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Vidyā and avidyā in Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya.

(International Seminar on Language, Thought and Reality in Bharihari, Delhi. December 12-14, 2003)

The words *vidyā* and *avidyā*, that are so important for Indian philosophy in general, are used in Bhartṛhari's (Bh) Vākyapadīya (VP) (in its *kārikā* (*kā*)-portion) not so often. Yet, there are some passages in the VP where these words suggest an intriguing variant of their interpretation (especially when they meet together in one verse, forming thus a pair in which the terms are linked in a particular way).

What is the concept of *vidyā* and *avidyā* in the VP? Could *avidyā* be interpreted purely epistemologically - as the absence of *vidyā* or true knowledge or is it a term linked more with the ontology of Bh's Śabda-brahma-vāda.

M. Beardeau (in the introduction to her translation of the I chapter of the VP) states "Bh never uses the word *avidyā* in its technical sense". Is it really so? One can say so if we take *avidyā* as the technical term of Advaita-vedānta. But does it automatically mean that Bh in his VP uses this word in the ordinary, literate sense - as 'ignorance, nescience' or yet he suggests a more profound way to deal with the notion of *vidyā* and *avidyā*? Here I completely agree with A. Aklujkar, who believes that in the VP *vidyā* and *avidyā* have definitely the status of terms.¹ If so what are they? How could they be determined and attributed?

The epistemological notion of *avidyā* is "nescience», which is usually contrasted to true knowledge, the knowledge of reality. In Sāṅkhya and Yoga this nescience is interpreted as an absence of the true knowledge of the qualitative difference between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* (to be more precise, between *puruṣa* and *buddhi* – one of the evolutes of *prakṛti*). In Nyāya (the corresponding term in this system is *mithyājñāna*) and Vaiśeṣika *avidyā* is the absence of knowledge of *padārtha*-s, which are the real ontological and epistemological elements of the universe. In Vedānta, *avidyā* (linked with the ontological concept of *māyā*) could be

interpreted as the absence of the true spiritual knowledge of the identity of *ātman* and *brahman*. In these systems, the overcoming of *avidyā* and obtaining the real knowledge leads to *kaivalya*, *apavarga*, *mokṣa*, respectively.

Let's turn closer to the text of the VP. The term *avidyā* is mentioned in the Trikaṇḍī twice: in the Kālasamuddeśa of Padakāṇḍā (kā 62) and in the Vākyakāṇḍa (kā 233). In both cases it goes together with the term *vidyā*.

In the kā 233 we encounter an interesting observation of Bh that the process of the discrete representation of the world – that is the paramount method of all śāstra-s, in reality describes *avidyā* only. *Vidyā*, in its turn transcends any tradition and conceptualization and is obtained somehow differently:

śāstreṣu prakriyābhedair avidyai vopavarṇyate/
anāgamavikalpā tu svayaṃ vidyopavartate// VP 2.233.²

The whole Vyākaraṇa-śāstra, with all its derivation procedures, the sequence of word-forms and their meanings turns out there to be purely *avidyā*. So, *avidyā*, according to Bh, is directly linked with the differentiating approach to the oneness and unity of the world that is Sabdabrahman. The sequence, which arises because of the activity of *kāla-śakti*, is an inevitable means for all linguistic procedures – first of all, the process of communication.

The point is: could we call by word 'nescience' the śāstra that is characterized by Bh in another place as: *dvāram apavargasya, vānmalānām cikitsitam* (1.14), that usually has the negative connotation and the signified of which is *avidyā* itself, that should be get rid off in order to attain *vidyā*?

It seems that for Bh the term '*avidyā*' rather means the differentiation proper and change or the transition of *avidyā* into *vidyā* is a natural process that presupposes the necessity of both elements: which is under transition and which is reached by this transition, that is *avidyā* and *vidyā*. If the experience of the world remains on the level of diversity - this means *avidyā*, that may lead to mistakes. Confer, for example, Bh's critique of the ordinary *pramāṇa*-s, like *pratyakṣa* and *anumāṇa* in the I kāṇḍa of the VP. (Also vide an interesting notion of dry

logic (*śuṣka-tarka*) by which Baijī, Saubhāva and Haryakṣa ruined the tradition of Mahābhāṣya – as it is stayed in the kā 479 of the II kāṇḍa).

Bh links *avidyā* with the level of a linguistic abstraction also. (The statement of relative significance of *appodhāra* is one of the main ideas of the VP). That abstraction yet is very important for educational purposes, which should be normally undertaken to reach someday the level of *vidyā*.

This transformation of *avidyā* into *vidyā* and vice versa could be observed in the case of ordinary communication, when the unity of meaning is obtained through the multiplicity of means – phonemes, word-forms etc. Indeed, in another kā of the VP this process Bh describes in general terms as a miraculous conversion of the course into effect:

He says:

anibaddhaṃ nimitteṣu nirupākhyam phalaṃ yathā/
tathā vidyā 'pyanākyeyā śāstropāyeva lakṣyate// VP 2.234.

That is:

“Just as it is impossible to describe the effect as linked with its courses in a particular way, thus indescribable *vidyā* is said to appear by means of the *śāstra*”.³

In other place Bh characterizes the means (*upāya-s*) as something that “when once used could be abandoned then” and that, “the use of the *upāya-s* is not compulsory”:

upādāyāpi ye heyāstān upāyān pracakṣate/
upāyānām ca niyamo nāvaśyam avatiṣṭhate// VP 2.38.⁴

(Though in this case Bh is speaking about the relatively nature of the use of different types of analysis, yet this place suites our context also). In this kā we find the indication that the process of transition from diversity to unity, which is the transition from *avidyā* to *vidyā* sometimes could be avoided. In the context of the Bh’s epistemology in this case, of course, one should speak about the “knowledge of ṛṣi-s” - *ārṣajñānam* and different types of *pratibhā*-experiences, the glimpses of *vidyā*, so to say, that are particular not only to ṛṣi-s but are experiences by ordinary people also.

But generally the unity of meaning is obtained through diversity and expressed also through diversity. This diversity is determined by the linguistic practice, that goes from the time immemorial and nontraditional knowledge, the knowledge that transcends worldly order

of things (*alaukikam*) failed to find the means for its usage into the ordinary word-practice (*vyavahāra*):

As Bh puts it:

yac copaghātajam jñānaṃ yac ca jñānam alaukikam/

na tābhyām vyavahāro 'sti śabdā lokanibandhanāḥ// VP 2.297

This *vyavahāra* conceals the real nature of things – *satyam* and thus is the *avidyā* in its action. This condition is the very nature of the word:

Asatyoṣādhi yat satyaṃ tad vā śabdanibandhanam/ VP 2.127

That is:

“Or (according to some) what is directly linked with the Word is the Reality itself, conditioned by the unreal”.

In another place Bh shows that *avidyā* is linked with power of time – *kālaśakti*. This power is believed by Bh to be the independent power of Brahman (*svātantryaśakti* – according to Helarāja). The action of this independent power of time is the first thing that one experiences when enters into the realm of discreteness, which is *avidyā*. And there is no such experience in the continual presence of *vidyā*. As it is stated in *Kālasamuddeśa*:

śaktyātmadevatāpakṣair bhinnaṃ kālasya darśanam/

prathamam tad avidyāyām yad vidyāyām na vidyate// VP 3.9.62

So, the position of Bh seems not to be close to the Advaitavedānta, that treats *avidyā* as an adventitious element attached to pure Brahman, but is rather close to the position of Kashmir Saivism, that interprets *avidyā* as the describable power of God – *īśvara-śakti*.⁵ *Avidyā* is called *śakti* also in the *Vṛtti* to the *kā*-s of the VP, namely to the first *kā* of it, where it is said that the diversity of “static and dynamic reality is because of the activity of *avidyā-śakti*”: *mūrttikriyāvivartau avidyāśaktipravṛttimātram*.

It is also possible to say that the concept of *vidyā* and *avidyā* in the VP functionally represents the *satyadvayam* concept of Vedānta and Mahāyāna.

Indeed, the level of division, determined by principal of *krama* in *buddhi*, (vide VP 2.19) that, in its turn, is the activity of time-power represent the unity by diversity, (that is *avidyā*). Of course this functionally is the same as *saṃvriti-satyam* of Madhyamaka. At the same time, the unity of *artha* that is Śabdabrahman itself is the level of *avidyā*, which could be linked with *paramārthasatyam*, that, as Bh's *avidyā*, (according to Nagārjuna) is also indescribable and not dependant on vyavahāra – the level of ordinary activity, that on our opinion here could be also understood as the level of verbal activity:

vyavahāram anaśṛtya paramārtho na deśyate/

paramārtham anagamyā nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate// Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 24.10.⁶

The position of Bh seems also to correspond to some early passages in the Upanishads, where *vidyā* and *avidyā* are described rather as two mutually completing each other principles-entities, than the two principles that oppose each other. See, for example, a passage from the Śvetāśvataropaniṣat:

dve akṣare brahmapare tvanante vidyāvidye nihite yatra gūḍhe/ kṣaram tvavidyā hyamṛtaṃ tu vidyā vidyāvidye īśate yastu so 'nyaḥ// Śvetāśvataropaniṣat 5.1:

«In the supreme, imperishable, endless Brahman, where two are hidden – *vidyā* and *avidyā*, - perishable (kṣaram – that also could be interpreted as 'divisible') is *avidyā* and immortal is *vidyā*. Who dominate over *vidyā* and *avidyā* is another” (that is ātman).

Confer also the well-known passage from Ísopaniṣad:

andham tamaḥ praviśanti ye 'vidyāmupāsate// tato bhūya iva te tamo ya u vidyāyām ratāḥ// anyad evāhurvidyayānyad āhuravidyayā/ ...

vidyām cāvidyām ca yastadvedobhayam saha/ avidyayā mṛtyum tīrtvā vidyayāmṛtam aśnute// Ísopaniṣad 9-11

“Into blind darkness go those, who follow *avidyā*, but as if into a greater darkness those, who rejoice in the *vidyā* alone. One is attained through *vidyā* and another through *avidyā*...who knows *vidyā* and *avidyā* together, crossing death by *avidyā*, in *vidyā* enjoys immortality”.

So, what is the relation between *vidyā* and *avidyā* according to Bh? The nature of this relation seems to be rooted in the paradoxical coexistence in the world of two principles – unity and diversity which are represented, on the one side, by the unity of Brahman and the multiplicity of things, on the other, - by the unity of meaning and multiplicity of means (phonemes, word-forms etc.) which manifest it, by the glimpses of understanding – *pratibhā* and the diversified analysis - *apoddhāra*. The process of understanding of a linguistic form thus, is the miraculous transformation of *avidyā* into *vidyā*. The whole method of Vyākaraṇaśāstra, according to Bh, turns out to be purely *avidyā*. However, it is a mean (*upāya*) of attaining the integral unitary meaning-vision - *vidyā*. So, *vidyā* and *avidyā*, as two sides of one coin form the inseparable whole of the world and linguistic transactions.

The collision of coexistence of absolute unity and the division of the phenomenal world, and thus the difficulties of one-sided *vivarta* or *pariṇāma* approaches to the explanations of the universe, is settled (or at least avoided) in the Vākyapadīya by the recognition of the ontological status of such reality as Speech - Śabda. The very nature of this reality is the mutual superposition of multiplicity and oneness, that are presented in it by two sides of a linguistic sign - signifier and signified - *vācya-vācaka-bhāva*.

¹ Aklujkar, A. *The philosophy of Bhartṛhari's Trikāṇḍī*, Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge Mass. [Unpublished] 1970, p. 13.

² Citations: *Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya* von Wilhelm Rau, Wiesbaden 1977.

³ In III.3.81 Bh also says about the “miraculous” (*adbhutā*) nature of causality. (I thank Prof. J. Houben for this reference).

⁴ Cf. also kā II.238 in the interpretation of Chr. Lindtner. (Chr. Lindtner, *Linking up Bhartṛhari and the Baudhas*, Bhartṛhari. Philosopher and Grammarian. Proceedings of the First International Conference on Bhartṛhari, Delhi 1994, pp. 198-199).

⁵ B.N. Pandit. *Specific Principles of Kashmir Saivism*, Delhi. 1997, p. 135.

⁶ *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās de Nāgārjuna avec la Prasannapadā de Candrakīrti*, Publiée par Louis de la Vallée Poussin, St.Pétersbourg 1913.