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Śabdapramāṇa as a Theological Category in Vedānta Deśika's Tattvamuktākālāpa

Sucharita Adluri

Abstract: This article considers the Śrīvaiṣṇava theologian Vedānta Deśika's (14th-century CE) understanding of śabdapramāṇa and deference to śabdapramāṇa that is evident in one of his most important expositions the Tattvamuktākālāpa and its commentary the Sarvārthasiddhi. For Deśika, deference to śabdapramāṇa is motivated by belief in a particular view of reality. This would be the acceptance of Viṣṇu as the Brahman of the upa-niṣads, his connection to authoritative scripture, and its propagation. Furthermore, to defer to śabdapramāṇa requires membership in a community and the requisite pedagogical training that confers the authority needed to speak for the tradition.

In the context of Indian *darśana*-s reliance on scripture (*śabdapramāṇa*) is decisive in arguments of soteriological import. Other epistemological categories like perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*) though valid, ultimately defer to the contents of the Veda on issues of metaphysics and ontology. But what does commitment to *śabdapramāṇa* mean? One way to assess this is by examining intellectual discourse that relies on scripture to evaluate the scope of sacred texts in theological argumentation. That is, an investigation of theological reasoning through examples that illustrate reliance on scripture. Another avenue of inquiry is to examine the motivations and qualifications on which deference to *śabdapramāṇa* is predicated. This article is concerned with the latter issue. Examining the discussion of the category of *śabdapramāṇa*, in a Sanskrit text of Vedānta Deśika (14th-century CE), a proponent of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, this article poses and answers the following questions—‘what does deference to *śabdapramāṇa* mean for Deśika?’ ‘What criteria characterize his commitment to scripture?’ Such an examination, however, does not imply that there is a monolithic understanding of reliance on scripture. The present discussion on the nature of one’s reliance on scripture is limited to the context of theological discourse or

śāstraic discourse since a practitioner's engagement and understanding of commitment to *śabdapramāṇa* may intersect and/or diverge from that of a theologian. For Deśika, reliance on *śabdapramāṇa*, in the *Tattvamuktākālāpa* (TMK), first and foremost implies an understanding and acceptance of a set of views about the supreme deity Viṣṇu's role as the primal teacher. Second, deference to *śabdapramāṇa* presupposes membership in a religious community. Third, commitment to and reliance on scripture require extensive pedagogical training. Thus, deference to *śabdapramāṇa* is a collective endeavour and not the undertaking of a lone individual. Beginning with a discussion on Śrīvaiṣṇava theology of which Deśika was a proponent, this article examines each of the three criteria that inform his understanding of deference to scripture.

Śrīvaiṣṇava theology

The Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India revere the deity Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa and his consort Śrī. Beginning with Nāthamuni (9th-century CE), who is considered to be the first important proponent, the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition (*sampradāya*) undergoes a complex development of synthesising and systematising the hymns of the Tamil Ālvār saints, the Sanskrit tradition of Vedānta, and Pāñcarātra. The Śrīvaiṣṇava interpretation of Vedānta called Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta¹ articulated by Nāthamuni and then Yāmuna (10th-century CE) was further developed by Rāmānuja (1077–1157 CE), who is said to have systematised this type of Vedānta. Subsequently, Vedānta Deśika (14th-century CE) consolidates Rāmānuja's teachings, defends Viśiṣṭādvaita against the criticisms of rival schools of thought, and is recognised as one of its leading exponents. The primary source for this study is the TMK the most important exposition of Deśika along with his commentary, the *Sarvārthasiddhi* (SS). In its scope, the TMK as an exposition of Viśiṣṭādvaita principles is encyclopaedic. In fact, Deśika states that the purpose of this composition is to establish the doctrines of Vedānta based on a critical evaluation of teachings advocated by rival schools of thought,² and that it is an exhaustive treatise for 'what is not treated here is not found elsewhere'.³ We may construe from this that the TMK was intended for Viśiṣṭādvaita theologians and perhaps theologians of rival schools, that is, those engaged in *śāstraic* discourse. In fact, the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition defines the *Sarvārthasiddhi*, the commentary on TMK, as an intellectual shield to defend oneself from the onslaught of outsiders.⁴

The TMK, which comprises five hundred verses in the *śṛgadhara* metre, is divided into five sections, which are like the strands of the pearl necklace (*muktākālāpa*) that is the text itself. The five strands (*sara*) cover topics salient to Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, namely, substance (*dravya*), individual soul (*jīva*), Brahman (*īśvara*), epistemology (*buddhi*), and metaphysical attributes (*adravya*).⁵ Scripture and its use as valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) of Brahman is addressed in the fourth section titled *buddhisara* (the knowledge strand) in verses 114–123.⁶ Here, Deśika begins by differentiating the Veda from extra-Vedic texts, considers the validity of *smṛti* as a

basic component of *śabdapramāṇa*, and concludes with an evaluation of particular *smṛti* traditions, such as the *purāṇa*, *Paśupata*, *Sāṃkhya*, and *Pañcarātra*. What is apparent in this discussion is not only what Deśika considers as *śabdapramāṇa*, but also what he means by reliance on *śabdapramāṇa*. That is, according to Deśika, a claim such as, ‘I defer to scripture’, in the context of commentarial and exegetical pursuits, entails a particular cognitive orientation, religious affiliation, and specialised training. Each of these three criteria is examined in the following sections.

Viṣṇu and *śabdapramāṇa*

Deference to *śabdapramāṇa* implies an ontological framework. According to Viśiṣṭādvaita, it is the understanding and acceptance that Viṣṇu, the Brahman of the *upaniṣads* is the cause of world production, preservation, and dissolution and exists in a soul-body relationship with his creation. For Deśika and other Viśiṣṭādvaitins, Viṣṇu also promulgates the *Veda* and various *smṛti* traditions, which comprise the Śrīvaiṣṇava scriptural canon. This section follows some of Deśika’s arguments on the validity of *śruti*, and *smṛti* traditions such as *purāṇas* and *pāñcarātra*, in some detail to illustrate that deference to *śabdapramāṇa* presumes the acceptance of a particular set of views about Viṣṇu’s role in the perpetuation and propagation of scripture. In other words, to properly defer to scripture implies an understanding of Viṣṇu as the source of all valid scripture in one sense or another.

Rāmānuja,⁷ Deśika’s predecessor, describes the function of scripture as follows: ‘therefore, *śāstra* alone is your *pramāṇa* in determining what is to be done and what is not, in determining what is to be accepted and what is not. The *Veda* augmented (*upabṛmhita*) by the *dharmaśāstras*, *itihāsas*, and *purāṇas*, teach only the highest reality called *Puruṣottama*, his pleasing form and the actions that are the means to attain Him.’⁸ Deśika, too, highlights these characteristics of *Veda* to invoke it as the organising principle differentiating Vedic and extra-Vedic traditions.⁹

The use of *Veda* as a measure of orthodoxy (*vedamūla*)¹⁰ is based on its authorlessness (*apauruṣeyatva*) and its eternality (*nityatva*). Deliberations on these attributes of the *Veda* were first undertaken by *Mīmāṃsā* in the context of sacrifice and the ritual implication of language. These speculations were later translated into the context of the exegetical tradition of *Vedānta*.¹¹ Although there may seem to be similarities to the *Mīmāṃsā* conception of *Veda* as authorless and eternal, there are major differences.¹² On the one hand, ‘the *Veda* is authorless and eternal because it is being uttered in that very order, which is remembered by an impression generated in the order in which it has been uttered again and again previously.’¹³ On the other hand, Viśiṣṭādvaita also takes great pains to describe the manifestation (*āviṣṭ*) of *Veda* by Viṣṇu.

Characteristic of Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita subscribes to the periodic dissolution and production of the world. However, even within this scenario, the Veda is still authorless and eternal. Rāmānuja explains—

when a [great] dissolution¹⁴ comes to an end, the Blessed One, the supreme Person, remembers the previous configuration of the world, and having resolved, ‘Let me be many’, he diversifies [into individual entities] the whole aggregate of enjoyable [i.e. non-conscious beings] and their enjoyers [i.e. conscious beings], previously collapsed in himself as but his residual power. Having created as old the *Mahat* etc [i.e. the cosmic material principle(s)] and the Brahmā-Egg [or universe itself] right up to Hiranyagarbha, and having manifested the Vedas in their traditional order, he imparts them as before to Hiranyagarbha, instructing him as to the production of the world and comprising the forms of gods etc., while he himself remains as its inner self.¹⁵

The Veda rooted in Brahman’s essence manifests in the same order from epoch to epoch and therefore authorless and eternal. Viṣṇu imparts the Veda to Brahmā (Hiranyagarbha/Prajāpati), in the same order as before and following this, the Vedic seers directly perceive or experience the Veda and reproduce and transmit them unaltered. To defer to the Veda implies an understanding and an acceptance of the role of Viṣṇu in the process of Vedic transmission. Deśika does not mention all this detail in the TMK, however, as a follower of Rāmānuja, he subscribes to this scenario of Viṣṇu’s role in evoking, manifesting, and transmitting the Veda which ‘reposes’ within His consciousness.¹⁶ While the role of Viṣṇu in the propagation of Veda is implied in Deśika’s discussion as he is more concerned with refuting the Prābhākaras and Naiyāyikas, in the discussion of the validity of smṛti, he is explicit in scripture’s connection to Viṣṇu.

As Viṣṇu’s essence, the Veda is authorless, eternal, and beyond the vicissitudes of matter (*pradhāna*), but smṛti, which is authored by various sages is susceptible to the three qualities (*guṇa*) of matter (*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*). Deśika begins with some general arguments as to why smṛti is a valid means of knowledge of Viṣṇu. He claims that generally, smṛti are declared as equal (*samāna*) to Veda¹⁷ by śruti, eminent teachers, and smṛti texts themselves. Thus smṛti’s validity is rooted in śruti. Also, both smṛti and śruti are said to have the same soteriological goals (*prayojana*). This goal that is shared by both types of scripture is of course liberation, which is the soul’s experience of eternal bliss as defined in the Śrīvaiṣṇava context. Subsequently, Deśika begins his discussion of the purāṇas by stating the first rule in the categorisation of smṛti, in Vedānta traditions—if contradiction with Veda is seen, smṛti is rejected as is established by the commentaries on *Brahma Sūtras*.¹⁸ For purāṇas he notes

similarly, this rule applies to the beginning of purāṇas due to the possibility that there could be human errors. If however, there is a contradiction between

the purāṇas, the order of validity/rule of strength would depend on the division such as *sāttvika* and so on.¹⁹

Purāṇas that are contradictory to śruti are invalid, but the hierarchy among various purāṇas is evaluated based on a classification mentioned in the *Matsya Purāṇa*, which accords the highest authority to Vaiṣṇava purāṇas since they are thought to be *sāttvika* in nature.²⁰ The rationale is that after Viṣṇu creates Brahmā, in epochs when the latter's *sattva* dominates he praises Viṣṇu, in epochs when his *rajas* dominates; he praises Agni and Śiva, and when his *tamas* dominates he praises himself. In the mixed epochs the goddess Sarasvatī and the Manes are praised. Although the propagator of the purāṇas may be Brahma, as an embodied being comprised of *pradhāna* and its three *guṇa* constituents, he cannot escape their effect. However, since the purāṇas that revere Viṣṇu are composed when his *sattva guṇa* dominates, they are the most authoritative.

Although Deśika, here, does not reject the various purāṇas as contrary to the Veda, he does validate the Vaiṣṇava ones as most authoritative, especially if there is a mutual contradiction among these purāṇas. The classification of purāṇas, which is the same as that of Rāmānuja, articulates allegiance to Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta and reads the supremacy of Viṣṇu, the Brahman of the upaniṣads, into the categorisation of sectarian purāṇas. The rationalisation as to why rival purāṇas are not valid is ultimately an ontological issue; it is the nature of Viṣṇu's creation. Smṛti texts as authored texts cannot escape the influence of *pradhāna* and are inherently prone to errors and faults. Viṣṇu, however, does provide an alternative in the form of Vaiṣṇava purāṇas that are purely *sāttvika* in nature and thus escape the effects of the other two qualities of *pradhāna*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Viṣṇu does not promulgate the purāṇas, but as the sole object of praise of the *sāttvika*-minded Brahmā, and as the eminent object of praise of the Vaiṣṇava purāṇas his connection to them is significant. Commitment to *śabdapramāṇa* thus includes knowledge of and acceptance of Viṣṇu's connection to the most authoritative of purāṇas.

The discussion of Pāñcarātra's validity shares some similarities to the purāṇa debate in that these texts also, since they are authored by embodied beings are susceptible to the deleterious effects of *pradhāna*. While the argument for the validity of Vaiṣṇava purāṇas is based on the *sāttvika* nature of Brahmā, Deśika utilises different principles in his refutation of arguments contra- Pāñcarātra. The reception of smṛti traditions such as Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Paśupata, and Pāñcarātra, by other *darśana*-s has been varied. Kumārila in his *Tantravārttika* for instance, denounces these traditions as extra-Vedic, though not completely outside the bounds of Vedic tradition like Buddhism and Jainism.²¹ The *Mahābhārata* (MBh) deems Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Pāñcarātra as smṛti traditions that are read together with the Veda.²² The *Brahma Sūtras*, one of the foundational texts of Vedānta reject Sāṃkhya and Yoga,²³ while Pāñcarātra's status within Vedānta²⁴ is complex, as the interpretations of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja differ vastly. Of these

smṛti traditions, it is only Pāñcarātra that has been adopted into the Vedāntic fold primarily because of Vaiṣṇava Vedānta.

To be sure there are doctrinal differences on the presentation of the highest reality (*tattva*) within Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Pāñcarātra, but ultimately for Deśika, Pāñcarātra is valid because it has been taught by Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa himself. In regards Sāṃkhya and Yoga he claims,

due to excessive errors, on account of *pradhāna*, there would be doubt of some good people; read together with śruti, by logic they are not to be refuted, but the contradiction with śruti is not removed²⁵

Thus, according to him, the MBh is right to advocate their acceptability from the point of view of reason and logic. However, these texts are not fully Vedic because of the sheer number of contradictions to śruti, and so their validity must be rejected.

However, as a smṛti tradition, Pāñcarātra too is similar to Sāṃkhya and Paśupata and is not above the effects of *pradhāna*. Deśika's reasoning for Pāñcarātra, now, focuses on the role of Viṣṇu in its propagation and transmission. Pāñcarātra is beyond these faults engendered by *pradhāna*, a characteristic of authored texts, but through devotees such as Pauṣkara and Śaṇḍilya, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa himself, expounds the Pāñcarātra.²⁶ This is similar to Kṛṣṇa's role as the teacher of the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhG). Furthermore, the sages who are the recipients of this teaching are characterised by *sattva* and hence above all faults that characterises association with *pradhāna*.

Unlike Sāṃkhya and Yoga, Pāñcarātra is authoritative because it is also part of Viṣṇu's cosmic plan. In BhG 4.8, Kṛṣṇa claims that he is born repeatedly for the protection of the good people, destruction of the wicked, and the establishment of dharma. Rāmānuja commenting on this BhG verse notes that 'good people' here refer to the best among the Vaiṣṇavas (*vaiṣṇavāgresara*) who have taken refuge in Kṛṣṇa.²⁷ Deśika echoes Rāmānuja's interpretation of the BhG when he claims, 'the activity or manifestation'²⁸ of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa is two-fold—for leading the *asuras* astray and for the protection of his followers. In regard to Pāñcarātra, the goal is for the protection of the good people and therefore those completely characterized by *sattva* such as Śaṇḍilya and so on, are themselves teachers of those texts.²⁹ Although Deśika does not specify what he means by 'good people', I think Rāmānuja's interpretation from BhG 4.8 can apply. He instructs sages on Pāñcarātra to protect his devotees and since only teachers characterised by *sattva* are the mediators, this smṛti tradition is above all faults. So, beginning with his role in the transmission of the Veda, as the auspicious object of the most authoritative of purāṇas, as a teacher in the BhG, and now in propounding the Pāñcarātra, Viṣṇu is ever-present and persists in conveying different scriptures to those who take refuge in him.³⁰

In Deśika's refutation of a last objection made by the *pūrvapakṣin* on the inclusion of Pāñcarātra as *śabdapramāṇa* and the exclusion of Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and

Paśupata, Viṣṇu's special relationship to Pāñcarātra is underscored. The objector claims that since all doctrines (*siddhānta*) such as Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and so on are concerned with the all-knowing Īśvara's divine cognition, which is eternal, and 'because, all doctrines are manifested through Īśvara; among these, how is Pāñcarātra different?'³¹ Deśika replies that Pāñcarātra is superior to other smṛti traditions 'because it is spoken by *bhagavān*, because it is accepted by authoritative men (*adhikāri*) such as Śaṇḍilya who are characterised by *sattva*, and because it is not contrary to the Veda, from these and for a hundred other reasons their difference is established'.³² The final justification, however, is that 'Pāñcarātra because of its validity (*pramāṇatva*) abides in divine cognition while the other tantras abide in divine cognition due to their invalidity (*apramāṇatva*)'.³³ 'Because Īśvara (Viṣṇu) is all-knowing, Vedas and Buddhist texts and so on abide in his cognition equally. By this however, there is no similarity among them. It is the same case here as well, this is the intention.'³⁴ Ultimately, though the all-knowing Viṣṇu is cognisant of various traditions, he only holds Pāñcarātra as valid. Thus, these texts cannot be argued as valid on the mere basis of Viṣṇu's awareness of them.

An examination of Deśika's discussion, thus far, illustrates particular connections between Viṣṇu and authoritative scripture in the Śrīvaiṣṇava understanding of *śabdapramāṇa*. Viṣṇu imparts the Veda at the beginning of time through Prajāpati, is linked to authoritative Vaiṣṇava purāṇas as their sole object of praise, and now promulgates Pāñcarātra through worthy men such as Śaṇḍilya, and so on. These examples draw attention to some of the criteria on which commitment to scripture is predicated. Deference to *śabdapramāṇa* for Deśika, implies a set of views on what scripture is and the relationship of Viṣṇu to these texts. Whereas the understanding and acceptance of scripture discussed thus far may seem to be just a cognitive attitude, the practical dimensions of what it means to defer to scripture, according to Deśika, are presented in the next two sections.

Religious community and *śabdapramāṇa*

The second criterion implied in Deśika's understanding of *śabdapramāṇa* is membership in a community. Deśika's discussion on the validity of Veda in relation to extra-Vedic texts underscores the connection between commitment to *śabdapramāṇa* and religious affiliation. That is, according to Deśika in the TMK, one properly defers to *śabdapramāṇa* when one is a member of Vedic society, since that is the prerequisite for access to relevant scriptures. Elsewhere, Deśika notes that 'scripture and reason declare unanimously that the distinctions of *varṇa* and *jāti* and the rules of conduct the *śāstras* prescribe accordingly are still fully valid among Bhāgavatas'.³⁵ Such priority given to one's caste and the role of scripture in attaining liberation is a major doctrinal difference that leads to the Tēṅkalai-Vaṭakalai sectarian rift within Śrīvaiṣṇavism in the 17th century.³⁶ Nonetheless, even the Tēṅkalai sub-sect's appeal to the Tamil Ālvār hymns rather than Sanskrit

scriptures does not preclude the importance of religious affiliation in connection with commitment to scripture.

In his discussion on the validity of śruti, Deśika refutes the 10th-century logician, Udayana, author of the *Nyāyakusumāñjali* (NK).³⁷ As one of the foremost proponents of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika theism, Udayana comprehensively treats śruti's validity in the context of a rational doctrine of Īśvara. One of the arguments in the Nyāya defence of Veda's validity was that it was accepted by the *mahājana*.³⁸ Udayana and other logicians utilise the concept of *mahājanaparigraha* to infer that the Veda is the work of a trustworthy person.³⁹ That is, the Veda is accepted by the *mahājana* (*mahājanaparigraha*) because they are the words of a trustworthy person, Īśvara. For Udayana, *mahājana* constitutes not just the followers of Vedic dharma, but exemplary men of other traditions as well. Although Udayana might seem more catholic in his interpretation of *mahājana*, he takes great pains to argue the difference between the *mahājana* who accept the Vedic tradition and those who adhere to extra-Vedic traditions.⁴⁰ Deśika rejects this interpretation of *mahājana* and it is this section of Udayana's *Nyāyakusumāñjali* that he references in the TMK. While for Udayana, the term *mahājanaparigraha* is primarily a corollary in establishing Īśvara's authorship of the Veda, for Deśika, acceptance by *mahājana* is a characteristic feature of Veda alone reflecting certain social distinctions.

Deśika's interpretation of this term seems more restrictive in the sense that he understands it to refer solely to those who accept the Veda. *Mahājana* are adherents of the Veda exclusively. He states that only men who are deliberate and wise⁴¹ (*prekṣāvanto mahānta*) accept this endless Veda along with its *aṅga*-s.⁴² Therefore, the claim that there is equality in the acceptance of Vedic texts and extra-Vedic texts does not hold. Neither does *mahājanaparigraha* mean acceptance by a great number of men, it only means acceptance by excellent men (*bahujanaparigrahitatvam na mahājanaparigraha api tu utkrṣṭajanaparigraha*). Moreover, the intention is that, these wise men accept only the validity of the Veda (*sa tu vedeṣu eva*). For Deśika, neither the Veda nor those who adhere to it can in anyway be compared to the followers of other traditions. Thus *utkrṣṭajana* employing the Veda as the standard do not expand or spread the extra-Vedic texts in the same way that they endlessly extend the Vedas because the latter are the limit or boundary beyond which they do not venture.⁴³ So unlike Udayana, for whom *mahājana* may include wise men following even other traditions, for Deśika, *mahājana* by definition can only mean those who accept the Veda.

So, why would unwise men (*anutkrṣṭajana*) accept the validity of extra-Vedic texts? According to him, there are two types of acceptance (*parigraha*)—acceptance by someone who is supported by faith (*kaścid āstikyanibandana*) and the other, acceptance by someone because of the desire for trivial aims and goals (*alpalapaprayoanābhilasād अपरा*).⁴⁴ Moreover, the fact that these men cling to goals that are unworthy or *nāstikya* is also reflected in their other limitations. For an enumeration of these limitations, Deśika summarises Udayana's discussion

on the differences between those who accept Veda and those who reject it. The *mahājana* who accept the Veda, he claims in the NK, are above all faults

Thus indolence etc (*ālasyādi*) cannot account for the acceptance of the Veda; for it prescribes rites and other observances that are difficult to accomplish. Nor is the Veda accepted by persons to whom admission has been denied in other ways of life (such as Buddhism) having other āgamas; for even those that are revered by other ways of life are not admitted as adherents of the Veda. Likewise, the acceptance of the Veda is not because of heedlessness of the distinction between lawful food and unlawful food and drinks; for the Veda precisely aims at establishing the distinction between the two and forbids the eating and drinking of certain things. The acceptance of the Veda cannot be due to an illusion resulting from the habit of false reasonings; for the Vedic observances extend even to children. It cannot be due to deception arising from association with heretics or imposters; for the Veda and its practices are transmitted from father to son.⁴⁵

Deśika, too, notes that ‘limitations⁴⁶ are seen in those who accept them (extra-Vedic texts) such as—lack of a foundation, laxity in religious observances, delusion due to the infatuation with logic, and leniency in food and dress etc—contrary to what is in the Veda.’⁴⁷ In his commentary on this verse he elaborates further on these impediments. The fact that the unwise lack a foundation means that they have no recourse to any other resource (*ananyagati*), especially the path of the Veda; they are lax in behaviour such as having contempt for rules that are enjoined or prohibited (*kartavyākartavyaniyama*). They are trapped by the deceit of heretical teachings (*parair vañcana*), the delusion due to the practice of false reasoning (*kutarkābhyāsavyāmoha*), and they are indulgent in food and dress etc (*aśanācchādanādisaukarya*).

Deśika’s discussion of the concept of *mahājanaprarigraha* emphasises commitment to the Veda as predicated on a particular social ethic. His interpretation of the term *mahājana* as *utkrṣṭajana* discloses the issue of religious affiliation that is implied in the commitment to *śabdapramāṇa*. The Veda and its soteriologic ethic, as interpreted by Deśika, are only accessible to the twice-born that study and practice the Veda in a particular way. Thus, to defer to the Veda, as Deśika understands it, in the TMK, is to participate in such a religious community.

Pedagogical training and śabdapramāṇa

In addition to membership in a religious community deference to *śabdapramāṇa* as exemplified in the TMK, requires specialised training. In the discussion on the concept of *mahājana* in the previous section, Deśika refutes the argument of the 10th-century logician, Udayana. To accomplish this requires in-depth knowledge of not only Viśiṣṭādvaita but also the Nyāya view of *śabdapramāṇa*. Fluency in such

matters is something accessible only to those trained to speak for the tradition and not simply a Śrīvaiṣṇava practitioner. Deference to *śabdapramāṇa*, according to Deśika's TMK, is not simply an awareness of a list of scriptures that are considered authoritative. One who is capable of deferring to *śabdapramāṇa* is also someone who is trained and knowledgeable to engage in apologetics and rule on disputed issues. The two examples in this section, illustrate the importance of pedagogical training for the proper application of *śabdapramāṇa*. The context of the first illustration is the issue of lost Vedic branches as it concerns certain rituals enjoined in *smṛti* such as the *aṣṭakā srāddha* (funerary) rites, which are not referred to in any of the existent branches of the Veda. Thus, the presumption that all actions of Vaidikas are rooted in the Veda is questioned. Various traditions explain this issue by claiming either that the Vedic branches that mention those texts have been lost or that the existence of such a Veda must be inferred. The second example is taken from one of Deśika's arguments on the validity of Pāñcarātra.

The controversy in regard to rites and rituals enjoined by *smṛti* but that are not found in extant Veda has been dealt with differently by different traditions.⁴⁸ Deśika in the TMK refutes the arguments of the Prābhākāras and Naiyāyikas to establish the Viśiṣṭādvaita point of view. This argument is only sketched here, in brief, since it is really the implication of this argument that is of interest. For the Prābhākāras, the existence of *śruti* which form the basis of rites such as *aṣṭakā* are inferred. Meaning that, as in the present day, in previous times also, Vedic people were undertaking these rituals in accordance with previously existing *smṛtis*. The validity of the practices as rooted in an eternal Veda was inferred by one's predecessors as is done today. Thus the existence of *śruti* in which the *smṛti* (such as that which enjoins *aṣṭakā* and so on) is rooted is arrived at through inference. The Nyāya perspective is that the branch of the Veda that is the root of such rites and traditions is presently lost.

Deśika's objection to the Prābhākāra view is that by not apprehending those *śruti*, simply inferring that their existence, would mean that the provenance of these rites is rooted in blind tradition (*andhasantānanīti*) and not rooted in *śruti* that is eternal and perceptible.⁴⁹ Deśika's view on this matter is that *smṛti* traditions such as the *aṣṭakā* rituals have their origin in *śruti* that have been studied by men somewhere (*kvāpi*), because it is *śruti* (*śrutitvāt*). Indeed, *śruti* is the recitation in some place of a collection of words with the palate etc. If the condition for recitation is due to the recognition of an ear and a speaker, how then can *śruti* be inferred?⁵⁰

Deśika also rejects the Nyāya argument of the rootedness of the tradition of the *śiṣṭa-s* in lost Vedic *śākhās*.⁵¹ He proposes a distinction between lost (*ucchina*) *śruti* and dispersed (*aprakirṇa*) *śruti*. He is willing to admit that some branches of the Veda, in the present time, in the present place, can be accepted as lost, but he cannot agree, if it is said that these *śākhā-s* have been lost in all the lands, for all time, because something that is eternal cannot be lost.⁵² Deśika rejects the rootedness of *smṛti* practices such as *aṣṭakā* simply as tradition (*ācāra*) and also objects

to the view of the lost Vedas.⁵³ Both these views go against his definition of śruti as the eternal essence of Brahman that preexists eternally and is manifest in a particular order and uttered in a specific pattern from time immemorial. To engage in such exegetical discussions requires a comprehensive interreligious understanding and an exhaustive knowledge of one's own tradition as well.

The second illustration taken from Deśika's defence of Pāñcarātra, demonstrates that Pāñcarātra's claims of superiority were severely criticised by opponents since certain texts of this smṛti tradition claimed supremacy to even the Vedas. For instance, in the *Sāttvata Saṃhita* it is said 'then not gaining the goal by studying the Vedas and its aṅgas, Śaṇḍilya (declared) the Pāñcarātra tantra'.⁵⁴ Deśika follows his predecessor Rāmānuja in contextualising this statement with reference to the *bhūmavidyā* section of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (7.1ff). There, it is said that even though Nārada is well versed in all the Vedas and the auxiliary sciences, he is still ignorant of the self.⁵⁵ Deśika argues that this statement does not mean that this upaniṣad rejects the authority of the whole Vedic tradition, it simply means that its teaching alone will lead to self-realisation. Just as texts like this upaniṣad cannot be considered contrary to the Veda, so is the case with Pāñcarātra.⁵⁶ Finally, Deśika ends his defence of Pāñcarātra by referring to Yāmuna's *Āgamaprāmāṇya*⁵⁷ and Rāmānuja's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*,⁵⁸ which he says explains all these issues and are the foundational texts that prove the authority of the Pāñcarātra smṛti.⁵⁹ Such statements are only meant to praise Pāñcarātra but not devalue the Veda.⁶⁰ Juxtaposing the TMK, with those of his predecessors, Deśika deftly creates a single curriculum, by resolving contradictions across various texts and postulating a single unified category of *śabdapramāṇa*. To defer to *śabdapramāṇa* in some ways means an ability to utilise it to such exegetical ends. This illustration also demonstrates the very important issue of teacher-pupil lineage (*guruparamparā*). Deśika considers himself a descendent of the lineage of important Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers such as Yāmuna, and Rāmānuja. Exegetical training, teachers, and years of study prepare one to ably defer to *śabdapramāṇa* and are implied in Deśika's understanding of deference to scripture. In this sense reliance on scripture is a feature of the intellectual activity of a religious community as a whole, it is a communal undertaking and is linked to the propagation and transmission of a tradition.

Conclusion

Clooney in his seminal article on Hindu theology writes that '[r]easoning carried forward without regard for authoritative religious sources needs to be distinguished from reasoning marked by attention to scripture and other religious authorities; the latter is theological reasoning'.⁶¹ Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta's reliance on scripture certainly qualifies it as theological discourse. Extrapolating what Deśika understands as deference to *śabdapramāṇa* from his discussion on

authoritative scripture, this article has identified certain criteria on which that commitment to scripture is predicated in the context of *śāstraic* discourse.

Deference to *śabdapramāṇa* does not simply mean recognition of certain scriptures as authoritative and valid, and their use but an orientation toward these texts motivated by belief in a particular view of reality. In Śrīvaiṣṇavism this would be the acceptance of Viṣṇu as the Brahman of the upanishad, his connection to authoritative scripture, and in its propagation. Furthermore, to defer to *śabdapramāṇa* according to Deśika requires membership in a community and the requisite pedagogical training that confers the authority needed to speak for the tradition. Certain aspects such as tradition (*sampradāya*), lineage (*paramaparā*), intellectual (*śāstra*) discourse, and authority (*adhikāra*) form the very core of deference to *śabdapramāṇa* as understood in the Śrīvaiṣṇava context. Deśika's understanding of deference to *śabdapramāṇa* carries with it the issues and concerns of a whole tradition and to defer to scripture is not an autonomous endeavour. For Deśika then, deference to scripture as a characteristic feature of theology would include the above-mentioned criteria.

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Notes

- 1 In this article, the terms Śrīvaiṣṇavism and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta are used interchangeably.
- 2 Varadacharya, TMK 1.1–4; Chari 9.
- 3 *yannāsmiṇ kvāpi naitat* (Varadacharya, TMK 5.134).
- 4 *Nyāyasiddhāñjana*, Chari 8.
- 5 *adravya* in Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta encompasses qualities of a substance that cannot themselves become substrates for other qualities, such as the three qualities of *prakṛti*, sound, touch, colour, and so on (Dvivedi, SS 5.2).
- 6 TMK 4.111—refutation of the Nyāya claim that validity of Veda is due to its composition by a trustworthy person (*īśvara*). TMK 4.112—refutation of the Nyāya view that the Veda was at the beginning, undivided into branches. TMK 4.113—argues the eternity of the Veda (Varadacharya).
- 7 For more on Rāmānuja and scripture see, Adluri (2006).
- 8 *tasmāt kāryākāryavyavasthitau upadeyānupadeyavyavasthāyām śāstram eva tava pramāṇam. dharmāśāstreṭihāsapurāṇādyupabṛmhitā vedā yad eva puruṣottamākhyam param tattvam tatpriṇarūpam tat prāptiyupāyabhūtam ca karma avabodhayanti* (Virarāghavācārya, RBhGBh 16.24).
- 9 Varadacharya, TMK 4.114–115.
- 10 Halbfass (1991, pp. 23–49).
- 11 Clooney (1987).
- 12 Beginning with 4.101, Deśika considers and refutes the views of rival schools on the nature of language, knowledge, and the Veda (Varadacharya).
- 13 *etadeva vedānām apauruṣeyatvam nityatvam ca, yat pūrvapūrvocchāraṇakramajanita saṃskāreṇa tameva kramaviśeṣam smṛtvā tenaiva kramenocchāryamāṇatvam* (van Buitenen, § 139).

- 14 There are two types of dissolution. A partial dissolution is characterised by the destruction of all creation up to, but not inclusive of Brahmā. During complete dissolution, all entities including the creator god Brahmā are absorbed into Viṣṇu.
- 15 Lipner (1986, p. 8).
- 16 Ibid., p. 9.
- 17 In contrast to Rāmānuja, for whom smṛti served to augment or corroborate (*upabṛmhaṇa*) the meaning of the Veda, Deśika, at least in the TMK, simply seeks to prove the equivalence between these two categories of *śabdapramāṇa*, but stops short of declaring smṛti as *apauruṣeya* and *nitya*. No longer is smṛti seen as serving a corroborative function, but instead once it is deemed valid, it has the same standing as the Veda.
- 18 *drṣṭe vedair virodhe smṛtipariharaṇam sūtrabhāṣyādisiddham* (Varadacharya, TMK 4.119).
- 19 *tadvan nītiḥ purāṇaprabhṛtiṣu bhavinām sambhavād vibhramādeḥ syād anyonyam virodhe tu iha balaniyatis sātṭvikādibhedāt* (TMK 4.119).
- 20 *In the epochs of tamas, the glories of Agni and Śiva are praised (Matsya Purāṇa 290.14cd). And in the epochs of rajas, the greater glory of Brahmā is considered (Matsya Purāṇa 290.14ef)*
Then in the epochs of sattva, the even greater glory of Hari is sung.
In these ages alone, those perfected by means of yoga, will reach the highest goal.
In the mixed ages, that of Sarasvatī and the Manes (Matsya Purāṇa 290.15).
- 21 Halbfass (1991, p. 61).
- 22 MBh *śāntiparvan* 12.339.111; 349.64.
- 23 Sāṃkhya and Pāsupata with their considerable divergence in doctrines and the path to liberation must necessarily be evaluated as invalid. If the Veda, according to Viśiṣṭādvaita, declares that Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa is the highest Brahman who is the material and instrumental cause of the universe, the Sāṃkhya claim of *pradhāna* as the material cause of the universe cannot be acceptable (Abhyankar, RBrSuBh 2.2.1ff). Similarly, the Pāsupāta claim that the material and instrumental cause as distinct and Pāsupati as the latter only, is unacceptable in the context of Vedānta (Abhyankar, RBrSuBh 2.2.36–39).
- 24 Viśiṣṭādvaita's appropriation of Pāñcarātra begins with Yāmuna and Deśika borrows some of his arguments from him. For more on Yāmuna and Pāñcarātra see, van Buitenen (1971) and Oberhammer (1971).
- 25 *bhūyasyarthe pradhāne vihitamati sattām samśayaśca kvacit syāt śrutyā bādham na rundhe śrutisahapāṭhitir hetvahantavyatā ca* (Varadacharya, TMK 4.120).
- 26 *pañcrārātrasya kṛtsnasya vaktā nārāyaṇaḥ svayam* (Dvivedi, SS 4.121).
- 27 Vīrarāghavācārya, RBhGBh 4.8.
- 28 It is unclear if *pravṛtti* should be taken in the sense of Viṣṇu's cosmic actions generally such as being the primal teacher to Śāṇḍilya and so on, or specific cosmic activities like the incarnations. Although in the case of Kṛṣṇa, both interpretations apply.
- 29 *dvividhā khalu bhagavataḥ pravṛttiḥ asuramohanārtham āśritasamrakṣaṇārthaṁ ca. pañcarātre sattvottarajanasamrakṣaṇārtham eva pravṛttiḥ, ata eva sattvottarāś śāṇḍilyādāya evam tacchāstra-pravaktārah* (Dvivedi, SS 4.121).
- 30 For more on Deśika's views on Viṣṇu as the primal teacher see Clooney (2005a, 207–9).

- 31 *tasmād īśvarapravartye sarvasminn api siddhānte sati kaśyacit pañcarātrasya ko viśeṣaḥ* (Dvivedi, SS 4.123).
- 32 *ataḥ kvacit prāmāṇye pañcarātrasyaiva prāmāṇyam bhagavatproktaṭvāt śāṇḍilyādisattvotarādhikāri-parigrahaṭ vedavirodhābhāvāt anyasmādapi śataśaḥ pratipāditāt vaisamyāt siddhyati* (Dvivedi, SS 4.123).
- 33 *apramāṇatvena tantrāntarāṇīśvarabuddhisthāni pramāṇatvena pañcarātram iti* (Dvivedi, SS 4.123).
- 34 *īśvarasya sarvajñātvena tadbuddhisthatvam vedānām buddhāgamādināmapi samānam. naitāvataḥ tatra sāmyam. tadvad atrāpiti bhāvaḥ* (SS 4.123).
- 35 Mumme (2009, p. 182).
- 36 Ibid., pp. 167–84.
- 37 Chemparathy (1972).
- 38 Due to the ambiguous meaning of *mahat*, *mahājana* can have a qualitative or quantitative connotation, as ‘wise men’ or ‘a great number of men’, respectively. Udayana, however, retains both connotations and interprets the term as *bahutvātiśaya*—many eminent persons. See Chemparathy (1987, pp. 67–80).
- 39 Chemparathy (1987) examines Udayana’s argument on this matter in detail.
- 40 *Nyāyakusumāñjali* (NK), *stabaka* 2, pp. 302–3.
- 41 I translate *mahāntaḥ* qualitatively as this is Deśika’s intention.
- 42 *prekṣāvanto mahāntaḥ parijagrhur imam sādharmaṇaṁ aṅgair anantam* (Varadacharya, TMK 4.114).
- 43 *nettham prasṛtir* (Varadacharya, TMK 4.114).
- 44 Dvivedi, SS 4.114.
- 45 *na hyatra ālasyādir nimittam. duhkhamayakarmapradhānatvāt. nāpyanyatra siddhāpramāṇye’ bhyupāye’ nadhikāreṇa asmin ananyagatikatayā anyapraveśaḥ. paraiḥ pūjyānāmapyatrāpraveśāt. nāpi bhakṣyapeyādyadvaitarāgaḥ, tad vibhāgavyavasthāparatvāt. nāpi kutarkābhyāsā ‘hitavyāmohaḥ. ākumāram pravṛtteḥ. nāpi sambhavad vipralimbhapāṣaṇdasamsargaḥ pitrādikrameṇa pravarttanāt* (Padmaprasada and Sastri, 302; Chemparathy translation 1987, p. 75).
- 46 *upadhi* or *upādhi* is in the singular even though it refers to a list of limitations. It is singular with the intention of relation to each one of the limitations, ‘*upādhir iti ekavacanam pratyekānvayatātparyeṇa*’ (Varadacharya 2004, p. 669).
- 47 *dr̥ṣyante gatyabhāvo niyatiṣu laghimā vañcanam tarkamoho vṛttisvāsthyādi caīśāmupadhiradhigame vaiparītyam tu vede* (Varadacharya, TMK 4.114).
- 48 Pollock (2005, pp. 51–52).
- 49 Varadacharya, TMK 4.117; Dvivedi, SS 4.117.
- 50 *śrutitve nityānumeyatvavyāghātāt tālvādivyāpāraiḥ kvacid uccāryamāṇe varṇasamghātaviśeṣa eva hi śrutiḥ. tasya kathan nityānumeyatvam uccāraṇadaśāyām vaktr̥srotor upalambhāt* (Dvivedi, SS 4.117).
- 51 *śākhocchedastv idānīm iha yadi sa mataḥ sarvataś ced asiddhiḥ* (Dvivedi, TMK 4.117).
- 52 Varadacharya, TMK 4.118; Dvivedi, SS 4.118.
- 53 Fn 18, in Pollock (2005, p. 52).
- 54 *tarhi sāṅgeṣu vedeṣu niṣṭhām alabhamānaḥ śāṇḍilyaḥ pañcarātratantram adhītavān* (Dvivedi, SS 4.121).
- 55 Ch Up 7.1.2–3.
- 56 Also mentioned in Abhyankar, RBrSuBh 2.2.43.

57 van Buitenen (1971).

58 These issues are treated in Rāmānuja's *Brahmaūtrabhāṣya* 2.2.40–43 and Yāmuna's *Āgama-prāmāṇyam*. Also see Oberhammer (1971) on Yāmuna's interpretation of said *Brahma Sūtras*.

59 *etaccāgamprāmāṇye bhāṣyāḍau ca vistareṇānusamdheyam* (Dvivedi, SS 4.122).

60 Also mentioned in Abhyankar, RBrSuBh 2.2.43.

61 Clooney (2005b, p. 449). His discussion of substantive issues that characterise theology is sufficiently broad to include Buddhist theology as well, see Cabezon (1999).