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Sentence analysis in the Indian philosophy of ritual (Mīmāṃsā)

1.

In the Indian system of ritual philosophy (Mīmāṃsā), the normative sentences are the stuff and the source of a reflection which is at the crossroads between grammar, philosophy, and hermeneutics,¹ and can be regarded as a specific chapter of the indigenous grammatical tradition in India.

The main representatives of this latter, viz., Pāṇini, Kātyāyana, and Patañjali, are rarely cited by Mīmāṃsā, but their legacy is not ignored and underlies the work of our ritualists.

The first and foremost text of pure Mīmāṃsā is a huge commentary (*Bhāṣya*) by Śābara (between 250 and 500 C.E.) on 2745 "Aphorisms" (*Sūtra*) ascribed to the semi-legendary seer Jaimini (dated 1st c. B.C.).²

These terse aphorisms are little concerned with grammar or sentences,³ and would remain mysterious and useless if we had not *Bhāṣya*. It is this latter which is exploited below with regard to the sentence interpretation practiced in Mīmāṃsā circles.

2.

Śābara discusses scores of ritual injunctions, some of them just once, others at sundry places. Some are thoroughly studied and sound like slogans for the Mīmāṃsā. Śābara explains them in order to clear up their use in ritual activity and duty (*Dharma*), to fit them into fresh contexts and to resolve conflicts and inconsistencies between the Vedic commands by putting a hierarchy among them and their components.

Among the Vedic (or sometimes pseudo-Vedic) injunctions, there is a core of phrases which are warmly debated and the pattern of which is as follows: "The (man) who desires such or such fruit/reward must perform such and such rite" (see a scheme of this in 3.).

The fruit is currently heaven (*svarga*), but may also be prosperity (*ṛddhi*, *bhūti*), cattle (*paśu*), Brahmic glory (*brahmaparacas*), offspring (*prajā*), sense-efficiency (*indriya*), kingship, etc. The verb (in the model: "to perform") is generally *yajeta* 'he should sacrifice', *juhuyāt* 'he should pour into fire (milk etc.)', or, less frequently, *ālabheta* 'he should immolate (an animal as a victim)'.⁴

The rites in which the foregoing verbs occur are various. The main one is the double oblation that takes place on the full moon and moonless days (*darśapūrṇamāsa*, henceforth *darśa-*); the daily milk oblation (*agnihotra*); the model rite in which the holy drink of Soma is offered (*agniṣṭoma* or *jyotiṣṭoma*), etc. ⁴ By scrutinizing the interplay between these 3 categories of elements, Śābara drew up a considerable corpus of philosophico-grammatical

observations, which unfortunately remains difficult to assess because it is scattered over hundreds or even thousands of pages of text and translation.

3.

The above type of phrase can be schematized under the following shape:

F(ruit)-A(gent) + P(erformance) + R(ite)

The order of the letters F—A + P + R is by no means fixed since word order in Sanskrit is officially free.

It is also noteworthy that Śabara is mainly concerned with the first 3 elements. He generally leaves out any consideration of R, possibly because R, expressed with the instrumental case ending, is somewhat outside the semantic heart of the sentence.⁵ At any rate, there is no explanation by Śabara of his commentatorial behavior.

4.

The Group F-A. It amounts to an x-*kāma* compound, e.g., *svarga-kāma*, literally 'heaven-desire'. Actually, the word, which has been extensively commented on, must be regarded as a possessive compound or *bahuvrīhi*. Consequently it does not mean 'desire of heaven',⁶ but "man having desire of heaven", and suggests that the part *kāma* is the one referring to the human agent.

It is firstly questioned who is the human agent. Some rites, e.g., the *agnihotra* or the *darśa-*, are comparatively simple indeed and easy to perform by the man who sacrifices for his own advantage (*yajamāna*).⁷ But an operation like the *agniṣṭoma* is long and intricate; it cannot be accomplished but by several priests acting for the sake of a sponsor (*yajamāna*) who pays them. Who is the agent in this case? Unmistakably, it is the *yajamāna*, because the desire of reward belongs to him and the fruit accrues to him.

At the very outset of the sacrifice, a ceremony takes place, the "dedication", in which the sponsor appoints priests acting on his behalf.⁸

Grammatically, if the subject of the verb, e.g., *juhuyāt*, is the priest, the name of the sacrificer himself, that is the man desiring the fruit, has the genitive case ending.⁹

Such a situation where two sides are working together allows one to distinguish between the sacrifice as a beneficial framework or a purposeful whole¹⁰ resting on the sponsor, and a set of concrete handlings and recitations depending on priests.

Thus the agent is the man who desires, decides, and receives the reward. Desire (*kāma*) is the link between man and act,¹¹ and also the basic incentive of any sacrifice. If the animals do not sacrifice, it is because they are unable to feel any desire, at least in this field.¹²

5.

Another problem arises in reference to the word *svargakāma*. Its ending is masculine. Does that mean that women are entitled neither to desire heaven nor to act for its sake? Absolutely not. The masculine gender is not to be taken strictly and can refer to the feminine person.¹³

The relevance of the grammatical gender or number for the ritual activity is an issue that is frequently dealt with by Śabara and gives opportunity for speculative considerations.

For instance, in the normative sentence "He washes (should wash) the cup",¹⁴ the object "cup", despite the singular number, holds for any cup or all cups. The hermeneutical problem will develop into an inquiry as to whether the word denotes a generic character or merely an individual where it is manifested.

6.

As stated above in 3., *svargakāma* denotes a person desiring heaven. Now it is possible that he feels this desire at one time but not at another. Accordingly, the compound might be considered as indicating the time, and mean that someone should perform the sacrifice (only) when he has the desire of heaven.¹⁵

If so, how to reconcile the fact that the sacrifices already mentioned (see *darśa-*° etc., above in 2.) are compulsory? The Vedic revelation claims that man should perform them as long as he lives, emphasizing thereby their obligatory nature.¹⁶ Yet, if their performance is submitted to such condition as a contingent desire, they lose their property.¹⁷

It is not the only time that the scheme F-A + P appears subject to a degree of inconsistency. The tension between obligation and option will arise again in other circumstances.¹⁸

To settle the problem brought about by the *kāma*-part of the compound, the text declares that *svargakāma* just occurs to express the result.¹⁹ So the back member of the word becomes semantically inert, and thus, the reference to man disappears.²⁰ Such hermeneutic juggling act is not isolated²¹. Since *svargakāma* exclusively denotes the reward aimed at, the man no longer plays any role in it, and ceases to be the predominant factor in the statement.

7.

Actually, what is basically at stake in the scheme F-A + P is to know what has priority: either the fruit wanted by the agent or the sacrifice prescribed by the verb.

Both positions are set forth side by side in XI 1 1 (Jha 2082):

1. The sacrifice prevails because it is the object of the injunction. And in order to have it performed, a man desiring heaven has to be discovered, who will act as a sponsor or agent. In that case the person would subserve the performance which is a goal in itself.²² By pushing the sacrifice into the foreground, this solution falls into a stalemate, for nobody is prepared to undertake such a weary effort for its own sake, without hope of benefit.
2. (The right position) Somebody is longing for heaven and therefore starts performing a sacrifice. According to that view, heaven prevails as the goal, and the sacrifice is the means thereto.

8.

An alternative interpretation argues that *svargakāma* refers to somebody desiring heaven on someone else's behalf, e.g., the priest known as *hotar* 'pouder of oblation' acting for the benefit of the *yajamāna* who engaged and appointed him.

Yet this view will be dismissed for various unclear reasons expounded in VI 2 7 (or 8)ff. (Jha 1020ff.). We have already seen that *svargakāma* designates nobody but the *yajamāna* (see 4. above).

On the other hand, the verbal voice is not decisive since in the scheme F-A + P, P represents not only a middle verb as *yajeta* 'he should sacrifice for himself' or *ādadhīta* 'he should install the fires for himself' which could show that the fruit of these acts accrues to the performer, but also incidentally an active performance verb like *juhuyāt* (see note 9).

As a matter of fact, the discussion basically intends to ensure that just a single man, the agent, is prompted by the desire of heaven. To demonstrate this, one needs to show that the man, confronted with sacrifice or desire, is a subordinate factor; because an other Mīmāṃsā rule avers that the grammatical number of this latter is to be taken strictly. Here the singular cannot be interpreted as referring to any or all agents²³ but exclusively to the sponsor.

9.

Can the word *svargakāma* throw light on the position of man within the ritual activity? This is a debated question and Śabara himself is uncertain whether man is principal or subordinate in this field.²⁴

A first view runs as follows: "A performer should be taken as mentioned only for the sake of the performance of the act and not independently of himself."²⁵

In the scheme F-A + P, man appears as the abode of desire, and remains a subordinate element. Accordingly, Śabara does not deem it difficult to overlook him by putting aside the *kāma* part in the compound *svargakāma* (see 6. above).

But it is true also that the human agent is predominant under another respect referred to in 10. below.

10.

In the scheme F-A + P, the element P is as basic as F-A. It amounts to, e.g., the verb *yajeta*, namely the middle optative of the verb *YAJ* (sometimes written *YAJi* by Śabara).

Yajeta is actually a combination of two parts: the stem *YAJ* 'to sacrifice' and the third person affix *-eta*.²⁶

Usually, the Mīmāṃsā sets up a hierarchy between them. The main element is the affix because it encloses the whole injunctive strength. The stem *YAJ* is there to give a shape to that rough power and to embody it under the form of a ritual act.

Sometimes it is declared that the predominant factor in all verbs (*ākhyāta*) is neither the agent nor the action but the *bhāvanā*, literally 'the causing-to-come-into-being', viz., the verbal productive energy.²⁷

Whatever it may be, the affix enjoins the sacrifice by direct denotation (*śrutī*), while the result is connected to it indirectly, that is through syntactical connection (*vākya*).²⁸ This is made clear when it is realized that the affix is part of the verbal form meaning 'he should sacrifice', while it is linked with the result not within the same word but only within the same phrase. So it is comparatively further away from the result than from the sacrifice.

This way of conceiving the relations between the notions in the form of relative proximity of words and word components is usual practice in the Mīmāṃsā.

If the affix had as tight a link with the result as with the sacrifice, this would trigger the collapse of the sentence by *vākyaḥeda* or 'syntactical split' (see below 11.).

But the injunctive affix is also meant to hint at the performer of rite, i.e., the agent. If this latter is regarded as predominant, the affix takes precedence over the verbal stem.²⁹

Śābara proceeds to say that such a sentence as *pacati devadattaḥ* 'Devadatta is cooking', where the nominative follows the verb, is only possible when the performer is the predominant factor.³⁰

11.

Granted that the scheme F-A + P orders a ritual operation, the next step is to define the procedure of enactment. No rite can be shorn of procedure, but it is impossible for the sentence prescribing the rite to command at the same time the way of effecting it. For a single sentence cannot enjoin the two things. In that case indeed, the scheme F-A + P would play two roles: the role of enjoining (*vidhi*) a rite; and that of being a reference (*anuvāda*) for the extra injunction of procedure.³¹

In order to avoid such a predicament, the injunctive sentence must confine itself to order the rite alone without further details. And these latter are to be sought in the context, among the phrases nearby,³² since "a sentence is always dependent upon what is immediately before or after it".³³

Sometimes it is possible to discover in the basic injunction a clue or an indirect indication of the procedure.³⁴

The other way around occurs as well. A first sentence states that one should perform the rite of *darśa-* on the full moon day, but is silent regarding the aim of the act, namely heaven, which can be discovered in another clause.³⁵

12.

The validity of a sentence is jeopardized if it conveys more than one message. In the scheme F-A + P, a choice (already mentioned in 7. above) is to be made among two approaches:

- the performing of the sacrifice through a desire of heaven;
- the fulfilling of one's desire of heaven through the carrying out of the sacrifice.³⁶

Moreover there is a second alternative focused on heaven itself:

- heaven may be held as something material, as an enjoyable substance. In this case it becomes subordinate to the sacrifice;
- it can be considered as pure happiness and, as such, it achieves the place of main factor.

Both approaches are thoroughly examined by Śābara ad VI 1, 1-3, but they are beyond the scope of an account concerning sentence analysis.³⁷

Let us limit ourselves to a simple remark. If heaven is pure happiness and thus prevails over anything else, how is it possible that it occurs in the scheme as prior member of a compound, viz. in rather a minor position (cf. *sūtra* 2, Jha 968)? There is neither answer nor comment on this point. The *siddhānta* or final position will barely be restated: sacrifice is subordinate; heaven is principal on two grounds:

- everybody usually acts for the sake of happiness and is unable to cope with such painful deeds as sacrifices regardless of any reward;³⁸
- the verb *YAJ* in the optative form requires a goal unless it is fruitless,³⁹ and this goal prevails over the rite itself in the comparative priority over the others.

Such an interpretation is the only one which spares the scheme F-A + P of inconsistency, for basically the situation in which somebody strives to obtain a reward and does something else is most incongruous.⁴⁰

13.

The hierarchical trend inside the *Mīmāṃsā* syntax and hermeneutics has brought about the tenet according to which no sentence at all can convey two messages of equal importance at the same time. If it tries to, a serious flaw entitled *vākyaabheda* 'syntactical split' occurs. The *vākyaabheda* is a hermeneutic concept well known in the *Mīmāṃsā*,⁴¹ and not ignored in the twin philosophical system of *Vedānta*.

There are two warnings against *vākyaabheda* throughout the *Śābara-bhāṣya*, and already at the very outset, in the gloss on the first *sūtra*.

Here it is pointed out that the same sentence cannot

- state that the investigation into the ritual duty (*dharma*) takes place before learning by heart the basic text of that duty, that is the *Veda*;
- and lay down at the same time that the inquiry begins after the memorization.

Such a combination would be contradictory since it would prescribe two opposed operational sequences via the same utterance. We are not allowed to presume such an inconsistency for it would blow up the sentence.⁴²

Further in the *Bhāṣya*, Śābara emphasizes that the second aphorism of Jaimini cannot declare that

- *Dharma* is what is described by the *Veda* and not what is indicated by sense perception and other means of knowledge;
- it is moral, not immoral.

As the *sūtra* contains just a single sentence, any double or manifold message would involve a syntactical split (*tad evaṃ sati bhidyeta*). To enunciate two ideas requires two separate clauses.⁴³

Thus we are inclined to see in the *vākyaabheda* a syntactical approach to the logical principle of non-contradiction. The difference lies in the fact that the logical principle states that

something cannot be A and not-A at the same time, while the *vākyabheda* says that the same sentence cannot convey A and not-A at the same time without being destroyed.

Under *sūtra* II 2,27 (Jha 263), one of the disputants points out that the sentence *paśukāmo etena yajeta* 'The one desiring cattle should offer that (oblation)' is jeopardized by a syntactical split. It is unclear how this objection is met,⁴⁴ but all the preceding explanations were precisely meant to tackle this problem.

14.

Another type of *vākyabheda* occurs when a sentence makes the reader think that it conveys a connection with the object in general and with the same object in particular.⁴⁵ In the inferential junction "For one desirous of acquiring sense-efficiency, (the officiant) should pour into fire (libations of) milk" (*dadhnā indriyakāmasya juhuyāt*), one cannot help having a *vākyabheda* if the work "milk" (with the instrumental ending *dadhnā*) plays two roles:

- that of helping the sacrifice in the capacity of ritual material;
- that of being the specific means of obtaining the reward.

A single sentence is unable to express both ideas together, and the discussion aims at deciding which solution to choose.⁴⁶

There are still more mentions of *vākyabheda* throughout the thousands of pages of the *Śabara-bhāṣya*, but the above are enough to exemplify the nature of the problems and the debates conducted by the Mīmāṃsā specialists.

15. Conclusion

In India, Mīmāṃsā is known as the *Vākyaśāstra*, 'the science of the sentence' as against the 'science of the word' (*Padaśāstra*) developed by the grammarians.

The examination of important statements belonging to the works of Vedic ritual is undertaken by the Mīmāṃsā in a way of its own. It is mainly hermeneutics with grammatical glimpses such as analysis of nominal compound or verb and remarks about the gender of words. Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics is convinced that the sentence allows a series of words to possess a relationship owing to the unity of their purpose. The most serious flaw in this respect is to break the sentential unity because more than one single message would be conveyed.

One of the means of discarding this danger is to introduce levels of importance for the sentential components so that the most important be acknowledged as the only one meant.

Discussions on this topic are extensive and often conclusive, as if the top priority was to discuss rather than to conclude. Thus we find again in the Mīmāṃsā the spirit prevailing throughout the fundamental treatise of Indian grammars: the *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali.⁴⁷

Notes

¹For the Mīmāṃsā in general, see J.M. Verpoorten 1987, *Mīmāṃsā literature, Hist. of Indian Lit., fasc. VI/5, Wiesbaden*. Grammatical material of the Mīmāṃsā is also considered

by Cardona 1983, *Linguistic analysis and some Indian traditions*, Bhandarkar Or. Research Inst., Poona, last chapter. But the topic studied here is not touched upon by him.

²A standard text of the *sūtras* with the sub-commentary of Kumārila (7th c.) is supplied in the *Mīmāṃsā-darśana*, Abhyankar/Joṣī (eds.), Poona, reprint 1970–76. An English translation of *Sūtras* and *Bhāṣya* is given by G. Jha, voll. 66/60/73 of the Gaekwads O. Ser., Baroda, reprint 1973–1974. Below the page given after the mention of the *sūtra* refers to this translation.

³*Sūtra*, II 1, 46 is a *locus classicus* with a definition of the sentence. Elsewhere, we encounter grammatical terms, e.g., (a) *vākyaśeṣatva* (I 3 13, I 2 22), *vākyaārtha* (I 2 40), *vibhakti* (I 3 29), *ākāṅkṣā* (II 1, 13), *ākhyāta* (II 2, 22), etc.

⁴All these technical terms of quite intricate rites have been collected and accounted for by C. Sen 1978, *A dictionary of the Vedic Ritual*, Delhi. The 3 rites are quoted together ad *sūtra* III 7, 18 (Jha 630).

⁵Ad *sūtra* XI 1, 6 (Jha 2134), Śabara makes a rare remark on R in the text *same darśapūrṇamāsābhyaṅ yajeta* 'one should perform the *darśa-*' on level ground', saying that its instrumental ending indicates that it is subservient to something else.

⁶Only once, ad *sūtra* II 1, 88 (Jha 977), the compound *svargakāma* is to be taken in its literal sense, signifying 'presence of desire of heaven'.

⁷A middle present participle meaning: 'the one who sacrifices for his own sake'.

⁸III 1, 18sv (Jha 630-631).

⁹Ad II 2, 25 (Jha 255): *dadhnā indriyakāmasya* (genitive) *juhuyāt* 'For one desiring sense-efficiency, one (= the priest) should pour into fire a libation of milk'. Other examples in 13.

¹⁰As stated by F.X. Clooney 1988, "*Devatādhikāraṇa*: A theological debate in the *Mīmāṃsā-Vedānta* tradition", *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 16, 280.

¹¹*Sūtra* VI 2, 6 (or 7) (Jha 1088).

¹²VI 1, 4-5 (Jha 972ff.).

¹³VI 1, 6ff. (Jha 976ff.).

¹⁴III 1, 13ff. (Jha 357ff.). This "cup rule" (*grahanyāya*) has been studied by J.M. Verpoorten 1984, in: *Orientalia J. Duchesne/Guillemain emerito oblata* (= *Acta Iranica, Homages et opera minora* IX), Leiden, 519ff.

¹⁵XI 1, 1 (Jha 2081–2082).

¹⁶X 8, 36 (Jha 2060–2061); VIII 1, 20 (Jha 1137): "Throughout life, one should perform the *darśa-*."

¹⁷VI 2, 10 (or 11) (Jha 1021). Permanence (*nītya*) and desirability (*kāmyatā*) are incompatible. If someone wants to sacrifice due to his desire of longevity etc., there is neither permanence nor obligation. If there is permanence, he will not sacrifice with these goals in mind.

¹⁸XI 1, 1 (Jha 2081). See also note 17.

¹⁹Ibid., and VI 2, 6 (Jha 1019).

²⁰Ibid.

²¹A discussion of the same about the word *daṇḍin* "stickbearer" questions if it denotes the man or the stick, see J.M. Verpoorten 1989-1990, "La comparaison du bâton et du porteur de bâton dans le Śābarabhāṣya", *Bulletin d'Études Indiennes* 7-8, 275.

²²VIII 1, 21 (Jha 1338) where this position is denied.

²³As in the *grahanyāya*, see note 14.

²⁴See F.X. Clooney, *Thinking ritually*, 144ff.

²⁵VI 2, 6 (or 7) (Jha 1018).

²⁶In reference to all of this, cf. already F. Edgerton 1928. "Linguistic notes on the Mīmāṃsā", *Language* 4, 171-177.

²⁷XI 1, 24 (Jha 2099). This point and many others have been taken from the *Śābara-bhāṣya* by Āpadeva (17th c.), author of a popular Mīmāṃsā treatise: "Explanation of the Mīmāṃsā Rules" (*mīmāṃsānyāyaprakāśa* or *Āpadevī*) published and translated by F. Edgerton (1st ed. 1929; reprint 1986).

²⁸These hermeneutical criteria are treated by Śābara ad *sūtra* III 3, 14. See also XI 3,14. See also XI 1,3 (Jha 2086).

²⁹XI 1, 22 (Jha 2098).

³⁰Ibid. Sanskrit text: *anuprayogaś ca kartṛpradhānye eva bhavati pacati devadattaḥ*. See also *Āpadevī*, § 82.

³¹XI 1, 9 (Jha 2088). The *Āpadevī* admits a category of normative sentences enjoining several things together.

³²XI 1, 10 (Jha 2089).

³³II 2, 27 (Jha 264 bottom).

³⁴XI 2, 2 (Jha 2130).

³⁵XI 2, 35 (Jha 2153). A phrase without F-A is given above in note 2.

³⁶In his translation, p. 965, Jha summarizes both viewpoints with the help of two formulas *kāmena yāgaṃ bhāvayet* "One should bring about the sacrifice by means of desire"; *yāgena kāmaṃ bhāvayet* "One should bring about the desired thing by means of sacrifice".

³⁷See J.M. Verpoorten 1981, "Une discussion sur le ciel dans le commentaire de Śābara aux Mīmāṃsā-sūtra (MimS VI 1-2-3)", *Annali dell'Instituto Orientale di Napoli* 41, 391ff.

³⁸VI 1, 2 (Jha 968 bottom).

³⁹VI 1, 3 (Jha 970).

⁴⁰VI 1, 3 (Jha 970). This curious passage aims at stressing the importance of the Vedic revelation which is able to reconcile in itself two human behaviors artificially opposed to each other.

⁴¹The name is already mentioned in *Jaimini-sūtra* I 2, 25.

⁴²I 1, 1 (Jha 1).

⁴³I 1, 2 (Jha 7; text in Fraunwallner 1968, *Materialien zur ältesten Erkenntnislehre der Karmamīmāṃsā*, Vienna, 20, 22.).

⁴⁴In II 3, 12ff. (Jha 290ff.), a hazy debate arises with regard to two schemes F-A+P:

1. one desiring prosperity should immolate the white goat dedicated to Vāyu;
2. one desiring Brahmic glory should offer the cooked rice dedicated to Sūrya.

⁴⁵III 7, 16 (Jha 628).

⁴⁶II 2, 25 (Jha 257).

⁴⁷L. Renou 1940, *La Durgḥaṭavṛtti de Śaraṇadeva I.1: Introduction*, Paris, 21: "Plus d'une fois nous sommes en suspens s'il (= Patañjali) accepte tel vārttika ou s'il se replie sur l'énoncé de Pāṇini". Something similar occurs with Bhartṛhari, cf. J. Houben, "Announcement. The Saṃbandha-samuddeśa... and Bhartṛhari's Philosophy of Language", 6: "The first principle is Bhartṛhari's relativism... This gives the VP (= *Vākya-padāvya*) an 'encyclopaedic' character. With regard to a certain subject, views are dealt with side by side". Elsewhere Houben uses the term *perspectivistic* "in the sense that he (= Bhartṛhari) seems to acknowledge that each view represents a possible and in its own theoretical context valid perspective" (Houben 1994, "Bhartṛhari's Familiarity with Jainism", *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute*, 75, 1-2).