in the South that Śaṅkara picked up Hastāmalaka and Ṭoṭaka, who together with Padmapāda and Sureśvara, went on to form the core of his disciples if the tradition is to be trusted.

We already know that Śaṅkara entrusted Sureśvara with a mission of writing a commentary on his works. According to the text of Mādhava the initiative actually belonged to Sureśvara who requested Śaṅkara to grant him permission and blessings to do it, feeling, perhaps, it was high time for him to improve his status among his co-students. Needless to say, Śaṅkara's decision to pick neophyte Sureśvara for such an important task as writing a commentary on his *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya*, irked the band of older disciples who in no time rallied behind Padmapāda considering him fitter for the task and casting aspersions on the genuineness of Sureśvara's conversion. Almost all Śaṅkara's hagiographies testify to the jealousy of other disciples. One may presume that, indeed, there must have been some animosity between Sureśvara and Padmapāda.

According to some hagiographies the disciples pleaded with Śaṅkara to change his mind, which he eventually did assigning the gargantuan task to Padmapāda. Initially, it was *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* that Śaṅkara wanted Sureśvara and later Padmapāda to comment upon. According to these sources Sureśvara pronounced a potent curse when the final choice fell on his chief rival and

²⁶ *Śaṅkara-digvijaya*, p. 133.

²⁷ *Śaṅkaravijaya of Anantānandagiri*, edited by N. Veezhinathan, University of Madras, Madras, 1971, p. 17.

²⁸ *Śaṅkara-digvijaya*, p. 128.

competitor.²⁹ Faced with the possibility of schism and conflict in the ranks of his students, Śaṅkara relented and assigned Sureśvara a more modest task – to write an introductory treatise on the system of Advaita. Mādhava narrates that when this treatise, *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, was completed, Sureśvara pronounced the curse that, since others obstructed his exegetical work, nobody's commentary on the *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* should become popular with the learned audience.³⁰ The composition of *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* not only secured his position among the disciples of Śaṅkara but also catapulted him into prominence, which resulted in more orders from Śaṅkara to write his exegesis. It was due to Sureśvara's curse, the tradition holds, that Padmapāda's commentary met with a very unhappy end. Partly destroyed by fire, it remained unfinished. As a result, none of the direct disciples of Śaṅkara succeeded in commenting on his *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* and the ambitious project was not completed before Vācaspati Miśra, the renowned Advaitic thinker active ca 841 AD.

Sureśvara did not belong to the original core-group of Śaṅkara's students but won his master's recognition and probably sincere appreciation by his literary pursuits, which demonstrated his skills as a polemicist as well as the profundity of his insights into the philosophical tenets of Advaita. It is, therefore, highly possible that towards the end of his life Śaṅkara favoured him by entrusting him with the leadership of his centre (most probably in Sringeri).

The later Advaita tradition tried to exaggerate the achievements of Sureśvara and highlight his importance. Mādhava's hagiography is the best example of this trend. It talks of Sureśvara every now and then recapitulating his accomplishments and praising his talents. In the text his advent immediately follows that of Śaṅkara, and he is said to be none other but Brahma incarnated in this world to assist Śaṅkara in his prodigious mission.

Out of a total of 1843 verses of Mādhava's text at least 324 verses deal with Viśvarūpa-Sureśvara. Such an exceptional dissipation of space in the otherwise short *kāvya* can only be explained by the fact that Mādhava was a representative of Sringeri Maṭha and for him the first pontiff thereof was of utmost importance and deserved to be given a significant, if not crucial, role in the narrative. Mādhava wishes us to believe that it is impossible to tell the story of Śaṅkara without telling that of Sureśvara. At one place he even claims that Sureśvara became a chief

²⁹ Vyāsācala's *Śaṅkaravijaya*, VII.28-71; Rājacūḍāmaṇi-Dīkṣita's *Śaṅkarābhilyudaya*, II.53-60; *Guruvamśa-kāvya* of Lakṣmaṇa Śāstrī, 257-260.

³⁰ *Śaṅkara-digvijaya*, p. 149.

disciple of Śaṅkara immediately after his ordination³¹, which is highly unrealistic and contradictory to other pieces of evidence from the same text. Mādhava equates Sureśvara with Padmapāda, Hastāmalaka and Ṭoṭaka even before the former's composition of *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* and the *Vārtikas*. He stresses Sureśvara's importance as a commentator and makes a long digression putting in the mouth of Śaṅkara the words of justification of his choice of *Vārtika-kāra*³² – the digression that most probably sought to give justification of Sureśvara's preeminence (even as a *Maṭha*-head) and portray other disciples' acceptance of this as *fait accompli*.

Sureśvara's Disagreements with Śaṅkara

Let us have a closer look at Sureśvara's disagreements with Śaṅkara found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* and showing an alternative interpretation of the text of the *Upaniṣad*. The following group of four disagreements is worth discussing in some detail:

1. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* (I.5.16), where Sureśvara, besides criticizing Śaṅkara, claims that his interpretation is correct and the other (presumably Śaṅkara's) wrong.
2. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* (I.5.17) where Sureśvara reading the word “*praiṣyan*” as “*pravrajiṣyan*” (contrasted with Śaṅkara's reading “*maṛiṣyan*”) insists on the correctness of the etymological approach advocated by him.
3. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* (III.5.1), where Sureśvara is being more liberal interpreting the word “*Brāhmaṇa*” of the original as the member of the three Aryan *varṇas*, while Śaṅkara's reading implies that *brāhmaṇas* alone are eligible for renunciation.
4. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* (IV.3.1), where Sureśvara again differs from Śaṅkara while interpreting “*Sa mene na vadiṣye*” as “*Sam enena vadiṣye*”.

If we take a closer look at the above list of examples, it will be quite clear that the last of them does not have any philosophical implications. In the third Sureśvara's reading is not in great opposition to Śaṅkara's, since what Sureśvara offers is just an expansion of the meaning given by Śaṅkara. The first example, again, may be regarded as the expansion of Śaṅkara's meaning. What Sureśvara really objects to here is the addition of the word “*eva*” to “*karmaṇā*” and “*vidyayā*”

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 128.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 144.

which enables us to understand (after Śaṅkara) that the world of elders and the world of gods are to be achieved by rituals and meditation respectively. Sureśvara is of the opinion that these worlds can be won by other means as well, not exclusively by the ones specified by Śaṅkara.

As far as the second example is concerned, the difference with Śaṅkara is evident. The interpretations of the word “*praiṣan*” given by Śaṅkara and Sureśvara are world apart from one another. Besides, Śaṅkara understands “*sampatti*” as a rite of entrusting one’s duties to one’s son before death. Sureśvara does not seem to have a clear stand on the issue. On the one hand, he is aware that there is no independent or subsidiary rite called “*sampatti*”. On the other hand, he still claims it to be a rite. His statement represents a real challenge to the Śaṅkara’s position but it remains unsuccessful due to its highly ambiguous character.

Thus, if we scrutinise these four instances we shall see that even though Sureśvara’s tone is quite different in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* as he is no more hesitant to contradict his most probably demised preceptor, in these examples he is not found to challenge the pillars and corner-stones of the Śaṅkara’s view of Advaita. His views may at times differ from Śaṅkara’s but he never contradicts Śaṅkara’s basic philosophical assumptions. Their differences may be safely restricted to the sphere of textual interpretation alone.

There is another noteworthy contradiction between the *Bhāṣya* and the *Vārtika*. Interpreting “Self-within-the-body” Śaṅkara says it means “*prāṇamaya puruṣa*”. Sureśvara openly contradicts this view claiming it means the absolute self. But even this boils down to a merely exegetical disagreement between the two *ācāryas*.

Two more instances of contradiction can be mentioned. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, II.1.193 Sureśvara claims his etymology of “*Puruṣa*” (*pūrayan*) is better than Śaṅkara’s (*puri śayanāt*). He also creatively reworks the parable of prince in the wilderness recorded by Śaṅkara and first narrated by Draviḍācārya. The list of such “harmless” disagreements by no means stops here.

But the only truly significant contradiction between Śaṅkara and Sureśvara relates to the interpretation of *nididhyāsana*. The former reads it as meditation, while the latter makes it identical with knowledge (*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, II.4.233). This is the only doctrinal difference between the two *ācāryas* we have been able to identify and will be discussed later on.

Sureśvara's View of the Method of Advaita

Drawing freely on his master's legacy, Sureśvara borrowed not only arguments but the very topics of debate. One of the topics he inherited from Śaṅkara is the role of the knowledge of the self (*jñāna*) and Vedic ritual observances (*karma*) in the process of attaining liberation (*mokṣa*). In his strong insistence on the utmost importance of this topic Sureśvara closely resembles his master. Śaṅkara commences almost every work of his with the polemics about what is directly instrumental and what is auxiliary in attaining *mokṣa*. Sureśvara follows suit and we can see him discussing it in the opening portions of *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, *Taittirīyopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* and *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*. His treatment of the topic in his possibly earliest work, *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, bears a clear mark of Śaṅkara's influence (most notably *Brahmasūtra-śaṅkara-bhāṣya*). His next work, *Taittirīyopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, sees the extension of the debate not in the sense that Sureśvara composed a sequence to his earlier work but because he added more arguments besides restating what had already been made clear by him and his master. His final and the most exhaustive treatment of the problem is found in the different portions of his most mature work, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*. This work being a crowning achievement of Sureśvara, he puts all his energy and polemical acumen into the debate on the question. It is hard to imagine lengthier and more exhaustive refutation (at least in that philosophical milieu), as Sureśvara, probably being aware that it is his last chance to speak on the subject, and being driven not only by his characteristic polemical zeal and the ardent devotion to his master but also by the desire to sum up his philosophical and spiritual career by leaving behind an Opus Magnum, does his utmost to consider all imaginable alternatives to the Advaitin's viewpoint and reveal their shortcomings.

The gist of Sureśvara's effort can be seen in *Sambandha-vārtika*, the introductory portion of the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, where he considers and destroys the opinions of three main adversaries – the Bhāṭṭa, the Prābhākara (*niyogavādin*) and the follower of Maṇḍana Mīśra (*prasaṅkhyānavādin*). All three are traditional rivals of the Śaṅkarite and Sureśvara confronts them in each and every work of his. The ardency and vigour with which he attacks them testifies to their considerable appeal to the thinkers of that time. By contrast, while debating two theories with weak scriptural and logical foundation – *Kāmaṅgīyavāda* and *Prapañcavilayavāda* – Sureśvara does not labour hard. Besides, he chooses to refute them only in his last work which is of truly encyclopaedic character. Among the above mentioned three, the first two are

Mīmāṃsakas with whom Sureśvara vehemently disagrees on the question of nature and attainment of *mokṣa* despite having much in common in the field of epistemology; while the last is even more dangerous as he has an alternative vision of Advaita, totally independent from Śaṅkara's, and attempts to fuse it with the methodology of the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā. Thus, all of Sureśvara's main adversaries are either Mīmāṃsakas or those profoundly influenced by this system.

As was already mentioned, the vigorous debate between Advaita and various schools of Mīmāṃsā regarding the methodology of *mokṣa*-attainment spanned over more than a millennium. The former supports *jñāna* (insight into the nature of self) as direct means of attaining *mokṣa* while the latter stresses the indispensability of *karma* (ritual observances and meditative practices). The polemics occupies a significant place in the writings of Sureśvara. All of his authentic works commence with a refutation of the Mīmāṃsā views of *karma* and its usefulness in the process of termination of bondage. Sureśvara contributes his bit to this debate, having inherited it from his preceptor for whom it was also a matter of arch-importance, which is obvious from the fact that he prefaced his commentaries on almost every major Upaniṣad with either a brief or more or less extensive discussion of this question. The Advaitin's involvement in this problem seems to have two objectives. First, to prove by all means possible, with reliance on both, scriptural word and reason, the inadequacy of his rival's position. Second, to find a niche for Vedic ritual in the body of Vedāntic method and thereby ensure that Advaita is not branded anti-Vedic (*nāstika*).

In the process of refuting Mīmāṃsakas, Sureśvara seeks to establish a radical opposition between *jñāna* and *karma* to preclude any chance of their combination and cooperation in bringing about *mokṣa*. Their sources (*hetu*) are different: *pramāṇa* and *avidyā* respectively. Their contents (*viśaya*) are likewise different: non-duality and plurality. Their nature (*svarūpa*) is antagonistic: *jñāna* reveals the object whereas *karma* is not known to have such capability. Expectedly, their effects (*kārya*) are conflicting: *jñāna* results in the removal of *avidyā*, while *karma* in origination, modification, obtainment and purification.³³ They also differ in respect of eligibility (*adhikāra*): ignorance and sense of agency make one eligible for *karma* whereas theoretical knowledge about the nature of the self and acquisition of certain moral qualities prepare one for *jñāna*.³⁴ Since Sureśvara regards *mokṣa* nothing but eradication of ignorance regarding self he attempts to prove that actions, Vedic or secular, feed on ignorance and are not potent to dispel it.

³³ *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, I.66.

³⁴ *Sambandha-vārtika*, 12.

While affecting the destruction of the edifice of Mīmāṃsā, Sureśvara goes into the nuts and bolts of this system and boldly challenges its fundamental assertions. He disagrees with the Mīmāṃsā theory of language, particularly with the idea of the preeminence of verb in the sentence and defends the possibility of purely informative sentences. As an extension of this debate he vehemently denies the Mīmāṃsā interpretation of Veda as a storehouse of injunctions and proves that Veda as much informs its student about the nature of the self as it enjoins actions. He straightaway rejects the idea that Veda is addressed to only one kind of disciples and advocates the theory of its conveying two messages, one of the importance of action, another of the exclusivity of knowledge, each addressed to different disciples on the different stages of development: one still under the sway of ignorance and longing for worldly fruits, another longing for liberation and detached from what the world has to offer.

The tone and direction of Sureśvara's polemics demonstrates that he does not seek to erase Mīmāṃsā altogether or deny it its right to exist as a philosophical system. What he doubts is not the valuable contribution of Mīmāṃsā to the classification and analysis of Vedic ritual but the usefulness of its subject in directly bringing about *mokṣa*. The potency of Vedic rites in helping acquire worldly goods is not something the Advaitin is prepared to deny but he insists that due to its innate limitations and fundamental flaws (like being rooted in *avidyā*) *karma* cannot produce something different in nature. Sureśvara like his master is ready to grant Mīmāṃsā a status of Vedānta's handmaiden (much in the same way as Mīmāṃsakas accommodated Vedānta) only with a proviso: the handmaiden is to depart the moment the mistress enters.

Both Śaṅkara and Sureśvara insist that *karma* is useful in the process of attaining *mokṣa* as a preparatory step. Dispassionate performance of obligatory (*nitya*) Vedic rites is thought to result in *citta-śuddhi*, purification of mind, which is crucial for the Vedāntic practice proper. Both are emphatic that such performance should cease before one turns to the Advaitic discipline proper. There is not the slightest scope for Vedic chores neither during the Advaitic discipline, nor after the attainment of *mokṣa*.

It may be surmised that what Sureśvara ultimately promotes is *naiṣkarmya*, which may be generally rendered as coming out of action, its factors, causes and results. When he uses this term in the title of his first book, *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, he may mean the establishment of the view that the self is by nature devoid of action, its results and factors. But what is most probably meant here is the establishment of the view that for the attainment of liberation one must renounce actions even before

one embarks on the path of knowledge which is very much in tune with what Śaṅkara reiterates on his commentary on the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Thus, *naiṣkarmya* is both the method involving the renunciation of all action as well as the avowed goal of Vedāntic practice, *mokṣa*, viewed as reestablishment in one's true self devoid of action and unsullied by its results.

In the Advaitin's view the role of *karmas* is to prepare one for the advent of knowledge. It is the knowledge of the self consisting in the cancellation of *avidyā*, metaphysical ignorance, that results in liberation. Time and again Sureśvara stresses that *karmas* contribute to the attainment of *mokṣa* only indirectly while *ātma-jñāna* does so directly. This comprehended, they can be described as *ārād-upakāraka* (remote means) and *sannipatyopakāraka* (proximate means) respectively.³⁵ *Karma* and *jñāna* constitute two stages of the process, but these stages do not overlap due to their innate contradiction. This much seems to be plausible, but what the Advaitins, including Sureśvara have to say on the nature of knowledge seems to stand in contradiction to the above said.

Eager to deny any scope for *karmas* apart from the above mentioned, the Advaitin, particularly Sureśvara's master, Śaṅkara, stresses quick succession of the knowledge of the self and liberation. In fact, knowledge of the self is liberation, as at the time of Śaṅkara and Sureśvara the concept of *akhaṇḍākāra-vṛtti*, the final mental modification cancelling *avidyā* and revealing Ātman-Brahman in its entirety, was not yet formulated. If the proximity of knowledge and liberation is so extreme that it borders on identity, then the division of means into remote and proximate loses its sense and one can even claim that ritual observances are as productive of liberation as the knowledge of the self. The only thing to save the Advaitin's position would be to underscore the difference in the duration of *karma* and *jñāna*. The former is a process and its result – purification of mind – is achieved gradually, while the latter is an event, a unique occurrence that does not require repetition and is hardly describable in terms of time. But this does not seem to solve the above-stated problem. In fact, Sureśvara faces it directly when he revises Śaṅkara's notion of *nididhyāsana*, identifying it with knowledge and then having to explain its relation to the previous stage of practice – *manana* (to be discussed later). There is no further discussion on this topic in the works of Sureśvara as he does not seem to be keen to address the problem.

The Advaitin's loyalty to the Vedic tradition and the resultant acceptance of *karmas* as a part of his scheme lands him in yet another difficulty – that of clarifying the relation between the performance of *karmas* and the purification of mind. The

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 1133.

problem here is certainly not as serious as the one just discussed since most opponents of the Advaitin in this case are *āstikas* that would not contest the notion of the purificatory function of Vedic observances. But the skepticism regarding the relation may be expressed by anyone assuming the *nāstika* standpoint and also by the modern student of Advaita attempting its critique from beyond the pale of Vedic orthodoxy, from the non-traditional society where ritual observances have lost much, if not all, of their significance. Apart from this major problem there is a more specific question as to the strength of the Advaitin's conviction about the usefulness of rites in his programme. Here one can only speculate since no Advaitin would openly challenge the sanctity of the Veda and the activity advocated by it. However, it seems that the Advaitin's heart lies elsewhere. He would be more comfortable if he dismissed *karmas* altogether, i.e. relegated them entirely to the level of ignorance and denied them usefulness in the struggle for liberation. But the pragmatic considerations prevailed particularly because no one questioned the dubious link between the performance of rites and the performer's moral evolution. That the link is dubious is evident: what makes the performance of Agnihotra, etc. a unique, indispensable cause of dispassion, control over senses, discrimination between eternal and non-eternal and other prerequisites of the Advaitic discipline? Cannot one instead take resort to the well-tried and tested Yogic practices like *prāṇāyāma*, etc. to effect the much-sought after purification of mind?

Partly due to the absence of necessity to do so, partly due to his integrative approach Sureśvara does not initiate a full-fledged discussion on the problem in any of his works but there is at least one place where his ambiguous statement may be interpreted as supporting something other than Vedic rites as a toll for mental purification. While discussing the question of eligibility for self-knowledge he says that it can even be the person belonging to the first *āśrama* provided he has extinguished his desires due to the practice in his previous existence: “*yas tu janmāntarābhyāsāt kṣapitāśeṣa-kāmanah...*”³⁶ It may well mean the performance of rites in the previous life, which is precisely the opinion of Śaṅkara, but the use of the word “*abhyāsa*” is noteworthy. *Abhyāsa* is, besides other things, a term of Yoga and refers to the effort to secure tranquil state of mind undisturbed by modifications.³⁷ So, Suresvara's words may sound like a preference for non-ritualistic, Yogic practices but this single example is certainly not enough to draw fast conclusions.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 89.

³⁷ *Yoga-sūtras*, I. 13. *Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras*, Translated by Rama Prasada, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 2002.

Besides, the context of the discussion seems to support the ritualistic interpretation of *abhyāsa*.

Sureśvara spends much force trying to define and distinguish *karma* and *jñāna* once and for all. By *jñāna* he means the operation of *śabda-pramāṇa* and the fruit of such operation. In this context *śabda* stands for Vedic word, specifically the identity statements (*mahāvākyas*) of the Upaniṣads. Sureśvara is insistent that hearing can bring about liberation, provided the hearer is adequately prepared and has gone through all stages of discipline prescribed by the Advaitin. Apart from this, all the discipline preceding the operation of the *śabda-pramāṇa* is *karma*. *Karma* comprises all duties of the *varṇāśrama* system, its ritual observances (performance of the *nitya*, *naimittika* and even *kāmya* rites), development of moral prerequisites and practice of meditation. Following Śaṅkara, Sureśvara regards meditation (*upāsana*) as a variety of *karma*. This stance is of major significance as it comes despite the fact that in the Upaniṣads meditation practices are called “*vidyā*”, the term semantically approximating *jñāna* or any other word used for knowledge. It is stressed that the fruit of meditation is impermanent while that of knowledge unsublatable.³⁸ Secondly, meditation is nothing but superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of some idea (however sublime it might be), i.e. perceiving the thing in the locus where it is not.³⁹ As such it is a notion lacking the certainty and durability of knowledge. Thirdly, meditation like action and quite unlike self-knowledge, operates in the context of presumed difference between the meditator and the object of meditation. Complete and permanent transcendence of this ultimately false division is not the goal of meditation. Meditation is possible only within the fold of *avidyā* and is not potent to dispel it, while self-knowledge although originating in the same context of duality is meant to cancel *avidyā* in which duality is rooted. The Advaitin insists that superimposition requires something other than another superimposition to remove it. The principle that the remover and the removed must be of opposing nature which is successfully applied in the polemics about the efficiency of *karma*, can and should be applied here as well.

Thus, Sureśvara denies the wide range of practices, ritualistic and social, physical and mental, the capacity to bring about liberation and relegates them to the position of less importance – that of preparatory steps, necessary only to prepare the ground for the rise of what is the one and only direct means of securing liberation – *jñāna*. The refutation of meditation, the variety of *karma* most proximate to *jñāna*, completed, *jñāna* stands unrivalled.

³⁸ *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, III. 93.

³⁹ *Bṛhadāranyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, I.4.7.895.

Many a time Sureśvara states that each *pramāṇa* has its field of operation where it is unique.⁴⁰ For Vedic *śabda* such field is the knowledge of the self, synonymous with the attainment of liberation. While *śabda* in its secular aspect dispels *avidyā* obscuring a particular object or a group of objects, Vedic *śabda* uproots *avidyā* in its totality when it uncovers Ātman-Brahman – the ultimate subject and object of any knowledge. If *śabda* were to share the field of its exclusive operation with something else, it would cease to be a *pramāṇa*. *Pramāṇa* has enough power to operate in its field and does not require the assistance of anything else to bring about its fruit. This epistemological presupposition being beyond dispute, Sureśvara tries to prove that the main field of Vedic word is knowledge of the self. Veda discloses two entities not cognizable by other means – *dharma* and Brahman. But there is a marked difference in the way they are attained. The fruits of *dharma* (including *svarga* or heaven) are attainable with the help of ritual actions, their kind and procedure being also supplied by the Veda, whereas Brahman is attained on hearing the Vedic word (*mahāvākya*), which dispels misconceptions about it.⁴¹ For Sureśvara, Veda (*mahāvākya*, to be precise) has almost magical potency. It at once transforms the personality of an adequately prepared listener by dispelling his ignorance and radically altering his perspective of himself and the world.

The important point Sureśvara is trying to make throughout his works is that unlike the secular word and even the Vedic word in its ritual aspect (the *karma-kāṇḍa* portions of the Veda) which yield mediate, indirect knowledge of their objects, sensuous or supersensuous, *mahāvākyas* bring about direct insight into the nature of the self. The former variety of *śabda* supplies one with the information about its object or, to use a modern epistemological term, the knowledge by acquaintance. What is of utmost significance for Sureśvara in this regard is that the knowledge by experience (*anubhava*) is achieved with the help of the *mahāvākya* itself, which thus proves its nature as a *pramāṇa*. Once the *śabda-pramāṇa* starts operating there is no scope or need for a conscious or unconscious effort (that characterizes *karma* in any of its aspects) on the part of the hearer of the *mahāvākya* to attain its fruit – the realization of Ātman-Brahman or *mokṣa*. *Pramāṇa* brings about its fruit – knowledge (direct experience in the case of *mahāvākya*) and one is not required to aid it in any way.

This is in stark contrast to the view articulated by the renowned Mīmāṃsaka philosopher Maṇḍana Miśra who believes one has to meditate on the meaning of the

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, I.3.48.

⁴¹ *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, II.105.

*mahāvākya*s to gradually convert mediate knowledge attainable on the mere hearing of the *mahāvākya* (*śravaṇa*) into immediate experience. Maṇḍana literally follows the Upaniṣadic passages talking about *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*, the hearing of, reflection on and meditation on Brahman respectively, that, supposedly, bring about its realization. A similar view is found in early Buddhism that recognized three kinds of wisdom (*paññā*): *sutamayā paññā* (the wisdom arising from just hearing the doctrine that can be compared with the knowledge by acquaintance, abstract understanding that does not result in the removal of suffering), *cintāmayā paññā* (the wisdom arising from the reflection on the doctrine) and *bhāvanāmayā paññā* (the wisdom internalized through meditation, *bhāvanā*, and converted into experience that uproots ignorance and results in liberation).⁴² Thus, Buddhists also seem to agree that meditative effort is indispensable and mere hearing can hardly put end to suffering. Since the early Buddhist analysis of *paññā* as having three stages appears to reflect the *śravaṇa-manana-nididhyāsana* scheme of the early Upaniṣads, it is not unlikely that Upaniṣadic thinkers also advocated meditation as a means of attaining Brahman, which makes Maṇḍana's interpretation of the Upaniṣadic *sādhana* more justified and even somewhat more rational. But Sureśvara fears that this will play down the role of Veda as *pramāṇa*, which is of utmost significance according to him as it brings about the experience even more immediate than the perceptual experience as in the case of *mahāvākya* where the subject (hearer) and the object (Brahman) ultimately coincide. This makes him insist on the self-sufficiency of Vedic *śabda* in uprooting ignorance, while all actions, including meditative practices, are necessary only inasmuch as they prepare the ground for the operation of the *śabda-pramāṇa*.

This minded, Sureśvara sets out to delineate the method of Advaita. He gives sufficient attention to the triad of *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana* and develops a theory of the sentence-meaning apprehension that is applicable to both secular utterances as well as *mahāvākya*s. The *mahāvākya* is addressed to someone who, besides having mastered the set of moral prerequisites such as dispassion etc. is capable of distinguishing the self and the non-self with the help of the *anvaya-vyatireka* method used in the Advaita tradition to demonstrate the existence of two entities (the self and the non-self) independently from one another. To comprehend the meaning of *mahāvākya* one should have precise, even though still intellectual, knowledge of what constitutes the self and the non-self. The hearer of the

⁴² Vide *Saṅgīti Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* in *The Long Discourses of the Buddha. A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, Translated by Maurice Walshe, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1995.

mahāvākya should possess the knowledge of grammatical coordination of words in the sentence (*samānādhikaraṇya-jñāna*), the knowledge of the subject-predicate relation (*viśeṣaṇa-viśeṣya-jñāna*), and the knowledge of the implication and the implied (*lakṣya-lakṣaṇā-jñāna*), which is crucial for the correct understanding of the message encoded in the *mahāvākya*.⁴³ Sureśvara seems to favour the indication of the exclusive type (*jahallakṣaṇā*) while comprehending the meaning of *mahāvākya*, whereas the later Advaita tradition clearly prefers the exclusive-cum-inclusive type (*jahad-ajahallakṣaṇā*).⁴⁴

Sureśvara is thorough in his elucidation of the three stages of the Advaitic practice proper: *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*. He interprets *śravaṇa* as determining the import of Vedic texts with the help of the above mentioned linguistic tools. This is connected with his debate on the independence and meaningfulness of *mahāvākyas*. What Sureśvara offers seems to be quite different from a rather simple explanation of *śravaṇa* as hearing the *mahāvākya* from the text or the teacher. *Manana*, according to Sureśvara, is a subjectively, psychologically important stage for the practitioner – the stage where one attains intellectual certainty as regards the subject of one’s study. To motivate the practitioner to go further on the path of Brahman-realization, the truth of Vedas should get an unassailable rational justification. The meaning of the *mahāvākyas* that dawns upon the adequately prepared disciple who has employed *śravaṇa* and *manana*, is described by Sureśvara as non-sentential (*avākyaṛtha*)⁴⁵ to distinguish it from the meaning arising on hearing any other sentence – the meaning based on the relation of subject and predicate the difference of which is not transcended. However brief it might be, Sureśvara’s analysis of non-sentential meaning of the *mahāvākya* may have contributed to the later Advaitic theory of *akhaṇḍākāra-vṛtti*.

Next Sureśvara defines *nididhyāsana*. He shows considerable creativity when he refuses to interpret *nididhyāsana* as mental act, the way *śravaṇa* and *manana* are, and sees it as a self-dependent awareness probably identical with the final realization. He glosses it as *aparāyatta-bodha* – realization not dependent on anything else.⁴⁶ The second line of the definition – “*pūrvayor avadhivena*

⁴³ *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, III.3.

⁴⁴ Vide *Pañcadaśī*, VII.74: *Tattvamasyādivākyeṣu lakṣaṇā bhāgalakṣaṇā/ so ’yam ityādivākyasthapadayor iva nāparā* (*Pañcadaśī of Śrī Vidyāraṇya Swāmī*, translated by Swami Swahananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 1967; Also *Vedāntasāra of Sadānanda*; translated by Colonel G.A.Jacob; edited by Dr. Avanindra Kumar, Parimal Publications, Delhi, 1995, p.126.

⁴⁵ *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, III.2, *Sambandha*.

⁴⁶ *Bṛhadāranyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, II.4.217.

tadupanyāsa iṣyate” that describes *nididhyāsana* as the limit and culmination of the two previously mentioned mental practices, led the translator interpret *nididhyāsana* as dependent on them.⁴⁷ This was scarcely Sureśvara’s intention. Several verses after he mentions *ananyāyatta-vijñāna*, awareness independent of anything else, probably of the knower, the object known and the mental operation and yet later identifies *nididhyāsana* with *vijñāna* (awareness).⁴⁸ Thus, he denies that *nididhyāsana* is a mental act and affirms that it, being identical with *vijñāna* has liberation as its direct and unavoidable result and exists for itself: “*svārtham eva tu vijñānaṃ muktimātra-phalaṃ smṛtam.*”⁴⁹ It would be more correct then to further identify *vijñāna* with liberation since that would explain sufficiently why *vijñāna* is *svārtha*, in contrast to *śravaṇa* and *manana* that are obviously *parārtha* – practiced for the sake of attaining the liberated state.

Sureśvara widens the rift between *śravaṇa* and *manana* on the one hand and *nididhyāsana* on the other hand by admitting the possibility of injunction in respect of the first two and its impossibility in respect of the latter is concerned. Injunction is possible in case of what depends on human effort, be it physical or mental action. This includes *śravaṇa*, *manana*, *śama*, *dama* and presumably the entire *upāya-catustaya* introduced by Śaṅkara.⁵⁰ *Nididhyāsana* is conspicuously absent from this list.

This represents a somewhat visible departure from the view of Śaṅkara who seemed to consider *nididhyāsana* as sustained meditation, a mental endeavour, which, like *śravaṇa* and *manana*, falls in the category of action and could therefore be the object of injunction. He treats it at par with *upāsana* in that both are repetitive acts: “*api copāsanaṃ nididhyāsanaṃ cetyaṅtāvṛttiguṇaiva kriyā’bhidhīyate.*”⁵¹ He also draws a clear line between the realization of Brahman and the complex of mental activities inclusive of *nididhyāsana* connecting them as the goal and the means respectively: “*avagatyarthatvān manana-nididhyāsanayoḥ.*”⁵² Besides, the etymology of “*nididhyāsana*” suggestive of activity and process and its being mentioned in the context of *śravaṇa* and *manana* sanction Śaṅkara’s interpretation.

Seeing the dangers inherent in his view, Sureśvara adds, rather belatedly, that he has nothing against the contention that the knowledge of Brahman arises

⁴⁷ *Sureśvara’s Vārtika on Yājñavalkya-Maitreyī Dialogue*, translated by Shoun Hino, Second imprint, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1991, p.179.

⁴⁸ *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, II.4.233.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, II.4.234.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, II.4.122.

⁵¹ *Brahmasūtra-śāṅkara-bhāṣya*, IV.1.1.

⁵² *Ibidem*, I.1.4.

from meditation and the rest (presumably *śravaṇa* and *manana*): “*vijñānotpatti-hetutvaṃ dhyānādeḥ...*”⁵³ But that upsets his own scheme of *mokṣa*-attainment, since, *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana* having been defined, there is no scriptural justification for the introduction of *dhyāna* into the method. The reason for the disagreement with Śaṅkara in this instance is probably that Sureśvara is too eager to prove that liberation results from the awareness of the Ultimate Reality alone and not from actions, be they physical or mental. It is not that Śaṅkara held a different view, but rather Sureśvara felt it necessary to put more emphasis on it. His solution to this problem, however, does not seem to be workable. Having bridged the gap between *mokṣa* and *nididhyāsana* by interpreting the latter as *vijñāna*, Sureśvara has to face a similar problem explaining how *manana* (undoubtedly an action, even though mental) might result in Brahman-awareness. The introduction of *dhyāna*, too, seems to be a hasty move in contradiction to the original text that contains no mention of it, unless *dhyāna* is interpreted as preceding *śravaṇa* etc. and made a part of the list of prerequisites (*śama* etc.) as was suggested by the commentator.⁵⁴

While arguing in favour of a limited and subservient role of *karmas* in the struggle for liberation Sureśvara tries to closely align Vedic word with other *pramāṇas*. Each *pramāṇa*, and the Veda is no exception, is totally independent in bringing about its fruit – knowledge. Once it has started operating there is hardly anything to prevent it from fructifying and its operation is instantaneous. However, *pramāṇa* cannot operate properly (or even at all) if there are no favourable conditions. If the percept’s sense-organs are not fine and keen enough, for example, perception will not take place or the knowledge received with its help will not be accurate. If some of the members of syllogism are missing or incorrect, inference will not take place or there will be pseudo-inference (*hetvābhāsa*). Likewise, if the hearer of the *mahāvākya*, even endowed with perfect sense organs, is not adequately prepared to comprehend its message, no knowledge will arise from hearing it.

This clearly defines the role of actions in epistemological process – to create a perfect ground for the smooth operation of *pramāṇas*. The way one has to draw nearer to the object one intends to perceive or to train one’s intellect in the basic rules of logic to use inference correctly, one has to undergo moral and psychological training to realize the truth of the *mahāvākyas*. All Advaitic discipline including performance of obligatory rites, obtaining intellectual certainty of the subject of the *mahāvākyas*, developing moral perfections and stilling one’s mind, is aimed at only creating proper environment for the *pramāṇa* to arise. This makes it sufficiently

⁵³ *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, II.4.234.

⁵⁴ *Śāstraprakāśikā* on *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, IV.4.1217.

clear that *pramāṇa* operates on its own, otherwise it would forfeit its status as *pramāṇa*, and there is no scope for actions after the arrival of knowledge, including knowledge of the self, which is identical with liberation. This makes *karmas* a remote means to liberation while *jñāna* is a proximate means thereto.

In his treatment of Vedāntic discipline, Sureśvara stands close to the Vivaraṇa school of Advaita, particularly in his insistence on *śabda*'s giving rise to the saving knowledge directly, thereby underscoring the ultimate importance of *śravaṇa*. Padmapāda, for example, claims that the unity of Ātman and Brahman which is *mokṣa* is the subject matter of Vedānta and is apprehended from the text itself, not from anything external to it that can be enjoined over and above the text that has the capacity to destroy all suffering along with its root – nescience: “*Na ca sāvīṣayād bahir yena prthaṇ nirdēśārthā syāt, samūlānārtha-hānis tu bahiḥ śāstra-viṣayād brahma-rūpāt.*”⁵⁵ Prakāśātman is even more explicit when he declares *manana* and *nididhyāsana* auxiliaries (*aṅga*) of *śravaṇa*, which is *aṅgin*.⁵⁶ It is true that the authorities of Vivaraṇa do not favour the performance of obligatory rites that are not essential in their view and can be considered distant means only if they lead to *śravaṇa-manana-nididhyāsana* through the purification of mind, which conflicts with Sureśvara's attempt to build a system, of which *karmas* are inalienable part.

Sureśvara's view apparently finds support in Vācaspati who categorically insists that cognition of Brahman can take place only in the purified mind and the only way to attain this purification is to pursue the path of rituals and similar observances (donation, fasting and other austerities): “*Nitya-naimittikānuṣṭhāna-prakṣiṇa-karmasya ca viśuddha-sattvasyāviduṣa eva utpanna-vividīṣasya jñānotpattiṃ darśayati... kṛptenaiva ca nityānāṃ karmaṇāṃ nityehitevopāttaduritanibarhaṇena puruṣa-saṃskārah.*”⁵⁷ This seems to bring Sureśvara close to the Bhāmātī school of Advaita. But the dissimilarities between the views of Sureśvara and Vācaspati are more pronounced than similarities. Vācaspati is clearly influenced by Maṇḍana when he insists on contemplation (*bhāvanā*) as an instrument of bringing about Brahman-realization. He also is of the opinion that contemplation

⁵⁵ *The Pañcapādikā of Śrī Padmapādācārya with Prabodhaparīśodhinī of Ātmasvarūpa and Tātparyārthadyotini of Vijñānānman*, Editors: S. Srirama Sastri and S.R. Krishnamurthi Sastri, Madras Government Oriental Series, no. 155, Madras, 1958, p.164.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pp.29-30.

⁵⁷ *Bhāmātī of Vācaspati. Ed. with English Translation by S.S. Suryanarayana Sastri and C. Kunhan Raja*, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras, 1933, Reprint 1992, pp. 84-85.

should be assisted by rituals and other practices till the end – something Sureśvara cannot compromise with.

Thus, Sureśvara's position, though not identical with that of Vivaraṇa, is certainly close to it. Sureśvara was most probably influenced by the spirit of early Vivaraṇa if we are to believe that Padmapāda who was Sureśvara's elder co-student, completed *Pañcapādikā* before Sureśvara composed his first work, *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*. What substantiates this view is a rather close similarity between Sureśvara's and Padmapāda's theories of relation between Brahman and *jīva*: *ābhāsavāda* of the former may be a variation of *pratibimbavāda* of the latter and is likely to have been modelled on it. It is also possible that *ābhāsa* (semblance) is an illustration of *pratibimba* (reflection), since the later authorities of the Vivaraṇa school use the expression "*cidābhāsa*" without effecting rupture with their school.⁵⁸ It is also noteworthy in this context that Sarvajñātman, the direct disciple of Sureśvara, is unequivocal in his support of the *pratibimba* model.

Sureśvara's Place in the Indian Philosophical Tradition

If, very roughly and with a great degree of caution (particularly in the Indian context), philosophers were divided into innovators (those who broke new ground or at least rearranged the knowledge they received from their predecessors in some novel way) and followers (those who did not make much personal contribution and mainly capitalized on the achievements of their predecessors), one would hesitate to place Sureśvara in the first group. Such innovators include those who, even as commentators, brought in fresh ideas to defend a system whose larger framework often looked already settled. One here thinks of thinkers like Vācaspati Miśra, Padmapāda, Praśastapāda, Vātsyāyana, Vijñānabhikṣu and so on. My use of the term "innovators", however, should not be construed as meaning that we regard it always possible to determine the personal philosophy of an Indian thinker as one can do in the case of Plato, Aristotle or Aquinas in Western tradition. In the Indian tradition thinkers of the past, even when they had something substantial or original to contribute to the system they were elaborating, mostly did so by way of writing commentaries – a fact which does not characterize Western philosophy as a whole. Indeed, Sureśvara dedicated his life to forwarding his predecessors' views and commenting throughout his career exclusively on the works of his master (Śaṅkara). What comes to the fore in all his writings is the ardent desire to follow Śaṅkara in spirit and letter. This much is obvious from the topics he discusses and the

⁵⁸ Vide *Pañcadaśī*, VII.229,230,239; VIII. 3,6,7,10, etc.

arguments he offers. In fact, Sureśvara's argumentation is largely based on Śaṅkara's. He restates Śaṅkara's points in such a manner as not to display any significant contradiction or ambiguity that might give rise to the interpretative creativity among his own successors. What he does can be compared to retouching the picture already painted by Śaṅkara.

This does not amount to saying that the system developed by Śaṅkara had no questionable or unclear points and was complete in itself, leaving no scope for further interpretation and growth. There was certainly a pressing need to develop metaphysics and epistemology of Advaita, defending their weak points from the inevitable onslaught of other schools. The history of the post-Śaṅkara Advaita seems to bear testimony to it. It witnessed the almost immediate rise and competition (that lasted for centuries) between two rival sub-schools of Advaita: Vivaraṇa and Bhāmatī. However, Sureśvara was not formally associated with either Bhāmatī or Vivaraṇa, although his relative affinity with the latter is undeniable. Nor did he offer a viable alternative to these schools. More often than not he chose to leave out the obscure areas of his master's vision of Advaita, particularly in the sphere of metaphysics, inheriting his vagueness and concentrating instead on propagating the articulated aspect of his teaching.

In the Indian scenario a traditional thinker would claim only to as much as restate and develop his predecessors' views and to reemphasize the core ideas of the school he belongs to, which makes the proposed division of Indian philosophers into "innovators" and "followers" particularly challenging. Nevertheless, it is doubtless that Sureśvara was more or less a literal interpreter of his master and did not venture to introduce anything into his system that might have inspired or necessitated subsequent revision or bidden unwanted conclusions. It may not be an apt comparison but there is incomparably more doctrinal difference between Śabara and Kumārila (or Prabhākara), the *bhāṣyakāra* and the *vārtikakāra* respectively of the Mīmāṃsā school, than between Śaṅkara and Sureśvara, the *bhāṣyakāra* and the *vārtikakāra* respectively of the Advaita tradition. In fact, the differences between Śaṅkara and Sureśvara are mostly exegetical. One might locate quite a number of them in *Bṛhadāraṇyakoṇiṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika* but their analysis reveals that Sureśvara hardly ventures to introduce anything that might upset the balance achieved by Śaṅkara. The only noteworthy exception from this unwritten rule is Sureśvara's revision of Śaṅkara's notion of *nididhyāsana*. But even then, it is likely that in this case in the ultimate analysis Sureśvara was motivated by the desire to uphold what was essentially Śaṅkara's position. Sureśvara's interpretation of *nididhyāsana* seems awkward and raises as many questions as it answers. The rest of

the differences between him and his master are strictly textual and have limited philosophical importance.

Where he exerted himself endlessly was the elaboration of his master's argumentation and in addressing time and again more or less the same issues that occupied his master. Considering his reverence for Śaṅkara, he most probably took it as his holy duty to follow in Śaṅkara's tow and to prevent others from consciously or unconsciously deviating from Śaṅkara's line as he understood it by embarking on the giant project of commenting upon Śaṅkara's works, including the second largest, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-śāṅkara-bhāṣya*. All this makes him world apart from the synthethizers like Vijñānabhikṣu, or rather original figures like Vācaspati Miśra and Maṇḍana Miśra who simply could not fit into the boundaries of a single school – the figures that could be, again with a degree of caution, described as “innovators.”

As is obvious from Sureśvara's heritage he was not fully awake to the necessity of developing certain unclear and questionable aspects of Śaṅkara's doctrine or simply conceived his life-task otherwise. He by far surpassed his co-students in terms of the quantity of literary output (Hastāmalaka and Ṭoṭaka left little behind, while Padmapāda's only work does not come even close to Sureśvara's in size). However, it remains a question whether the quality and philosophical value of his work matches its quantity. It is particularly true if we compare Sureśvara with Padmapāda whose unfortunately unfinished exegesis of his master's *Bhāṣya* on the *Brahmasūtra* gave rise to the most popular and literarily most prolific sub-school of Advaita. Significantly, Sureśvara himself did not father any tradition within Advaita. He is undoubtedly respected as the first pontiff of Kanchi but academic surveys of the tradition of Advaita usually do not contain much material on him and his contribution to this school. Though he does get a reference, he hardly receives a thorough scrutiny.

Innovative elaboration of his school that includes development of theories and introduction of new concepts was certainly not Sureśvara's forte. It is textual interpretation and polemics where Sureśvara's talent comes to the fore. As an exegete he is meticulous. His highlighting occasional shortcomings in Śaṅkara's interpretation of the original shows that he is not less devoted to his work than to his master. Whatever the original meaning of the scriptural passages might have been, Sureśvara's commentary certainly feels like a breath of fresh air as his readings are sometimes more appealing to reason and even more justified from the point of view of the original than Śaṅkara's as in the case of “*sa mene na vadiṣye*” which he reads as “*sam enena vadiṣye*” (*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, IV.3.1) or even somewhat more egalitarian (when he reads “*brāhmaṇa*” as a member of any of the

three *varṇas*) (*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, III.5.1). This shows that notwithstanding the large size of his work and tremendous responsibility of making it consistent and meaningful, his eye remains keen at every given moment and he tirelessly searches for minute and apparently insignificant details to improve upon and thereby make his contribution as a critic. It must be stressed once again that in his exegesis Sureśvara never attempts to smuggle in philosophical ideas of his own or introduce anything that can be interpreted as a revision of the stance of his predecessors.

Sureśvara certainly presents a convincing figure as a polemicist. Debate is something he truly loves and never shrinks from. True, he inherited from his master not only the topics of discussion but even the lines of argument, but this fails to prevent one from appreciating his overall significant contribution in the field of philosophical debate. He has everything that makes one a seasoned debater: the knowledge of the nuances and niceties of his and his opponent's position, acute awareness of every chink in his rival's armour, extraordinary wit and cunning and, above all, an ardent desire to prove his master correct at any cost. Beyond any doubt, he is schooled in the tactics of Indian debate as is seen from his skilful employment of many a tried and tested method to achieve his goal: development of his opponent's position until its absurdity becomes obvious, demonstration of the inevitability of such dreaded consequences as the impossibility of liberation and the chance of there being infinite regress if the opponent's position is assumed, splitting the opponent's position into options and then destroying them one by one, and, of course, mustering the support of scriptures to clinch his argument. He also makes use of the principle of residuum (*pāriśeṣya-nyāya*). For instance, if *mokṣa* is something attainable and if *karma* has been disqualified as a means to attain it, *jñāna* has to be declared as the means.

From treatise to treatise Sureśvara is seen to polish his performance until he unquestionably comes of age in *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*. The method he masters allows him to carry on with his refutation of his opponent for hundreds and thousands of verses with seemingly unflagging vigour, which is clear from the way he develops a couple of pages long introduction to *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-śāṅkara-bhāṣya* into 1136 verses long debate known as *Sambandha-vārtika* and which does not prevent him from following up its parts with the same strength and determination in the remainder of the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*. In the heat of polemics he does not shrink from assuming conflicting and diametrically opposing positions in order to achieve his main purpose – to bring the opponent down by demonstrating that the position assumed by him is open to attack from all

sides and that at least one of the blows inflicted upon him will be fatal. In this connection the charge of inconsistency may be levelled against Sureśvara but he should not be accused of being illogical or disloyal to the principles of the school he represents considering that most often (in the Indian milieu) debate served the objective more practical than theoretical – to defeat the opponent but not to work out a consensus or develop a perfect theory through collective effort. Theory was developed in the context of debate that had particular opponents pitted against one another and almost every aspect of theory unfolded contextually and was influenced by specific polemics.

Sureśvara's talent as a polemicist allowed him to effect thorough refutations of the rival schools. As is seen in his works, particularly in *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya-vārtika*, he usually proceeds from top to bottom of the opponent's theory in a ruthlessly methodical manner reaching the very foundation of the theory and then demolishing it so that the opponent is left entirely without a basis. For example, while debating with the Prābhākara, Sureśvara reaches the very foundation of that school – the theory of *niyoga* (Vedic imperative) – and spares no force in his attempt to demonstrate the logical impossibility of there being such an entity. The same is replayed in his attempt to destroy the school of Maṇḍana Mīśra, when he identifies its metaphysical foundation – the *bhedābheda* theory – and lays bare its contradictions.

It is a pertinent question why Mīmāṃsā and not some Buddhist schools or Sāṃkhya-Yoga merit so much Sureśvara's attention. After all, as a philosophical system Mīmāṃsā is comparatively uncomplicated, what with its preoccupation with the technicalities of Vedic ritual and reluctance to enter metaphysical controversy. The answer may be that it is precisely the simplicity of Mīmāṃsā that made for its popularity, particularly with the masses. Based on and dealing directly with the texts of Śruti it had unquestionable credentials as an *āstika* system – it at least appeared to be closer to the Vedic roots than Sāṃkhya or Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. What is even more important, it did not demand much of its students. It did not call for renunciation of the world and its pleasures and, in fact, insisted on the indispensability of married life. It did not presuppose gruelling moral and meditative training the way other schools did. Maintenance of sacrificial routine along with observance of basic moral rules seemed to be easier than the life of uncertainty and privation in caves and jungles coupled with intense mental effort. Finally, it promised rewards in the afterlife, including liberation and did not question the possibility of having enjoyable existence both here and hereafter. The combination of not unreasonably big effort with maximum benefit must have satisfied and attracted many, since extremely few

longed for liberation here and now and that too so intensely as to deny the Mīmāṃsā-proffered scheme, which was not much of a burden and was not contrary to common sense. So, the debate between Advaita and Mīmāṃsā was not only a collision of differing metaphysical theories, ideas of the highest good and methodologies of attaining one's goal. It was a clash of radically opposed lifestyles (the renunciate and the householder). In the philosophical tradition it resulted in a protracted and animated debate that did not spare the fundamental assumptions of both schools, while in the more popular literature like Śaṅkara's hagiographies it went down as a conflict between Śaṅkara, the paragon of renunciation and detachment, and Maṇḍana/Viśvarūpa/etc., the householder of immense learning – the conflict where both sides had much to lose and therefore stubbornly stuck to their guns.

For the Advaitin defeating the Mīmāṃsaka had a profound significance. As the Mīmāṃsaka leant heavily on the metaphysics of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, defeating the former would certainly affect the debate with the latter. What is even more important, Mīmāṃsā, rising from the earlier strata of Vedic thought offered a different soteriological orientation and drew a different picture of man's *summum bonum*. The disagreement as to the highest end of man is as serious as it can be and makes reconciliation hardly plausible. The host of Indian thinkers beginning with the champions of the Śramaṇa era insisted on the difference between *svarga* propounded by Mīmāṃsā and attainable by ritualistic means, and what they valued most – *mokṣa*, attainable by means of insight into the ultimate reality. Getting involved in this controversy Sureśvara declares the impossibility of attaining *svarga* by following sacrificial routine. What he probably stresses here is that if we go by the agreed upon meaning of “*svarga*” (undiluted bliss, pure unending happiness) then this cannot be achieved by employing limited means. On the other hand, only *mokṣa*, the complete coming out of suffering should be counted as true happiness and, therefore, authentic *svarga*. In other words, rituals cannot yield *svarga*, if *svarga* is interpreted as unending happiness. If it is interpreted otherwise, it is of no interest to the Advaitin. Besides, it will become a flaw in the Mīmāṃsaka's value system. Ultimately, claims Sureśvara, it does not matter how we call the highest *puruṣārtha* or the highest goal of human existence, as long as we accede that it is of the nature of the self – eternally accomplished and beyond the scope of works, Vedic or otherwise.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ *Sambandha-vārtika*, 1096-1097.