

**Some logical inconsistencies in the term ‘*Acintyabhedābheda*’:
A 20th century Advaita Vedānta appraisal**

by Sudipta Munsī

This paper attempts at a summarised representation of the arguments made against the *Acintyabhedābheda* doctrine of the Bengal Vaiṣṇavas of the Caitanya school from the standpoint of Advaita Vedānta by Paṇḍita Nirañjanasvarūpa Brahmācārī Navatīrtha Nyāyavedāntācārya, former Professor (*Mahācārya* section), Government Sanskrit College, Calcutta, in the fourth part of his Bengali work called *Advaitamatatimirabhāskara*.¹ The fourth part is devoted to the task of proving that Caitanya was out and out an Advaitin. For this, he makes certain points from the historical standpoint and thereafter subjects the doctrine of *Acintyabhedābheda* to the test of reason, which, he says, it fails. I propose to present a detailed rejoinder to this from the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava standpoint in a separate paper on a future occasion. Nirañjanasvarūpa Brahmācārī raises various alternatives regarding the meaning of the term ‘*acintya*’, which, it seems, is considered by him to be obscure. To begin with, he says:

1. If the meaning of the term ‘*cintā*’ occurring in the word ‘*acintya*’ is understood as mere knowledge (*jñānamātra*), then the expression ‘*acintyabhedābheda*’ would carry the meaning of such a difference-cum-identity (*bhedābheda*), as does not become the object of any knowledge whatsoever, regardless of its application to the relation of God (*Īśvara*) and the individual self (*jīva*) or world (*jagat*) or power (*śakti*) and the possessor of power (*śaktimān*). But since the property of being the object of knowledge (*jñānaviṣayatā*) is something, the absence whereof is not found anywhere, i.e. it is an ever-present (*kevalānvayī*) property, therefore, there can be nothing in the world which cannot become the object of knowledge. Since the Supreme

Lord (*parameśvara*) is held to be omniscient, therefore, there is nothing which cannot at least become the object of the knowledge of God. The philosophers of the Nyāya school, however, hold entities like the flower of the sky (*ākāśakusuma*), hare's horn (*śaśaśṛṅga*), the son of a barren woman (*bandhyāputra*), etc. only as the things that do not become the object of knowledge.² These entities are called *alīka* by them. In that case, difference-cum-identity (*bhedābheda*) should both be treated as *alīka*,³ and if it is so accepted, then nothing can be said or written about such entities, because the verbal expression of an entity presupposes a knowledge of it. Although, the exclusion of *alīka* entities from the precinct of knowledge compromises the ever-present or *kevalānvayī* nature of the property of being the object of knowledge (*jñānaviśayatā*), still it must be remembered that the Naiyāyikas do not accept any such category (*padārtha*) like the *alīka* ones, as does not become the object of knowledge. Therefore, the ever-present nature of the property of being the object of knowledge is ultimately not at stake even in the Nyāya scheme of epistemology. The philosophers of the Sāṅkhya, Yoga and Advaita Vedānta schools, however, accept the property of being the object of knowledge (*jñānaviśayatā*) even in regard to the *alīka* entities. They accept a mental mode (*cittavṛtti*) called *vikalpa*, of which *alīka* entities become the object. Thus Patañjali says in the *Yogasūtra*⁴: *śabdajñānānupātī vastuśūnyo vikalpaḥ*, which means that if a word is uttered to mean an *alīka* entity, then it gives rise to a mental mode or *cittavṛtti*, on account of which we have knowledge of that particular entity, but no awareness of its actual existence thereby occurs. Had it been the case that there would have occurred no mental modification or knowledge on the utterance of words expressing an *alīka* entity, then upon hearing a sentence of the form of “There goes the son of a barren woman, wearing a crown decorated with sky-flowers, donning a cloth made of the hairs of tortoise, and holding a bow, made of hare's horn” (*eṣa*

bandhyāsuto yāti khapuṣpakṛtaśekharaḥ/ kūrmaromapaṭācchannaḥ śaśaśṛṅgadhanurdharaḥ), the listener would not have laughed outright, for the knowledge arising from the hearing of the said sentence is the cause of his laughter. He laughs only because he understands the impossibility of actual existence of such entities. As such, it must be understood that it is not the case that an *alīka* entity gives rise to no knowledge of it at all. If in this way, difference-cum-identity (*bhedābheda*) is taken to be *alīka*, then on account of its knowledge howsoever being possible, it will not be endowed with the property of not being the object of any knowledge whatsoever (*jñānamātrāviśayatā*), and hence this *bhedābheda* is not fit to be qualified by the adjective *acintya*.

Now, the author proposes the following second alternative:

2. If the word ‘*cintā*’ is understood as direct cognition (*sākṣātkāra*), then the expression ‘*acintyabhedābheda*’ will carry the meaning of such a difference-cum-identity that is endowed with the property of not being the object of direct cognition (*sākṣātkārāviśayatva*). Even then, the adjective *acintya* is not apt, for the mutual difference of a jar (*ghaṭa*) and a piece cloth (*paṭa*) and the identity of a jar with another identical jar, and a piece of cloth with another identical piece of cloth are directly cognised, and such it (i.e. the difference-cum-identity or *bhedābheda*) cannot be endowed with the property of not being the object of direct cognition (*sākṣātkārāviśayatva*).⁴ If it is said that such an adjective is applied to the relation of difference-cum-identity obtaining between *Īśvara* and His inward (*antaraṅgā*) and outward (*bahiraṅgā*) powers, that are not directly cognisable, then also the use of the said adjective remains redundant. This is because, the inability of transcendental entities (*alaukika viśaya*) like heaven (*svarga*) of being known

through empirical cognitions (*laukika-sākṣātkāra*) is accepted by all. As such, no new thing is being established; therefore no new thesis by the name of *acintyabhedābheda* is thereby established. If it is said, that the adjective ‘*acintya*’ is used to qualify *bhedābheda* in the sense in which it is used in the scriptural statement of the form of ‘*acintyāḥ khalu ye bhāvāḥ na tāmstarkenā yojayet*’⁵, then also it may be said that so long as the meaning of the word ‘*acintya*’ there remains undetermined, the meaning of the said scriptural statement as a whole remains unascertained.

Now, the author presents a third alternative in the following manner:

3. If it is said that ‘*acintya*’ here means something that is endowed with the property of not being the object of the knowledge, proceeding from other means than scriptural testimony (*śabdetarapramāṇajanyajñānāviśayatva*), then such entities as heaven (*svarga*), the different abodes of the Lord like *vaikuṇṭha*, *golaka*, etc., deities like Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu, their forms (*vigraha*), powers (*śakti*), etc. will become the object of the word ‘*acintya*’, and the scriptural statement quoted above provides for the non-application of reasoning and ratiocination to such entities. As such, scriptural assertions are the sole means of knowing these entities.

In reply, the author says, since the Advaita Vedāntins too do not have any objection to such a meaning of the word ‘*acintya*’, as they also hold the Vedas to be endowed with self-reliability (*svataḥprāmāṇya*) and as such, they are ready to accept such things as are indubitably established by the *śāstras* or scriptures, even if they go against the evidence of empirical means of knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary to know first of all as to what are the things that are actually spoken of by the *śāstras*, and what are not.

Now, the scriptures are replete with such statements and assertions as are apparently contradictory to one another. If these statements are not reconciled and the inner unity of their significance is not established, then the meaning of such *śāstras* will not be determined at all. Therefore, one has to resort to reasoning for arriving at a harmonious meaning of these apparently contradictory scriptural statements. Thus, the meaning of the scriptural statement ‘*acintyāḥ khalu ye bhāvāḥ na tāmstarkenā yojayet*’ is that one should not resort to reasoning in regard to such entities as do not become the object of other means of knowledge than scriptural testimony, but are the objects of the intention of the scriptures (*śāstratātparyaviṣayībhūta*). Reasoning is not prohibited for laying bare the intention of the *śāstras*; on the contrary such a reasoning is prescribed, just as we find in the following verse of the *Manusmṛti*

ārṣaṃ dharmopadeśāṅca vedaśāstrāvirodhinā

yastarkenānusandhatte sa dharmam veda netaraḥ

Thus, we learn from the said verse of Manu that the reason that is not in conflict with the meaning of the Vedas, is alone fit for determining *dharmā* and the scriptural significance. This is also the import of Vyāsa in the following aphorism from the *Brahmasūtra* (2/1/11)⁶:

tarkāpratiṣṭhānadapyanyathānumeyamiti cedevamapyavimokṣaprasaṅgaḥ.

The import of such Upaniṣadic statements as ‘*yato vā imāni bhūtāni*’, ‘*sadeva somyedamagra āsīt, ekamevādvitīyam*’, etc. is that before creation, the Supreme Self (*paramātmā*), who is one and without a second, the ultimately real, was solely existent, and it is through His illumination that this multifarious world is known and that this world was neither at the beginning, nor will it be there at the end. As such, it is not present in the middle too, i.e. even though it is being cognised, yet it is liable to be sublated (*bādhita*), and hence it is illusory. It may be asked as to how this multifarious

universe came into existence, to which it may be replied that it is through *māyā* or illusion that it is so. Just as the moon, despite being one, appears to be many due to its reflection in various water bodies, or just as a magician is able to create many things without the use of any constituent material, likewise due to the effect of *māyā*, which is inscrutable (*acintya*) and adept in creating the apparently impossible (*aghaṭanaghaṭanapaṭīyasī*), which pertains to the Supreme Lord (*parameśvara*), that the world is being cognised.

It may be asked as to whether this power of the Lord called *Māyā* is real or unreal? In reply it must be said that it is not real, but verily unreal. Because, according to the *Śruti* and *Smṛti* statements, the world is unreal, and it is the effect of *māyā*; so the unreality of the cause, viz. *māyā* logically follows. But why is *māyā* called the power of the Lord? How is it possible that the Lord is real, while his power unreal? Again, is *māyā* different or non-different from the Lord? *Māyā* is described in the *Śvetāśvataropaniṣad*⁹ as the power of the Lord because it is the one-without-a-second Lord that creates the world through his power, and not the *jīva*. Despite the Lord being real, his power *māyā* is unreal because the effects of *māyā* are unreal. In spite of being unreal and the power of the Lord, *māyā* is neither different nor non-different from the Lord. This is because, if *māyā* is different from the Lord, then it becomes real. It cannot be so because everywhere in the Vedas and other scriptures, the effects of *māyā* are described as unreal. Moreover, if *māyā* is real, then it will contradict the Vedic statement that the Supreme Lord (*parameśvara*) is ‘*ekamevādvitīyam*’ or one-without-a-second, i.e. devoid of any intra-difference (*sajātīyabheda*), inter-difference (*vi-jātīyabheda*) and self-difference (*svagatabheda*) altogether. If on that score, *māyā* is regarded as non-different from the Supreme Lord, then it has to be accepted as conscious (*cetana*); but *māyā* is not conscious, but inert (*jaḍa*) on account of its being the cause of the world, which is of the nature of inertness (*jaḍātmaka jagat*). This holds true not merely for the Lord and his power, but also such cases as fire (*agni*) and its power of burning (*dāhikā śakti*).

Therefore, it has to be described as something ineffable that is other than both difference and non-difference. This property of being ineffable on account of being something other than both difference and non-difference is the real meaning of the expression ‘*acintyabhedābheda*’, which otherwise, as already shown, does not stand the test of reason. *Anirvacanīyatva* or ineffability is verily the meaning of the word ‘*acintya*’ here. It is in this sense only that the outward (*bahiraṅgā*) or inward (*antaraṅgā*) power (*śakti*) of the Lord (*Īśvara*) can be both different and non-different from Him.

Notes and References

¹ Brahmacārī, Śrī Nirañjanasvarūpa. *Advaitamatatimirabhāskara*. Calcutta: Sādhana-patha Prakāśana.

² Bhaṭṭācārya & Bhaṭṭācārya (1958:26). Bhaṭṭācārya, Śrīmohana & Dineśacandra Bhaṭṭācārya. 1958. *Bhāratīya Darśana Kośa*. Vol. I. Calcutta: Sanskrit College.

³ This may be treated as an instance of *āhāryajñāna*.

⁴ For a detailed historico-philosophical discussion of the doctrine of difference-cum-identity (*bhedābhedavāda*), see Bagchi (1997:39-41). Bagchi, Mahāmahopādhyāya Yogendrānātha. 1997 [reprint]. *Sāṅkhyamatasamīkṣā* [in Bengali]. Calcutta: Darśana o Samāja Trust.

⁵ This verse from the *Bhīṣmaparvan* of *Mahābhārata* is quoted by Jīva Gosvāmī in his *Tattvasandarbhā* (Section 11). See Bandyopādhyāya (2015:31). Bandyopādhyāya, Aśokakumāra, ed. 2015. *Śrībhāgavatasandarbhā prathamāḥ sandarbhaḥ Tattvasandarbhāḥ* with

the Sanskrit commentaries of Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa and Rādhāmohana Gosvāmi Bhaṭṭācārya and the Bengali translation of Nityasvarūpa Brahmācārī. Kolkata: Sadeśa.

⁶ See Śāṅkarācārya's commentary on this particular *sūtra* and the sub-commentaries *Bhāṣyaratnaprabhā* of Govindānanda, *Nyāyanirṇaya* of Ānandagiri and *Bhāmātī* of Vācaspati Miśra thereon. See Shastri (2010:366-369). Shastri, J. L. ed. 2010 [reprint]. *Brahmasūtra Śāṅkarabhāṣyam* with the sub-commentaries *Bhāṣyaratnaprabhā* of Govindānanda, *Nyāyanirṇaya* of Ānandagiri and *Bhāmātī* of Vācaspati Miśra. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Sudipt Munsī
Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia
Austrian Academy of Sciences
Hollandstrabe 11-13
2nd Floor
1020 Vienna
Austria

© Sudipta Munsī 2018

E-mail: sudipta.munsi@oeaw.ac.at