

# ***PRATIBHĀ-VIMARŚAḤ : THE PHILOSOPHY OF ABHINAVAGUPTA***

Prof. Arindam Chakravarty

Paying acute attention to words is a shared feature of the Vedic and Tantric traditions. The compound-word used to describe the theme of this seminar is "*pratibhā-vimarśaḥ*". Since this kind of a compound gives semantic priority to the second or latter word, let me begin by meditating a little upon the word "*vimarśa*".

In ordinary-even ancient Sanskrit, this word "*vimarśa*" means any intellectual investigation, enquiry or deliberation-any occasion to think twice or decide rationally between alternatives. Now, two types of mental states go through alternatives: one is an unpleasant state called doubt or uncertainty, the other is a pleasant state, called the feeling of freedom or choice. The doubting mind uses "OR" ("वा") when it says: "Is that a man or a tree-trunk?" The choosing, electing, unconstrained agent also uses "OR" ("वा") when she says: "I can either do x or do y, as I wish." I shall end this lecture with this powerful and playful word "वा" with which I began it.

2. In the **Nyāya Sūtra** (1.1.23) the word "*vimarśa*" is used as a synonym of "doubt": "...*viśeṣāpekṣo vimarśaḥ saṁśayaḥ*". If we take that sense of the term, then this is a seminar designed to investigate some aspects of Kashmir Śaivism, to articulate our doubts concerning the nature of intuitive knowledge or *pratibhā* and concerning the deep and complex metaphysics, aesthetics, epistemology and theology of Abhinavagupta.

But, as anyone who knows the first thing about Kashmir Śaivism should know, that term "*vimarśa*" does not mean doubt at all, in that system of thought. Both in Śaiva Tantra as well as in Bhartṛhari's Philosophy of Language *vimarśa* is that special function of differentiating, articulating, inter-connecting self-reflection without which the power of illuminating awareness (*prakāśa*) would not be complete or capable. Far from being synonymous with doubt, *vimarśa* is a necessary condition of certitude. I cannot claim to be aware of either an external tree or an internal mental feeling unless I can distinguish the tree from the soil underneath, unless I can organize my successive perceptions of the trunk, the branches and the leaves into one synthesized judgment: 'This is a tree', and unless I can re-identify the tree across multiple occasions of experience: 'That same tree again'. This is why Bhartṛhari remarks: "If awareness loses its language-like eternal character, then even awareness would not be able to illuminate. This language-like grid of all thought is called *pratyavamarśa* or *vimarśa* (VP I/124). Abhinava almost echoes Bhartṛhari when he says: *na hi nirvimarśaḥ prakāśaḥ samasti, upapadyate* (*TĀ, III*). Illumination without articulation is neither possible nor intelligible. But there is a difference of emphasis



between the Grammarian and the Tantric ways of employing the concept of *vimarśa*. Bhartṛhari uses the concept in the following argument to deduce the linguistic nature of all object-directed ordinary awareness:

- Premise 1: Every objective awareness has an intentional content.
- Premise 2: Intentional content can come only through articulating structure and recognitional function of *vimarśa*.
- Premise 3: Wherever there is articulation, distinction and exclusion there is implicit presence of language.

Therefore, every awareness is implicitly shot through with words.

Although Abhinava quotes Bhartṛhari's verses (VP I.123-124) with approval (in IPV I/5/14), his own emphasis on the active, spontaneous, choosing nature of *vimarśa* goes beyond the thesis that all objective awareness is linguistic in character. Following Utpala (who after all refutes *sphoṭavāda* while commenting on *Śivadṛṣṭi*), he links it up with the '*svātantrya*' or performative freedom that is so distinctive of the Kashmir Śaiva concept of knowledge. Unlike the subjective idealist Berkeley whose "perceptions" are passive receptions, and unlike Yogācāra Buddhist *sva-samvedana*-self-presenting fleeting experiences which are totally causally determined by previous dispositions and immediately preceding mental states (*samanantara pratyaya*) Abhinava's knower (*pramāṭṛ-saṁvit*) makes its own content wilfully creatively-projecting its own chosen film of this "*darpaṇadrśyamāna nagarī*" the world-city mirrored in the mind onto itself. The argument used by Utpala for the indispensability of *vimarśa* for any act of cognition goes somewhat as follows:

- Premise 1. A mirror or a crystal also reflects and reveals other objects. But they are inert. Consciousness has to be distinguished from them because there is something that it feels like to be conscious and consciousness is not dependent upon a further revealer or recognizer.
- Premise 2. What makes a crystal or mirror etc. insentient and *saṁvit* alive and selfaware is the capacity to select and grasp actively—a capacity and freedom that insentient reflects lack.
- Premise 3. This free activity is *vimarśa*.

Therefore, *vimarśa* is what makes the light of consciousness special. This argument is encapsulated in the following *kārikā* commented upon by Abhinava:

स्वभावमवभासस्य विमर्शं विदुरन्यथा । प्रकाशोऽर्थोपरक्तोऽपि स्फटिकादि जड़ोपमः

(IVP, 1/5/11)



3. Both of these above arguments **Vākyapadiya's** and **Īśvarapratyabhijñā-Vimarśinī's**—are of that form which in Nyāya is called "*tarka*", or counterfactual reasoning of the form:

"Had it been the case that Not-P, then Q would not be possible. But Q is possible. Therefore P."

What is most fascinating is that in the very context of speech the **Chāndogya Upaniṣad**—a part of **Sāmaveda**, employs exactly such a *tarka*, using the counterfactual (lṛṇ) conjugation: Had there been no speech, there would have been no knowing obligations and prohibitions, no truth and falsity, no good or bad, no enchanting and disenchanting. It is speech which makes us know all these distinctions. Therefore worship speech.

"यद्वै वाग् न अभविष्यन्, न धर्मो नाधर्मो व्यज्ञापयिष्यन्, न सत्यम् नानृतम्,

न साधु नासाधु, न हृदयज्ञो नाहृदयज्ञो—वागेव एतस्सर्वं विज्ञापयति ।

वाचमेव उपास्स्व इति । "

(CU 7/2/1).

Notable is the mention of aesthetic assesment in terms of what the heart knows or that which knows the heart—as one of the outcomes of the speech-principle!

4. It is easy to recognize that we are free in imagination and willing, but are we free in knowledge or *pramiti*? Aren't we totally at the mercy of the object or the world? Abhinava meets this worry frontally by showing how at each of the three acts—which together make a conscious agent a knowing subject (*pramātā*) consciousness—in the form of the "I" that faces "all this" as well as invents the other as a "You"—but is always acting freely, even when it freely identifies itself with a solid inert frozen world becoming a "This" itself! These three acts are the act of cognizing (ज्ञानम्). Thus to see this seminar-hall is, for me, to focus on a selected part of my potentially all-encompassing field of consciousness—just these faces, these chairs, that wall etc., etc., then separate it out from other inner and outer ideas that are also claiming my attention, and then to decide to recall some past experience through resemblance with which I classify and identify what I focus on now. In commenting upon the Bhavadgīta passage: "*mattah smṛtir jñānam apohanañca*" (15/15. BG) Abhinava elaborates on this using our key-word *vimarśa* again:

“तत्र अहमिति यो विमर्शस्तत एव अपूर्वावभासनमयं ज्ञानं विश्वमहासृष्टिम् 'घट एव' इति सर्वात्मकं भावखण्डनासारं विकल्पनाज्ञानात्मकम् अपोहनं पाशवसृष्टिरूपमायामय ... प्रमात्रुचितं स्मरणं च संस्कारशेषतां नीतस्य संहृतस्य पुनरवभासनात्मकम् इतीयता समस्त ज्ञानानि संहृतानि इति सर्वज्ञता पूर्वकं स्वातन्त्र्यरूपं कर्तृत्वमुक्तम् । ”



It is interesting to note how the explanation of the free self-proliferation of *ahantā* or I-ness leads him into an allusion to omniscience (सर्वज्ञत्व).

5. That is a good point of departure for touching upon the first word of our title: *pratibhā*, since *pratibhā* generates knowledge, according to Patañjali's **Yoga Sūtra** (3/33) assumes the form of a saving (*tāraka*) knowledge of all things. What should be discussed regarding this very crucial concept of *pratibhā* are:

- (a) Bhartṛhari's epistemology of sentence-understanding and its links with practical knowledge, and innate instinctive activities (VP I/118 which calls it शब्देषु एव आश्रिता शक्तिर्विश्वस्यास्य निबन्धनी । यन्नेत्रः प्रतिभात्मायं... and VP II/143-152) of even subhumans!
- (b) The role of *pratibhā*—as a sort of creative genius and innovativeness in poetic and aesthetic theory of Ānandavardhana and Abhinava, and also the need for *pratibhā*-insight in the appreciation of poetry.
- (c) The place of *prātibha* knowledge in the **Yoga Sūtra** (3/33 and 3/49). Different conceptions of omniscience in different schools of Indian philosophy.
- (d) The role of *pratibhā* in Tantra-philosophy and its relation with *parā vāk* and its welling up in the form of life breath as well as a Cosmic Creative exuberance that is nevertheless searching for a peaceful resting place in the heart. The following passage from 6<sup>th</sup> *Āhnika* of **Tantrāloka** makes some of those connections clear and it also links up our two concepts—*vimarśa* and *pratibhā*—directly with each other:

संविन्मात्रं हि तच्छुद्धं प्रकाशपरमार्थकम् । तन्मेयमात्मनः प्रोज्झ्य विविक्तं भासते नभः । ।  
तदेव शून्यरूपत्वं संविदः परिगीयते । नेति नेति विमर्शेन योगिनां सा परा दशा । ।  
स एव "खात्मा मेयेऽस्मिन्भेदिते स्वीक्रियोन्मुखः । पतन्समुच्छलत्वेन प्राणस्पन्दोर्मि संज्ञितः । ।  
तेनाहुः किल संवित्प्राक् प्राणे परिणता तथा । अन्तःकरणतत्त्वस्य वायुराश्रयतां गतः । ।  
इयं सा प्राणना शक्तिरान्तरोद्योगदोहदा । स्पन्दःस्फुरत्ताविश्रान्तिर्जीवोहृत्प्रतिभामता । ।

(TĀ VI/13)

It appears to me after consulting the sources that MM. Gopinath Kaviraj refers to in his pioneering work *The Doctrine of Pratibhā in Indian Philosophy* that we can isolate six general features of the concept of *pratibhā* in all these different manifestations in different schools of thought :

- (a) It is a sudden flash of synoptic awareness of the whole sentence meaning that exceeds the amalgamation of the separate elements of the word-meanings.



- (b) It is a power behind and successful poetic or musical or dramatic creation which inspires a sense of awe and charm, amazement and rapture (*camatkāra*) which makes us feel "This just right, nothing else would be appropriate in its place!"
- (c) It is also a cognitive-imaginative-artistic excellence which spontaneously evokes responses in the like-hearted connoisseur, though it requires a corresponding *pratibhā* for the relisher's heart to resonate with the universalized sentiments transformed into that savoured juice flowing from the intuition of Great poets.
- (d) It functions in a way that even the person employing the power does not know how it works, since it does not obey any determinate causal laws: '*niyati kṛta niyama rahitā*.'
- (e) It is responsible for all the freshness and novelty that flows out naturally like milk from the cow's udder—here is a play between "गौः" as cow and "गौः" as speech. It is a talent that expresses itself through ever newer productions!
- (f) Though most brilliantly expressed in mystical omniscience or aesthetic creativity—this same *pratibhā* also lies at the root of such basic unlearned capacities as in spring, the cuckoo's sweet voice and the child's ability to generate the full grammatical language out of a few sample sentences from the adults or the basic knowledge of 'do's and 'don't-s that people display in their daily practice!

7. Abhinavagupta himself shows this *pratibhā* in almost all the above six aspects in nearly all of his writings!

For example, there is an age-old controversy between Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya theories of knowledge concerning the freshness (*anadhigatatva*) requirement for *pramāṭva*. Mīmāṃsā insists, for all sorts of Veda-related reasons, that nothing counts as knowing unless it is cognising what was not cognised before: the already cognized cannot be known again. Knowledge must be fresh. Nyāya more concerned with veridicality and the correct causal lineage of the piece of knowledge and staunchly propounding the possibility that even what is perceived can be recognized by a strengthening inference and testimony can be knowledge-giver even about something one has already seen or inferred (प्रमाण संज्ञा) produces the counter-example of "धारावाहिक प्रत्यक्ष" repeated continuous perception of the same object. Abhinava steps into this debate in the 4<sup>th</sup> *āhnika* of *Tantraloka* (TĀ 4/85) but with an example that only Abhinava can bring into the heart of epistemology—thereby shifting epistemology from a dried up intellectual Cartesian brain to a full-bodied heart:



"दृष्ट्वा समाश्लिष्य चिरं संचर्च्य चेतसा ।  
प्रियायैः परितुष्येत किं ब्रूमः किल तान्प्रति?"

When a lover pleases his beloved woman first by seeing her with his eyes, then by embracing her for a long time, then by repeatedly ruminating on her with his mind—what shall we say about such repeated cognition of the same object? Abhinava agrees with Nyāya that all the subsequent tactile, introspective, inferential, emotional knowledge of the same object after it has been already visually perceived once—equally deserve the title of "*pramā*". Yet he retains the novelty-requirement of the Mīmāṃsā because though it is the same woman being seen, touched, loved, talked about, thought about each time, she is new: क्षणे क्षणे तन्वतामुपैति । And this is because *pramāṇa* here is working along with *pratibhā*.

इत्थं च मानं संप्लुत्यामपि नाधिगते गतिः ।  
नव्यर्थता नानवस्था नान्योन्याश्रयतापि च । (TĀ4/85)

The doctrine of knowability of the same thing by many *pramāṇas* is preserved, yet it does not degenerate into knowing a state already known object.

Another example from Abhinava's *pratibhā* also shows how he links up the most esoteric spiritual practice such as meditation on the twelve forms of the Goddess Kālī with the most logical reconfiguration of the twelve epistemic roles played by a free-willing consciousness. The logical space for these epistemic phases or roles is generated by combining, mathematically, the three major modes—knower, means of knowing and the object known, with the four major ontological states of (1) the state beyond change, (2) creation, (3) stable continuation, (4) dissolution or collecting back into the original form. The resultant 12 states are interpretations of the twelve Tāntric forms of Kālī the mother! (TĀ VI/145-172).

	Knower (प्रमाता)	Means of knowing (प्रमाण)	Known (प्रमेय)
The Nameless (अनाख्या)	महाभैरव चण्डोग्रा काली	मार्तण्ड काली	यमकाली
Creation (सृष्टि)	परमार्क काली	संहार काली	सृष्टि काली
Stability (स्थिति)	कालाग्निरुद्रा काली	मृत्यु काली	रक्तकाली
Dissolution (संहार)	महाकाल काली	भद्र / रुद्रकाली	स्थितिनाश काली



## 8. Conclusion

Both in Indian and Western Philosophy, a rift has been often posited between reason and direct experience, logic and mysticism, conceptual philosophical thinking and yogic melting away of the mind. This conflict—I think—vanishes totally in Abhinavagupta's thought. He is well known as a great महामाहेश्वर Tantric teacher, and a great musician and dramaturgist, and above all a great devotional poet—who embellishes every chapter of each book with a gem of an invocation verse describing intimate details of his own mystical experience, e.g.:

अलं क्रियन्ते गात्राणि यत्स्पर्शविवशस्थितेः  
स्पर्शतन्मात्रवपुषं संस्तुमः परमेश्वरम् । ।

(अभिनवभारती 9<sup>th</sup> chapter)

But he was also a master of dialectic. Not only has he reinterpreted the dialogue between Śiva and Pārvatī in many Tantras as the inner dialogue of *vimarśa* going on in every human heart—especially in the clear mind of the spiritual seeker—he also has reshuffled the *yoga* of Patañjali by making all the other eight steps of *yoga* from *yama* to *samādhi*—even *samādhi* as subservient to the most important supreme means to self-realization: 'good reasoning' सत्तर्क! This insight, I submit, links up the 'वा' or "OR" of doubt-generated by the equipoise achieved between two philosophical positions through good *āgama*-abiding-reasoning with the "वा" or "OR" of *vimarśa*—a *vimarśa* that leads to the स्फुरत्ता—that enlightenment which brings us back to our primal own nature—The blissful nonduality of pure Śiva-consciousness and pure wilful free creativity of *parā-vāk* or *pratibhā*!. Such *tarka* as we saw in the **Chāndogya Upaniṣad** directly grounds our *upāsana*—and our argumentation can become offerings of the most intricately structured flowers of syllogisms: न्यायप्रसूनांजलिः ।

