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Hermeneutics and Śāṅkara

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Comprehension of *Brahman* is effected by the ascertainment, consequent on discussion, of the sense of the *Vedānta*-texts (Śāṅkara).

To understand a text means to establish a close contact between the reader and the author. This relation could be either object-based or subject-based or subject-object based. If the author belongs to the contemporary world and discusses things in our own midst, the problem of "understanding" the meaning is not very difficult. But when we have to deal with a text that belongs to a remote past and concerns a subject-matter not very familiar, the task becomes difficult. The spatio-temporal distances make factual verifications tedious. The task is more difficult if the text is religious because it is supposed to be the revelation of some divine being. Obviously we take the help of some interpreter or commentator for understanding the text. At times this helps because the interpreter is closer to the spirit of the text in terms of time and place. But, then, we have to run the risk of being misled as well, because our understanding of the text is *through* another mind which could be a biased one. We require, in such cases, first, to distinguish between the commentator's shades and the content of the text and to ascertain the meaning of the text. When the text belongs to some religious tradition other than mine, the task is further complicated. It requires an unprejudiced, objective and appreciative treatment of the subject, perhaps a healthy combination of "religiography" and "religiology."

The art of interpreting a religious text either by me today or by a commentator of another day is said to be hermeneutics. Here we are in search of the meaning of a statement. Can this meaning be obtained simply by understanding the words and the sentences? Or, do we have to read, and can we read, the mind of the original author without mixing up ours with his? Further, can the original meaning be obtained without being transmuted by our mind? Even when obtained, will that be of any use to the reader standing several thousand years away from the actual composition? And even if the text is understood and is useful to the reader, what difference would it make to others belonging to the same situation or to future generations? Such questions and other similar ones crop up when we take up a subject like the present one for discussion.

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Hermeneutics must involve seeking to answer such questions. The decision of gods about the truth contained in the script, pronounced by Hermes, the divine messenger, has to be understood, if not directly, then through the interpreter, the poet. At times, in Europe, the Church claimed to be the sole interpreter of Scripture. Against the Catholic claim to authoritative interpretation of the Bible, Protestants tried to develop some universally valid rules of scriptural interpretation and the science of hermeneutics found a solid base to be treated as an independent discipline.

During the nineteenth century, F.E.D. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) distinguished between explanation (based on reasoning) and understanding (based on feeling).¹ He advocated total detachment of the interpreter from the object. The ethico-psychological hermeneutics of Schleiermacher was further developed into "new hermeneutics" by Karl Barth (1886-1968), with the publication of the second edition of his *Commentary on Romans* in September, 1921. Barth emphasized the awareness of interpretation without subjectivity. For him the interpretation should be based on linguistic interpretations of the simple act of reading. Here it matters little whether the text belongs to one's own tradition or not. *Hermeneuein* is, in fact, to interpret a foreign tongue.

In the Vedic tradition the *Mīmāṃsakas* have developed, in great detail, the art of interpreting the texts with a view to finding the ritualistic meanings of the entire text. Patañjali and Bhartṛhari have taken care of the linguistic aspects of the religious texts. The Advaitism of Śaṅkara leans heavily on the Upaniṣadic portions of the Vedas, called *Vedānta*, without, of course, rejecting or disregarding other parts. All the four parts of the four Vedas are treated as the body of scripture by all the orthodox systems of Indian thought; the difference lies in emphasis. The whole body of the Vedas is called *Śruti* (usually translated as Scripture, but literally "heard of") because it was first "visualized" by the seers and then transmitted to posterity, through the teacher-taught chain and recorded in the "script" at a much later stage.

Unlike the Semitic tradition and the *Mīmāṃsakas*, the Advaitic school of Śaṅkara does not consider scripture to be the sole means for other-worldly knowledge. Śaṅkara points out that for knowledge into the nature of *dharma* (duty) the scripture could, probably, be the absolute authority, but not in the case of an enquiry into the nature of *Brahman*. He holds that the scriptural texts, on the one hand, and intuition, on the other, are to be had recourse to, according to the occasion. This is so, firstly, because intuition is the final result of the enquiry into *Brahman* and, secondly, because the object of enquiry here is an accomplished fact.² He further states that no intelligent person disregards his experience³ and also maintains that scripture is the

¹ R. E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*, Evanston, 1969.

² Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Brahma-sūtras*, I. i. 2.

³ Śaṅkara on *BS* II. ii. 28, *na ca svānubhāvāpalāpah . . . kartum*.

authority for the *Ātman* (Self) simply because it removes ignorance and not because it makes known to me something unknown.⁴

The relative value of scripture is exhibited by Śaṅkara in unambiguous terms. For him scriptural knowledge, analysed by reason and supported by experience, can give us knowledge of the ultimate. The *words* are, no doubt, a great help to our realization of the ultimate, but, as it were, a mere prescription does not give us relief from suffering. We are required to get the right medicine and absorb it. Similarly, we have to reflect on and meditate upon the nature of reality after hearing of it.⁵

Scripture itself, Śaṅkara points out, recognizes its subordinate position in a couple of contexts. In the *Muṇḍaka* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* the relativity of scriptural knowledge is clearly admitted. In the former *Upaniṣad*, Aṅgiras tells Sanaka that the knowers of *Brahman* declare two kinds of knowledge to be known—the higher as well as the lower. Of these the lower is the Vedas, the phonetics etc., and the higher is that by which the undecaying is apprehended.⁶ In the other *Upaniṣad*, Nārada tells Sanatkumāra that, even after learning all the Vedas and the sciences, he is simply a *mantravid* (learned person; a man of action, according to Śaṅkara—*mantravitkarmavit*) and cannot be the *ātma-vid* (knower of the Self), because he has been told that the knower of the Self does not grieve (whereas he is still under grief).⁷ Interestingly, the *Upaniṣad* here suggests that, even if the seeker of the Self is ridiculed as an extremist (*ativādin*), he should admit himself to be so and need not give up the pursuit.

The self-authentication (*svataḥ-prāmāṇyatā*) of the Vedas is upheld by Śaṅkara, for, according to him, they do not require anything else for their luminosity, as is the case with the sun.⁸ But the authenticity of scripture is recognized only in those non-perceivable spheres which could not be otherwise contradicted. So far as our phenomenal surroundings are concerned, scripture is not automatically authoritative. Even if hundreds of scriptures declare the fire to be cold or without light, they cannot be trusted. According to Śaṅkara, we have to interpret such texts as conveying some other sense.⁹ Otherwise, it will go against the law of contradiction: the same thing cannot be the locus of opposite qualities such as hot and cold,¹⁰ and the law of identity expects things to have their own nature.¹¹

⁴ Śaṅkara on the *Bhagavadgītā*, II. 18, *sāstrantu ... ajñātārthajñāpaka-tvena*.

⁵ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II. iv. 5, *Ātmā vā're draṣṭavyah ...*

⁶ *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, I. i. 4.

⁷ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VII. i. 2-3.

⁸ Śaṅkara on *BS* II. i. 1., *vedasya hi nirapekṣam svārthe prāmāṇyam*.

⁹ Śaṅkara on *BG* XVIII. 66., ... *arthāntaram ṣrutervivakṣitam kalpyam*.

¹⁰ Śaṅkara on *BS* II. ii. 33, *na hyekasmin dharmiṇi ... śiṭoṣnavat*.

¹¹ Śaṅkara on *Br. Up.* IV. iv. 6., *na ca svābhāviko dharmo eva nāsti ...*

Although scripture is authentic in its own sphere, it does not give us immediate reality. The statement regarding the real is mere name which is a modification of reality and which arises from speech.¹² Those who meditate on a name such as *Brahman* become independent so far as the name goes, but there is something greater than the name (the greatest of all—the *bhūmā*),¹³ and that can be realized in experience only.

Between scriptural knowledge and experience the use of reasoning (*manana*) is prescribed by scripture itself. Scripture makes use of reason for its help.¹⁴ In the well-known instance of the *Byhadāranyaka* (II. iv. 5) the seeing of the Self is possible only through hearing, reasoning and meditating. The hearing, for Śaṅkara, includes the scriptures as well as the words of the teachers (*śrotavyaḥ pūrvamācāryataḥ āgamaśca*), and *manana* means intellect or reasoning.¹⁵ Unless a person is well-versed in scriptures as well as in matters of logic, he cannot be competent even to classify the subject-matter of the scriptural statements.¹⁶ Śaṅkara cites the second famous example where the use of reason is admitted by scripture and endorses the contention that only an intelligent person can reach the destination after hearing from scripture as a kidnapped person reaches Gaṇdhāra after hearing from a reliable source.¹⁷ Śaṅkara recommends as well as applies reason for clarification of the scriptural meaning. He prescribes that, if there is some difficulty in determining the meaning of a scripture, the pseudo-meaning should be eliminated and the appropriate meaning should be arrived at with the help of reason.¹⁸ Reason is the tool for making the distinction between what is real and what is not real.¹⁹ Total elimination of reason, for Śaṅkara, is an impossibility. One reason could be superseded by another, but if we try to negate reason itself, this would bring the whole course of human life to an end.²⁰

Reason, thus, is admitted to be an important tool for bringing out the correct meaning of scriptural statements. But reason is not given independent authority. It could be relied upon only when it is supported by scriptural experience.²¹ The subject matter of scripture cannot be decided by reason alone; reason has to take scripture as its base, otherwise it would be baseless and unfounded.²² Reason and experience together can determine the purport of scripture.

¹² *Ch. Up.* VI. i. 4. *vācārambhaṇa vikāro nāmadheyam.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, VII. i. 5.

¹⁴ Śaṅkara on *BS* I. i. 2, *Śrutyaiva ca sahāyātvena tarkasyābhyuṣetatavāt.*

¹⁵ Śaṅkara on *Ch. Up.* VII. xviii. i, *matirmananam tarko.*

¹⁶ Śaṅkara on *Br. Up.* IV. xv. 5, *parinisthitaśāstrabuddhibhīveva ...*

¹⁷ *Ch. Up.*, VI. xiv. 2, *paṇḍito medhāvi Gaṇdhārānevopasampādyeta.*

¹⁸ Śaṅkara on *BS*, II. i. 11, *śrutyarthavipratipattau...*

¹⁹ Śaṅkara on *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* VI. 12, *buddhirhi naḥ pramāṇam sadasato...*

²⁰ Śaṅkara on *BS* II. i. 11.

²¹ Śaṅkara on *BS* II. i. 6, *Śrutyanugṛhīta eva hyatra tarko...*

²² Śaṅkara on *BS* II. i. 11, *nāgamagamyē'rthe kevalena tarkeṇa ...*

Neither free ratiocination nor complete dogmatism could attract Śaṅkara in his interpretation of scripture. Against pure rationalism he would say that Reality is beyond intellect and the ultimate Self is, in fact, the witness of our intellect.²³ Against dogmatism he would say that intellect is the only tool for distinguishing between the real and unreal. He is also not prepared to concede any speculation which is against scripture as well as reasoning, however important that might be. He boldly states that even the words of the *Sāṃkhya*s, the *Kāṇādas*, the Buddhists and the *Mīmāṃsaka*s cannot be respected because they are devoid of authority as well as reasoning.²⁴

In order to arrive at a proper conclusion regarding the purport of scripture Śaṅkara would always prefer to make use of his own reason, rather than follow the *smṛtis* (codes) that claim to deal with the subject matter of liberation, for scripture is the direct means of knowledge and it does not require any other means for its validity (*svataḥ-prāmānyam*). *Smṛtis*, on the other hand, are indirect means of knowledge and are similar to inference.²⁵ He is well aware of the fact that people who hold the authors of the *smṛtis* in high esteem would not be trusting their rational explanation because they depend on others for their wisdom (*paratantra-prajñā*).²⁶ Why the *smṛti* is less reliable and one has to explain the meaning of the scripture with the help of reason and experience is obvious from the fact that the *smṛti* is based on memory and not on reasoning. An explanation (*vyākhyā*) is the complete explication of what is said in a sentence or a group of words.²⁷ In the context of Śaṅkara's philosophy an explanation of a scriptural text is called *bhāṣya* (commentary).

A commentary, says Puṅyarāja, an eleventh century commentator on the *Vākya-paḍīya* of Bhartṛhari, is not the elucidation of grammatical constructions; it is the clarification of entire issues contained in a statement.²⁸ The author of the *Shishupāla-vadha* defines a commentary as the explication of the profound meaning contained in condensed sentences.²⁹ Although Śaṅkara wrote commentaries on the major *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Kārikās* of Gauḍapāda, and the *Brahma-sūtras* (the *Vedānta-sūtras*) of Bādarāyaṇa, his commentary on the last work is supposed to be his *magnum opus*. According to him the *Vedānta-sūtras* string together the flowers of the *Vedānta* passages and he in turn claims to have discussed the texts referred to by the aphorisms.³⁰ Why a commentary on them? Because they essentially

²³ Śaṅkara on BG IV. 42, *buddheḥ paratantu sa buddherdraṣṭā parātmā*.

²⁴ *Upadeśa-sāhasrī*, XVI. 64-65.

²⁵ Śaṅkara on BS I. iii. 29, *pratyaksam śrutih . . . anumānam smṛtiḥ*.

²⁶ Śaṅkara on BS II. i. 1, *paratantraprajñastu—bahumanatsmṛtinam . .*

²⁷ *vi-ā-khyā-ac; vivaraṇātmake śabdāsamūharūpe granthabhede kathane*.

²⁸ *Vākya-paḍīya*, II. 485, *tatra bhāṣyam na kevalam vyākaraṇasya nibandhanam, yavat sarveṣām nvāya-bijānām bodhavyam*.

²⁹ *Shishupāla-vadha*, II. 24, *sankṣiptasyāpyato' syaiva vākyaśyārtha garīyasah, svīstaratarā vaco bhāṣya-bhūtā bhavantu me*.

³⁰ Śaṅkara on BS I. i. 2.

state everything in an indubitable but very brief manner.³¹ And Śaṅkara is pretty sure that the comprehension of the *Brahman* is effected by the ascertaining, consequent on discussion, of the sense of the *Vedānta* texts, not either by inference or by other means of right knowledge.³² Śaṅkara has chosen the *Vedānta-sūtras* to be the major vehicle for his philosophy because he found ample scope for superimposing his own ideas on the *Vedānta* system through them. This is evident from the very beginning of his commentary on the *sūtras*, which is introduced with a discussion on the theory of error (*adhyāsa-bhāṣya*). Such treatment of the texts is possible only in a *bhāṣya* or a *vārttika* (exposition)³³ or a *pañjikā* (annotation),³⁴ but not in a *tīkā* (gloss).³⁵

One of the best instances of Śaṅkara's hermeneutic acumen is to be found in his commentary on the fourth aphorism of the *Brahma-sūtras* dealing with the harmony of the Vedantic texts.³⁶ Śaṅkara abides by all the five-point formula of a discussion on any such topic (*adhikarana*), as propounded by the *Mīmāṃsakas*, namely, the proposition, the doubt, the opponent's view, the refutation and the established end.³⁷ What is prohibited in the discussion is the reference to one's own defects (cf. *Mricchakatika*, 9.3). The discussion on the subject is, briefly, as follows :

The subject or the proposition (*viśaya*) is the authority of scripture as the right means of knowledge, as stated in the previous aphorism.³⁸ The doubt arises as to whether the *Vedānta* passages refer to activities pertaining, if not to rituals, to devout meditation (*upāsana*) and similar actions mentioned in those texts. If such is the case, scripture could not be taken to be the source of *Brahman*.³⁹ The opponent's view (*pūrva-pakṣa*) is that the scriptural statements pertain to ritualistic actions only and those texts that do not do so are without sense (are explanatory).⁴⁰ Śaṅkara is surprised to note that even those who are fully acquainted with the object of the Vedas declare that their purpose is seen to be the injunction of action. He emphasizes that the expression *tu* (but) in the aphorism under discussion is meant to rebut the opponent's view. He maintains that

³¹ *alpākṣaramasandīgham sāravad viśvatomukham astobhamanavadyam ca sūtram sūtrakṛto viduh. Pārā. Purāṇa, XVIII.*

³² Śaṅkara on BS. I. i. 2, *vākyaṛtha vicāraṇādhyavasāna nirvṛtā...*

³³ *uktāmuktaduruktānām cintā yatra pravarttate, tam grantham vārttikam prāhurvārttikajñā maṇiṣibhiḥ; Pārā. Purā.*

³⁴ Hemachandra, *Abhidhāna-cintāmaṇi*, II. 170: *pañjika sakalapadavyākhyā.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, *tīkā nirantara-pada-vyākhyā.*

³⁶ BS I. i. 4., *tattu samanvayāt.*

³⁷ *viśayo viśayaścaiva purvapakṣastathottaram nirṇayaśceti siddhāntaḥ śāstre' dhikaraṇam smṛtam.*

³⁸ *Brahmaṇaḥ śāstra-pramāṇakatvam; Śaṅkara on BS. I. i. 4.*

³⁹ *svavākyagatopāsanādi karma-paratvam; Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Jaimini-sūtras, I, ii. 1, āmnāyaśya kriyārthatvāt ...*

Brahman is known from the *Vedānta* part of scripture because in all these texts the sentences construe the same purport and indicate that matter (viz., *Brahman*). Śaṅkara holds that an action is done in order to obtain something or to modify it or to get rid of the same. But in the case of *Brahman* it is otherwise. The *Brahman* is of the nature of an accomplished thing. Its knowledge does not depend on a person's endeavour (*na puruṣa-vyāpāra-tantra Brahmavidyā*). He who knows *Brahman*, becomes *Brahman*.⁴¹ In the epistemological realism of Śaṅkara, knowledge is not taken to be a mental action even,⁴² and the knowledge of *Brahman* also depends on the object, like the knowledge of a post.⁴³ All injunctions and all other means of knowledge, for Śaṅkara, end with the cognition expressed in the words, "I am *Brahman*."⁴⁴

Śaṅkara clarifies the doubt regarding actions pertaining to devout meditation (*upāsana*) also. He says that, if the knowledge of the absolute unity has arisen, there exists no longer anything to be desired or avoided, and thereby the conception of duality, according to which we distinguish actions, agents, and the like, is destroyed.⁴⁵

After his reply to the opponent's view and the clarification of doubt Śaṅkara establishes his own doctrine and says, "It follows that... the doctrine that on account of the uniform meaning of the *Vedānta* texts, an independent *Brahman* is to be admitted, is hereby fully established."⁴⁶ Śaṅkara also justifies the independent treatment of *Brahman* knowledge by Bādarāyaṇa in the *Vedānta-sūtras*. He maintains that, as the comprehension of *Brahman* and the Self has not been propounded in the *Dharma-sūtras* of Jaimini, it is quite appropriate that a new *Sāstra* (system), whose object is the identity of *Brahman* and the Self, should be entered upon.⁴⁷

The commentary on the identity-statement in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*⁴⁸ is another good instance of Śaṅkara's hermeneutical acumen. When Āruṇi Uddālaka received a negative reply from his son Śveta-ketu (who had just returned after his graduation) to the question whether he was instructed in the subject by which the unheard becomes heard and so on, he tells the son that as the clay and the pots, the gold and the ornaments are one and the difference lies only in name, so he is one with that which is the root of all. Śaṅkara explains that the same all-pervading Self is inherent in every individual soul, hence the statement "That thou art." He further says that prior to the discussion with his father the son was identifying himself with the physical body. But now he has realized that he is one with the abso-

⁴¹ *Muṇḍaka Up.* III. 2. 9. *Brahmaveda Brahmaiva bhavati.*

⁴² Śaṅkara on *BS.* I. i. 4, *jñānam nāma mānasi kriyā na.*

⁴³ Śaṅkara on *BS.* I. i. 2, *sthāṅureveti tattva-jñānam, vastutantratvāt.*

⁴⁴ Śaṅkara on *BS.* I. i. 4., *tasmādahaṃ Brahmāsmityetadavasānā . .*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, *namu tathā Brahmana upāsanaividhiṣeṣatvam sambhavati.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, *... samanvayāditi siddham.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, *Brahmātmaikyāvagatih . . . śāstrārambhah.*

⁴⁸ *Ch. Up.*, VI. viii. 7, *tattvamasi svetaketo.*

lute reality.⁴⁹ Here a doubt arises as to why Śvetaketu did not realize the oneness with the Absolute from the very beginning. Śaṅkara tells us that the non-apprehension of unity is due to our natural instincts which identify the "I" with the body, the senses and so on. It is only after hearing of the identity from his father that Śvetaketu contemplates and comes to know that he is neither the doer of actions nor the enjoyer of their results and is, in fact, one with the essence of the cosmos. This knowledge of the identity arises from *Śruti* (here father acts like the teacher). The earlier knowledge (or, more precisely, ignorance) of the oneness of the soul and the body, is sublated and cancelled by the later knowledge.⁵⁰ Śaṅkara notes that scripture also admits of the later realization of the truth after being instructed, as is the case with the kidnapped person reaching Gaṇdhāra when given the right direction. He also notes that if there is any delay in the realization of the unity after instruction, reflection and contemplation, it is due to the *prārabdha-karma(s)*. Release takes place, so to say, when these *karma(s)* are exhausted.⁵¹

The methodology prescribed in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (II.iv.5) for knowing the reality is adopted here as well. After being told by the father about the identity, and after having this made clear with the help of examples and reason, the son contemplates (*nīdīdhyāsitavyah: niścayena dhyātavyah*) and then pronounces that he understood (*vijajñau*).⁵² The repetition of the word "understood" emphasizes the certainty of the realisation and also indicates the end of the chapter. Śaṅkara is emphatic on the point that the statement pronounces identity only, because no other meaning could be derived from this sentence.⁵³

After this brief and hurried consideration of Śaṅkara's treatment of scripture we can make only a few concluding remarks. We can say that in the hermeneutics of Śaṅkara we find a blending of three major factors, viz., scripture, reason and experience. The three strands make a strong thread that joins the Vedantic statements for the unified end of the realization of the one reality without second (*ekamevādviṭīyaṃ*). The first two elements of Śaṅkara's methodology are common to most hermeneutics. What is distinctive in Śaṅkara, and for that matter in several philosophical systems of the Indian tradition, is the emphasis on experience. For Śaṅkara the knowledge of *Brahman* has to find its culmination in the experience of *Brahman* (*Brahmānubhāvavasānatvāt Brahmaññānasya*). An interpretation is not for its own sake, for even a dull mind does not act without a purpose (*prayojanam annuddīśya na mando'pi pravarttate*). The endeavour is not, further, to refute others without having a position of one's own, like the *Mādhyamika* philosophers. The purpose of the interpretation

⁴⁹ Śaṅkara on *Ch. Up.* VI. xvi. 3., *sadevāhamasmīti vijajñau*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, *tasmātsatsatyādviṭīyātmanavijñāne vikārāṅṛta jīvātma ...*

⁵¹ Śaṅkara on *Ch. Up.* VI. xiv. 2.

⁵² *Ch. Up.* VI. xvi. 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, *na cānyā gatirīhaṃ sadātmatvopadeśādarthāntarabhūtā.*

of the text is the realization of the unity between the Self and the *Brahman*. To this end all our interpretations should proceed.

We can also say that Śaṅkara is neither subjective nor objective to the extreme in his treatment of scripture. In practice, perhaps, no treatment could be either purely subjective or entirely objective. Śaṅkara's epistemological realism provides for an objective treatment of the reality. But, as far as the interpretation of the text is concerned, one has to take into account the personal convictions of the interpreter. A commentary has to explain even those factors that remained untold in the text.

It can also be said that in his commentaries Śaṅkara steers a course between dogmatism and scepticism. His interpretation is based on reason. But unconditioned reason is not admitted. It has to follow scripture in matters of other-worldly statements. But scripture, too, is not accepted blindly. Scriptural assertions, if dealing with phenomenal contexts, cannot be taken to be reliable when they go against reason or common-sense.

Śaṅkara's interpretation, by and large, still remains a guideline for most of the speculative minds in India. - The sincerity with which he pursued his task acts like a light house for the seekers of the Infinite.