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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Studies in Advaita Vedanta: Towards an Advaita Theory of Consciousness.* By Sukharanjan Saha. Kolkata: Jadavpur University, 2004. Pp. 231.

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*Studies in Advaita Vedanta: Towards an Advaita Theory of Consciousness*, by Sukharanjan Saha, is a collection of papers each of which has something to say about consciousness in Advaita, although some of the papers have a rather tenuous connection to this theme. Saha brings to bear a lifetime of study of Advaita and its philosophical contexts in these essays. The one notable lacuna in his approach is the tendency to ignore virtually all contemporary literature on Advaita, and to concentrate almost entirely on the original Sanskrit texts themselves—although he is clearly at home in a variety of modern philosophical techniques. His views are, in themselves, interesting and carefully spelled out.

In “The Many Faces of the ‘I,’” Saha draws on well-known uses of *aham* in Śaṅkara, Vācaspati, and Padmapāda to draw the larger conclusion that Advaita is willing to allow for multiple, context-variant senses of ‘I,’ in contrast to both a Naiyāyika like Gadhādhara and Western thinkers like Husserl.

“Advaita Analysis of Suffering” is an elegant and surprising essay. Much of it appears to be a fairly general survey of the manner in which different Hindu and Buddhist thinkers identify a positive cognitive error in understanding reality—*avidyā*—as the cause of suffering. But Saha notes that the classical consensus on suffering is not an empirical statement; there are ordinary success stories, after all. He then ingeniously uses this fact to show that suffering is something structural to existence. Śaṅkara’s example of someone who feels “I am fair-complexioned” is a smug indication of the suffering brought to bear on others who are not, in a society that favors fair complexion. Suffering, Saha argues, is socially relative; it relates to value structures more than mere physical discomfort. If all were of the highest or lowest *varna*, there would be neither pride nor striving, neither bragging nor lamenting. The metaphysical discussion on suffering, it turns out, is really a commentary on Hindu society.

Saha heroically—in the light of modern, especially Western scholarship, which sees Śaṅkara as an arch-conservative proponent of brahminical values—tends to see the Advaitin as a social reformer. In the essay above, he sees Śaṅkara as teaching precisely the social lesson against discrimination when he talks of suffering. Saha returns to this theme in “Śaṅkara and Varna Distinctions in Hinduism.” He puts forward the argument that since Śaṅkara held that all social distinctions were not ultimate (*pāramārthika*), and since class/*varna* distinctions are social ones while liberating knowledge is ultimate, *varna* is irrelevant to liberation. How those traditionally excluded from brahminical philosophy will respond to this generosity is another matter.

In “Inner Sense and Higher Order Consciousness,” Saha usefully explains how Nyāya takes an awareness of awareness to be a matter of inner sense, while Advaita denies this. It is sometimes hard to follow him through the essay, as it is not always clear what is being argued. But the contours of the standard Nyāya and Advaita positions on putative higher-order consciousness are laid out competently. The Nyāya position is clear enough, in that the higher-order awareness is an inner perception, with the mind playing the role of an ‘inner’ organ for the self. So the self becomes conscious of an object through the mind, and that act of consciousness itself becomes an object of the mind; in the latter instance, the mind functions to generate a higher-order consciousness, taking the first mental state as its object. This is relatively clear, but puts a great burden on Nyāya to give a cogent theory of mind, such that the idea of the mind as an inner sense organ becomes persuasive. But this challenge lies beyond the scope of Saha’s essay.

Gradually, Saha’s argument emerges. Advaita takes the mind to be separate from consciousness, which is the untouched *ātman*. So, there may well be mental states that are the object of the mind, but this is not higher-order consciousness, as the mind itself is materially different from consciousness. Furthermore, as Advaita rejects the idea of the mind being a sense-organ, it does not see the putative case of higher-order consciousness as a sensory state (i.e., as inner perception).

Next, Advaita has the notion of witness cognition (*sākṣijñāna*), which applies to awareness of non-sensory states. But these states, whether intentional or not, are themselves not states of consciousness according to both Advaita and Nyāya, since there is no cognitive structure to them. Hence, even though the cognition of these states is higher-order, in that it takes as content states that themselves have content, it—that is, *sākṣijñāna*—is not higher-order consciousness, but merely consciousness; for the lower/first-order states are not themselves conscious. So, once more, there is no higher-order consciousness in Advaita.

Finally, there is the concept of *svaprakāśa* (self-illumination, in Saha’s translation). This appears to be the Advaitic candidate to rival Nyāya’s notion of higher-order consciousness as *anuvyavasāya*, the ‘after’ cognition that takes the consciousness of objects as its object. But, once more, this turns out not to be the case. Self-illumination is the fact of being conscious of being conscious when conscious of anything. This is directly a feature of every consciousness, and therefore not a higher-order operation on another consciousness. In short, then, Saha demonstrates that Advaita takes the very notion of higher-order consciousness to be a myth, although he makes his case in an elliptical way.

In the central portion of the book, Saha presents a translation and gloss on the opening section of Citsukha’s *Tattvapradīpikā*, his celebrated exploration of the concept of *svaprakāśa*. The elucidation is helpful in that the original text is very dense and embedded in the debates of its time. Nevertheless, Saha himself cleaves closely to the tradition, and possibly does not do enough to convey the fruits of Citsukha to a reader who may not be at home in later Advaita. This translation will be helpful to all those seeking to gain access to the last untranslated member of the traditional

three great Advaitic dialecticians, the others being Śrī Harṣa and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī.

The last section of the book consists of two long chapters on the *anirvacanīyakhyāti* or, as Saha translates it, “indeterminability” thesis. In his discussion, Saha equates error with illusion. This is somewhat problematic since, while illusion is an error, not all cognitive errors are illusions; they might be mistakes other than the strongly phenomenological situation of illusion. But the thrust of the discussion does not suffer from this, since no key aspect of it depends on making this distinction clearly.

In “The Negative Thesis,” Saha follows broadly Vimuktātman’s discussion of the Buddhist position of *asadvāda* in his *Iṣṭasiddhi*, and Vācaspati’s more famous treatment of the different accounts of error in the *Bhāmatī*. He follows Vimuktātman’s argument that, if the *asadvāda* position is a denial of the existence of an object simpliciter (something that few if any Buddhist philosophers would admit—a fact not commented on by Saha), then the very appeal to the nature of experience—that there is something that constitutes its content—shows that *asadvāda* is inadequate. Saha’s treatment of Vācaspati makes the interesting claim that *ātmakhyātivāda*—the thesis imputed to the Vijñānavāda Buddhists to the effect that the object of error is a mental construct—is compatible with and contained by the thesis of *asatkhyāti*—the thesis normally imputed only to Madhyamaka Buddhists, to the effect that the object of error is simply not existent. Saha therefore seeks to collapse the two Mahāyāna schools, and makes the critique of *asatkhyāti* the main point of Vācaspati’s critique.

Saha then goes on to look at the *satkhyāti* position—that the object of an erroneous cognition does exist—exemplified in the *anyathākhyāti* theory. Saha shows the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā theory to be in line with that of the earlier Naiyāyikas. According to this theory, in the cognition that this is silver, made with regard to shell, both shell and silver exist, since intentionality of cognition is required for the realism of these schools. The problem lies in “wrongly localizing” the one with regard to the other; the problem is with the relationship between that which is cognized and that with which it is identified.

After analyzing the Advaita approach to this, Saha interestingly turns to the later Nyāya view that even the relationship is real. Gadhādhara argues that the relationship between the base of the cognition and its characterization is always real; an erroneous cognition is merely one in which the relationship that is asserted is wrong. A wrong relationship is not an unreal one. Saha then marshals the argument of the later Advaitin Gaudabrahmānanda against this novel idea. He presents the latter’s argument that it is logically redundant to think that there is any way in which either the base object or its characterization actually enter the content of the cognition; only the relationship between them does. (It is the rope-as-snake that is the content of the cognition, not either the rope or the snake in itself.) Gaudabrahmānandi concludes that the earlier Nyāya view of the relationship as unreal is more sustainable—but granting this, of course, only leads to the predictable conclusion that the unreality of the relationship is explicable only

through the *anirvacanīya* thesis. Although Saha does not defend the origin of this idea, clearly it lies in an Advaitic metaphysics that rejects the direct realism of Nyāya.

The rest of the chapter is spent looking at Ānandabodha's use of the consistent Advaitic argument—going back at least to Vācaspati—that the *anyathākhyāti* theory cannot account for the spatiotemporal divergence between the indexical marking of the snake as here and now and the claim that the snake is really existent elsewhere. The fact of that snake elsewhere and at another time cannot account for the phenomenology of the snake here, and the snake here is *ex hypothesi* not a real snake. It is, therefore, indeterminate as to what ontological status the snake of the erroneous cognition occupies.

The last chapter is somewhat misleadingly titled “Anirvacāniyakhyati: The Positive Thesis,” because it is not directly about this *khyātivāda* at all. Instead, Saha explores the Advaitic theory of *ajñāna*—the failure of cognition—as a ‘positive,’ that is, an occurrent, rather than as the absence of veridical or erroneous cognition. According to Advaita, the failure to cognize the rope as a snake is phenomenologically unquestionable: the subject undergoes some sort of experience rather than none at all. The constant presence of consciousness in such statements as ‘I am ignorant’ is explicable only through this ‘positive’ thesis, according to Advaita. This feeds through into the analysis of taking the rope to be a snake, as much as taking the empirical features of experience to be the self (*ātman*). The experience of the snake is poised between denying and affirming its existence. So, too, with the complex misidentification of the agentive, shifting mental states with the pure consciousness of the self. Advaitins explain this experience through the mechanism of imposition (*adhyāsa*), when, not knowing that this is a rope, the concept of the snake—indeterminably neither real nor not real—structures empirical content. Following an analysis along these lines, Saha finally turns to the annulment (*bādha*) of the illusion that the rope is a snake. Focusing here, as throughout this chapter, on Prakāśātman's *Pañcapādikavivaraṇa*, Saha talks about the definition of annulment as the specific case of bringing about the end of that ignorance caused by illusion. This very act of annulment of the miscognition that the rope is a snake is, of course, also invariably connected to and consequent upon knowing that the rope is a rope. In the same way, the annulment of the miscognition that the self is the individual, embodied person in a world of suffering follows the identification of *ātman* with *brahman*. With a series of detailed presentations of Prakāśātman's own arguments, Saha brings the reader in stages to this conclusion.

This book will repay the close and careful attention of the reader who is sufficiently interested in Advaita's sophisticated and sustained arguments to follow Saha's erudite and intimately knowledgeable account. Although it is itself very deeply embedded in the demanding and arcane English of scholarly Indian philosophy, it provides a great deal of rich material for those who would benefit from it in their quest to take the dense and contextual terminology of classical Indian philosophy to a wider, global audience of philosophers.