SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN
ŚAṆKARA AND BUDDHISM *

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I

In the history of Indian Philosophy the relationship of Śaṅkaraite Advaita Vedānta to Buddhism has aroused considerable interest among scholars since ancient times. Sometimes it is said that the contents of Śaṅkara's Vedānta are all Buddhistic (Mahāyāna) with the outward coverage of upaniṣadic lip-service. In other words, Śaṅkara is 'a Buddhist who pretends to be a vedāntin' and his philosophy is 'Mahāyāna Buddhism in disguise'. Vijñāna Bhikṣu refers to a verse of 'Padmapurāṇa' where Śaṅkara has been called 'a Crypto-Buddhist' (Prachchanna Baudhā).¹ Emphasising the points of striking similarities between Śaṅkara's philosophy and Mahāyāna Buddhism, S. N. Dasgupta, in his History of Indian Philosophy remarks, "'His (Śaṅkara's) Brahman was very much like the Śūnya of Nāgārjuna ....... The debts of Śaṅkara to the self-luminosity of Vijñānavāda Buddhism can hardly be overestimated. There seems to be much truth in the accusations against Śaṅkara by Vijñāna Bhikṣu and others that he was a hidden Buddhist himself ....... Śaṅkara's philosophy is largely a compound of Vijñānavāda and Śūnyavāda Buddhism with the Upaniṣadic notion of the permanence of self-superadded'".²

But against this appellation of Śaṅkara as a Buddhist in disguise, there are some strong grounds developed by some of the post-Śaṅkara Advaitins. They hold that Śaṅkara who was mastermind behind the 'downfall of Buddhism in India' cannot be called a 'crypto Buddhist'. In support of their contention, many

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of them referred to the fact of his using 'bitter and harsh words' for Buddha and Buddhism. In Pancapādiṇī Vivaraṇa Prakāśātman rules out any claim with regard to the Buddhist influence upon Śaṅkara³ and condemns a thinker who talks of the affinities between Buddhism and Śaṅkara's Philosophy as one 'who talks something which befits an ignorant man and his case is indeed pitiable'.⁴ It is said that Śaṅkara whose mission was to restore the supremacy of Ātman as viewed by the Seers of Upaniṣads could not be friendly with those Buddhists who often say, 'even a reasoned argument from the mouth of a follower of the veda looks ugly like a necklace or a string of beads placed on the feet'.⁵ However, we had to wait until the arrival of Śrīharsa for a dispassionate appraisal of Buddhism, because most of the post-Śaṅkara Vedāntins without trying to understand the real significance of the Mahāyāna Buddhism advanced bitter and derogatory remarks against Buddhism and blindly repeated Śaṅkara's arguments.⁶ Śrīharsa and Citsukha have depicted some similarities between Mādhyaṃika philosophy and Śaṅkara's philosophy in a novel way. They dispassionately argue that in order to keep the socio-cultural milieu of his time though Śaṅkara used the Mahāyāna Buddhists' phraseology, this does not affect his chief concern for the uplift of 'aupaniṣadic' thought. He was not a Buddhist who pretended to be a vedāntin. Here our contention is that it is correct rather to say that since historically Śaṅkara arrived after the glorious time of Mahāyāna Buddhism he could not totally avoid Buddhists' influence. But it is incorrect to characterise Śaṅkara as 'a Buddhist in disguise'. Under this perplexing context, what we intend to discuss here is a critical exploration of different aspects of the issue from the standpoint of history. We shall see that Mahāyāna Buddhism had been influenced by Upaniṣadic teaching and bitter relations between Buddhism and Vedānta were the consequences of the rivalry developed through Sarvāstivādins and Svatantravijñānavādins's philosophy. Instead of making reconciliation, these thinkers posed Buddhism as 'absolutely opposed' to Vedānta. History tells us that Buddha himself protested against the too much of vedic retualism but he was not militant against the 'Upaniṣadic philosophy'. Before elaborating our contention, we shall try to chalk out some similarities between Śaṅkara's Vedānta with that of Vijñānavāda and Śūnyavāda school of Buddhism and also try to highlight the possible influences of them in the formation of 'Śaṅkara's philosophy.'
Some Reflections on the Relation between Śaṅkara and Buddhism

II

Śaṅkara who historically figures in the eighth century AD after Śāntaraksita, wrote extensive commentaries on different Upaniṣads as well as on Brahmasūtras of Bādhrayana. In Brahmasūtrasabhyṣya there are clear evidences that he was acquainted with the current philosophical trends of his time. He devoted a large section of his commentary on the refutation of the other philosophies. Among the Buddhists he vehemently criticised both Vaibhāśikas and Saṅrāntikas under the name of Sarvāstivāda, Svaṭantra-Viśnūnavāda of Dinnāga and Śūnyavāda. In criticising the stand of Viśnūnavāda of Dinnāga, he has ‘Ālambanaparikṣā’ in his mind. Among the individual Buddhist philosophers, he criticised Dharmakīrti the great Buddhist Logician. While criticising, Śūnyavāda, he takes up the popular connotation of the word ‘śūnya’ as ‘zero’ or ‘nothing’ and condemns ‘śūnyavāda’ as ‘Nihilism’. He argues that a philosophical position which pictures the empirical world as a transitory show of non-substantial appearances (śūnya) is not even worthy of criticism, because absolute unreality of sheer appearances without any underlying reality (tattva) to appear is a self-defeating proposition which cannot be defended by any instruments of valid cognition. But a careful intellectual journey through the writings of Nāgārjuna (2nd century A. D.) and his followers can definitely make it clear that Śūnyavāda is not nihilism; it does not deny the reality of the world altogether. Such a nihilistic interpretation springs from a basic misunderstanding or misconception of Mādhyamika Philosophy. Surprisingly Śaṅkara himself apprehends that Brahman, the Absolute in his philosophy may be misconceived by the ignorant as nothing (śūnya). Let us cite some of the fundamental aspects of Mādhyamika philosophy which will reveal how close the teachings of Śūnyavāda to Śaṅkara’s own teaching and as a result, we shall be logically able to say that Śaṅkara’s criticism of Śūnyavāda is only outward and springs from a misconception of the word śūnya and his too much passionate zeal to revive Upaniṣadic Vedānta. Let us begin with the word ‘śūnya’.

Nāgārjuna used the word ‘śūnya/śūnyata’ in order to designate both phenomenal and transphenomenal reality in a somewhat technical sense. In case of phenomena, the word śūnyata has two imports. It negatively means the rejection of the uncritical acceptance of the independent nature of worldly things and positively it stands for the dependent, changing nature of objects. It is a simultaneous case of both rejection and revelation. The world is called ‘śūnya’,
because it is emptied or devoid of any intrinsic nature of its own (nīḥsvabhāva). On mundane level we act on the basis of certain standpoints such as ‘is’, ‘is not’, etc. and form different theories of reality. But these empirical determinations are not applicable to the Absolute. To put it otherwise, the world is called śūnya, because everything in this world is relative and mutually dependent and in this sense devoid of any self-essence. But the truth of all empirical determinations lies in their indeterminateness or the Absolute which is termed as Nirvāṇa. But there is no chasm or gap between saṁsāra and nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is the unconditional transcendental ground for the conditional, phenomenal reality called saṁsāra. But the difference between saṁsāra and nirvāṇa is not again absolute one; it must be relative, because if we say that this type of relativity or dependence is exclusive or of absolute nature then it would amount to the violation of the rule of relativity itself... “The one and the same Reality when viewed through causal conditions, is declared to be the world and when these not depending or not appropriating or relative, it is called Nirvāṇa”.

It is here where Śaṅkara’s view of māyā and the world comes closer to Nagarjuna. Śaṅkara holds māyā to be beyond the reach of empirical determination which functions through the categories like ‘is’ or ‘is not’ (bhāva, abhāva) etc. We cannot categorise māyā as “either real or unreal or real-unreal. Even it is neither real nor unreal”. This indeterminable nature is also attributed to the empirical nature of the world which according to Śaṅkara is a product of indeterminable māyā. What is the status of the world then? The world enjoys only a relative status, it is neither real nor unreal either. It is not unreal (asat) because it is a fact of experience, it is not like ‘hare’s horn’. It can not be called real (sat) like Brahma, because it is not trikāla-abadhi - devoid of contradictions in three forms of time (i.e., past, present and future). This in turn suggests that the world is not denied by Śaṅkara as an unmitigated negation; rather he admits its relativity reality. By using the word ‘śūnya’, Nāgārjuna too points to the relative relativity of the world. It is a misinterpretation that śūnyavāda preaches nihilism, according to which everything is unreal. The Buddha himself again and again told his disciples that truth lies neither in Ucchedavāda not in Sarvāstivāda but in Madhyamā pratīpāda. Nāgārjuna and his followers made this statement explicit in their works. The ‘middle path’ of Nāgārjunian philosophy is not a mechanical combination or meeting point of two extreme alternatives.
like Aristotle’s ‘Golden Mean’ which is meant to form a balance between two extremes. It is rather the rising above, going beyond all extreme views in order to see things as they are and in this sense it is ‘no path’ at all in the ordinary sense of the term. Nāgārjuna does not deny that there is a reality (tattva) behind this changing, conditional world of appearance. This reality is called Nirvāna. S. N. Dasgupta is very much correct when he says that Śaṅkara’s ‘Brahman was very much like the śūnya of Nāgārjuna. It is difficult indeed to distinguish between pure being and pure non-being as a category’.

Not only this, both Mādhyamikas and Śaṅkara propounded absolutist systems of philosophy. But the question arises: How do the Absolutists explain the status of the world? The answer to such query, we think, is inherent in both the systems of Absolutism in their commitment to the degrees of truth or reality. What in metaphysical language in Śaṅkara’s philosophy called sattā (beinghood) in epistemological language of the Mādhyamikas called satyam (Truth). Nāgārjuna in the Mādhyamika-kārikā says:

Dve satye samutpāśritya buddhānām dharmadeśanā /
Loka samvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramārthataḥ //

(‘Dharma’ in Buddha’s teaching should be understood resorting to both convention and absolute truth). Prajñākarmati in Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā explains paramārthasatyā which is otherwise known as ‘akṛtrimatvat vastrāpān’ (things-in-itself) as something which remains beyond the reach of our conceptual knowability. Candrakīrti, a commentator (of 7th century A. D.) on Mādhyamikakārikā makes a subdivision of samvṛtisatyā into ‘alokasamvṛti’ and ‘lokasamvṛti’ - seeming truth and functional truth. When we perceive a rope as ‘rope’ and a snake as ‘snake’ we say that our cognitions are true. These are facts of our empirical determinations or ‘lokasamvṛti’. But when our senses do not function properly, we have illusory cognition of a ‘snake’ in a ‘rope’ or of dream objects or a perception of ‘double moon’, we say that our cognitions are mithyā or false. It is ‘alokasamvṛti’. Samvṛtisatyā which has functional value in the phenomenal world is also called vyāvahārika satya and is considered as a means (upāya), a ladder for reaching the goal (upeya) namely paramārthasatyā (Absolute Truth).

It is interesting to see here how Śaṅkarite Advaita Vedānta deals with
the hierarchy of existence or truth and how close it comes to the Mādhyamika’s account. To the Śaṅkarite Advaita Vedāntins, there are three kinds of existence - pāramārthika (absolute), vyāvahārika (conventional) and prātibhāsika (illusory or seeming). Absolute existence belongs to Brahman, conventional existence to the world and seeming or illusory existence to ‘silver in a nacare’ or ‘snake in a rope’ etc. or in dream objects.  

The reality of the world is vyāvahārika or conventional/functional, because the world is considered as something which remains uncontradicted till the realization of one’s identity with Brahman.

What seems to be important here is that both the Mādhyamika and the Advaita Vedānta systems of philosophy being absolutistic in nature have felt the necessity of admitting the degrees of truth or existence. And the account of conventional truth by the later Mādhyamikas are at par with the Śaṅkarite Advaita Vedānta. The difference between the two is only of linguistic phraseology. Candrakīrti’s subdivision of ‘alokasamvr̥ti’ corresponds to the prātibhāsika and ‘lokasamvr̥ti’ to vyāvahārika levels of truth of the Advaitins. In Advaita Vedānta the world is considered as false. Though Śaṅkara distinguishes between seeming reality (prātibhāsika sattā), and the phenomenal reality (vyāvahārika sattā), the distinction between them is not absolute. Ultimately both these ‘realities’ are subsumed under one category, that is, false (mithyā). The apparent snake is false, for it does not exist in rope, its substratum; it vanishes when the rope is cognised. Similarly the world is seen as false the moment Brahman, its substratum, is directly realized.  

The Absolute truth which is known by the words ‘tathāta’ or śānyata’ in the Mādhyamika philosophical literature is non-conceptual, non-conventional, uncontradicted for all times. The absolute reality (Paramārtha sattā) which is known as Ātman or Brahman in the Advaita Vedānta is also beyond the reach of all concepts and conventions, remains uncontradicted for ever. For the absolute reality, the Mādhyamikas use the term ‘advaya’ whereas the Advaitins use the term ‘advaita’ and both surprisingly enough mean that the absolute is ‘non-dual’. So far as the degrees of truth is concerned, the difference between the Mādhyamikas and Śaṅkara seems to lie in their respective approach to uphold the Absolutism on the one hand and to sustain the relative existence of the world of our experience on the other. Śaṅkara develops an ontological approach where the emphasis is not like the Madhyamikas on ‘the correct attitude of our knowing’ but unlike the Mādhyamikas on ‘the thing known’.  

For Śaṅkara, when ‘aparokṣānubhūti’
takes place, all the differences get vanished, "the knowing faculty too gets concentrated and lost in it (Brahma vida brahmaiva bhavati). The difference between the Mādhyaṃkās and Śaṅkara seems to lie in their respective approaches, not in the thing or content to be approached. For the Mādhyaṃkās when reason gets despair, the hour of truth discloses. These striking similarities might have led scholar like B. M. Barua to remark: ‘Was Śaṅkara’s Philosophy itself possible or intelligible without reference to Buddhist philosophies, the Mādhyaṃkā in particular, which flourished in South India? The question, as we are now persuaded, must be answered in the negative’.22

III

In the historical phases of the evolution of the Buddhist thought after Nāgārjuna of the 2nd century A. D., momentum given by Asanga and Vasubandhu of the fourth century A. D. made some distinction. Like Nāgārjuna they uphold that Reality is non-dual. But unlike Nāgārjuna they positively declare that the Reality is Vijñānātītā or Pure consciousness which is the permanent seat of changing states of empirical existence. Vasubandhū who was honoured as Second Buddha, had been a sarvāstivādī in his early period of life and authored ‘Abhidharmakosa’. It is said that he was later on converted to Vijñānavāda by his elder brother Asanga and he wrote his revolutionary treatise called Vijñānapratītāsiddhi which comprises Vīmśatikā and Trimśikā. The author wrote commentary on vīmśatikā and Sthiramati wrote commentary on Trimśikā. In the former part Vasubandhū criticises the atomic view of the world as propounded by Sarvāstivādins and Vaiśeṣikas and in the latter he exhibits his positive philosophy. To him Pure Consciousness is the ultimate reality, Ālayavijñāna is the reality from vyāvahārika standpoint, Klīśa Manovijñāna is the individual being and the world occupies the status of Viśayavijñāpī.

But Śaṅkara while criticising Diṇṇāga (5th Century A. D.) and Dharmakīrti under the general name vijnānavāda has in fact criticised svatantravijñānavāda, according to which the momentary unit of consciousness is the ultimate reality. Like Hobbes in the west, the Svatantravijñānavādin advocated nominalism and for explaining the problem of identity they spoke of the fact of similarity. It is precisely here Śaṅkara directed all his criticism which goes by the general name Vijñānavāda. A close study of Vasubandhū’s work which evidences his
originality, vigour and philosophic insight immediately points to the fact that it does not have any fundamental difference with that of Śaṅkara’s view developed in the latter half of the 8th century. A. D. Śaṅkara’s view of Nirguṇa Brahman may roughly correspond to Vasubandhu’s ‘Pure Consciousness’ or Vijñāptimātra, Iśvara or Saguna Brahman to Ālayavijñāna, Jiva to Kliśṭa Manovijñāna and jagat to visṣayavijñāpti. Śaṅkara’s charge of subjective idealism is applicable to svatantravijñānavāda according to which consciousness is momentary and things of the world are ‘modifications of our sensations or mental states. They criticised the notion of permanent self and considered changing psycho-physical coglomeration as the so called self. In absence of any permanent principle like Pure Consciousness they try to explain the fact of identity by resemblance (sādrśya). Śaṅkara’s criticism here resembles the Neo-Kantian’s argument against the Sensationalists in the west.

But it seems to be mysterious that Śaṅkara does not criticise Vijñānavāda of Vasubandhu and Asaṅga. We know from the historical evidences that Śaṅkara’s time was a period of ‘mutual animosity, hatred and distrust’ in extreme form among the Buddhists and the Hindus. It might have been the case that he himself could understand that there is nothing substantial to differ from Mahāyāna Buddhism. Any explanation regarding the relation of Śaṅkara’s Philosophy with Buddhism would remain incomplete unless we discuss Gauḍapāda’s contribution. Because it is Gauḍapāda (6th century A. D.) whom Bhāvaviveka, a junior contemporary of him, recognised as an independent philosopher and praised for his dispassionate, impartial spirit of interpretation. It is said that in Gauḍapāda’s works, the best that is in Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu is contained. Gauḍapāda, who flourished about the period 780 A.D., wrote a commentary on the Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad in verse and clearly explicate the nondualistic teaching of upaniṣad. Gauḍapāda was the teacher of Govinda-pāda who happened to be the teacher of Śaṅkara. He agrees with Nāgārjuna in maintaining that from ultimate standpoint it is impossible to accept the doctrine of origination. According to him “there is neither dissolution nor creation, neither any bounded self, nor any practising saint; neither a person striving for salvation nor an emancipated self. This is the essence of truth”.23 In his bhāṣya on Māṇḍukya-kārikā, Śaṅkara remarks that the words like creation and dissolution are meaningful only with reference to an existent thing. Since plurality does not exist at all, the question of creation is meaningless.24 Śaṅkara
also tells us that Gaṇḍapāda is in complete agreement with the Vaijñānavādins in holding the unreality of the external objects and the reality of Pure Consciousness. Like Vijñānavādins, Gaṇḍapāda placed dream states and actual states on almost equal footings. This is perhaps the reason that some interpreters accused Gaṇḍapāda to be a vedāntin was actually a Buddhist in disguise. But on the contrary our contention is, that definitely Gaṇḍapāda was influenced by Mahāyāna Buddhism as propounded by Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu but the whole metaphysical framework of the Mahāyāna Buddhism was to a great extent based on Upanisads. So there is no harm on the part of Śaṅkara in being influenced by the Upanisadic teachings through great Mahāyāna masters and advocating explicitly the upaniṣadic non-dualism. As an independent philosopher whose business consisted largely of interpretation, Gaṇḍapāda inherited the non-conflicting aspects of Buddhism with Upanisads and worked for the revival of upaniṣadic thought in an independent way that might suit the order of the age. However, Śaṅkara was very much keen to picture Gaṇḍapāda as an advaitic master and did not mention many of Gaṇḍapāda’s explicit references to Buddhism. Historically Gaṇḍapāda’s time was later than the great Buddhist masters like Aśvagoṣa, Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. Scholars like S. N. Dasgupta tried to show that Gaṇḍapāda’s teaching as Buddhistic from his Kārikās. In the fourth chapter of his Kārikās he says that “he adores that great man who by knowledge as wide as the sky realized (sambuddha) that all appearances (dharma) were like the vacuous sky (gaganopamati)”. This resembles ‘kathaṁ ca gaganopamati’. Moreover, Gaṇḍapāda expresses his profound adoration to Lord Buddha in his Kārikā no IV, 2.4, when he says that “the Buddhas have shown that there was no coming into being in any way (sarvathā Buddhairajātīḥ paridīpaḥ). All these might have led S. N. Dasgupta to state that Gaṇḍapāda himself was possibly a Baudhā and one according to whom, the fundamental philosophical framework of Upaniṣads “tallied with those of Buddha”. Śaṅkara on the contrary, concludes his commentary on Gaṇḍapādakārikā expressing his adoration to the great Gaṇḍa depicted him as one who “by churning the great ocean of the Veda by his great churning rod of wisdom recovered what lay deep in the heart of the Veda, and is hardly attainable even by the immortal gods”.

But to us who consider philosophy in somewhat modern sense, as a science of interpretation it is not important whether someone was a Buddhist or
a Hindu in faith. What is historically more significant is to see that every thinker is a product of certain age. In Indian philosophical heritage it is equally true. It is difficult to deny that the metaphysics of Upaniṣads maintained its survival in and through different phases of historical changes, and in that historical spheres of change, no philosopher could avoid the influence of his earlier masters’ voices. In such a historical juncture Gauḍapāda appeared as a product of the meeting point of Upaniṣadic Hinduism and Mahāyāna Buddhism. Śaṅkara as he was, in the like manner influenced by Gauḍapāda’s teachings that depict no rivalry between Upaniṣads and Buddhism regarding metaphysical foundation. But by this, we are not sufficiently empowered with historical facts to say that he was a Buddhist in disguise. He was a committed Vedāntin who enriched his methodology from the teachings of great Buddhist masters.

IV

If we look into the matter from the point of view of history, then it seems to be more cogent to say that the fundamentals of Mahāyāna Buddhism are largely the philosophy of Upaniṣads in disguise. Again, if there were no fundamental difference between Mahāyāna Buddhism and Upaniṣads, why was there so much of ‘animosity and hatred’ between the two approaches recorded in history? What could be the possible grounds on the part of Śaṅkara to be much vocal, to use so many harsh languages and to advance hostility against the Buddhists?

To get a cogent and comprehensive reply, we think, we are to go back again to history itself. In India unlike the west, the line of demarcation between philosophy and theology is so thin that most of the times one overlaps other and makes it’s philosophy theological and theology philosophical. Buddha himself was not fond of philosophical questions, rather his main interest was to put human beings on reasoned ground of moral uplift. He was totally disgusted with the rigidity of rituals and corrupt practices like casteism, ‘with the sacrifices in which animals were butchered’ and ‘supremacy of the Brahmandom’. But he was not militant against the Upaniṣadic teachings. It was only after his death and during the 5th century A. D., that Diśnāga became very eager to place the philosophical aspects of Buddhism as a completely independent system and depict it as totally opposed to the Vedānta philosophy of Upaniṣads. During the
period of the 6th century A. D. Dharmakīrti instead of highlighting the philosophical richness of Vasubandhu which is very close to Upaniṣads, along with his criticism of Mīmāṃsakas and Naiyāyikas ‘‘widened the gulf between Buddhism and Vedānta created by Diṅnāga’’\textsuperscript{31} Then during the period of its 8th century Śāntaraksita and his disciple Kamalaśīla, like Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti, criticised Vedānta for its declaration of ‘Consciousness to be permanent’. Moreover, it was a time in India’s cultural history when in the absence of any great masters of Nāgārjuna’s or Vasubandhu’s stature, Buddhism was being deprived of getting patronage of the throne and wealthy in society. At the time of Aśoka, Buddhism spread rapidly almost all over India and many other countries as well. Soon after this, degeneration set in and degrading practices grew in Buddhism. Śaṅkara was born and lived in an era when the Buddhist ‘‘monasteries became rich centres of vested interests and their disciples became lax, and magic and superstition crept into the popular forms of worship’’.\textsuperscript{33} Śaṅkara himself being a product of such historical situation ‘‘has nothing but bitter and strong remarks for Buddhism’’.\textsuperscript{34} It is indeed true that thoughts and feelings that are common to the community or masses in vague and diffused forms get crystallized and concentrated in the philosophical writings of any given period. And Śaṅkara as a philosopher is no exception to this.\textsuperscript{35} Śaṅkara is surely one of such fortunate philosophers who tactfully interpreted the concepts of Upaniṣads, gradually replaced the blind forces by conscious and rational foundations, and offered the prevailing ethical practices a new direction. We should not forget that Śaṅkara was also a product of a particular socio-cultural milieu.

It is true that Śaṅkara was influenced by Buddhism. But it is one thing to say that the influence of Buddhism upon Śaṅkara can not be ignored; and it is completely different thing to say that he was a Buddhist who pretended to be a vedāntin or a crypto Buddhist. We do not deny that Śaṅkara’s conception of \textit{matha} was an adoption of \textit{sangha} of the Buddhist culture. He travelled throughout India and established four \textit{mathas} (monasteries) in order to bring harmony among the diverse thought-currents that were prevalent in the Indian society. He felt it necessary to formulate a philosophy which was not only a direct interpretation of Upaniṣadic texts but also different from Buddhism. To strengthen our claim that Śaṅkara was an independent thinker of Upaniṣadic heritage with originality, vigor and insight, we shall cite a few instances where he not only differs from
svatantravijñānavāda but also from Gauḍapāda and Vasubandhu. Again, before concluding our survey, we shall dismiss the claim of some post-Śaṅkara philosophers that Śaṅkara gave a fictitious status to the world. The use of the word ‘tuccha’ (insignificant) for the world in Daśāśloki by Śaṅkara we think, is somewhat context-oriented and to keep this usage in the proper context we would dismiss the claim that, for Śaṅkara, the world is fictitious. We have seen that against ‘svatantravijñānavāda’s position of ‘to be perceived by the mind is to be a portion of the mind’ (sahopalambhāniyama), Śaṅkara develops several arguments. In his Brahma-sūtrabhāṣya 22, 28, he argues for the difference between objective cognition and the objects in cognition (tasmad artha-jñānayorbhedaḥ). The object of cognition is not the cognition it produces. Further, when Dinnāga says that ‘internal consciousness itself appears as if it is something external’, Śaṅkara refutes it by saying that ‘if there were no external world how can we say that consciousness appears as if it is something external’? All these show that Śaṅkara was very eager to establish his system of philosophy in a way that would make it distinct from Buddhism. The concept of one eternal Brahman was not enough to mark this borderline. The urgency was felt more perhaps for another reason, that is, Vasubandhu (A. D. 420-500) in his ‘Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi’ advocated a type of idealism which seemed to be very near to the non-dualism of the Upaniṣads. Being an independent philosopher with profound originality Śaṅkara differs from Vasubandhu and even from Gauḍapāda. Unlike Vasubandhu and Gauḍapāda who placed dream states and actual states on almost equal footings, Śaṅkara in explaining the sūtra 2.2.29 of Brahmāsūtra endorsed the view that the mundane level of reality cannot be likened to a dream. The apprehension of the external world in every act of perception cannot be denied. Here he is on the same platform with the realists and the pragmatists in admitting the existence of an external world outside and independent of the subject and judges the validity of knowledge by practical results.

Even if it were argued that Śaṅkara’s description of the world as ‘tuccha’ in ‘Daśāśloki’ is a clear cut instance for ‘his leaning towards Buddhism’, we do not subscribe to it from the consideration of historical milieu. We also think that because of their richly suggestive character Śaṅkara’s writings seem to ‘accommodate diverse interpretations with an apparent ease’. We would propose to interpret his view on ‘tuccha’ in the following way: when a person has
experienced one's essential identity with Brahman, he would not attach any significance to the world as apart from Brahman. It has deep epistemological implications. Even the very method of 'not this', 'not this' (neti neti) in the gradual process of spiritual development, all the means of knowledge (such as, perception, inference, even scriptural testimony) and different types of scriptural injunctions - all these would become insignificant, because they are like a ladder which can be thrown away after climbing to the roof. By no means does this mean that they are mere thought-constructs or fictitious.

From the whole bulk of foregoing discussion, we are led to the conclusion that Śaṅkara was not a Buddhist in disguise but a committed Vedāntin who openly declared his philosophy to be the 'aupaniṣadic' philosophy. Since he was flourished after the great masters of Buddhism, his thoughts were influenced and he did enrich them from the Buddhist thought-currents without sacrificing the cream of the Upaniṣadic teachings of the oneness of reality which is otherwise known as Ātman. His explication of the hierarchy of existence is similar to Mādhyamika's view of the levels of truth. A more significant aspect of this hierarchy of truth is that the earliest account of it may be traced in initial form in the Upaniṣads. The Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad's explanation of Brahman as 'Truth of truths or Being of beings - 'satyasya satyam' is to be considered as the seed of such gradation to be developed throughout different stages. So in this particular case also instead of saying that Śaṅkara only imitated what had been said by Mādhyamikas we prefer to say that both Mādhyamikas and Śaṅkara represented only distinctive phases of the same hierarchy of truth contained initially in the upaniṣads. But Śaṅkara's criticism of Śūnyāvāda as nihilism is not correct and this has been frankly admitted by Śrīharṣa. Some writers on Indian Philosophy believe that there might have been some thinkers who took the world as śūnya or unreal. And Śaṅkara while criticising śūnyāvāda might mean their view. However, there is no work or historical evidences in this regard extended to us. It is indeed true that Śaṅkara to a great extent was influenced by Vasubandhu's thought through Gaudapāda. But Vasubandhu in turn declaring Pure Consciousness as the Reality only developed the philosophical germ contained in the Upaniṣads and brought Buddhism closer to Vedānta. So when Śaṅkara characterises his philosophy as "the philosophy of upaniṣads, he in fact does not undermine the Buddhist philosophers like Aśvaghoṣa, Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu. Buddhism which came as a protest against corrupt rituals in the
name of spirituality in Hinduism and advanced a reformation in society, philosophically founded by these thinkers without any genuine opposition to Upaniṣadic metaphysics. Śaṅkara also in his zeal to revive upaniṣadic thought protested against the orthodox and dogmatic Hināyaṇists and too much subjectivism of Svatantravijñānavāda. Śaṅkara historically figured in a time when there were explicit ‘enmity, hatred and mistrust between Buddhism and Vedānta and it would happen to be very difficult to think dispassionately about Buddhism. It is only explicit in Śriharṣa (A. D. 1000-1100) because historically he flourished in a time when ‘‘Buddhism was ousted and the struggle died down’’.40 All these may lead us to close our survey by saying that instead of considering Buddhism and Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta as ‘opposed systems’, let us claim that there are different phases of development of the same non-dualistic metaphysics from the Upanisadic period to the time of Śaṅkara. However, it is true that sometimes the same thought current was disturbed and diverted towards other directions in the midway, but ultimately credit went to Śaṅkara who revived it and set the direction alright. Modern scholars of Indian Philosophy have the apprehension that ‘there was a far greater influence of the Upanisads on the Mahāyāna sūtras than what is supposed till now’’.41

NOTES

* The authors are indebted to Professor K. P. Sinha, Department of Sanskrit, Assam University, Silchar for his comments on the earlier draft of the paper and also for his suggestions for the improvement of the paper.


3. See : Pañcapādikā Vivaraṇa (Ed. R. Shastri, Benaras 1892), p. 84.


6. Unlike other post-Śaṅkara advaitins, Śriharṣa tries to revive the long lost glory of the great advaitic master Gauḍāpāda who speaks of the affinities of his view with that of Śūnyavādins. For Śriharṣa like Gauḍāpāda, Śūnyavāda does not mean ‘nihilism’. Again he openly admits the affinities of his dialectical arguments with that of Śūnyavādins. That ‘Advaita Vedānta and Śūnyavāda are not two opposed systems of philosophy’, is expressed in his book. He says : Tathā hi yadi darśaneṣu śūnyavādānirvacaniya pakṣayor āsrayanam tada tāvad asnūśāṁ nirbādhaiva sarvapathinatā, - Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhaḍya (Chowkhamba Sanskrit Book Depot, Benaras, 1914), pp. 229-30.

7. Śaṅkaraśīla appears just before Śaṅkara in the 8th century. He and his disciple Kamalaśīla like Dinnāga and Dharmakīrti criticised other schools of thought and Vedānta particularly for its acceptance of Consciousness to be permanent and in this way they instead of supporting Vasubandhu’s stand pictured Buddhism and Vedānta as absolutely opposed systems of thought.

8. Diṇnāga’s Ālambanaparīkṣā (Reconstructed by N. Aiyaswami Shastri, Adyar Library, 1941) is not a pioneer work on Vijñānavāda. Unlike Vasubandhu of ‘Vijñānātma-tattvāt (tīrthāṅkara) where he depicted Consciousness (will) as the ultimate Reality, Diṇnāga considered momentary consciousness as reality. Śaṅkara vehemently condemns it in the general name of Vijñānavāda. But Śaṅkara’s criticism cannot touch Vijñānavāda of Vasubandhu.

9. Śāntarakṣita on Brahma-sūtra 2.2.31, ‘Śūnyavādānirvāṇa-vipratisiddha iti tāntirākraṇāyā nādarañā kriyate, Na hi ayam sarvapramānāparisiddho lokasya vyavahāro ‘nyat tattvamanadādigamyā śākyate pañhanotum, apavādābhāve utsarga prasiddheḥ’.

See Śaṅkara’s commentary on Chāndogya Upaniṣad. Chapter VIII. ‘Digdeśaṅgagati phalabheda śūnyaḥ hi paramārthasad advayam Brahma mandabuddhīnām sadāviva pratibhāt’.


14. See : Mādhyamikakārikā, Ch. 24, Verse No. 8.

15. Vyavahāramanā śritya paramārthino na deśyate/Paramārthamanāgamya nirvānāṁ
nādhīgamyate/ (without a recourse to conventional truth, the absolute truth
cannot be understood It is impossible to realize nirvāna without understanding
the absolute truth). See : Mādhyamikakārikā, ch. 24, Verse 10; also see the vṛtti
(Prasannapadā) by Candrakirti thereon :

Tasmād nirvānādhiņgamopāyatvād avaśyameva yathāvasthitā samvṛtiḥ ādaveva
abhyaṣeyā bhājanamiva salitārthinā". (Suppose someone wants to drink water,
he should use pot to reach his goal. Similarly, in understanding the Buddha’s
teaching, one must take recourse to conventional truth if one wants to attain
nirvāna, the absolute truth. See : Prasannapadā, commentary on

16. "Trividam sattvam - pārmarthika, vyāvahārika, prātibhāsīkañcetu; pāramārthika
sattvam Brahmaḥ, Vyāvahārikaṁ sattvamakāśadeḥ, prātibhāsīkarāṁ sattvam
sūktirajatadeḥ, Tatha ‘gataḥ san’ iti prayatka vyāvahārikaṁ sattva viṣayuddhena
prāmāṇyam' - See : Vedānta-Paribhāṣa of Dharmarājādhvarindra, Eng. Trans
p. 81.

17. For details see : Sanghamitra Dasgupta’s article entitled, “Is Māyā the material

18. For details see : T. R. V. Murti : The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, (George

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid, also see Munḍaka Upaniṣad, III-II-9.

21. See the author’s article entitled : Levels of Truth in Mādhyamika with a note

22. Prolegomena to a History of Buddhist Philosophy, p. 19 as quoted by A. K.
Raychoudhury in The Doctrine of Māyā, (Calcutta, Dasgupta & Co. 1952)
p. 186.

23. ‘Na nirodho na cotpattirna baddho na ca sādhhakah/ Na mumukṣurma vai mukṭa
ityēśa paramārthaś/ See Gaudapāda-Kārikā Śāṅkarabhāṣya 2, 61, 32, by
Durgacharan Śāṅkhyā Vedānta Tirtha. For English rendering, see Hemanta K.
Ganguly, Radicalism in Advaita Vedānta (Calcutta, Indian Publication Society,
1988), 63.

24. Ibid
25. ‘Vijñānavādino buddhasya vacanāṁ bāhyārthavādpaksapratisedhapatam ācharyena anumoditam’ - See Śaṅkarabhāṣya on Gaudapāda Kārikā IV, 27.


27. Laṅkāvatarasūtra Ed. by B. Nanjio, Kyoto, 1923, p. 29.


29. Ibid


32. Two instances may be cited to exemplify how much moral degradation was prevalent in the then Indian society. Traditional Hindus used to consider their Buddhist counterpart in the society with hostile feelings and hatred. Mimāmsā which dealt with the karma portion of the Vedas was complementary to the latter part of the Vedas or Upanisads. A Mimāmsaκa commented: “Because Buddha taught his doctrine to fools and śūdras, therefore, it is clear that his teachings were false like a counterfeit coin” A Buddhist also said: “Long time has passed and women are fickle by nature. So it is very difficult to ascertain the purity of Brāhmaṇa race”. these instances are recorded in Śantaraksita’s Tattvasangraha 3155, 3156. (Ed. Pt. K. K. Krishnamācharya. Gaekward Oriental Series, Baroda, 1926); also see: C. D. Sharma (1994), p. 333.


35. In this context it is interesting to mention what B. Russell, says in Preface of his 'A History of Western Philosophy. Philosophers are, according to Russell, ‘both effects and causes; effects of their social circumstances and of the politics and institutions of their time, cause (if they are fortunate) of beliefs which mould the politics and institutions of later days’. (London, Allen & Unwin, 1988 Ed. Preface) p. 7.

36. The chief exponent of this view is Prakāśānanda (A. D. 1500-1600), the author of Vedāntasiddhāntamuktavali. Madhusudana Sarasvatī in Advaitasiddhi explains the theory of śrīśrī propounded by Prakāśānanda. According to Prakāśānanda, ‘when the knowledge of Brahman dawns, the world becomes absolutely zero. All distinctions are thus, ultimately valueless, the so-called functional reality of the world being non-different from any imaginary or fictional reality
The world is not even an indeterminable reality but a case of total fiction just like a chimera. See: Sanghamitra Dasgupta; Vivartavāda Vs. Dr̥ṣṭi-sr̥ṣṭivāda : Some Reflections. The Vedānta Kesāri Vol. 84, August 1997.


38. If the task of a philosopher is interpretation, then Śāṅkara is an excellent interpreter. On the one hand, he is unwilling to break with the past and yet open to the socio-cultural changes around him. He could stretch the sublime thoughts of old molds without breaking them and in this sense, in spite of his respect for tradition, he could claim freedom from it.


41. See: G. C. Pande: Life and Thought of Śaṅkarāchārya (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1994) p. 270. The influence of the upaniṣads upon Mahāyānasūtras may be a subject for investigation from the point of view of history. The discussion on this aspect does not lie within the scope of the present paper.