

Interpreting Indian Texts: Concepts vs. Context*

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Abstract—This paper deals with the two general methodological approaches for the interpretation of Indian cultural phenomena, viz. the conceptual and the contextual ones. Generally, it can be said that the conceptual approach aims to express Indian philosophical ideas and cultural narratives in terms of Western philosophical discourse, whereas the contextual approach aims to reconstruct the initial context in which these ideas and narratives have been formulated. Several cases are discussed in which conceptual and textual approaches provide us with different solutions of some problems. It can be concluded that both approaches can be fruitful on different occasions.

Keywords—*Indian philosophy; perspectivism; inclusivism; henotheism*

I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary studies of Indian philosophy and culture the question of the methodology is extremely important. Using the dichotomy elaborated in cultural anthropology, we can describe the two basic opportunities as the emic and the etic approaches. The first of them implies following traditional modes of description, whereas the second one makes use of the concepts elaborated in Western cultural tradition. The first approach indeed can be fruitful, still one should keep in mind that many questions dealt with by Western scholars cannot be solved in the frames of Indian traditional discourse. This is especially true in the case of historical questions, because in Indian traditional discourse cultural phenomena are usually considered unchangeable. In such cases Western concepts help a better understanding of some points in Indian philosophy and culture, which otherwise would remain unexplainable.

As W. Halbfass put it, "Understanding ancient Indian thought cannot mean becoming like the ancient Indians, "thinking and seeing the world exactly like them. We are not capable of such "objectivity," and if we were, we would obviously not be "like the Indians." [1]

On the other hand, in some cases Western concepts may appear irrelevant with respect to Indian traditional philosophy, and the rigorist followers of traditional modes of explanation may accuse Western scholars of misinterpretation and imposing of their dominant discourse on Indian cultural heritage. In recent years this contradiction between traditional and Western scholars became acute. It is

*Fund: This work was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (RSF) under Grant 16-18-10427.

especially since a very convenient concept of Orientalism has become a kind of mainstream, that traditional scholars can now apply it critically addressing the way of reasoning specific to Western academic discourse.

At the same time, it is not a rare case that the use of Western concepts with respect to Indian culture goes hand in hand with ignoring or misunderstanding of the original context. Especially it can be true when new concepts are created in order to explain some strange and unprecedented cases in Indian culture. Indeed, it is one thing to apply Western concept because we see, say, a typological similarity between Indian and Western culture, but it is quite another thing to invent a new concept just in order to denote something that seems otherwise inconceivable for us. In the latter case inventing of a new concept does not contribute a better understanding of a problem. It merely helps to express it in an "academic" manner.

So, let us discuss some examples of how — successfully or not — the concepts of Western philosophy are applied in Indian studies and how some questions can be better solved if the original cultural context is taken into account.

II. LOGIC VS. ILLOGIC: HENOtheISM IN VEDIC RELIGION

Let us begin with the question that puzzled many Western scholars of the 19th century. Namely, who is the head god of the Vedic pantheon? On different occasions, different gods (e.g. Indra, Agni, Soma, Vāruṇa or Vāc) are proclaimed supreme. A scholar brought up in a monotheistic paradigm generally presumes that the polytheistic system of the Veda must be similar to that of the Ancient Greece or Rome (in their ripe form), with each god of the pantheon possessing the own strictly defined functions. In this view the case of Vedic religion, indeed, seemed puzzling. Therefore it is little wonder that wishing to explain this seeming logical inconsistency Max Muller invented a special term, that of henotheism, designed specifically to describe this strange state of affairs

For a period of time this interpretation remained generally accepted, though strictly speaking the only use of "henotheism" was that this concept helped to rank Vedic religion side-by-side to other religions of the World, each designated with a specific "-ism" term. It did not help to understand the reason why Vedic attitude towards gods differed from the anticipations of Western scholars. No wonder that in the view of contemporary scholars, addressing to Vedic religion as henotheism seems irrelevant.

Patrick Olivelle designated the term of henotheism an "interpretive monstrosity" and provided a different explanation. Why not consider these claims of the supremacy of different gods not as a logical description of their place in the pantheon, but as a rhetoric device (*atīśayokti*), a kind of hyperbola, so common in royal panegyrics? [2] Or having in mind that Vedic religion was based on the ritual functionalism, yet another explanation can be provided. It seems probable that the god that is praised in a particular hymn is considered the supreme one on account of his functional efficiency. Being in need at this very moment on account of the functions it can accomplish, this god is considered to be the most important now. This solution reminds us inevitably on the exegetical principle of the *Brāhmaṇas*, where a mythological explanation is introduced in an ad hoc manner, just to explain a particular case, with no attempt to bring these ad hoc explanations together in a single consistent narrative.

The question of the "supreme god" in Vedic religion brings forth a further problem. Is it fundamentally reasonable to analyze phenomena of Indian pre-modern culture in terms of 'formal logic'? That is to say, if we find something strange or illogic in Indian texts, is it enough to claim that ancient Indian discourse is illogic per se? Or can we say that generalizations of a similar scope are a priori ill-founded, as they derive from a poor knowledge of initial context?

It has been since L'évy-Bruhl that controversies arise with respect to the question of whether the discourse of pre-modern cultures – say, that of the Vedic *ṛṣis* — can be characterized as "illogic", "pre-logic" or "mythological", and as such different from the modern "formal logical" or discursive worldview. Indeed, pre-modern people are usually untrained in formal logic, therefore they tend to follow their daily experience instead of logical constructions. On the other hand, it will be no point denying that in their daily life they followed a sort of common sense logic, being able to identify casual relations between different phenomena. And at the same time one should remember that ancient Indians were able to create comprehensive intellectual systems like that of *vyākaraṇa*, which evidently would have been impossible for someone whose world-view is 'illogical'. Moreover, recent studies in cognitive sciences demonstrate that even modern people in their daily life usually follow some stereotype schemas, which appear a result of preceding experience. So, there is no point in opposing pre-modern "mythological" and modern "logical" or "scientific" world-views, ultimately they are the same [3].

Instead of trying to grasp all the supposed characteristic features of Indian culture in one term or in a single general judgment, it is reasonable to focus on single cases trying to reconstruct the context that can provide a clue to some problematic issues. Indeed, in the context of the cross-cultural studies it may seem very tempting to formulate some basic principles that distinguish pre-modern Indian culture from the "Western" culture. But usually attempts of this kind appear speculative. Instead of formulating some "basic logical principles" peculiar to Indian culture, it would be better to concentrate on particular cases and their cultural context.

III. TEXTUAL CRITICISM VS. RECONSTRUCTION

One more example of the controversy of the "formal logic" vs. "contextually based approach" can be found in the history of reception of the "*Mānavadharmasāstra*" (MDhŚ) in the West. This text is full of evident discrepancies and contradictions which puzzled indeed Western scholars. E.g. the verses 5.4-26 list kinds of meat allowed to be eaten, and immediately after that verse 5.27-55 prohibit eating of meat emphatically. Or the verse 3.13 claims that a brahman can marry a woman of a lower *varṇa*, including *śūdras*, whereas 3.14-19 prohibits this possibility.

Western scholars of the 19th century considered these discrepancies as an evidence of the late and composite character of the text. But Olivelle has recently proposed another explanation. He suggested distinguishing two different modes of narrative in the MDhŚ: the descriptive (legal) and the prescriptive (moral). Describing common practice, the author of the text (Manu) formulates rules to regulate it (as in the case of meat which probably was commonly eaten at the time). But still he also emphasizes his moral /prescriptive/ normative position: those who wish to follow the law of dharma should not eat meat, marry *śūdra* women, etc. [2] So, mutually contradictory statements appear just different perspectives of a single issue, which means that procedures of textual criticism can be of little use in this case. On the contrary, the best way for understanding the text is attempting to reconstruct the author's opinion.

The case of the "*Mānavadharmasāstra*" is not at all unique. On the contrary, it is quite typical for pre-modern Indian texts, to combine features of different times or various levels of description. Let us now turn to another example from a quite different textual tradition, namely from the great epic poem of "*Rāmāyaṇa*". Generally, Indian epic poems are full of contradictions, but especially this is true for the "*Mahābhārata*". As to *Rāmāyaṇa*, it seems more monolithic, still there is at least one very famous narrative discrepancy. In the 7th (last) book Rāma returned to his town Ayodhyā and after some time he sent his wife Sītā away, so that she went to live in the wood. She was pregnant at the time and found refuge in the hermitage of the sage Vālmīki, where she gave birth to Rāma's two sons. The reason for Rāma to drive Sītā away was the slander of the people that she had lived in the house of Rāvana. But evidently Rāma and all his army knew that these accusations were baseless, as Sītā underwent a trial by fire, which proved her chastity. Also from a stylistic point of view this episode stands in a sharp contrast with the rest of the poem. Usually scholars tended to explain this as a later amendment caused by Brahmins who wanted to introduce a kind of morality in the epic poem.

However, a Russian scholar P.A. Grintser proposed a different interpretation. He considers this story as a trace of an old narrative of the unfaithful wife who initially belonged to the world of her husband's antagonist and helped him to defeat her husband. This narrative can be traced in the fairy-tails of different people and cultures. Significantly, in some Jaina versions of *Rāmāyaṇa*, in Sanskrit *Adbhūtarāmāyaṇa* as well as in several South-East Asian versions of this epic poem Sītā appears to be the daughter of Rāvana or of his

wife. Grintser also claims that the very story of Sītā's birth from the soil in the field indicates her chthonic or infernal origin. He concludes that the narrative of Sītā's trial and second exile is a trace of an early version of Rāma's story that did not survive in India and can be discovered by means of reconstruction only [4].

Here the reconstructed context is not of synchronic (as in the case of the MDhŚ discussed above), but of diachronic nature. Still, both cases demonstrate the general tendency of Indian culture that can be designated as inclusivism, i.e. the tendency to adopt and retain elements of different origin or of different axiological status, incorporating them into a single system.

IV. INDIANS DOUBT ON THE MULTIPLICITY OF APPROACHES

A question can be posed of whether Indian authors reflected on this peculiar feature of their own culture. In cases of Vedic mythology or Indian epic the answer would be probably negative, as these texts have been composed over a long period of time and were transmitted in an oral tradition. Quite other is the case of more recent intellectual traditions where the works were composed by single authors and traditions of reflection upon the means of philosophical investigation were elaborated. The most outstanding is the case of grammar (vyākaraṇa), an intellectual tradition with an evident tendency to inclusivism.

Initially, Indian grammatical tradition emerged as a vedāṅga, i.e. an auxiliary Vedic discipline. Characteristically, it posed itself as a universal discipline that embraces all the divergences between different Vedic schools and traditions. It should be noted that although the Vedas are usually considered a monolithic group of texts, initially these texts existed in many readings and traditions (śakhās), so it was significant that grammar was intended to regulate the linguistic usage of all these traditions with all their possible discrepancies. Patañjali in the following manner formulated his methodological credo: "sarvavedapāriṣadaṃ hīdaṃ śāstram" (this discipline relates to all Vedic assemblies) [5]. Later the same tendency to consider the Vedas as a unity, irrespective of the divergences of different schools, can be traced in Mīmāṃsā.

Already in the "Mahābhāṣya" this tendency to include different views concerned not only divergent textual traditions, but also philosophical matters. Within this framework, Patañjali justified different views on the same issue, e.g. he justified both the opinions of universal and substance to be the referent of the word, or different interpretations of Katyāyana's vārttikā on the relation of the word with its meaning, etc. Further this trend reached its pinnacle in Bhartṛhari's "Vākyapadīya", which can be characterized as an encyclopedia of different, often mutually exclusive, doctrines on the nature of language, its role in the Universe, its connection with cognitive processes, etc. It usually remains uncertain which of the views expressed in the text were the most preferred by Bhartṛhari. Later commentators claimed that Bhartṛhari himself preferred the views which doxographic traditions identified as the so-

called Pāṇinīya darśana. Still, the text of the "Vākyapadīya" does not testify any preference in favor of these views. Some modern scholars, on the other hand, elaborate a specific concept to denote Bhartṛhari's methodology, namely the concept of perspectivism. They claim it was Bhartṛhari's general tendency to justify different views and doctrines and to demonstrate that each of them is valid in certain circumstances or from a certain point of view. On the other hand, the concept of perspectivism is also not completely immune to criticism [6], [7].

In some respect the concept of perspectivism seems similar to henotheism or kathenotheism of Max Muller discussed at the beginning of this paper. In a similar way it gives name to a strange phenomenon of Indian culture, thus making it familiar to us. Still, it does not help us much to understand why such phenomena as perspectivism could have emerged and which role it played in Bhartṛhari's philosophy. Having in mind the previously discussed general tendency to inclusivism in Indian culture, we can suggest that Bhartṛhari's "perspectivism" can be considered not so much a pluralistic philosophical doctrine as an encyclopedic narrative strategy, aimed to collect and preserve different views of the previous tradition in their totality.

V. CONCLUSION

Summing up we can conclude that in the cases discussed above the knowledge of the cultural context is indeed important for understanding of problematic points in the history of Indian culture and philosophy. Conceptual approach is also fruitful as it provides us with the means to analyze and express Indian doctrines in terms of Western philosophical discourse. Still in some cases using and especially inventing new concepts can be superfluous. We have seen how taking into account inclusivist tendencies of Indian culture relieves us from inventing new concepts or sophisticated explanations. On the other hand, this very tendency towards inclusivism should not be overestimated. It would be no use hypostatizing inclusivism and considering it as a dominant trend to be discovered in every sphere of Indian culture.

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