Obsessive Clinging (*abhinivesha*):

A Perspective on Addiction from Yoga Psychology

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Introduction

Conceptual categories overlapping with the modern idea of "addiction" are prominent in the psychological analyses of Buddhist philosophy and the Yoga Darshana, the school of philosophy having Patanjali's *Yogasútras* as its authoritative basis.[1] Relevant categories are also present in classical Indian medicine (Ayurveda). These traditions have rich philosophical and theoretical bases and are also associated with systems of self-cultivation and/or therapeutics. Today, clinical studies on addiction treatment drawing from Buddhism (mainly forms of mindfulness meditation), yoga (usually modern postural yoga) and traditional Indian medicine proliferate.[2] Given these clinical applications and

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[1] Following the journal's conventions, Sanskrit is here transliterated according to Shri Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar's own system, which differs from IAST conventions. In brief, long vowels and retroflexion are both marked by a stroke similar to the acute accent (´). Although Sarkar's published writings do not discuss the system's basis, this diacritic has precedent in the ancient Latin apex sign used to mark long vowels, especially in epigraphy (see e.g. Oliver 1966). The diphthongs written as *ai* and *au* in IAST are instead *ae* and *ao*. Vocalic and consonantal *r* and *l* use the same character, distinguished only by phonetic context; likewise, *visarga* and the consonant *h* are both written *h*. The guttural and palatal nasals are written as *uṅ* and *iñ*, respectively (IAST *ṅ* and *ñ*), while the palatal and guttural sibilants (IAST *ś* and *ṣ*) are written as *sh* and *ś*, respectively.

Many of Sarkar's publications are based on oral lectures to his disciples, and in quoting from these I silently correct errors in Sanskrit spelling, etc., unlikely to be authorial. I cite English-language sources by paragraph number (§) from the *Electronic Edition of the Works of P. R. Sarkar, version 9* (abbreviation: EE9). Bangla and Hindi sources are quoted by page number.

[2] For a survey of mindfulness-based approaches to addiction treatment and a review of research, see Bowen et al. (2016). Recent meta-analyses of clinical studies of yoga and substance use disorder include Walia et al. (2021) and Brooks et al. (2021) (focused on women). I am

their well-acknowledged therapeutic potential,[3] serious endeavor to understand the theoretical and philosophical perspectives of these traditions on addiction is warranted. Perspectives from yoga traditions are especially underrepresented in the literature.[4] This brief essay examines a single conceptual category—*abhinivesha*—relevant to addiction in classical Yoga and in the thought of a twentieth-century Indian guru and philosopher, Shri Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (1922–1990), known to his disciples as Shrii Shrii Anandamúrti. While better known for the philosophy of Neohumanism, Sarkar's thought touches a variety of fields. Relatively little scholarship has been devoted to Sarkar as a philosopher of yoga,[5] but I hope to show that this is a productive lens for approaching his oeuvre.

How are deeply rooted dispositions to be addressed? Sarkar prescribes a rich array of spiritual, ethical, and physical practices. His book on yogic therapy and natural medicine also offers treatment plans for a variety of diseases, combining herbal medicines, yoga postures, diet, naturopathic treatment and so forth.

Etymologically, *abhinivesha* means something along the lines of "entering," "immersion," or "abiding" (*nivesha*, from the verb *vish* ["to enter"] with prefix *ni-*) in an intensive manner (additional prefix *abhi-*). It may refer to clinging to something tenaciously, whether to an object of desire, an idea, etc. The word has a complex history and multiple shades of meaning. My exploration here is indebted to Frederick Smith's (2023) recent article on *abhinivesha*, which examines the term in yoga and across Sanskrit literary genres.

In book II of the Yogasútra (hereafter "YS"), the *sádhana-páda*, Patanjali introduces the concept of *kleshas*: mental "afflictions" or "defilements" that impair the healthy functioning of thought. In brief, these are ignorance (*avidyá*), egotism (*asmitá*), passion or attachment (*rága*), hatred (*dveśa*), and *abhinivesha* (YS 2.3). A similar account of *kleshas* features in Yogácára Buddhism (Gokhale 2020: 70–71). Ignorance (*avidyá*) is the foundation of the other four (YS 2.4). The practice of yoga (*kriyáyoga*)—in this context defined as austerities (*tapah*), mantra-incantation (*svádhyáya*) and contemplation of God (*iishvaraprańidhána*) (YS 2.1)—leads to samádhi and causes attenuation of the *kleshas* (YS 2.2).

YS 2.9 elaborates upon the concept of *abhinivesha* without appearing to define it: *svarasaváhii vidúso 'pi tathá rúdho 'bhiniveshah*. Provisionally, we might translate this thus: "Tenacious clinging (*abhinivesha*) flows from one's own nature (*svarasaváhii*, lit. "flows from/with its/one's own sap/essence") and is developed/established (*rúdhah*) even in the wise (*vidúso 'pi*), just as [in others] (*tathá*)[6]." Cf. the translations of Smith (2023: 343), "Abhinivesha is ascendant even in a learned man, just as in others; it flows from one's own nature"; and Acri (2012: 506), "Persisting spontaneously, obsession springs up in this manner even in the wise." However, the Yoga Darshana's exegetical tradition, beginning with the *Bhášya* commentary on the *Yogasútras*, generally attributes to abhinivesha a much narrower meaning: "clinging to life," the will to live innate in all beings, even worms (*krmer api*)—hence also "fear of death." As Smith (pp. 343–45) notes, virtually all modern translations of the *Yogasútras* follow suit.

Years ago, I was intrigued to note that Shri Sarkar's explanations of *abhinivesha* differ starkly,

not aware of high-quality review articles concerned with Ayurveda-based addiction therapy.

[3] As Bowen et al. (2016: p. 187) conclude regarding mindfulness-based approaches to addiction, "We are at the beginning: there are many questions remaining to be explored, but preliminary evidence from increasingly large randomized controlled trials suggests that these questions are worth pursuing."

[4] Many examples of efforts to articulate a Buddhist perspective on addiction could be adduced; see for example Marlatt (2002), which is typical for its lack of philosophical and historical depth. More admirable in this regard is Kang (2010). Clinical perspectives dominate the literature on addiction and yoga. In this context yoga generally refers to modern postural yoga, and if discussions of yoga philosophy are present, these are often superficial (see e.g. Khanna and Greeson 2013).

[5] See Kang (2003) for a study of Sarkar's philosophy in its Indian philosophical context, including comparison to classical Yoga.

[6] Alternatively, *tathá* could mean "in the same manner [as the preceding *kleshas*]."

although these explanations occur in the context of citing the *Yogasútras*. I am aware of five discourses where Sarkar engages with the topic of *abhinivesha*: three lengthy discourses published in the *Subhášita Saḿgraha* series, parts 7, 8, and 24 (of 1958, 1959, and 1979), respectively; and two shorter discourses published in the *Ananda Vacanámrtam* series (parts 2 and 27). In brief, Sarkar defines *abhinivesha* as compulsive or obsessive behavior driven by mental conditioning (*saḿskára*; "reactive momenta," in Sarkar's technical terminology). He cites as the main example what we might call alcoholism, i.e. addiction to alcohol. I wondered at the time whether *abhinivesha* might not be a category in Sanskrit broadly applicable to "addiction," and observed that the term has a rich history in Indian philosophy that would merit further study.

My interest in the subject was renewed with the publication of Smith's illuminating 2023 article. As he shows, the term has a range of uses in different genres of literature and schools of philosophy, from "intense engagement" (in the *Káshikávrtti*, a grammar) and "fixed intent" (in the *Mahábhárata*) to "strong attachment" or "grasping" [onto something negative] in Buddhist philosophy. To elaborate on some of its Buddhist usages, the Madhyamaka Buddhist philosopher Candrakiirti, for example, lists abhinivesha as one of the synonyms of rága, "attachment" or "passion."[7] In Yogácára (i.e. Vijiṇánaváda) *abhinivesha* is used as a synonym of *prapaiṇca*, "spiritually negative clinging" (Schmithausen 1987: 360–61). The word's negative connotations are evident in Dharmashástra as well, where we find the expression *vitatha-abhinivesha* in the sense of "habituated or inclined to untruth."[8] The term also appears in Ayurveda: Smith (350–51) notes that the Cárakasaḿhitá describes a mental illness (*mánasa-roga*) called *atattva-abhinivesh*a, "clinging to the unreal." While Smith likens this to obsessive-compulsive disorder, it might in fact represent something closer to psychosis, though it "cannot be interpreted with any single modern mental disorder" (Rymbai et al. 2023: 509). More neutral and even positive meanings of abhinivesha are also attested: the *Bhakti-rasámrta-sindhu* of Jiiva Gosvámii, for instance, refers to "single-minded attachment to Dharma" (*dharma-eka-abhinivesha*, 4, 3.57), and in his commentary on the *Bhagavad-giitá* Shankara glosses *abhinivesha* with *niśthá*, "intent upon, devoted to" (5.17).

In what sense, then, did Patanjali intend *abhinivesha*? Given the degree to which Yogácára Buddhism informs Patanjali's technical terminology,[9] it is certainly possible that Patanjali had in mind a meaning such as "intense clinging." Indeed several scholars besides Smith have interpreted *abhinivesha* this way.[10] Gokhale (2020: 70–75) goes a step further and argues that Patanjali's *abhinivesha* should be interpreted as "dogmatic view," i.e. clinging to false views, on the basis of the Yogácára background to the *kleshas*, in which context *dŕśti* ("view") and *abhinivesha* appear to be interchangeable (at least in some examples). Still, there is a significant possibility that the *Bhášya's* explanation—clinging to life/the will to live—reflects Patanjali's intention precisely; contemporary specialists are increasingly inclined to view the *Bhášya* as an autocommentary, that is, as Patanjali's own explanation of the *Yogasútras*. According to this view, advanced most cogently by Maas (2013), the *Yogasútras* and *Bhášya* form a single composition, known by tradition as the *Pátaiṇjalayogashástra* (Patanjali's Treatise on Yoga). Even in this scenario, the *Bhášya's* interpretation of *abhinivesha* appears idiosyncratic, suggested neither by the *sútra* itself (YS 2.9) nor by closely-related philosophical literature. Later commentators nonetheless upheld this interpretation, including Shankara (to whom the *Vivarańa* commentary is attributed), Bhojadeva, Vácaspatimishra, etc. As way to reconcile this problem, Gelblum (1992) suggests that the *Bhášya's* comments on YS 2.9 were intended as an illustration rather than definition of *abhinivesha*. While there may

[7] The opening of the sixth book (*prakarańa*) of the Prasannapadá, commenting on the word *rága*, lists as synonyms *rága*, *sakti*, *adhyavasána*, *sauṇga* and *abhinivesha*. See Smith (2023: 354–55) on Nágárjuna's use of *abhinivesha* in the sense of attachment or clinging.

[8] *Manusmrti* 12.5 describes three kinds of mental sin: ruminating about other people's wealth, contemplating wrong-doing, and *abhinivesha*, attachment, i.e. habitual inclination, to untruth.

[9] See especially Gokhale (2020) and O-Brien-Kop (2022).

[10] Robinson (1972: 304), Filliozat (1977: 536 [n. 47]), Gelblum (1992: 82 [n. 26]), and Acri (2012: 506–7) have come to my attention.

be some evidence for this interpretation,[11] I do not find it fully persuasive.

Abhinivesha in Shri Sarkar's writings

Let us now examine Sarkar's discussions of *abhinivesha* and their contexts. As mentioned above, I am aware of five published discourses that engage with *abhinivesha*, listed by date[12]:

1. "Brahmabháva o Mánava Jiivana," in *Subhášita Saṁgraha, Saptama Khaṅḍa* [Part 7]. Bengali. Date: Phálguńii Púrńimá, 1958. Translated into English as "The Macrocosmic Stance and Human Life."
2. "Citishakti O Mánasa Sádhaná," in *Subhášita Saṁgraha, Aśtama Khaṅḍa* [Part 8]. Bengali. Date: 5 July 1959, in Jamalpur. Translated into English as "Cognitive Force and Psychic Practice."
3. "Manuśya ká kartavya," in *Ananda Vacanámrta Saptavińsha Khaṅḍa* [Part 27]. Hindi. Date and place unknown, presumed to be 1969. Not yet published in English.[13]
4. "Cardinal Attributions of God," in *Ananda Vacanámrtam Part* 2. Date: 14 September 1978, Patna. This discourse was mostly or entirely in English.[14]
5. "Incantation and Human Progress," in *Subhášita Saṁgraha Part 24*. Date: 30 November 1979, Tatanagar. Published first in English based on a trilingual discourse (Bangla, English, and Hindi).[15]

Each of these has a somewhat different focus.

It should be mentioned from the outset that Sarkar never proposes a direct translation of *abhinivesha*, whether into English or Bangla. One might presume that he does so in "The Macrocosmic Stance and Human Life," where *abhinivesha* is glossed as "psychic obsession" (§33). However, nothing corresponds to this in the Bangla; "psychic obsession" was supplied by the translator (not unhelpfully). The discourse "Cognitive Force and Psychic Practice" contains a different and more opaque gloss, "self-obsession," likewise absent from the Bangla.

A comparatively detailed explanation of *abhinivesha* appears in the earliest of these discourses (1958), translated into English as "The Macrocosmic Stance and Human Life." Sarkar quotes YS 2.9 (§31), and then provides the following explanation (§32–34), here retranslated:

> *Svarasaváhii vidúso 'pi tathá rúdho 'bhiniveshah.*[16]
>
> In the world there is no shortage of wise and talented people who understand the difference between spiritual knowledge (vidyá) and ignorance (*avidyá*).[17] They also know what is right and wrong (*sad-asat*), what is *dharma* and *adharma*. They may even deliver eloquent speeches on *dharma* and morality in assemblies and meetings, yet knowingly engage in sinful deeds in their personal lives, despite understanding the dreadful consequences of sinful actions. [Like the other *kleshas*,] this too is a particular manifestation of avidyá, one that keeps vidyá

[11] I have in mind Vácaspatimishra's interpretation of *Sáṁkhyakáriká* 47–48, discussed briefly below.

[12] Lectures delivered to disciples on various occasions, transcribed (often from audio recordings) and then lightly edited for publication by staff of Ananda Márga's publications department (usually, it seems, with relatively little involvement by the author). In the case of *Subhášita Saṁgraha*, vols. 1–8, the published discourses were re-dictated in Bengali after the lectures (usually in Hindi). The short discourses published in the *Ananda Vacanámrtam* series were provided with titles by the editors, while the titles of *Subhášita Saṁgraha* discourses are the author's.

[13] I am grateful to Táraka Ghista (personal communication) for bringing this discourse to my attention and making available to me a draft translation under the title "Duty of Humanity." I am also grateful to Madhuresh Sumit for clarifying several Hindi passages with me.

[14] The discourse was in all likelihood given in English, as were the lectures on previous and subsequent days; it was transcribed from a tape that may no longer be available. Audiotapes survive from 12 Sept and 15 Sept 1979.

[15] According to the Publisher's Note, this discourse, published first in English, is based upon a trilingual discourse (Bangla, English, and Hindi) delivered in Tatanagar in 1979, a recording of which survives.

[16] While the published editions print *svarasobáhii*, which the audiotape supports, this is simply a Bengali-inflected pronunciation of *svarasaváhii*. The Hindi-language discourse in *Ananda Vacanámrtam Part 27* prints the correct *svarasaváhii* (p. 95).

[17] In Shri Sarkar's thought, *vidyá [shakti]* and *avidyá [shakti]* more specifically represent the opposing forces causing attraction to the divine—introversion and spiritual growth—and extroversion, i.e. attraction to the material world, respectively.

> suppressed and does not allow it to flourish in individual life.
>
> On this subject a story comes to mind. Once there was a person addicted to drink who by scriptural study and by cultivating intellectual knowledge realized in heart and mind that the habit of drinking alcohol is extremely bad. His *vidyá*-nature told him to give up drinking wine and so he resolved to give up his drinking habit. He decided that when an auspicious day comes into view he will begin to lead a disciplined life. As he waited, that auspicious day arrived. At the time that he used go daily to the liquor store, he walked down the road to the store with extraordinary firmness. Passing by, after taking ten steps he began to say, "O mind, you are heroic. You gave up the habit of alcohol—you went ten steps beyond the wine shop. Today I will reward your bravery—I will fill you to the brim with wine." After this the drunkard entered the wine shop and drank even more than he would on other days. This story illustrates *abhinivesha* beautifully.[18]
>
> From where does this propensity (*vrtti*) of *abhinivesha* derive its impetus? It is the acquired *sańskáras* of human beings that provide its impetus; one's own *sańskáras* provide vitality to the propensity of *abhinivesha*. Emerging from within the mind, this [karmic] flow (*rasa-praváha*) helps avidyá remain established (*adhišthita*). As long as a human being remains guided by its individual [karmic] flow, that is, by *svarasa*, it remains an individual being (*jiiva*), and when it is guided by the flow of Brahma (*brahma-rasa*), it becomes Shiva—it is liberated.

From this we may understand more or less how Sarkar interprets YS 2.9: *svarasaváhii vidúso 'pi tathá rúdho 'bhiniveshah* means, "abhinivesha has one's own reactive momenta (*sańskára*) as its impetus and is established even in a learned person, just as [in others]." For Sarkar, *vidúsah* (genitive of *vidvas*, whose nominative form is *vidván*) refers to an educated person who may have deep intellectual understanding of right and wrong and the spiritual path. He appears to gloss *rúdhah* ("established, grown, developed" etc.) with the adjective *adhišthita*, which could mean "established," i.e. entrenched, or perhaps have the weaker sense of "present;" alternatively, it could connote something exerting control, i.e. "dominant." Sarkar's interpretation of *svarasaváhii* resembles that of the early-modern commentator Vijiṇánabhikśu, who writes, "*svarasaváhii* means that [*abhinivesha*] flows due to karmic conditioning (*sańskára*) alone."[19] As for *abhinivesha* itself, Sarkar understands this to refer to deeply ingrained habitual behavior that resists change even when one reaches a clear understanding of its devastating impact. The example of the alcoholic falls squarely within the scope of "addiction," and Sarkar also uses Bengali expressions such as *pánásakta* (attached to drink), *madyapa* (drinker/drunkard), and *madya-páner abhyása* (habit of drinking wine) that reinforce this.

The discourse "Incantation and Human Progress" (1979) also contains an account of *abhinivesha*. Its context is much different: the lecture concerns the role of mantra-incantation (*japa*) in spiritual life. Sarkar turns to *abhinivesha* in §21–22 after introducing the idea that only words specially infused with vitality (*caetanya*) by a great tantric guru (*mahákaola*) can be regarded as perfected or empowered (siddha) mantras (§19–20). He then says,

> Even when the human mind understands everything, it still runs towards crude physicality. People realize what is detrimental and what is beneficial, yet despite that they move towards things that are detrimental to them. It can happen that way, and it does happen quite often.
>
> *Svarasaváhii vidúso 'pi tathá rúdho 'bhiniveshah*: Even a great scholar, a highly learned person, who knows what is proper and what is improper, is still driven by his or her inherent reactive momenta, and knowingly moves towards improper and undesirable things.[20] This mental disease, which is in fact

[18] Sarkar recounted a similar humorous story to early disciples; see Pranavatmakananda (2019: 302–3).

[19] Vijiṇánabhikśu's *Yogavárttika* ad YS 2.9: *svarasena sańskáramátreńa vahatiiti svarasaváhii*.

[20] In the printed book, this sentence is placed in quotation marks, as though it is a translation of the *sútra*.

> a crude movement driven by *avidyá* [ignorance], is called *abhinivesha*. When even the mind of a learned person runs towards crude physicality, then what can forcibly draw the mind towards subtlety, towards benevolence, and break the shackles of crude bondage? The living mantra can. Only [these] are the real mantras; the rest are not mantras, but mere collections of words.[21]

Here Sarkar adds the idea that *abhinivesha* is a "mental disease," a category of modern psychology as well as Indian medicine (as *mánasa-roga*), and proposes incantation of a duly empowered mantra to be the ultimate medicine. The idea of *siddha mantras* belongs more to the world of tantric Mantrashástra than Patanjali's philosophy of yoga. Still, in the Yoga Darshana *svádhyáya* is usually interpreted to mean mantra-repetition, and is one of three elements of *kriyáyoga*—together with ascetic practice (*tapah*) and dedication to God (*iishvara-prańidhána*)—that YS 2.2 links to attenuation of the kleshas.

The account of *abhinivesha* in "Cardinal Attributions of God" (1978) is briefer. Published in volume 2 of the *Ananda Vacanámrtam* series, the discourse is essentially a commentary on *Yogasútra* 1.24, which defines Iishvara (God). In the course of the lecture Sarkar quotes six additional *sútras* of Patanjali—the most of any discourse, it seems.[22] After introducing YS 1.24 (§1–2), defining *klesha* (§3), and explaining *avidyá, asmitá, rága* and *dveśa* (§4–11), Sarkar quotes YS 2.9 and offers the following explanation, in comparatively informal language (§13):

> The last one and the most dangerous one is *abhinivesha*. Even the learned persons and the *jiṇániis*, the scholars [who] know that this is this and that is that, or what is what and which is which – even knowing everything they are entrapped by certain propensities.[23] This particular nature of weakness is called *abhinivesha*. Several times you would see a teacher moving his fingers as if he is using a cane. In classroom he uses cane. Now there is no cane in hand but he is moving his finger in that style. A drunkard knows that drinking is a very bad practice. Even then he cannot give it up. These are all examples of *abhinivesha*.

Sarkar again adduces the example of the alcoholic. However, the other example differs notably: a school teacher so habituated to punishing pupils with a stick that his body repeats this motion unconsciously. In this case *abhinivesha* denotes a compulsive reflex based on an ingrained habitual activity. It is surely meaningful that the activity in question is violent and pernicious, even if tolerated socially (in Bihar in 1978) and performed without overt malice. The example does not align well with framework of addiction, though it could fit obsessive-compulsive disorder. In the remainder of the discourse, Sarkar explains the five forms of mental functioning (*vrtti*)[24] (§14–22) and the remaining technical terms from YS 1.24 (*karman, vipáka*, and *áshaya*) (§23–29); after this he completes his explanation of the meaning of Iishvara (§30).

The third discourse listed above contributes additional points of interest.[25] First, its examples of *abhinivesha* differ from those of the alcoholic and the habitually abusive teacher, and suggest a more general principle: *abhinivesha* is the psychic tendency that prevents a person from adhering to moral principles that they both comprehend and accept. Sarkar illustrates this with the example of an erudite traditional scholar—the *vidvas* of *Yogasútra* 2.9—who

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[21] I have rephrased the final sentence, which is printed thus: "Only [siddha mantras], the rest are not mantras, but mere collections of words."

[22] *Yogasútras* 1.7–9, 1.24, 2.5–6, and 2.9.

[23] Sentence re-punctuated.

[24] Students of Sarkar's thought are likely more familiar with his use of the term *vrtti* to mean "psychic propensity," referring to the fifty *vrttis* associated with the cakras of yoga. He appears on one occasion to reconcile these two different usages by referring to the *vrttis* of Patanjali's philosophy as "the five main propensities; all other propensities are dependent on these" ("Yoga and Bhakti," in *Subhášita Sańgraha Part 18*, §13). In the same paragraph he refers to propensities other than the five as "subsidiary." How these concepts might cohere remains unstated, and Sarkar elsewhere refers to the "main propensities" as fifty in number; see for instance "The Three Species of Human Being" (18 August 1979, Taipei, English).

[25] This Hindi-language discourse, perhaps of 1969, was published in *Ananda Vacanámrta Part 27* (1996), which consists of various discourses recovered from audio tapes and periodicals; see the Publishers Note.

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does not practice his own instructions, and "whose mind begins to race towards hell" as soon as he puts away the scriptures.[26] He then gives the example of a person who acknowledges the sinful nature of bribery but nonetheless accepts bribes. The third example is of a person who expresses interest in joining the Ánanda Márga, but only after getting his daughter married (thus avoiding Sarkar's prohibitions on caste-based marriage and dowry for his disciples). These examples suggest a concept much broader than "addiction:" *abhinivesha* represents behaviors one clings to habitually despite knowing better. A second point of interest in this discourse is its more detailed exegesis of the concept of *svarasa*. I translate this here, leaving untranslated the difficult term rasa (juice or essence, but also liquid, elixir, flavor, savor, delight, etc.; more freely, "flow"):

> Human beings flow in the current of their own rasa. That ocean of human ideation, what is it? It consists of rasa; it is fluid, which means that one can make whatever kind of wave is desired flow in the mind. The mind is like a fluid substance. You can create whatever kind of wave you desire. So what is this? *Svarasa* [means] one's own *rasa*, while the rasa of supreme consciousness (Paramátmá) is expressed in the entire universe. What is the individual flow of rasa for a human being? It is the self-centered *rasa* in one's own mind, that is, it is the flow of *rasa* of the little 'I', [expressing as] "I will do this and that." The expansive flow of rasa of Supreme Consciousness (Paramátmá) is exactly like this too. What is this rasa? Universe-centered, which means [expressing as] "I will do this or that for the entire universe." For this reason it is said concerning the Supreme Consciousess, "Truly, He is rasa" (*raso vai saḥ*) [*Taettiriya Upanišad* 2.7.1]. Who is He? He is the ocean of rasa. One who tastes this ocean of rasa, the ocean of Brahma (cosmic consciousness) or *rasa* of Brahma, is called a *rasika* ["one who savours"]. This is the scriptural explanation of the word *rasika*: one who tastes the ocean of Brahma's rasa. (p. 94)

The discourse continues by quoting *Yogasútra* 2.9 on *abhinivesha*, providing as examples the erudite but degenerate scholar, bribery, and thievery. To overcome such obsessive clinging, a spiritual aspirant (*sádhaka*) "must merge their *svarasa* with the ocean of the rasa of Brahma" (p. 96)

Sarkar also engages with the concept of *svarasa* beyond his exegesis of *abhinivesha*. Note for example the following, from a Bangla-language discourse published in 1969:

> If we call this endless, playful rhythm of the macrocosmic vital force (*mahápráńa*) *parama-rasa* [the supreme or macrocosmic flow], then we will call the individual rhythm (*chanda*) of the unit being *svarasa*. The true significance of spiritual practice (*sádhaná*) is to merge the *svarasa* into the *parama-rasa*.[27]

This idea of *svarasa* as the "individual rhythm" of a person, formed by *sańskára*, allows us to make a crucial connection. In several discourses Sarkar uses an English-language expression that appears intended in the same sense as *svarasa*: "entitative rhythm" or "entitative flow," where "entitative" apparently corresponds to the reflexive pronoun *sva* ("one's own," i.e. individual) and "rhythm" or "flow" to rasa.[28] This equivalence was in fact noted previously: the translator of another Hindi-language discourse of 1969, "Svábhávika Dharma and Bhágavata Dharma,"[29] glossed *svarasa* and *parama-rasa* as "entitative rhythm" and "Macrocosmic rhythm" in a passage[30] similar to the discussion of

[26] p. 96: "So when he is apart from the scriptures even momentarily, his mind begins to race towards hell" (my translation).

[27] "Jaeviisattá o Vishvapráńa," in *Tattva Kaomudii Part 2.*

[28] For "entitative flow," see especially "The Spirit of Yoga" (Ernakulam, 1979) and "Man and His Ideological Flow" (Tapei, 1979), both published in *Subháśita Sańgraha Part 12*. For "entitative rhythm," see for instance "One Will Have to Know Oneself" (Ernakulam, 1965).

[29] See the Publisher's Note in *Ananda Vacanámrtam Part 33.*

[30] To quote in full: "Rasa means 'flow'. Human existence is a flow, or rasa; of the two ends of human existence, at one end there is Paramátman, or *parama-rasa*, [the] Macrocosmic flow; at the other there is *viśaya-rasa*, or the flow of the crude world. Now, human existence is *svarasa*.

svarasa and the rasa of Brahma quoted above. We thus arrive at a translation of *Yogasútra* 2.9 that reflects Sarkar's interpretation and uses his distinctive technical jargon:

> *Svarasaváhii viduśo 'pi tathá rúdho 'bhiniveshah* (Yogasútra 2.9). "Obsessive clinging (*abhinivesha*) has the entitative flow (*svarasa*) [of an individual's reactive momenta (*saṁskára*)] as its impetus and is established even in a learned person, just as [in others]."

The second discourse listed above, "Cognitive Force and Psychic Practice" (1959), adds little concerning *abhinivesha* but is illuminating for other reasons, discussed below.

Yoga psychology, *abhinivesha*, and the philosophy of addiction

As a starting point for examining the implications of Shri Sarkar's *abhinivesha*, it seems necessary first to address the nature of his departure from the *Bháśya* and other premodern *Yogasútra* commentaries. Did he privilege a particular commentarial or sectarian reading of Patanjali? To what extent was Sarkar even familiar with the *Bháśya*? What kind of intervention in the Yoga Darshana does his reinterpretation of *abhinivesha* represent?

It is generally unclear which sources Sarkar had in mind when discussing any given philosophical system. In this regard, the discourse "Cognitive Force and Psychic Practice" (Citishakti O Mánasa Sádhaná, 1959) stands out for its focused exposition of Patanjali's *sútras*, as well as elaborations upon ideas derived from the *Bháśya*. The first section (§1–13) is devoted to defining *citishakti*, the "cognitive faculty" or "power of cognition," a term for *puruśa*, consciousness. This is essentially a commentary on the *Bháśya* to YS 1.2, whose enumeration of five qualities of *citishakti* Sarkar expands upon. Afterwards (§14–17) he segues to *vivekakhyáti*, the Sáṁkhya/Yoga concept of liberating insight. Next (§18–25) he explains that the mind experiences five states (from *kśipta*, extremely perturbed, to *nirodha*, suspended), depending on its degree of concentration, a teaching that appears to be based on the *Bháśya* to YS 1.1, which refers to these as "stages" or "levels" of mind (*cittabhúmi*).[31] Then is addressed *samprajñáta-* or *savikalpa-samádhi* (§26–31), followed by discussion of the five forms of mental function (*vrtti*) in Patanjali's Yoga (§32–45), and a return to the subject of samádhi and *citishakti* (§46–48). It is in the context of the third *vrtti*, *viparyaya* ("defective cognition" or "false knowledge about an unreal object," §37), that Sarkar briefly mentions the *kleshas*; he describes these as five forms of ignorance (avidyá) that *viparyaya* produces (§36–39). This seems to pick up on the *Bháśya* on YS 1.8, which refers to the *kleshas* as five divisions of avidyá, and the Bháśya to YS 2.3, which refers to the *kleshas* as five *viparyayas*. Sarkar (§38) also identifies the *kleshas* as synonyms of the Sáṁkhya categories of darkness, delusion, great delusion, dark of the night, and blinding darkness (*tamah, moha, mahámoha, támisra*, and *andhatámisra*),[32] again an idea mentioned in the *Bháśya* on YS 1.8. The source ideas and technical terminology of this discourse are entirely those of Patanjali's Yoga, and Sarkar unambiguously picks up on themes from the *Bháśya*. Hence, where Sarkar differs from the *Bháśya* it is not for lack of familiarity: such departures appear purposeful.

Despite close engagement with the *Yogasútra*, Sarkar never positions his philosophical writings as a contribution to the Yoga Darshana. Although I suggest that we may approach him as a philosopher of yoga, he does not claim Patanjali's *sútras* as authoritative scripture, and in fact wrote his own Sanskrit *sútra* text—the *Anandasútram*—with a brief Bengali autocommentary that encapsulates his philosophical views. What, then, are we to make of his engagement with Patanjali's philosophy and his intervention on the subject of the *kleshas*, especially *abhinivesha*? One possibility is that Sarkar considered himself to be restoring the correct meaning to *abhinivesha*; that is, his remarks on the subject could be viewed as intervening to restore Patanjali's own intended meaning (with which he concurs). We

In Tantra there is a type of *sádhaná*, that is, *rasa-sádhaná*. The object of *rasa-sádhaná* is to merge the *svarasa* (entitative rhythm) into *parama-rasa* (Macrocosmic rhythm). The conception of *rásaliilá* has been derived from the idea of Puruśottama encircled by innumerable devotees (*svarasas*); each and every *svarasa* tries to become one with *parama-rasa* (Parama Puruśa [or Puruśottama]). This is what is known as *rásaliilá*."

[31] Sarkar treats this topic elsewhere as well, e.g. in "Yoga and Bhakti," in *Subháśita Saṁgraha Part 18* (1965).

[32] See for instance *Sáṁkhyakáriká* 47–48 and the *Yuktidiipiká* thereon.

cannot be certain, but there are reasons to believe that he considered the author of the *Bhášya* to be distinct from Patanjali. First, this has been the traditional view for many centuries and remains the dominant and default view in India. Second, it is reported that while dictating his autocommentary on the *Anandasútram*, Sarkar justified its necessity by citing the example of Patanjali, whose *sútras* came to be misinterpreted, he alleged, due to the lack of such an autocommentary.[33] Sarkar would hardly be the only modern author to disagree with the *Bhášya* and to propose a different interpretation: I have already mentioned several.[34] Moreover, this is not the only case where Sarkar's interpretation differs. To cite another, Sarkar's interpretation of the word *áshaya* in YS 1.24 overtly (but silently) contradicts the *Bhášya*.[35]

Might Sarkar be correct, historically, in his re-interpretation of *abhinivesha*? This is not a question we can answer categorically. Scant evidence exists for early interpretations of the *Yogasútra* that do not follow the *Bhášya*. One example is the medieval Javanese Dharma Pátaiṇjala (Teachings of Patanjali), which seems to preserve a non-*Bhášya* tradition of interpretation, and understands *abhinivesha* along the lines of "obsession" (Acri 2012: 506–7). Al-Biruni, the famous Muslim scholar present in India in the eleventh century, translates *abhinivesha* into Arabic as '*allāyaq*, "attachment, devotion" (Verdon 2024: 251); his sources for Pátaiṇjala Yoga are unclear. In any case, as mentioned, the *Bhášya*'s understanding of *abhinivesha* as "clinging to life" is idiosyncratic, and a plain reading of YS 2.9 in its historical context would instead suggest understanding *abhinivesha* as some kind of deeply-rooted attachment—a powerful and pernicious negative tendency, like the other four *kleshas*, namely ignorance (*avidyá*), egotism (*asmitá*), passion or attachment (*rága*), and hatred (*dveśa*). Bridging this interpretation with that of the *Bhášya* is Vácaspatimishra, who in his tenth-century commentary on *Sámkhyakáriká* interprets *andhatámisra* (blinding darkness) or *abhinivesha* as fear of eighteen kinds, which he explains as the fear of loss of various objects of the senses and their means of obtainment—thus a kind of obsessive clinging. While Sarkar's interpretation is hence plausible in general terms, it is difficult to corroborate.

In their context, Sarkar's discussions of *abhinivesha* do not suggest an agenda to restore a historically "correct" meaning of *abhinivesha*, nor do they suggest a strictly exegetical agenda. That is to say, Sarkar advances neither an historical nor philological argument explicitly, nor does he position himself as an exponent of the Yoga Darshana contributing to traditional exegesis. While he frequently cites the *Yogasútra* approvingly, this should not be mistaken for its acceptance as infallible scripture; on occasion Sarkar objects strenuously to Patanjali's positions, particularly on the nature of God.[36] One could say that he engages with the *Yogasútra* in a constructive manner as a philosopher and spiritual teacher, drawing on its rich resources in giving voice to his own views, possibly for pedagogical purposes. In other words, Sarkar's purpose in reinterpreting *abhinivesha* is philosophical: to offer a metaphysical explanation of certain kinds of obsessive, compulsive or addictive behavior based in the philosophy of yoga. Perhaps he observed this to be a lacuna in the Yoga Darshana: "addiction" is such a distinctive, widespread and pernicious phenomenon that failure to address it in a theory of the mind and spiritual liberation would be a profound oversight.

In Sarkar's interpretation, the *kleshas* represent five stages of avidyá, beginning with ignorance (defined as regarding the transitory as permanent) and culminating with *abhinivesha*, the most malign form of *avidyá*. The third *klesha* is *rága*, "attachment" or "passion," which the *Bhášya* explains as "desire, craving or greed for pleasure, or for the means of its attainment, … based on the recollection of

[33] This is reported by Acosta (2010 and personal communication), whose main sources were interviews with early disciples of Sarkar, such as Sushil Dhar.

[34] See n. 10 above.

[35] In brief, the Bhášya interprets *áshaya* as *vásaná*, i.e. "karmic trace" (*tadanuguńá vásaná áśayáh*), but in Sarkar's interpretation of YS 1.24 it means *ádhára*, "receptacle": "*Ashaya* means 'containing entity'. Each and every expression of this universe of ours, each and every entity of this universe requires some *ádhára*[,] i.e. container[,] where to remain" ("Cardinal Attributions of God," §125, in *Ananda Vacanámrtam Part 2*).

[36] See for example "Shiva in the Light of Philosophy (Discourse 17)," §18–22, in *Namah Shiváya Shántáya*. For a more subtle example of Sarkar's critical engagement with the *Yogasútra*, see his definition of sleep (*nidrá*) in the commentary on *Anandasútram* 1.24, which may be read as a critique of *Yogasútra* 1.10.

pleasure."[37] Sarkar's explanation instead places emphasis on external influences, rather than recollection, in encouraging unhealthy sensory attachments:

> What is *rága*? Due to the influence of certain external influences such as books or bad company or any kind of bad association, when one feels weakness for a certain object or moves towards that object without being guided by any reason, without any reason or rational support, the *avidyá* that causes such stage of mind is called *rága*. ("Cardinal Attributions of God," §10)

The fifth *klesha*, *abhinivesha*, thus represents an intensification of *rága* extending beyond "weakness for a certain object" or the longing for pleasure. At this stage, desire progresses to the point of fixation or obsession. With *rága*, external influences play a critical role, while with *abhinivesha* the impetus becomes internal. Far from simply lacking rational support, desire becomes so deeply rooted—*rúdha*—that even clear understanding of the unethical and injurious nature of the behavior involved fails to check one's action. It has become integral to a person's *svarasa*, their entitative rhythm or flow formed by conditioning (*saḿskára*). According to yoga metaphysics, such conditioning may belong to this life or another: the traumas, choices and experiences of a person's current life may not adequately explain all cases of *abhinivesha*.

How, then, are such deeply rooted dispositions to be addressed? Sarkar prescribes a rich array of spiritual, ethical, and physical practices for his disciples. His book on yogic therapy and natural medicine also offers treatment plans for a variety of diseases, combining herbal medicines, yoga postures, diet, naturopathic treatment and so forth.[38] It is thus notable that Sarkar's discussions of *abhinivesha* and the concept of *svarasa* converge upon a single lofty remedy: to overcome obsessive clinging, the entitative flow (*svarasa*) of the microcosm must be made to converge with the flow (*rasa*) of Brahma, the macrocosmic ocean (*brahma-samudra*). An individual must cease to be impelled by *svarasa*. Here the theistic, Vaeśńava-inflected devotional orientation of Sarkar's yoga come to the fore:[39]

> To progress towards the stance (*bháva*) of the supreme consciousness, one will have to plunge into the ocean of the macrocosmic flow (*brahma-rasa*) and move in its current. In the path of this movement the microcosm (*jiiva*) will experience the sweetness of the supreme entity's divine play. Relinquishing one's sense of doership to him as the agent, undulating in his vibration, in the rhythmic sway of his flow, one must become immersed in that supreme *rásaliilá* [play of *rasa*][40]… Just as the entitative flow of the individual leads one into the grip of avidyá, the supreme flow leads one towards the vast, the boundless. This supreme flow itself is Brahma, the embodiment of rasa. (§36–37) …
>
> The more a human being guides its entire existence towards the supreme entity as the agent of action and witnessing entity, the more it comprehends the expression of its flow. The more one rushes towards the macrocosmic stance, the divine effulgence, the more one's entire being becomes radiant and the more the darkness of avidyá is kept at bay (*sarate tháke*). Consequently, if one is to dispel the power of avidyá one certainly must take shelter in the supreme consciousness. (§40) …
>
> In the past, the entitative flow of the macrocosm (*brahma-rasa*) found expression through Caetanya Maháprabhu. Ordinary people would madly chase after him, dancing, singing, crying and laughing. This macrocosmic flow was also expressed through the medium of Shrii Krśńa by the

[37] *Yogasútra* 2.7: *sukhánushayii rágah* ("Passion is a consequence of pleasure"). The Bháśya explains: *sukhábhijiṇasya sukhánusmrtipúrvah sukhe tatsádhane vá yo gardhas tršńá lobhah sa rága iti* ("'Passion' means desire, craving or greed for pleasure, or for the means of its attainment, for a person who has had experience of pleasure, based on recollection of [this] pleasure").

[38] *Yaogika Cikitsá o Dravyaguńa* (1958), published in English as *Yogic Treatments and Natural Remedies*.

[39] The passage is here re-translated from the Bangla original (pp. 23–26), but retains the paragraph numbering of the English edition (EE9).

[40] In Vaeśńava tradition, *rásaliilá* refers to the nocturnal dance of Krśńa and the *gopiis* of Vrndávana, a theme prominent since the *Bhágavata Puráńa* (book 10). Cf. footnote 30.

> sound of his flute. Hearing its melody, people would rush forth madly, abandoning status, decorum and vanity. Forgetting the protective confines of their homes, the *gopiis* [of Vrndávana] danced, sang and laughed to that rhythmic sound. (§45) In Ánanda Márga this rhythmic flow (*rasa-tarauṇga*) of Brahma is embedded in the very processes of spiritual practice. Thus, whether in the present or future, in the course of time or beyond time, if one practices this sádhaná continuously with sincerity, they too will sing and dance, will laugh and cry, and in this manner steadily advance towards the supreme stance of the blissful cosmic entity. (§46) … Life's fulfillment lies in moving in the current of the supreme flow. The path by which this movement takes place is called the Ánanda Márga, the path of bliss. (§47) ("The Macrocosmic Stance and Human Life," 1958)

The power of *abhinivesha* is such that overcoming it requires a total loss of self-impetus, self-will—a complete surrender of self (*prapatti*) into the blissful flow of Brahma, the supreme consciousness (*parama-puruśa*).

Once elsewhere, in "Incantation and Human Progress" (1979), reviewed above, Sarkar instead emphasizes the power of tantric mantra-meditation, silent repetition of an empowered (*siddha*), duly-imparted personal mantra (*iśśta mantra*), for attaining the "awakening of mantra" (*mantra-caetanya*) and breaking free from the shackles of *abhinivesha* (§20–31).

On this basis one might think that, for those unwilling or unable to take up intensive spiritual practice, Sarkar offers little of value for the treatment of addiction. However, Sarkar's discussions of addiction are not confined to his explanations of abhinivesha. A more complex picture emerges when considering his remarks on substance abuse, intoxication, sensory attachment, mental illness and many other topics that we cannot fully consider here. Those interested in developing or enhancing addiction treatment protocols based on Sarkar's yoga in fact have substantial resources to experiment with. It seems abundantly clear, however, that Sarkar regarded intensive spiritual practice (with the many lifestyle changes this may entail) and surrender of will to the divine as the most effective means of overcoming addiction.

Oral histories offer fascinating insight into how Sarkar addressed addiction. Many of the collected stories of early disciples feature tales of overcoming vice, especially smoking, drinking, meat-eating, and corruption, and in a few cases serious alcoholism.[41] A common thread in these tales of recovery is the total reorientation of an individual's life under the guidance of the guru and the practice of *sádhaná*. Sarkar's own spiritual charisma looms large in these stories: in addition to teaching yogic practices, he would alternatingly charm, admonish, and sometimes miraculously cure his ailing disciples. He placed much emphasis on diet, regularity in spiritual practice, maintaining good company, and strict avoidance of negative influences. Commenting about a certain Jitendra Tyagi, following his recovery from near-fatal alcoholism under Sarkar's guidance, he reportedly commented, "Such addictions are due to the effect of *tamoguńa*, the crude force. In order to counter it, all that is needed is to increase the sentient influence upon the person. Unless one is strict in *sádhaná* and remains in a sentient environment, it is difficult to overcome such kinds of addiction" (Pravanatmakananda 2019: 302).

I turn briefly now, in closing, to the question of what Shri Sarkar's concept of *abhinivesha* might contribute to the philosophy of addiction. While bio-medical discourse provides addiction the semblance of universal, scientific truth, the concept is in fact modern and in many respects culturally specific. As James McHugh (2021: 9) observes, "the language and ideas we often use to talk about, demarcate, and understand this complex phenomenon very much belong to a certain time and place, and shape our thinking and ability to act in certain ways." To speak of addiction means to invoke "a constellation of modern, mostly Western ideas about free will, ethics, neuroscience, pathology, and political rhetoric" (ibid., p. 9). At the same time, phenomena such as substance-dependency obviously have universal dimensions and invite comparative, cross-cultural inquiry, grounded in the examination of particular

[41] For accounts of various early disciples' experiences with Sarkar based on collected oral histories, see Acosta (2010) and Pranavatmakananda (2019, especially pp. 295–307 and 335–50).

philosophical traditions. Yet the study of addiction in non-Western systems of thought, and Indian philosophy in particular, seems not to have progressed very far yet. Notably, for example, the topic is not addressed in state-of-the-art reference books such as *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy* (Ganeri 2017) and *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies* (Newcombe & O'Brien-Kop 2021).

It is possible that this gap stems from the absence of a single category of premodern Indian thought that maps well to "addiction." Take for example the category of "human vices" (puruśavyasanas) outlined in the Arthashástra (VIII, 3) and other early literature. Four of these are regarded as "arising from desire" (*káma*) and map well to broad definitions of "addiction": the vices of hunting, gambling, [sex with] women, and alcohol. Other vices "arise from anger"; these comprise of abusing others verbally, causing injury to property, and physical assault, which do not correlate to "addiction" but could in some circumstances be considered compulsive behaviors (cf. Sarkar's example of the abusive teacher). At the same time, the problem of sensory and other forms of attachment is central to Indian philosophy, which offers uniquely rich resources for thinking about desire, dependence, compulsion, intoxication, substance abuse, self-destructive behavior and other aspects of the cluster of ideas cohering around "addiction." The idea that "craving" (*tŕśńá*) is the source of human suffering (*duhkha*) is at the heart of Buddhist philosophy, for instance, and Buddhist psychology offers tremendous insight into addiction and its amelioration (Kang 2010). More detailed studies are required of the kind now being produced in other fields of philosophy, e.g. ancient Greek (Paszkowski 2022).

As for Sarkar's reading of *abhinivesha*, this brings us close to an idea cognate to addiction while nonetheless grouping together a wider range of psychological and behavioral phenomena. Through *abhinivesha*, Sarkar postulates a shared basis for obsessive-compulsive behaviors and sense-based addictions rooted in the metaphysics and technical terminology of the Yoga Darshana, but without being bound by traditional interpretations. This perspective on addiction stands out for its formulation within sophisticated non-Western categories of thought and the possibilities it holds out for liberation from one of the most wrenching of human conditions. How this perspective might advance cross-cultural understanding of addiction as well as its treatment stands out as a promising area for further inquiry.

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