

Chapter V

Krishnachandra Bhattacharya : The Spiritual Significance of Vedanta

Krishnachandra Bhattacharya is a distinguished Indian Philosopher of modern times, noted for his phenomenological persuasion and pithy, analytical style of writing. Like the author of the *Vedānta paribhāṣā*. Bhattacharya adopts the Nyāya method of exposition for the Vedāntic thesis. He goes a long way with Kant in attaching importance to the mode of knowing or awareness of anything, which he argues to be alternately tripartite: cognitive, conative and affective. The absolute can have alternative formulations or symbolisms. Philosophy, ethics and aesthetics are alternative symbolisms for the Absolute. The Absolute is approachable by either of the symbolisms. Bhattacharya's most distinguished work *The Subject as Freedom* is a classic treatment of the Vedantic thesis about *ātman*, which he calls the subject. The subject is revealed in speech-acts of a speaker. The speaker is the subject, which incarnates in speaking the word 'I'. There are hints of this line of approaching the *ātman* in terms of the first person pronoun 'I' or *aham* in Samkara's *bhāṣya* on the *Brahma Sūtra*. There are two awarenesses *asmad* and *yusmad*, I and you, distinct and different, from each other.

Bhattacharya has ramified this distinction into the general epistemological as well as ontological thesis concerning the subject and object. Accordingly there are two basic philosophies : the philosophy of the subject and the philosophy of the object. Bhattacharya goes with Kant in admitting the possibility of self-knowledge. In point of fact Bhattacharya has developed his thesis of the subject in terms of a critique of Kant's views about the impossibility of rational psychology. Bhattacharya's philosophy of the subject is called 'spiritual psychology', and it is argued as possible. It is not confutable since our mode of awareness testifies it in and through over experience of using language and the set of pronouns. There is a uniqueness about the first person pronoun 'I'.

The speaker self, the 'I' is obviously different from 'you', 'he', and 'they'. But there is an inner dialectic in I – awareness. The 'I' is distinct from 'me' the embodied dimension of 'I'. The 'me' has a past, and may have a future, but the 'I' the subject properly so-called is eternal. There are experiences in course of which the 'I' stands apart from 'me', disengaged, alienated and distinguished. The distinguishment or disengagement of the 'I' from 'me' is a spiritual experience, called *vairāgya* in the tradition. The attitude is a data of phenomenology, there are traces of it in Husserl as well. Bhattacharya calls the attitude of distinguishing the 'I' from 'we' the experience of subjectivity. Freedom is nothing else than distinguishing the subjects from every possible objectivities. Freedom consists in an act of

pratyāhāra of the subject from the object. This appears to be Bhattacharya's general stand.

Bhattacharya has written extensively on the philosophies that propound views of the subject as to be distinguished from every objective attitude in such tracts or studies of Vedānta, Sāmkhya and Yoga, available in Volume I of his *Studies in Philosophy. The Subject as Freedom* is not exegetical, rather a free analytical developing of Bhattacharya's sympathies with those philosophical positions. In the present context we shall however take into account his remarkable essay "The Advaita and its spiritual significance"¹.

In this essay Bhattacharya says that *adhyāsa* is the basic experience which Advaita analyses and goes on to generalise the finds to establish its other thesis. The basic *adhyāsa* concerns with the illusoriness of the individual self. Other tenets of Vedānta, such as *Brahman* as the sole reality, *Māyā* as neither real nor unreal, *Īś'vara* as Brahman in reference to *Māyā*, *mokṣa* through knowledge of and identity with *Brahman*, etc are but elaborations of the single, and central notion of *adhyāsa*.

Adhyāsa is an experience of illusion and is to be distinguished from error in thinking. But correction occurs in both though illusion exits wonder when corrected. Bhattacharya compares our apprehension of something as involving "a feeling of the scales falling from the eyes"². This

is a novel analogy at home with most of us. According to Bhattacharya correction of illusion is a deepened spiritual-experience like repenting our past actions. In the moral consciousness of repenting our past, there is an abrupt break with our past, and we “find it hard to imagine how we could perform them”³. When I repent my past, the past appear alien to me, though intellectually absurd it may appear, yet the agent of past is at once I and me, at once subjective and objective. The self which is castigated in repentance is not merely me but also I. The past I is disowned, cognitively viewed as a sort of you (*yusmd*) that is yet I (*asmad*). This is a contradiction, but it nonetheless does appear.

According to Bhattacharya the illusory objectivity of I is the individual self, the me. But the identity of self and the not-self has the form of self, the self as embodied. The embodiment is a *upādhi*, a restrictive adjective of the self. What is remarkable in the experience is that both individual self, that is , the me as false, and the eternal self that is never me are born in one and the same spiritual consciousness.

The me, as distinct from the subject, is the prototype of objectivity. To feel it as illusory is to be aware of the possibility of the objective itself being illusory. Bhattacharya points to the complexity involved in the experience. There are two illusions. One, the I appearing as objective subject, as me; and two, the you appearing as I. A person in wondering how he could be what he cannot be, can correct the first illusion,

but the second illusion is not corrigible, and it continues. The first illusion is intellectually absurd, but felt in a living manner. He is aware of the me or the body as only felt, as embodiment or limiting character, *avaccedaka*. When the illusion is corrected he realizes that such a body was his individual illusion. In the illusion that continues the body appears to be a substantive fact, distinct from he and yet as somehow he. His body is illusory, but he does not disbelieve it. The body is the point of reference of the entire world, hence if the body is realized as illusory, the world too goes away with it. The mistaking of me for I is individual illusion, but the body appearing as a fact in the world is a cosmic illusion. The spiritual consciousness of one's illusory individuality consists in the self being believed as not-self. From this premise the theory of objective illusion gets suggested, and is known as

anirvācyā khyātivāda.

The concept of *māyā* is the principle of illusion which cannot be characterized either as real or as unreal. Primarily *māyā* renders the self believe in willing and feeling that it is an individual. This belief persists even when the individual sees that the self cannot be an individual. The persistence of the belief serves a useful purpose, namely that if there were no belief in individuality who would see the unreality of individuality. The principle of individuality is logically prior to a person's consciousness of himself as individual and of the world. And since individuality is not *per se*

real, the principle has to be taken as the cosmic principle of illusion. Again, a person finds himself as an individual in a world of many individuals. The world is also the system of experiences of the individual self, but apart from the individual self they are empty distinctions, having no self-identity and yet undeniable.

Having made the necessary epistemological distinctions as regards the conditional reality and utter falsity of the individual self, Bhattacharya passes on to the ontology of the advaitic Vedānta .

Māyā as the cosmic principle of illusory individuality stands in reference to “the unindividual self or Brahman”⁴. *Brahman* has no reference to *Māyā*, but *Māyā* cannot be understood without reference to *Brahman*. Again *Brahman* is *Īś'vara*, or the Lord of individual selves and the creator of the world. The Lordship of *Īś'vara* is accounted for by saying that the world is understood as the system of experience of the selves. The selves believe themselves to be individuals so far as they will their experiences to be taken as their *bhoga* actualising their *karma*. The world is the domain of experiences, otherwise the manifold of *nāma – rūpa* has no other purpose to serve, “Creation is understood as manifestation in the soil of *Māyā*”⁵. The world is an absolute appearance, it is real as *Brahman* and unreal as alienated from Him. There is a sense in which it is permissible to say, in advaita parlance, that Brahman becomes the world without losing His transcendence. But it cannot be so said in respect of the *jīvas*. The *jīva* is

Brahman. When the *jīva* views himself as other than Brahman, the otherness is no absolute appearance as the world, “but only the content of his many beliefs”⁶. Hence from the *jīva*’s point of view of individuality *Brahman* appears to him absolutely as *Īs’vara*.

Bhattacharya seeks to correct the misunderstandings around the relationship between *Brahman* and *Īs’vara*. It is not the *jīva* who views *Brahman* as *Īs’vara* in reference to his individuality and the world. Advaita conceives *Īs’vara* as “an absolute emanation from Brahman”⁷. The creative thought or *īksā* is like magic. It is “creativity of absolute appearance”⁸, neither absolutely real nor unreal. Brahman’s creativity is what *māyā* is. Freedom or *māyā s’akti* is no restriction of the being of Brahman. *Īs’vara* and *Brahman*, both are characterized by the same epithets of eternality, omniscience, purity and freedom. *Īs’vara* in one of His forms wields *māyā s’akti* and is immanent in the world, and in another merges back into *Brahman*. “As transcendent, *Īs’vara* is conceived as what is not *Māyā*, as determined not by *Māyā* but by freedom from *Māyā*, as other than the world that is put forth by Him as an appearance, while *Brahman* is understood without reference to *Māyā* and the world”⁹.

Bhattacharya discusses the issue if Brahman can have determinations. *Sat*, *Cit* and *Ānanda* are not determinations, in themselves each is the unspeakable Absolute formulated by our consciousness. It is significant that Bhattacharya renders *Cit* as “knowledge”¹⁰ instead of the

usual rendering as “consciousness”. Following this suggestions and Bhattacharya’s other writings, together with the Jaina insight of *anekāntavāda*, Kalidas Bhattacharya formulated his celebrated thesis of *Alternative Standpoints in Philosophy*¹¹. However, the point is that Bhattacharya in taking *Sat*, *Cit* and *Ānanda* as unspeakable alternative Absolutes, lays down the possibility of what may be called *anekānta Vedānta*. This is a contributory line of approach and looks back to what the *Gītā* declared :whatever path one may follow, the same goal would be reached.

Bhattacharya pointed the case of *mokṣa* as the correction of subjective and cosmic illusions, and points out that the process of correction itself should be viewed as illusions. The reason for saying this is *mokṣa* is not “an eternal predicament of the self”¹², it is not something to be reached or effected or remanifested. *Mokṣa* is to be contemplated as the self itself or *svarūpa* of Brahman. In a striking sentence Bhattacharya remarks, “The self or absolute is not a thing having freedom but is freedom itself”¹³. If that be the case, then what about the *sādhana* or discipline to attain freedom? The discipline in the advaita mode consists in realizing that bondage is an illusion, and one is eternally free. The only way of attaining freedom is to know the truth about oneself. It is primarily a matter of knowledge, and secondarily that of willing and feeling. The latter ways of action and feeling set the individual self on the path of the progressive transparency of mind,

ceto darpaṇa mārjanam, cleansing the mirror of the mind so that it does not distort and obscure the truth to shine on its surface. When the poet says : “Make me simple and straight as a flute of reed for thee to fill it with music”¹⁴. It is a prayer for correction of the illusion of the ego through bhakti. The teaching of *niṣkāma Karma* in the *Gītā* is likewise a prescription for coming out of the illusory idea of agency of actions. When Bhattacharya renders *cit* as “knowledge” he means by it “spiritual being”. It is not the detached consciousness of a spectator. The knowledge of the self is not distinct from but one with the knowledge : *brahmavid brahmaiva bhavati*. In Bhattacharya’s words, “The clarity of spiritual being is implicitly or explicitly the clarity of knowledge”¹⁵.

Is Vedānta religion or philosophy? Much of course would depend on what one means by the terms ‘religion’ and ‘philosophy’, and it should be foolhardy to expect unanimous definitions. Bhattacharya has his concept of ‘philosophy’ as ‘The self-evident elaboration of the self-evident’¹⁶. Bhattacharya says that realization of the self is held as something sacred in all religions, and in this sense Vedānta is primarily religion. Advaita holds self-knowledge as sacred knowledge, knowledge *par excellence*. In the introduction to his *bhāṣya* on the *Bhagavadgītā* Sankara declares that *jñānātmukti na karma samuccayāt*, knowledge of the self alone is enough for mukti, there is no need of supplementary help from other sources. Advaita prescribes knowledge as its distinctive *sādhana*, self-sufficing

discipline. The self in order to be known is to be accepted, first in faith (*s'raddhā*) which remains to be confirmed, clarified and formulated by reason, and finally inwardized into vision (compare Tagore's comments : "poetry naturally falls within the scope of a philosopher, when his reason is illumined into a vision"¹⁷). It is no wonder that one and the same Samkara who wrote the *Brahma Sūtra bhāṣya* should also write the *Saundaryalaharī*. Thus for Advaita, philosophy is an integral part of religion and its characteristic self-expression.

As a religion advaita takes care of both the individual and the universal. As a religion advaita stands for a deepening of one's spiritual individuality while at the same time it professes the salvation of all. Bhattacharya calls it "inwardization of one's subjective being". It is universal in the sense that philosophically advaita presents a truth that is for all. It guarantees God and salvation to all finite beings, human, sub-human, and celestial. Advaita is a religion of harmony and hospitality. There is another aspect of great importance. "Advaitism", as Bhattacharya phrases the religion of *advaita*,¹⁸ conserves one's spiritual individuality, and no less importantly, it recognizes spiritual individuality in others too. Bhattacharya interprets the concept of *svadharma* as spiritual individuality, and thus follows the *Gītā*¹⁹ that the caste names are used with a psychological significance. The idea that the other's spiritual individuality is as sacred as mine makes advaita the most tolerant among religions. At the philosophical

level every individual self is taken as the one self or reality, and as a religion advaita denies the world that is common to all and retires into the solitude of subjectivity.

According to Bhattacharya, on both the counts, as religion and as philosophy, advaita is practical idealism. The distinction between *prātibhāsika* and *tuccha* implies that even the illusory object is not imaginary. On the plane of ethics, advaita prescribes *nivṛtti* to be practically achieved through discipline. The spirit is taken as the only reality, while the object is absolutely naught. The world as appearance is a symbolism of the spirit, a *vibhūti* as the *Gītā* recounts, “Whatever in this world is powerful, beautiful or glorious, that you may know to have come forth from a fraction of my power and glory”²⁰. Logic, Law and the revealed word itself, all are symbolism, i.e., unreal in themselves and yet showing the reality beyond. Everything has to be accepted in order to be effectively denied. Life for an advaitin is a spiritual game, an examined life that is worth-living when and if it aims at absolute freedom of the self, freedom from all relativity, including that of good and evil. Freedom from law is to be achieved by the willing of the law, by the performance of one’s moral and spiritual duty without desire, not only for pleasure, but even for spiritual merit, and merging one’s individual life in objective institutional spiritual life. Bhattacharya incorporates much that is in the *Gītā* while spelling out the practical idealism of advaita. Since the *Gītā* is the *smṛtiprasthāna*

of Vedānta, this may be admissible. Yet the doubt lingers that his account tones down the radical element of Vedānta putting it at the service of social and religious orthodoxy. Bhattacharya appears to take an ahistorical view of religion and society and argues for a modern defence of orthodoxy in the name of spiritual realism.

The spiritual significance appears to be the uppermost. He is also eloquent on the import of *Srūti*. He seeks to bring out the epistemological import of the experience of *adhyāsa* leading to its ontological rewards of self-certitude. He leans towards a more radical *status-quo* of the society and its manners. But obliquely, in another context, in his essay "Swaraj in Ideas"²¹, he upholds national esteem and self-consciousness in the psyche of a people under foreign domination. But in the piece we have chosen for our discussion, he does not come out with any inclination for social change, or evinces any passion for ameliorating the degeneration of the millions of our country. He decidedly lacked the grand passion of Vivekananda, the compassionate heart of Buddha, as the Swami used to put it. The manner in which he interprets the *Gītā* concepts of *lokasamgraha* does not seem to incorporate any notion of change. And the virtues which he mentions towards the close of his paper are negative, lacking the vivacity which Vivekananda or Sri Aurobindo invested them with.

When Bhattacharya comes to talk of toleration whatever he says sounds like rattling of dry bones. One has just to compare Vivekananda or

Sri Aurobindo with Bhattacharya to see how great is the difference. Bhattacharya's concept of toleration is so very negative that it sounds like indifference to others. Religious life, as Bhattacharya expounds it, is to be led within windowless monads. For him religion is coextensive with society and its institutions. But there may be different religions within one society. He does not seem to favour the possibility of inter-religious dialogue, or enriching one's religious ideas by learning from other's religion. There is nothing in Bhattacharya's account to suggest that toleration may be synergic as well. Religions, like language, develop in a historically given situation and live or survive through material, geographical and culturally interactive modes of change and adaptation. In spite of advaita religions of India have survived through metamorphosis and discovering unity in diversity.

Bhattacharya has no patience with reformers in socio-religious matters. If religion consists in deepening of faith into subjective realization, then advaita should have no objection to transformation of the social order on the empirical plane.

For Bhattacharya advaita is the religion of *jñāna*. How does advaita as the religion of *jñāna* stand in relation to Vedic and post-Vedic worship and ceremonial? Bhattacharya is quite evasive on this point. It is true that he refers to the historical evolution of Hinduism, but being on the side of the *status quo* in social matters, refrains from the causal factors of

the evolution. Without minimizing the role played by advaita in history, it should be pertinent to admit that empty rituals and ceremonialism resists the inwardization or realization of subjectivity. More often than not religious life of the average men and women is a matter of habit and adherence to custom. Bhattacharya notes that it is possible that moral and ceremonials are apt to be taken as self-sufficing religion. The advaita religion of *jñāna* is indeed a protest against socially oriented disciplines which work against the attainment of *mokṣa*. The advaita cult of self-knowledge may derive its meaning from the concrete religion of worship, but it may not be so necessarily. A Ramakrishna or a Ramana Maharsi attests to the possibility.