Vedāpauruṣeyatva

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The wise ancients of this country considered knowledge as the most precious thing in the life of a human being, for if there is anything that can free a human from the cycle of births and deaths, and the endless suffering this entails, it is knowledge. The *Gāyatrī* mantra which is regarded as one of the most unique found in the entire Vedic corpora, and the daily recitation of which is prescribed as the most essential part of one's religious duties, is in fact nothing but a prayer to the Lord to bless us with knowledge—*dhiyo yo naḥ pracodayāt*. Knowledge or enlightenment was thus considered the greatest asset in life, not only by the ancient Vedic seers, but also by the founders of the various schools of thought originating from this land. Statements such as *athāto brahmajijñāsā, athāto dharmajijñāsā, tattvajñānāt niśśreyasādhiyāmaḥ*, found in the *sūtra* texts related with different *darśana*s, clearly indicate that knowledge has been a focal point of all the *darśana*s, including the *avaidika darśana*s such as the Bauddha and the Jaina.

It is precisely for the reason that knowledge has been given the most venerable place among the most valued goals of human life, that the Vedas have, through the ages, been held in high esteem as the most sacred literature of this land. As a matter of fact, the very word 'Veda' is derived from the linguistic root *vid* meaning "to know," indicating that the name 'Veda' given to the text is very appropriate as it is "a [unique] means of knowledge."[1] But then the question arises: what guarantee is there that the cognition derived from the Veda constitutes knowledge rather than delusion? As a matter of fact, this is the allegation made by the *avaidika darśana*s—that the cognition obtained from the Vedas is liable to be in error, and hence cannot be accepted as true knowledge.

However, the Vedic tradition has an answer, the likes of which are unseen in any religious discourse elsewhere in the world, to this question. The traditional argument

is thus: words or sentences do not have any defects of their own. If any defect is found in them at all, then it is solely due to the defect of the person who used them. If a person errs in his utterances, or else if he errs in his understanding that forms the basis of his utterances, then naturally, the words and sentences that express his views inherit his defects, and people who receive those sentences will not obtain right knowledge from them. If, on the other hand, the speaker has no defects whatsoever, either in his pronunciation or in his thinking, then he is to be considered an *āpta*—a trustworthy person—and the work he has authored or the sentences he has uttered will be considered *pramāṇa*. However, the trustworthiness of a person whom we have not seen, and who is not among us, cannot be decided easily, and doubts will certainly linger on about the validity of any work he may have written. Since the Vedas are *apauruṣeya*—not authored by any person—the tradition claims that there is no possibility of defects either in the words or the sentences of the Vedic texts, or in the thought content intended to be conveyed by the Vedas.

This reasoning by the adherents of the Vedic tradition has not been left unchallenged, as is well known. Apart from the Buddhists and the Jains who proclaimed skepticism about the validity of the Vedas, even those, such as the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school, who regarded the Vedas as valid testimony, nonetheless saw fit to question the logicality of the concept of *apauruṣeyatva*. However, the *apauruṣeyatva-vādin*s convincingly argued that if an *apauruṣeya* text were not to be envisaged, it would be impossible for there to be conclusive decisions in the matters of *dharma* and *adharma*. For *dharma* and *adharma* are supra-sensory entities, and consequently our sense-organs are of no use in knowing their characteristics. Inference based solely on sense-perception is likewise of no use, for such independent inferences can be freely applied in any manner one pleases, and might even be used by some clever person to call as *adharma* all that is established in society as *dharma* and vice versa.

Therefore, we ultimately have to depend upon a scriptural text to know the true *dharma* and *adharma*. However, unless we are certain of the trustworthiness of the author of such a text, our faith in them will not be strong enough to persuade us to accept them without question. Then the question obtains: how is one to know that the author of some scripture, believed to have lived thousands of years ago, was an *āpta*? An *āpta* is described as a person who has perfect knowledge (including of facts concerning supra-sensory entities such as *dharma* and *adharma*); is not a deceiver; is not given to passions or hatred; and finally, who is endowed with the great virtue of kindness

towards people who suffer due to ignorance.

The Vedic tradition argues that it is a great tax on one's credulity to imagine so many rare virtues in a person from so long ago who is not available for scrutiny, and was not so scrutinised even by one's forefathers. There also being many claimants to *āptatva* with conflicting claims, it also cannot be granted that assuming such virtue in an unseen author provides any definite conclusion regarding *dharma*.[2] Therefore, it argues that there is parsimony of assumption in envisaging that the Vedas are *apauruṣeya*, and holds that this view is also supported by internal evidences, for we find several Vedic statements that describe the Vedas as eternal, such as *yāvad brahma viṣṭhitaṃ tāvatī vāk*.[3] It is therefore also held that the Vedas are the foundational authorities in respect of supra-sensory entities such as *dharma*.[4] The very term *sanātana dharma* used for the Vedic religion connotes a beginningless existence and indestructibility till eternity. Such a religion can never be based on a prophet-inspired theology.

The above are some of arguments that the *apauruṣeyatva-vādin*s put forth in support of their position. These arguments may not be convincing to all; some hold that the doctrine of *apauruṣeyatva* is just a matter of faith and that the arguments are unsatisfactory.[5]

However, within the framework of certain concepts and theories accepted by him, the *apauruṣeyatva-vādin* has to address certain pertinent questions, else the theory of *apauruṣeyatva* would lose all credibility. The point being made here is the following:

Any advocate of the theory of *apauruṣeyatva* of the Vedas, whether he be a Mīmāṃsaka, a Vedāntin, or an adherent of Sāṅkhya or Yoga, accepts that a *śabda* is of two kinds—*dhvani* (sound/utterance), and *varṇa* (phoneme). Of the two, a *śabda* that is in the form of *dhvani* has both origination and destruction. However, the *apauruṣeyatva-vādin* holds that the other form of *śabda*, namely the phoneme, is eternal and has no origin or destruction. Further, it is all-pervasive in space also. Thus, although all the *varṇa*s are eternal and everywhere in space, they can be heard by a person only when they are manifested by *dhvani*. Each *varṇa* has a different *dhvani* that manifests it, and when a speaker uses his faculties to produce the particular *dhvani*, then the corresponding *varṇa* is manifested and grasped by a listener. Likewise, a word or a sentence is a group of phonemes arranged in a particular order. For example, when the *varṇa*s given by *jakāra*, *akāra*, *lakāra*, *akāra*, and *makāra* are arranged in such an order and manifested so, then only a listener can grasp the word *jalam*.

Now the problem that the *varṇa-nityatva-vādin* faces is that he cannot arrange the *varṇa*s in an arbitrary manner. For ordering may be of two kinds, spatial and temporal. If one phoneme can be placed beside another phoneme in space, or if a phoneme can be associated with a moment or interval of time so that a series of phonemes is associated with a series of time, then the *varṇa*s can have spatial or temporal order. However, as per the *varṇa-nityatva-vādin* the *varṇa*s are all-pervasive in space and eternal in time, and hence cannot have any kind of order, either spatial or temporal. The problem of explaining the arrangement of phonemes in a particular order as a word or sentence, it may be noted, is not specific to just Vedic sentences, but also occurs with linguistic usage in everyday life.[6]

With regard to the sentences of our daily usage, the *varṇa-nityatva-vādin* has an answer. He readily grants that the *varṇa*s, being eternal and all-pervasive, cannot have any sequence. However, the cognition of the phonemes that the hearer gets following the utterance of sounds and the manifestation of the phonemes, can and does have an order associated with it. This order, as is evident upon reflection, belongs to the cognition of the phonemes, but not to the phonemes themselves. Being subject to such a cognition, the phonemes themselves may be said to have an indirect or a conditional order, one that is neither spatial nor temporal. Though the phonemes are eternal, words or sentences in common use are considered as *pauruṣeya* or the products of some person, for the underlying order of cognition of the phonemes, being dependent on the will and utterance of the speaker, is to be considered as his product, and the phonemes that are thus indirectly qualified with such an order are themselves treated as *pauruṣeya*.

For this reason, the explanation of the ordering of phonemes, given in the instance of the sentences in our daily usages, is unsatisfactory in respect of Vedic statements. For if the order of the phonemes being dependent on the will of a speaker is the criterion for being *pauruṣeya*, then even Vedic sentences would also have to be considered as *pauruṣeya* only because they have speakers who utter them, and the theory of *apauruṣeyatva* would collapse.

However, the *apauruṣeyatva-vādin* has an answer here. He accepts the notion that the *varṇa*s, being eternal and all-pervasive, do not have an order of their own. He also concedes that the only possible explanation for their perceived order is to hold that the perceived order of the phonemes is really none other than the order that belongs

to the manifestation of the phonemes. Then, the question of the difference between a *laukika* sentence of everyday life, and a Vedic sentence, persists. The *apauruṣeyatva-vādin* answers that the sequence of phonemes in a *laukika* sentence did not exist prior to its creation by an author. It is the will of a speaker or an author that created the sequence of phonemes initially, and the corresponding word or sentence is then considered to have been authored by whoever created the sequence. For instance, it was the will of Kālidāsa that the first stanza of his Raghuvaṃśa—*vāgarthāviva sampṛktau...* should have phonemes arranged in that sequence, that caused such an arrangement of phonemes that is associated with the great poet. But in case of a Vedic sentence such as *agnimīḷe purohitam*, it is not so. The Vedic seer who realized this sentence with the phonemes in such a sequence, did not will that such should be their sequence. In other words, he did not have any freedom to create the order of the phonemes or words, unlike Kālidāsa. While realizing the hymn, he just followed the sequence that had existed in previous Creations also. Even in the previous Creation, the seer who had then realized the hymn with the phonemes in the same order, did not then create it—he too just realized it without making any change in the order of the phonemes. But when he recited the hymn, since the phonemes became manifested by his efforts, to that extent it is his product and is *pauruṣeya* only. At the same time it is *apauruṣeya* also, in the sense that nobody ever, in the infinite, beginningless sequence of Creations until now, has had the freedom to create the sequence, other than what previously existed. Even the Brahman whose "breathing" is described as the Vedas—*niśśvasitaṃ etad*[7]— does not change the sequence of the Vedic phonemes. He just follows the sequence of phonemes as they were in the previous Creation, and teaches the same in the next Creation also. This, i.e., the unchanging sequencing of the phonemes of the Vedic sentences is, according to the *apauruṣeyatva-vādin*, the *apauruṣeyatva* of the Vedas.

The Vedas are a unique asset of our ancient civilization, whose votaries make a bold claim of infallibility based on *apauruṣeyatva*. It is noteworthy that there is no other instance of its kind elsewhere in the world, even among ancient civilizations. The Vedas have an unbroken oral tradition of continuity for thousands of years, as has been noted by all serious students of philosophy. While those who did not have the advantage of serious study under qualified teachers tended to downgrade them as being just the poetry of an ancient pastoral/agricultural society extolling some local events, serious study has revealed nuggets of profound philosophical thought which are timeless, awe-inspiring, and contain remedies for lifes problems.

Notes

[1]*nendriyāṇi nānumānaṃ vedā hyevainaṃ vedayanti, tasmādāhuḥ "vedāḥ"* cited in Madhva's Viṣṇu-Tattva-Vinirṇaya.

[2]There are many inherent logical conundrums in any one prophet claiming validity for his version of the supra-sensory entities such as merit, sin, *dharma*, etc., whose existence is dimly recognized by all of us. Apart from the inevitable conflicts with other such claimants, the facts that his statements are clearly circumscribed by the limited knowledge available to him, and are distorted by personal and parochial considerations at the time, cannot be disputed by any impartial seeker. Thus, major modifications or clarifications to the theology propounded by the supposed flawless *āpta* are sought to be introduced subsequently by successors, many times leading to the formation of different sects, all claiming allegiance to the same prophet. Such problems are nothing but clear indications of defects in the original formulations, and verily even of shortcomings in the prophet-centric approach to spiritual understanding. While the Vedānta is also subject to the problems of interpretation of texts, it should be noted that the interpretational support-base such as the Nirukti, Vyākaraṇa, etc., are also already prescribed and universally accepted, and debates are within the scope defined by them. The discourses of Vedānta are thus scholarly and of a different character than those of prophet-based ideologies, which are mainly propagated by violence or petty inducements.

[3]Aitareya Āraṇyaka 1.3.8; also see *vācā virūpa nityayā*, Ṛg Veda 8.75.6.

[4]See for example authorities such as *vedo'khilo dharmamūlaṃ smṛtiśīle ca tadvidām* (Manusmṛti 2.6); *vedo dharmamūlam, tadvidāṃ ca smṛtiśīle* (Gautama-dharmasūtra 1.1); *vedapraṇihito dharmo hyadharmastadviparyayaḥ*, (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 6.1.40).

[5]It should be noted in this regard that this doctrine was evidently known to, and accepted by, the tradition of the grammarian Panini who is accepted to have lived prior to the 5th century BCE, cf. his statements *tena proktam* (Aṣṭādhyāyī 4.3.101) and *kṛte granthe* (ibid., 4.3.116) and his commentators' explications of the same. Thus the claim of some modern scholars that the *apauruṣeyatva* concept is an invention of relatively late theologians cannot be sustained.

[6]The linguistic ordering of phonemes in everyday life is, unlike the orderings of most things in the world, neither spacial nor temporal, for it cannot be said that some phonemes exist in some areas of space and not in others, and it likewise cannot be said that some phonemes exist at some times but not at others. The speaker produces an utterance that orders the sounds corresponding to phonemes in a temporal order, but the associated phonemes are not ordered temporally—indeed, a word or a sentence makes sense to a listener precisely because all its parts exist and are understood together.

[7]*evaṃ vā are'asya mahato bhūtasya niḥśvasitametad yadṛgvedo yajurvedaḥ sāmavedo atharvāngirasa itihāsaḥ purāṇaṃ vidyā upaniṣadaḥ ślokāḥ sūtrāṇi anuvyākhyānāni vyākhyānāni,* Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.4.10.