

## Monotheism and Śaivism in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad

The question whether the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad is monotheistic and Śaivite brings to mind Tola and Dragonetti's syncretic and synoptic book, *Indian and Western Philosophies : Unity in Diversity*<sup>1</sup> (2004) since they successfully, at least to an extent, negotiate the problems of defining and comparing Hindu ideas within a non-Hindu intellectual milieu. The problems of approaching the terms "monotheism" and "Śaivism" or "Śiva" through English<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tola, Fernando, and Carmen Dragonetti. 2013. *Indian and Western Philosophies Unity in Diversity*. Reprint edition. Philosophy. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

<sup>2</sup> By English is meant both the language and its tradition of Continental and Analytic philosophy. Further, English is a language which can willy-nilly accommodate the concept of the Heideggerian 'dasein', thus being symptomatic of a dualism which cannot be got rid off entirely while deciding upon the nature of Brahman and Śiva in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad. The fact remains that the nature of Brahman cannot be defined without resorting to language, including Sanskrit, since languages are all contingent on subject/object dichotomies and monads and not dyads. Here are two lines from the Acharya Śaṅkara's *Aitareyopaniṣad* to illustrate this fact regarding Brahman: "There is not a second thinker who can think of that thinker" & "The same self will be split into two halves, like a bamboo, to become the thinker and the thinkable" (Translation by Swami Kritarthananda, p.163 from his *A Collection from Śaṅkara's Commentaries on the Prasthāna-Traya*, 2017 Reprint edition of the first, 2016 edition. Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture). Further monotheism has very colonial overtones deriving from 17<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Thus, one needs to be cautious in applying the term monotheism to any Hindu canonical text. It is a weak God, as shown by John Caputo in his *The Weakness of God: a Theology of the Event*. Bloomington Ind.:

are open to problems which writers like Bihani Sarkar forget to address in such monographs like her *Heroic Shāktism: The Cult of Durgā in Ancient Indian Kingship*<sup>3</sup> (2017). The point here is to thus, access the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad through the lens of the Sanatana Dharma. Thus we turn to the *Saundarya Lahari* (सौन्दर्यलहरी) whose authorship is as problematic as its

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Indiana University Press, 2006, that we find the kind of monotheism that admits of duality. Within Christianity, the Godhead becomes Triune, unlike within Hindu traditions. In most Hindu traditions, God is unequivocally powerful. Thus when within an Eastern concept we say God is everywhere to translate सर्वभूतेषु, we do not mean that God is everywhere. Rather, it is meant to be understood that Śakti has become many and everything has become Acharya Śankara's 'split-bamboo' mentioned above. The *bhutas* include the building blocks of tanmatras (तन्मात्र). The Christian God according to all theologians from Jürgen Moltmann to Graham Ward, is a God who hangs in shame, powerless from the Rood. Even Allah and YHWH are both weak Gods; since they are fundamentally Covenant Gods. Hinduism precludes such weakness within Brahman right from the Tantras to even Vaishanava Tantra. God never suffers within any Hindu text as God suffers and Justifies as we find in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. So, to speak in another way, when Karen Armstrong speaks of God in her corpus, she is speaking of monotheism but certainly not the kind to be found anywhere in Hinduism. Probably, what is meant here by monotheism is whether the

<sup>3</sup> Sarkar, Bihani. 2017. *Heroic Shāktism: the Cult of Durgā in Ancient Indian Kingship*. First edition. British Academy Monograph . Oxford: Oxford University Press.

meaning within a Indian milieu far removed from the times of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad.

Here we find:

जगत्सूते धाता हरिरवति रुद्रः क्षपयते

तिरस्कुर्वन्नेतस्वमपि वपुरीशस्तिरयति ।

सदापूर्वः सर्वं तदिदमनुगृह्णाति च शिव-

स्तवाज्ञामालम्ब्य क्षणचलितयोर्भूलतिकयोः ॥ २४ ॥

Thus we find that whoever the author of सौन्दर्यलहरी may be; thought it only right to separate Śiva from Rudra and to conflate Ishvara with Sadashiva. So our interpretation of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad should also be seen not as a disjuncture between Śiva and Ishvara.

To illustrate: in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad we find that Rudra sees without eyes, hears without ears and knows without having sense organs. This speaking from within a Western tradition is to define God as omniscient and omnipresent. But the moment we use the Sanskrit 'sarvabhuteshu' we know that this omnipresence and the omnipresence of being the 'esse' of us, are not the same thing. So while God in the Abrahamic religions is the absolute hospitable Other, Rudra who is Śiva becomes, as it were Ishwara in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad. Therefore the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad is not about monotheism or Śiva or, even Rudra. It is more about our Selves. It is useless to see it as not parts of Vedanta, and even Kashmiri Śaivism. Textual exegesis happens within a particular socio-cultural milieu; whereas from within the universe of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, we cannot and should not obsess with the methods employed by say, Hans-Georg Gadamer. The trap is to fall into searching for those qualia which are non-existent in the major and the minor Upaniṣads. In this sense, the set premises of the assignment needs critique since no scripture within the Sanātana Dharma admits to monotheism. As has been pointed out in the lectures in this

course and by Professor Sutton elsewhere; the *Bhagavad Gita* itself does not ever reject one form of philosophising over the other. It is all syncretic. But again in passing, Professor Sutton's obsession with what is actually there in the text applicable to the literary artefact is misplaced in texts which define a faith community. Perhaps, there is too much Jacques Derrida and even the subaltern obsession with textual minutiae in this assignment and the lectures. Thus, while the questions posed in regard to the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad are for testing textual knowledge, are in fact contrary to say the methodologies of say an arch-interpreter: Vachaspati Misra. It is not difficult to copy-paste either Swami Gambhirananda's translation or Valerie Roebucks' translations. What is more important is that we understand that no system of Indian thought including the ones we find within the Bhakti movement, sees Rudra etymologically. For instance, to parse words for academics points and say that Rudra comes from root for crying, is to say that a river meanders and is snake-like. So when one googles a snake like movement, one sees an anaconda feasting on a deer. Then one believes that snake like movements are to slowly swallow a deer and meandering is akin to peristalsis. Thus, this insistence on textuality alone is dangerous because it essentially imposes a logocentric world-view on a world-view which does admit of any difference between this writer and the internet and the examiner. This is not to speak of Advaita. These categorisations are all reductive and in fact, heresies of paraphrase. It is easy to see how Rudra becomes Śiva who in turn becomes who live in the 'pura' of the body and thus is the Purusha, even within the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad. In truth, no such thing happens. And, thus the lectures are not what Professor Sutton believes in his Dharma YouTube channel. Those talks are more valid than his lectures in this course. This course is fundamentally misleading since it gives a very Judaeo-Abrahamic approach to Shiva. The obsession begins with the insistence on diacritical marks. And insistence on citations invented by the American Academy of Religion. In passing, this author has reviewed Sarah H Jacoby's useless magnum

opus on Sera Khandro. This whole exercise of framing this answer is an exercise in futility. The problem with Professor Sutton is that he is genuinely Hindu but because of his fixations and entrenchment within a Western academic setting, he would obsess on issues not pertinent to the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad. It is like reading those volumes of Karl Potter's encyclopaedias on Hinduism. One would get the impression that Vaishnavism and Kashmiri Saivism are too entirely different things. But as is well known to whoever is examining this, Sri Avinavagupta commented on the Bhagavad Gita, albeit with extra verses.

Now, the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad is read and seen as apart of a unified tradition mentions Rudra and Shiva. But that does not mean that the many composers over the centuries saw them as distinct. They must have seen all three, that is Rudra, Shiva and the Purusha as One. But this One within the universe of Yoga is not that One spoken of by say, Emmanuel Levinas. We have to make certain that we access and asses the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad through the works of the late Georg Feuerstein. Feuerstein understood Yoga in the West as none other did till date. Flood and Sutton come close, but they are unfortunately sold out to the lure of the logos. This writer cannot agree with Professor Sutton's assignment and course materials because he slots everything for comprehensibility and reduces the Sanatana Dharma to an academic exercise. I suspect even he knows this.

So what is the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad about if not monotheism and Shaivism? It is about becoming Shiva. It is about becoming Rudra. It is about Yoga. Which Yoga? That Yoga which Tantrics find in the *Gheranda Samhita*. That Yoga which is attributed to Swamis Vivekananda and Yogananda. And attributed to Mahavatar Babaji and to Trailanga Swami. To say that the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad is not about Sakti is to miss the point that textual universe is shaped by an exterior universe mediated by the lived rules of the Sanatana

Dharma. For instance, is not the COVID 19 pandemic about Rudra? The answer again is that He sees without seeing et cetera.

At the cost of being undermarked, this is the proper place to make certain that we set records straight. In no way should monotheism be part of the assignments since it confuses neophytes to my Dharma. Many would be gullible enough to misinterpret the text and believe that there is monotheism within the world of the Sanatana Dharma. Professor Sutton knows clearly that even atheism and nastika are not the same things. Yet he says in his Dharma Talks that our Sanatana Dharma admits of atheism. It is this disjuncture from the liturgical life of the Sanatana Dharma as practised in various parts of India, that we have such muddled thinking from otherwise devout white Hindus. Though, in the lectures, Professor Sutton and others hedge themselves by differentiating between praxes and theory. But this is not philosophy or any of the social sciences. It is theology. Professor Sutton teeters at the brink of Bihani Sarkar and Sarah H. Jacoby's intellectual abyss. There occurs in all three of them a disjuncture between praxes and knowledge which is not sapientia.

So, as far as the lectures go, there is a distinct Rudra in the Mahabharata too. But is that Rudra that Rudra of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad? The exegete's answer will certainly be that there is an evolution from the latter to the former. But that is the wrong answer. We forget that Monier Williams is not alive anymore. And that era is gone. The simple answer is unacceptable to scholars. It is that none knows. As simple as that. To say that the Vira Saivas are not Vedantins and the Saiva Agamas are more or less important than the Upanishads betrays a naivete unimaginable for a person who travelled the globe. This writer is a student of Shakta Tantra. And he is surprised to know that Tantra is different from Advaita Vedanta and it is also different from what Srila Prabhupada taught. Because the secret of Tantra so touted by the likes of Hugh Urban and David Gordon White is that a

Kaula Guru, internally becomes through viraja homa, Rudra qua Shiva qua the Purusha qua the Sri Yantra. It does not mean one becomes God. One becomes That; vide अचिन्त्यभेदाभेद philosophy/theology. If one read online and offline, one thinks that this is only reserved for Vaishnavism. No. It is as Shaivite and Tantric as can be. In this sense, which is the lived sense of approaching the Upanishads, the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad is Shaivite and even Tantric. Conversely, the khechari mudra is not a siddha technique. It is as much a Bhakti technique as it is a Samkhya technique.

The rest is beyond the scope of this essay.