CONCEPT OF ADHYĀSA IN ŚANKARA'S PHILOSOPHY

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The three basic texts of the Vedānta are the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavadgīta, and the Brahmasūtra. Together they are referred to as the Prasthānatraya, the triple canon of Vedānta. The Upaniṣads constitute the revealed texts– śruti prasthāna; they mark the summits of the Veda which is śruti. The Bhagavad gīta comes next only to the Upaniṣads. As this text forms a part of the Mahābhārata which is a smūti, it is called smūti –prasthāna. The third of the canonical text is the Brahma Sūtra which is regarded as Nyāya –prasthāna, because it sets forth the teachings of Vedanta in a logical order.

The Bhāṣya[1] of Sri Śankara is the means for understanding the meaning of the Sūtras. The Bhāṣya begins with the Adhyāsa Bhāṣya. According to the Advaita theory of Anirvacanīya, there is Jñānādhyāsa or superimposition of knowledge and also Arthādhyāsa[2], superimposition of objects. Adhyāsa means error or mistake[3]. This is the base of Advaita Vedānta and of Śankara's interpretation of the Brahmasūtra. Śankara tries to show that the Brahmasūtra is compatible with Advaita Vedānta. His claim is that adhyāsa causes the cycle of birth and death with its concomitant suffering. Once the error is removed, that is the end of the cycle. Errors can arise for various reasons. When we act without knowledge, we commit an error, even if I know that I am ignorant, I am still making a mistake. In all of these cases, I am ignorant of the truth and, more importantly, I take the false as real and possibly the real as false. The price of these mistakes is suffering. Ignorance is the source of error and error causes suffering. The solution is therefore knowledge. Knowledge of Brahman brings realization and release from suffering. All techniques, Yoga paths etc; are only methods for preparing the mind to receive that knowledge.

According to Sri Śankara, the world is only relatively real[4]. He advocates Vivartavāda or the theory of appearance or superimposition. Just as a snake is superimposed on the rope in twilight, the world is superimposed on Brahman. If we get the knowledge of the rope the illusion of snake in the rope will vanish[5]. Like that if we get knowledge of Brahman or the imperishable the illusion of the world will disappear. In vivartavāda the cause produces the effect without undergoing any change in itself. Snake is only an appearance on the rope. The rope has not transformed itself into a snake like milk into curd. Brahman is immutable and eternal. Therefore, it cannot change itself into the world. Brahman becomes the cause of the world through Māyā. When Avidyā or the veil of ignorance is destroyed through the knowledge of the eternal, when mithyājñāna or false knowledge is removed by real knowledge of the imperishable or the living reality, we shine in our true pristine divine splendor and glory. The world is not an illusion. It is relatively real while Brahman is absolutely real. The world is the product of Māyā or Avidyā. The unchanging Brahman appears as the changing world through Māyā. Māyā is a mysterious indescribable power of the lord which hides the real and manifests itself as the unreal. Māyā is not real, because it vanishes when we attain the knowledge of the eternal. It is not unreal also, because it exists till knowledge dawns in us. The superimposition of the world on Brahman is due to Avidyā or ignorance. Śankara's introduction to his Brahmasūtrabhāṣya often called the Adhyāsabhāṣya is astonishing. They are simply outpourings from anubhava or experience of an enlightened sage, and which appeal to that sārvatrika-anubhava, or universal experience, that belongs to each and every one of us. Śankara further defines the avidyā in the śruti as this adhyāsa. Once this avidyā is removed what is left is Vidyā or knowledge that is the experience of Brahman, the ultimate reality. Therefore, Śankara says, the purpose of the śāstra is to reveal Brahman by identifying and removing Avidyā or misconception, so that Brahman can shine of its own accord.

The adhyāsabhāssya of Sri Śankara, "Smṛtirūpaḥ paratra pūrvadūṛṣtāvabhāsaḥ adhyāsaḥ"[6] is the illusory appearance, in another places, of an object seen earlier elsewhere. It is similar in nature to recollection. On seeing a rope in dim light and not recognizing it as a rope, a person mistakes it for a snake which he has seen elsewhere. The snake is not absolutely unreal, because it is actually experienced, and produces the same

effect, such as fear and so on, as a real snake would. At the same time, it is not real, because it is no longer seen when the rope has been recognized. It is therefore described as anirvacanīya, or what cannot be classified as either real or unreal.

In the above definition, the words 'similar in nature to recollection' are intended to exclude recognition. Recollection of an object previously experienced, but which is not now present before the person recollecting. Recognition is when the same object previously experienced is again present before the person.

In the Bhagavadgīta it is said that everything in this world is brought into existence by the association of the 'field' and the 'knower of the field', or the self and non- self [7]. Sri Śankara points out in his commentary on this verse that the association of these two is only by superimposition, since there cannot be any real association between the self, which is absolutely real and the non- self which has only empirical reality. The non -self is superimposed on the self and consciousness which is the nature of the self is attributed to the body mind and organs.

Sri Śankara, further points out in his adhyāsabhāsya on the Brahmasūtra that when there is superimposition of one thing on another, the latter is not affected in the least by the good or bad qualities of the former. Therefore, nacre does not become more valuable because it is mistaken for silver, nor does a rope get the qualities of the snake which it is mistaken for. The implication of this statement is that the self does not undergo any of the changes, nor does it experience any of the joys and sorrows, of the body, mind and organs. It is however only because of this mutual superimposition of the self and the non-self that all action, both secular and religious, becomes possible. The self by itself is neither a doer of action, nor an enjoyer of the results. It becomes a doer and an enjoyer only because of this superimposition as a result of which, as Sri Śankara says the real and the unreal namely; the self and the non-self are into one, as it were. All actions, including the various rites laid down in the Vedas, thus come within the sphere of Avidyā or nescience, which is the cause of superimposition.

Superimposition is of two kinds Svarūpādhyāsa and samsargādhyāsa. When a rope is mistaken for a snake, the snake alone is seen. The existence of the rope is not known at all. Hence the snake is said to be superimposed on the

rope. This is known as Svarūpādhyāsa. The second kind of superimposition is when a crystal appears to be red in the proximity of a red flower. Here, both the crystal and the flower are seen as existing and the redness of the flower is attributed to the crystal also. This is known as samsargādhyāsa. Both these kinds of superimposition are present in the mutual superimposition of the self and the non-self.

Because of the superimposition of the non-self on the self, the existence of the self is not recognized at all, and the non-self is alone recognized as existing, this is svarūpādhyāsa. In the superimposition of the self on the non-self, only the consciousness of the self is attributed to the body, mind and organ. This is samsargādhyāsa. The result of this mutual superimposition is that every one identifies himself with the body. This is the root cause of all sufferings. Giving up this wrong identification with the body-mind complex and realizing that one is the self which is beyond all suffering and all the pairs of opposites such as heat and cold, success and failure and so on, is vidya or knowledge. It is this knowledge that is contained in the Upaniṣads.

Svarūpādhyāsa is also known as Nirupādhikādhyāsa or superimposition without a limiting adjunct or upādhi. The superimposition of an illusory snake on a rope is of this type. A red flower which makes a transparent crystal near it look red is an upādhi. The superimposition of the red colour on the crystal is a superimposition with upādhi, and it is known as sopādhikā-dhyāsa; which is the same as samsargādhyāsa.

In the superimposition of the snake on the rope, the substratum is considered to be the rope. But the rope itself is not real, and is a superimposition on Brahman or consciousness. Therefore it is said in Vedānta that the substratum is rajjūpahitacaitanya or consciousness apparently limited by the rope.

The illusory snake is said to be Prātibhāsika and the rope like everything in this world is Vyāvahārika or empirical reality. Brahman alone is Pāramārthika or Absolute reality.

Adhyāsa or superimposition is the cognition as a particular theory of what is not that, like the cognition of what is not silver as silver. Other examples given by Sri Śankara are - when one's wife or son is happy or

unhappy, one consider oneself also as happy or unhappy; one attributes the qualities of the physical body, such as fatness, leanness and so on to oneself, as one says-"I am fat I am lean" etc; one says-"I am blind, deaf etc; attributing the qualities of the sense organs to oneself. This superimposition is beginning-less, it is of the nature of illusory cognition and is the cause of the notion of agency and enjoyership. The truth is that one is the Ātman which is free from all these qualities. The wrong identification with the body, mind, organs etc; can be removed only by the realization of one's real nature. The aim of Vedānta is to enable one to attain this realization.

CONCLUSION

Śankara defines Adhyāsa as the apparent presentation to consciousness by way of memory of something previously observed in some other thing[8]. Śankara's formulation of the concept of Adhyāsa as the presupposition of philosophical investigation is a milestone in the philosophy of Advaita. According to him, a philosopher must inquire into the nature of the process of the mind with a view to discover the ultimate principle of life viz. the self or consciousness. Śankara's entire epistemology rests on the polarity of the subject and object. Śankara refers to this polarity as the one between 'asmad' and 'yuṣmad'- the 'I' and 'you'. Here the former being the self, the subject, and the latter being the non- self, the object. The subject, he asserts, can never become an object. Similarly, the object can never become the subject; he compares this subject –object difference to that existing between light and darkness. In every case of adhyāsa Śankara says, there is coupling of the real with the unreal. The real that is the self is pure consciousness. It gets involved in the activity of knowing because of its association with the mind. In these instances, the mind, which is insentient, becomes a knower (jñāta), because of its association with the self which is consciousness.

According to Śankara, the relation between mind and self involves mutual superimposition[9]. This relation is false since there cannot be any real relation between the self and the non-self. Wrong identification takes place at different levels and this adhyāsa plays an important role in secular and scriptural activities. Śankara tells us that it is because of wrongly identifying the self with the body that a person can claim himself to be a male, a Brāhmaṇa etc. It is only when one identifies with the sense organs that one

may think of oneself as deaf, blind etc. Happiness and unhappiness are both states of being caused by wrong identification with the mind. Śankara says that this superimposition can be overcome when right knowledge of the self (Vidyā) arises. Knowledge can be divided into two types-empirical and trans-empirical. His metaphysics start with empirical pluralism to terminate at Brahman. Śankara is clear that the difference between Nirguṇa Brahman and Saguṇa Brahman reflects the dissimilarity that exists between knowledge and ignorance. He presents this distinction in terms of two points, the absolute and the relative—Vidyā and Avidyā or the Pāramārthika and Vyāvahārika perspectives respectively. For Śankara pluralism is only provisional and thus, it is not possible to say that Advaita is a philosophy centered on two real standpoints.

Notes & references:

[1] Sūtrārtho varṇyate yatra vakyaihi sūtrānusāribhiḥ
Svapadāni ca varṇyante bhāṣyam bhāṣyavido viduḥ.

[2] Jñānādhyāsārthādhyāsātmaka adhyāsadvaividhyam.

[3] atasmin tadbuddhiḥ.

[4] vyāvahārika

[5] rajjusarpabhrama

[6] Brahmasūtra Śānkarabhāṣya

[7] Bhagavadgīta XIII .2

[8] Smūitirūpaḥ paratra pūrvadṛṣtāvabhāsaḥ.

[9] itaretarādhyāsa

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