

Chapter-2

The Concept of Relation in Indian Philosophy

We shall try to situate the problem of relation against the background of philosophical thinking on relation in India. We do not claim to be exhaustive, but this will give us indications of the main trends.

Each school of Indian thought deals with its own specific problems of relation in a somewhat empirical fashion. There has been little systematic attempt to evolve a coherent philosophy of relation as such, though there was necessarily a good deal of cross-fertilization in the course of inter-school polemic. This has not always resulted in mutual enlightenment. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school inscribed *sama-vāya* in their list of categories as a member in its own right and simultaneously tossed *samīyoga* into the category of quality. The mixed logical-ontological character of the categories themselves is also a problem point as for the persistent temptation to regard relation as a substantive *tertium quid*¹ which has bedeviled so much of the philosophical thinking of India. But it is also true that "relation" is so centrally important that the various doctrines of the different systems seem to hinge on it. For all the Indian schools, the problem of relation is not, as for Hume, epistemological, but metaphysical. The question asked here is whether relations are real. This is a useful and original frame of reference within which we can locate the various systems.

The two basic aspects of experience, of being and thought, are identity and difference, to which all pairs of categories, subject/object, body/soul, universal/particular, can be reduced, and in virtue of that fact related to each other in the sense that one seems to belong to the other or one seems to imply the other.

There is change, and yet there is somehow permanence also. This is our common belief, and we do not feel bothered about their relation except when we become reflective and metaphysical. When we do begin reflecting, we are immediately confronted by the question: is the relation between the two real? If so, how can both belong to one and the same thing diametrically opposed as they are to each other? The various systems of Indian metaphysics seem to us to be different attempts to answer the question.

All the possible basic approaches to this question can be formulated *a priori* as follows: (1) identity, difference and relation are all equally real; (2) all are equally unreal; (3) both relata are real but the relation between them is false; (4) all identity, difference and the relation are equally false. Every one of the systems of Indian philosophy can be brought under one or the other of the four views. That all the three, relation as well as relata, are equally real is the fundamental metaphysical doctrine of all the realist systems: the Nyāya, the Vaiśeṣika, the Mīmāṃsā, Jainism and all the realist interpretations of Vedānta. This is because a pluralist view of reality cannot be sustained without accepting the reality of relation. The question raised here is: how can there be an unreal relation between two reals?

The Sāṃkhya system, on the one hand, held that although the terms are real, the relation between them is false. Relation cannot be of the same status as the relata. *Puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, one representing identity, the other representing difference, are both real, but the relation between the two is not real or ultimate. It can be removed by *viveka* or discriminating knowledge. There is no real relation either between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* or between two *puruṣas*. The question here is: how can there be a real relation between two such incompatible and exclusive realities as *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* or identity and difference?

The Bauddha and Vedāntin schools hold that the relation, and necessarily, therefore, one of the terms, is false. The Vedāntins reject difference and the Bauddhas reject identity. The Mādhyamika Buddhists rejected all three.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas rightly emphasized the reality of relation, but they did to such an extent that it seems to become a “thing” in its own right. The reasons for this lie in the heterogeneous character of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika categories in which predicable and predicament are apparently placed on the same footing. Aristotle was careful to avoid this confusion.

The Sāṃkhya-Yoga thinkers had perceived this difficulty with the realist position. They held that *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* were so totally incompatible that they could not possibly be related. But they did not realize that separation involves relation no less than connection. They thought, relation meant only connection, so that if the relation was rejected, the relata would immediately fall. Therefore, it is possible to ask, if the relation between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* is false, why do the two not become one? The conception of two absolutes is self-contradictory. And the further corollary that if relation is false, then the relation between cause and effect is also false and the Śāṃkhya doctrine of *pariṇāmavāda* or real modification of the cause into the effect would be reduced to *vivartavāda*, the theory of apparent modification resulting in a merely apparent effect. A final implication of the logic of accepting identity behind difference which escaped the Sāṃkhya-Yoga school was the necessity it imposed on also accepting one *puruṣa* behind the appearance of the plurality of *puruṣa*. Their insight was valid but imperfect as regards the difference in status of relata and their relation.²

The Bauddhas and Vedāntins recognized the impossibility of the hypothesis of two independent realities or absolutes. They both agreed that relation could not be as real as the relata, because it is not immediately given in direct experience like the relata, and secondly, because if it also were "real" then it would itself become a term. The influence of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika seems to be at work here. Relation, they argued, must, therefore, have a status different from that of the relata; therefore, it must be false. But this necessarily entails the falsity of one of the terms of the relation, "difference" of the Vedānta, "identity" for the Buddhists. There cannot be an unreal relation between two reals. Obviously, Bauddhas and Vedāntins are influenced by their unexpressed metaphysical options in their choice of which term to reject. The Vedāntin regards identity as more fundamental than difference, basing upon the *ātman-brahman* teaching of the *Upaniṣads* and the experience of deep sleep and *ātmānubhava*. The Bauddha, on the other hand, argues from the principle that reality must be efficient or *arthakriyākārin*, which identity or permanence is not, since it cannot explain change, which is an obvious fact of experience. It is clear that both Vedāntins and Bauddhas are somewhat selective and that both cannot be right, since it accepts only one aspect of experience. They do, however, share the merit of not rejecting experience altogether, as the Mādhyamikas do in reaction against their apparent dogmatism. Identity and difference, being correlated, must go together, say the Mādhyakas, if one is false or unreal, the other must be too. Since, however, *ātmavāda* and *anātmavāda*, identity and difference, are mutually incompatible, both cannot be accepted. Therefore, both must be rejected. The Mādhyamika argues that neither pure identity nor pure difference can explain change. Both are necessary to account for it. Reality (*tattva*) must transcend all categories. While fully appreciating the inexorable logic of the Mādhyamika School, one has to agree that its weakness is that it seems to allow no point of contact between *tattva* and

ordinary experience. To be free from contradiction, *tattva* must be transcend-ent, yet to be realized, it must also be immanent in experience. This is the corner-stone, the pivotal point of Indian philosophy, and hence clarification of conception of relation becomes a matter of fundamental significance.

We may note the usages of relational terms to gain a clearer insight into the conception of the nature of relation itself. There is no class of words which can escape relations. They appear as nouns, either directly, as in 'son', or indirectly, as in 'knowledge' (which must be knowledge of something); so too with pronouns, verbs, adjectives, numbers, prepositions. We can hardly construct a proposition without relation creeping in, for as an acrobat leaps from trapeze to trapeze, so our mind leaps from relation to relation. Even Śamkara was aware of this. He writes in the *Gītā-bhāṣya* (XIII.12) that every word employed to denote a thing denotes that thing, when heard by another, as associated with a certain genus, or a certain act, or a certain quality, or a certain mode of relation. Thus 'cow' and 'horse' imply genera, 'cook' and 'teacher' imply acts, 'white' and 'black' imply qualities, 'wealthy' and 'healthy' imply possession.

We shall focus on the generic term *sambandha* and three relational words *saṁyoga*, *samavāya* and *svarūpa*.

Sambandha means binding or joining together, close connection or union or association, conjunction, inherence, connection with or relation to (instrumental), with or without *saha*, or comparative. *Sambandha* is hard to be defined, and it has wide-ranging connotation of the English "relation". It is used as a generic term embracing *saṁyoga*, *samavāya*, and *tādātmya* as specific kinds of relation. We may refer to Śamkara's *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* (II.ii.38)³ and in the discussion of the Vaiśeṣika theory of causation

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earlier in the same work (II.ii.13)⁴ we get confirmed that the term '*sambandha*' includes relations of spherical contact and causal and logical relations. In such relations both terms are concrete and perceptible and others in which one term is perceptible and one not, and yet others in which neither is so. As a general tenor of his thought Śamkara accepts *samyoga* relation within the sphere of *vyāvahārika* or phenomenal experience, however critical he may be of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika attempts of explaining the causal relationship between the created universe and its creator in terms of *samyoga* and *samavāya*.

Śamkara had serious reservations about *samavāya*. This is evident in passages critically dealing with the Vaiśeṣika system. In the *Gītā-bhāṣya* (XIII.10) he uses *samavāya* in the non-philosophical sense of "society of man" the only instance of *samavāya* used in the philosophical sense occurs in the *Upadeśa-sāhasrī* (I.iii.115): *śarīra samavāyibhiḥ*. The *Brahmaṣūtra* says that pleasant touches connected with body can produce no change in me. But this is a solitary instance, and shows that Śamkara had little use for the term as a vehicle of his thought. In his using metaphysical arguments to support the testimony of *śruti*, he constantly refers to *sambandha* existing between *ātman-brahman* and the world. As for the relation of cause and effect, between the Lord and the world, Śamkara's unequivocal answer is the relation of *tādātmya*, the relation of identity: *tādātmya lakṣaṇa sambandha papatteḥ* (II.ii.38). Even though he found no difficulty in predicating such a relation between the world and Brahman, the four distinct groups of Vedāntins and all claiming to be authentic interpreters of his thought, do not agree. Perhaps the matter is not quite so simple for the average mind.

Notes and references

1. *Siddhānta Lakṣaṇa Jāgadīsī*, - p. 256, Chow, edn.
2. "nātaḥ sambandho dharmigrāhakamānavādhāt".-5.98.-*Sāṃkhya-kārikā*.
3. "nāpi samavāyalakṣaṇaḥ sambandha; āśrayāśrayibhāvān-irupahyāt".-2.2.38. *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya*.
4. "kāryaviśeṣaṇa nānātvarī".-2.2.13. *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra*.