

Bhartrhari

Language, Thought and Reality



Edited by
Mithilesh Chaturvedi

Bhartr̥hari:

Language, Thought and Reality

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Vidyā and Avidyā in Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadīya

VLADIMIR P. IVANOV

The words *vidyā* and *avidyā*, which 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, constituting a pair in which the terms are interrelated 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 rather linked to the ontology of Bh's Śabdabrahma-vāda.

Madeleine Biardeau (in the introduction to her translation of chapter I of the VP) states “Bh never uses the word *avidyā* in its technical sense.” Is it really so? One can argue if the word *avidyā* as a technical term of Advaita Vedānta. But does it automatically mean that Bh in his VP uses this word in the ordinary, literal sense, as ‘ignorance, nescience’, or does he suggest a more profound way to deal with the notion of *vidyā* and *avidyā*? Here I completely agree with Ashok Akuljkar, 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?

¹ Ashok Akuljkar, *The Philosophy of Bhartṛhari's Trikāṇḍī*, doctoral dissertation, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University [Unpublished] 1970, p. 13.

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* and *mokṣa*, respectively.

Let's focus on the text of the VP. The term *avidyā* is mentioned in the Trikaṅḍī twice: in the Kālasamuddeśa of Padakāṅḍa (kā 62) and in the Vākyakāṅḍa (kā 233). In both cases it goes together with the term *vidyā*.

In 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 some how differently:

*śāstreṣu prakriyābhedair avidyāvopavarṇyate/
anāgamavikalpā tu svayaṃ vidyopavartate//*

VP 2.233²

The whole Vyākaraṇa-śāstra, with all its derivation procedures, the sequence of word-forms and their meanings turns out to be purely *avidyā*. So, *avidyā*, according to Bh, is directly linked with the principle of differentiation in the oneness and unity of the world that is Śabdabrahman. 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 the word 'nescience' the śāstra that is characterized by Bh in another part of the text as *dvāram apavargasya, vānmalānām cikitsitam* (1.14). 'Nescience' usually has the negative connotation the signified of which is *avidyā* itself which should be dropped in order to attain *vidyā*?

It seems that for Bh the term *avidyā* rather means the differentiation proper. Thus the change or the transition of *avidyā* into *vidyā* is a natural process that presupposes the necessity of both elements: the one which is under transition and the one which is reached by this transition, that is

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

avidyā and *vidyā*. If the experience of the world remains on the level of diversity – this means *avidyā* – that may lead to error. Consider, for example, Bh's critique of the ordinary *pramāṇa*-s like *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* in kāṇḍa I of the VP. (Also vide an interesting notion of dry logic (*śuṣka-tarka*) by which Baiji, Saubhava and Haryakṣa ruined the tradition of Mahābhāṣya – as is stated in the kā 479 of kāṇḍa II.)

Bh also links *avidyā* to the level of linguistic abstraction. (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 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 Bh describes this process in general terms as a miraculous conversion of the course into effect. He says:

*anibaddham nimitteṣu nirupākhyam phalam yathā/
tathā vidyā'pyanākhyeyā śāstropāyeva lakṣyate//*

VP 2.234

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

In another place Bh characterizes the means (*upāyas*) as something that ‘once used could be abandoned’ and that, ‘the application of the *upāya*-s is not compulsory’:

*upādāyāpi ye heyās tām upāyān pracakṣate/
upāyānām ca niyamo nāvāśyam avatiṣṭhate//*

VP 2.384

(Though in this case Bh is speaking about the relative nature of the use of different types of analysis, yet this suits 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*, could sometimes be avoided. In the context of Bh's epistemology in this case, of course, one should speak about the ‘knowledge of ṛṣis’ – *ārṣajñānam* – and different types of *pratibhā*-experience, the glimpses of *vidyā*, so to say, that are inherent not only to ṛṣi-s but are experienced by ordinary people also.

³In III.3.81 Bh also says about the ‘miraculous’ (*adbhuta*) nature of causality (I thank Prof. Houben for this reference).

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

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 time immemorial. As for the non-traditional knowledge; the knowledge, that transcends worldly order of things (*alaukikam*), it fails to find expression into the ordinary usage (*vyavahāra*). As Bh puts it:

*yac copaghātajam jñānam yac ca jñānam alaukikam/
na tābhyāṃ vyavahāro'sti śabdā lokanibandhanāḥ//*

VP 2.297

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

asatyopādhi yat satyam tad vā śadbanibandhanam/

VP 2.127

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

In another place Bh shows that *avidyā* is linked the power of time – *kālasakti*. This power is believed by Bh to be the independent power of Brahman (*svātantryaśakti* – according to Helārāja). The operation of this independent power of time is the first thing that one experiences when one 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 bhinnam kālasya darśanam/
prathamam tad avidyāyām yad vidyāyām na vidyate//*

VP 3.9.62

So, the position of Bh seems to differ from that of the Advaita Vedānta, which treats *avidyā* as an adventitious element attached to pure Brahman, but is rather close to the position of Kashmir Śaivism, that interprets *avidyā* as the describable power of God – *īśvara-śakti*.⁵ *Avidyā* is also called *śakti* in the Vṛtti to the kā-s of the VP, namely to the first kā of it, where it is stated that the diversity of “static and dynamic reality is due to 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 the principle of *krama* in *buddhi*, (vide VP 2.19) that, in its turn, is the activity of time-power,

⁵ B.N. Pandit, *Specific Principles of Kashmir Śaivism*, Delhi 1997: 135.

represents the unity by diversity (that is, *avidyā*). Of course this is functionally the same as *saṃvṛti-satya* in Madhyamaka. At the same time, the unity of *artha* that is Śabdabrahman itself is the level of *vidyā*, which could be linked to *paramārthasatya*, as Bh's *avidyā*, (according to Nāgārjuna) is also indescribable and not dependent on *vyavahāra* – the level of ordinary activity – that in our opinion here could be also understood as the level of verbal activity:

*vyavahāram anāsrītya paramārtho na deśyate/
paramārtham anāgamyā nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate//*

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 24.10⁶

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

*dve akṣare brahmaṣare tvanante vidyāvidye nihite yatra gūḍhe/
kṣaram tvavidyā hyamṛtaṃ tu vidyā vidyāvidye īsate yastu so'nyaḥ//*
Śvetāśvataropaniṣad 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*. The one who dominates over *vidyā* and *avidyā* is another (that is *ātman*).”

Consider also the well-known passage from Īsopaniṣad:

*andhaṃ tamaḥ pravīṣanti ye'vidyāmupāsate/
tato bhūya iva te tamo ya u vidyāyāṃ rataḥ//
anyad evāhur vidyānyad āhuravidyayā/....
vidyāṃ cāvidyāṃ ca yas tad vedobhayaṃ saha/
avidyayā mṛtyuṃ tīrtvā vidyayāmṛtam aśnute//*

Īsopaniṣad 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*... one 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 of two principles in the world – unity and diversity – are represented, on the one hand, by the unity of Brahman and the multiplicity of things, and

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

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 Vyākaraṇasāstra, according to Bh, turns out to be purely *avidyā*. However, it is a means (*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 problems which originated from one-sided *vivarta* or *pariṇāma* approaches to the explanations of the universe, are settled (or at least avoided) in the Vākyapadiya 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*.