

WHAT IS IT TO BE A WITNESS-CONSCIOUSNESS (SĀKṢIN)?

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Phenomenology has acknowledgeably a common face both for the Indian and Western traditions. The crucial question however whether Indian phenomenology succeeds where the western counterpart fails has not received a final answer as yet. Such a hyper-phenomenology, it is to establish its status, as a I am concerned to show, must receive empirical support from the state-of-the art research on consciousness. This is the principal contention of this article. Any positive answer under this genera that has emerged must therefore be seriously probed for its empirical worth in the light of current paradigms of cognitive studies. In what follows, I shall review Professor Bina Gupta's major contribution made in the form of a book (1998), which goes in tandem with two other interesting articles (Sinari 1997; Pradhan 1997) and evaluate them in the context of research on consciousness.

Professor Bina's well-documented study endorses a positive answer from the meticulous study of a fragment of Advaita phenomenology and it is published by one of the prestigious study series. True to her task, the learned Professor only claims to reconstruct a fragment, meaning thereby that no hyper-phenomenology has ever been attempted. Having its focus on one of the most enigmatic epistemological notion of Sākṣin or Witness-Consciousness, as it occurs in the *Vivaraṇa* traditions, it reconstructs the phenomenology from the scratch. The study is extremely original and almost has no ancestry, and it is also inspired by Mohanty-style phenomenology, which continues to be the ruling paradigm even today. For Bina, the key to Witness-Consciousness lies in the consciousness of self-consciousness. This must be embodied in statements like 'I know I am conscious of my self-consciousness'. Does it

pose a challenge to both of the fronts of phenomenology as well as the present-day cognitive studies? Does Bina meet the challenge so as to explain what it is to be having a consciousness that is conscious of itself? In what follows, I will enumerate the reason why she does not.

Bina's problem is to characterize *Sākṣin* as both pre-reflexive (that which accompanies all I) as well as non-constitutive (that which is other than I), together with its being non-positional (in that it is not part of the world) as well as transparent (that is not in the sense of being known but it should include ignorance that holds that it is not this). What empirical support she can draw in favour of this type of such amalgamated phenomenology? Is such a strange second higher-order theory of consciousness with three set of contradictory traits (I and the not I, positional and non-positional and transparent and non-transparent) acceptable to empirical standards that are prevailing in current cognitive science? For Francis Crick and Christoff Koch (1990), the neural basis of consciousness in a certain phase-locked 40 Hz neural oscillations. This is not obviously identical with self, which requires more conceptual content. This may not explain what is to like to be in a state of consciousness of the self. It is still mysterious. This is to speak of one crucial question within current work within cognitive science. New Mysterians like Tom Nagel (1974) raised a question in his 'What is it to be a Bat?' to capture it something not reducible. Even if we have all the facts about bat, what it to be a bat would still prove elusive. How much of it can throw light on comparative phenomenology?

Bina's main hypothesis is that as *Sākṣin* is one of the most important concepts which can bear the brunt of scrutiny in cross-cultural contexts, it must be of comparable interest more to the Transcendental Ego of Husserl than to the transcendental Unity of Apperception of Kant, and even so, it might in the final run come nearer to Sartre's non-(trans)-positional transparency of consciousness (the way it leaks into the world, so to say), but as a substratum of consciousness, it must still go beyond. Here lies the crux of the problem that Indian hyper-phenomenology face. The crux is that it is not a species of consciousness but it should be rightly described as the ultimate

substratum, which remains as the foundation of all-cognitive experience or self-shining light (149-152). We cannot deride that such a self-effulgent light cannot get empirical support but we must know what use we are going to put it into. Obviously, this is also a concern that is widely shared by many other serious thinkers, as mentioned above, in their discussion much of which is also oblivious of the fact that even phenomenology must turn empirical in the West (Baiju, Reena and Kanthamani, 2000).

I shall refer to Professor Pradhan's Nagel-looking question '*What is it to be a Soul?*' (1999) below that sounds analogous to his question '*What is it to be a Bat?*'. However it was answered by holding that to be a soul is to having an ontologically real substance. Elsewhere, Pradhan (1998) equivocates persons with minded-beings, meaning thereby that the notion of person invites a certain unity. Pradhan must tell us more about how person is structured so as to escape the charge of a fallacy of equivocation. It is not very clear what peculiar advantage acquires in calling persons as minded persons without knowing what it is to call a mind. Ironically perhaps, Pradhan here gives the impression that he argues for an attribute or property-style dualism in opposition to Professor Gandhi's attributeless soul (1976). But that is only a façade. He argues for a substance dualism, which no one holds today. It is not clear whether this clashes with the unity view stated above. May be attribute or property-dualism is compatible but this is not what he argues for as it will become clear in due course. Hence my little question. Does Pradhan's emperor wear clothes?

Bina's work, on the other hand, remains as a major contribution towards a reconstruction of Indian epistemology according to which the anti-theatrical claims of knowledge and ignorance mutually imply each other (15). Bina thinks that Śaṅkara has a real and noteworthy contribution to make like the *Cogito, ergo, sum* of Descartes in which both the claim 'I know P' and 'I do not know P' has its locus in the postulate of Witness-Consciousness (41,61). That is, one who refutes the self is also the self. Thus, both the iterated cases of 'I know that I know p' as well as 'I know I do not know that p' are revealed by Witness-Consciousness. The central

argument is stated as follows :

'To know the absence of the knowledge of x (in 'I do not know x ') one must already have the knowledge of x -in which case there would be no absence of the knowledge of x , but a positive ignorance concealing x . so they conclude that the perceptual experience 'I do not know' refers to a positive entity and not to the mere absence of knowledge' (79).

That is to say, I do not know x has an underlying logical form I know that I do not know x . It is not sanctified by any Pramāṇa-style epistemology (e.g. *Nyāya*) for which we require a sceptical query. Either the paradox of the iteration 'I know that I know that' is conveniently overlooked or else they are not to be treated on par with each other. Hence comparison is possible with currently known models of epistemology for which such iteration poses a problem. This is especially so after Gettier's proof that there is certified true belief which is not knowledge (Kanthamani, 2000). Every theory of knowledge, it is argued, must presuppose a theory of ignorance, and not necessarily a theory of sceptical quest. It is a Pramāṇa-free epistemology, as eloquently phrased by Professor Ram Prasad (1994).

Let us grant that both Bina and Pradhan might agree that Witness-Consciousness is of comparable interest to the transcendental presupposition of all our experiences. Pradhan just assumes it, whereas Bina prefers to read the features of Witness-Consciousness as taking us beyond. Thus the question for Pradhan 'What it is to be in a soul-state?' must seek more or less a similar answer to the question for Bina: 'What it is to be a Witness-Consciousness?' except in certain respect. As Pradhan reflects over this, he recognizes that two sides of the debate have emerged in recent years. The first holds that to be in a soul-state is not to be in a predicative state (a state in which nothing could be predicated of it). May be quality-less Brahman provides an imago here. We can call it as a *Nirguṇa-Brahman* state. Professor Ramachandra Gandhi expounds such a view. To be in a soul-state is to be in a *Nirguṇa-Brahman* state. Does Gandhi try to tell us that being is indeterminate? And hence it should be identified with Non-being and Nothingness? The answer is not clear at least for thinkers like Pradhan who refuse to toe the line of

Hegel or Sartre.

Quite opposed to Gandhi, Pradhan wants to counter it by saying that to be in a soul-state is to be in a Saguna-Brahman state. This brings into sharp relief the debate that is articulated in one of most important articles he has authored after a great deal of reflection. He wants to choose the major premise, which asserts that to be in any such state is to be in predicate state-*sui-generis*. Even Nirguṇa Sate, which claims Brahman as impredicable, amounts to predictability. From this, Matilal elsewhere concluded that if impredicable is also a predicate, then this is contradictory and hence, false (1990). He suggests that the only way Vedantins can escape from being falsified is to add that this is not predication as Brahman is impredicable (154). This is exactly what Gandhi does. It appears that there is tangle. The tangle is that on the one hand the Naiyāyikas apply the tools of analysis for mounting a charge against Advaitins, while the Advaitins find it convenient to have recourse to phenomenology. With a sigh of independence, Pradhan thinks that it is only paradoxical. For Pradhan, granting that there is at least one predicate that is not predicable amounts to saying that it is predicable. That which is not predicable is predicable after all. That is,

The state of being impredicable is predicable

Hence, it is predicable.

Pradhan veers round to dispose it without realizing that another question protrudes. Supposing that

The state of being impredicable is impredicable.

If so, then it is predicable

It is not, then it is.

So Pradhan might require a type theory to distinguish the types to which his response is positive. But Pradhan has no time to marry Nirguṇa Brahman with Russellian type distinction. The real opposition between Gandhi and Pradhan, if we may so term it, consists in the former being able to pass from.

I am attribute less

The soul is not merely *sans cogitans*.

I think means therefore I communicate.

The soul is not *sans communicans* (let me use this as a locution).

Is it plausible to conclude that it is third personal rather than first personal? But it is still first-personal but it is simulated addressee state. That is, one can simulate being the others. Gandhi's stance appears to be consistent with one of the dominant paradigms of cognitive science. Let us assess whether he deviates from this.

That is, thinking is not an attribute because communication is not an attribute of the first person.

Hence, to be in a soul-state is not to be in first personal-state.

If follows that

'I think' is more an addressee-state rather than a predicate state.

What is it to be an addressee-state or a communicative-state? Gandhi's answer is that it is to be in an addressee state at least in the imagination. Gandhi's conclusion may be understood as that to be in a communicative state is to simulate you into that state. Therefore, it is an attributeless state in the first-person, and not third person.

To say that an addressee state is a communicative state is not as bad as it looks in the light of present day cognitive science. So far he does not deviate from the paradigm. This means that that no state of being is a state of the self. No state is the state of the self. To be in a soul-state is not to be in a state of self. Gandhi has to reconcile this with the following. To be in a soul-state is to be an addressee state. So far Gandhi is working under the assumption that soul is a substance without any attributes. There is no evidence to think that once it is planted as addressed state, it is not a substantive state. If it were so, then it must also be in predicate state. By what objection one can rule it out? This is exactly where the shoe pinches. Pradhan is no different. Or so I contend.

Pradhan's intervention starts with the assumption that to be in a soul-state is to presuppose (transcendentally) that there is a self. That is, to be in a soul-state is to be in a transcendental state, which causes other soul-states. May be that it is a loosely-knit neo-Kantian, neo-Husserlian, or neo-Advaitin state of being. Unfortunately, Pradhan cannot pinpoint the exact direction into which it can be moved. Further, Pradhan has no patience to reconcile the substantive state with an attribute state or predicate state either. Both enter into opposition in the context of current science in which substance dualism is given a go-by whereas predicate or property dualism is given some shape. Pradhan does not have anything to do with the above distinction. Invariably he thinks that he cannot afford to lose the substance view. And so, he conflates speaking on behalf of an attribute state and speaking for a substantive state. That is the reason why he concludes his discussion by saying that it is an ontologically real substantive state (Pradhan, 1997). Pradhan's neo-Kantian outlook urges him to hold that to be in a soul-state is to be in an *a priori* state. To be in a substantive soul-state is to be in transcendental predicate state. This not only a stinker because it assumes both a Kantian state as well as a predicate state. Pradhan reads too much into an *a priori* state and hence we are not illumined by what he means by a transcendental predicate state. He goes further.

Now, Pradhan wants to derive a Wittgensteinian rider to it saying that to be in a soul state is to be in a grammatical or linguistic state. From this, he jumps to an un-Wittgensteinian conclusion that it is a substantive state. To be in Wittgensteinian state is therefore to be in a Cartesian state for Pradhan. Unfortunately, he never realises that this does not make a distinction between Gandhi's and himself. To mark his position, he should first of all tell us he does not agree with substantive state posited by Gandhi. And then he should also tell us what makes the difference between a linguistic state and communicative state. Since he never attempts these things, his opposition to him falls on its own ground. He calls it an Advaitin state in contrast to Gandhi's audience-oriented stance. Can Pradhan pass from the dualistic syndrome towards a non-dualistic stance, which is what is needed to support his overtures to Advaitin's position? In case Gandhi is

taken for an Advaitin, by virtue of his appropriation of Nirguṇa-Brahman-like state, then Pradhan's critique will turn out to be totally redundant. His transcendental trick, which presumes that it is a transcendental predicate plus linguistic state, thus does not pay off.

As remarked above, Bina, being faithful to this Advaitin stance, is more hesitant to call for a Kantian type of reasoning to her aid. While agreeing that that Witness consciousness is the condition of possibility in a Kantian sense, Bina hastens to point out that it is too narrow. The transcendental unity of apperception only stipulates that the pre-reflexive state must accompany all our experiences. Does it guarantee the so-called unity of consciousness? This is one of the important controversies today. But for Bina, the default here is that it presupposes a distinction between the empirical and the transcendental ego. But is it not necessarily a self-conscious-I about which I am both conscious as well as not being conscious (i.e., ignorant). Is conscious an entity or property? Bina can hardly give a decisive answer to this question.

Nowadays, it has become rather necessary to distinguish many notions of consciousness. First comes the organismic consciousness which is needed if one wants to distinguish sleeping and waking state but since this is almost indefensible, it puts many Indian theories in the dock (Ned Block, 1990). Is it a phenomenal state like the state of being aware of something? Supposing the answer is positive, the question immediately arises as to whether she simply overburdens the phenomenal state with an awareness of the self or the unity of self. This appears to be unusual conceptual burden, which it cannot bear. How phenomenal state *p* and phenomenal state *q* can be attributed to one and the same self? None of these alternatives can be executed without an inherent flaw. The former can give only a 'non-conceptual' content and the unity requires that we attribute the same I to two distinct experiences. We need a 'linking principle' as Peacocke (1994) contends elsewhere. Nor is it clear whether Bina needs a consciousness that is in possession of the concept of self, which is not identifiable with the ability to use this concept in thinking about itself. But she needs a consciousness of consciousness of itself. What is that consciousness that is of the second order? Is it a state, which can be

internally scanned? If not so, is it a state in which I attribute an intransitive state, which says that 'I am nauseous'? Or else, is it a transitive state (by having p , I am aware of q) which says that 'I am seeing something as a mosquito'? A transitive or access state is defined to be a state in which we have thought p and q , and thought q and r , and there is thought p and r . A non-transitive state does not undertake this. One standard criticism here against transitive state is that we have thought q , we have thought p and q then we have q and (p and q), then we have q and q and etc. ad infinitum. Some higher order theories claim that they can escape this by stopping it at a level. Such higher order theories cannot be criticized for collapsing the transitive and intransitive state. The point is that they know where to stop.

Now, the question is: What sort of second higher order theory Bina wants to open up at the risk of a sort of ad infinitum. Would not consciousness of self-consciousness lead to consciousness of consciousness of self-consciousness? The onus is on her to tell us whether her notion skips the unity of consciousness or what it is. There are three separate notions namely consciousness of being conscious (a quasi-property-state), consciousness of consciousness (substantive state) and consciousness of self-consciousness (hyper-substantive state) that are glued together into one. How to describe that state? (S.V.Bokil 2000).

No answer is forthcoming from Bina's investigations. I am I as well as not-I. Something else is needed to fill up the gap. This forces her to posit a monster namely consciousness of self-consciousness. It is a mongrel notion because it stipulates that both (I know that (I know and I do not know)). K (Kp & $\sim Kp$) is transcendently deducible from witness consciousness. There is at least one thing, which I know and that is consistent with at least one thing I do not know. This should be a premise for 'Either there is at least one thing I know or there is at least one thing I do not know' that is transcendently deduced from the above premise. This much is made clear from her argument. How to convince our students with a proof?

So, Bina's consciousness of self-consciousness required not merely a consciousness of being conscious which may be agreeable to a 'reflexive'

form ('the thought p ' entails that 'I believe that there is a thought p ') of higher order theories of consciousness (Peter Carruthers, 1996). We have prevented the regresses, but such higher order theories required language as an additional ingredient. They may agree to self-consciousness if this were taken to be identical with Saksin that is involved in language. We have no languageless thoughts. Bina is not prepared for this type of eventuality. But, on her stipulation, it should be absolutely real (151) as opposed to empirically real or transcendently real. So mere self-consciousness will not do. Even so, Witness-consciousness is the self-consciousness - I that can not be individuated in Kant's way by making use of the pre-reflexive cogito. The reason why this is so is that it contains an ingredient of ignorance 'not his' and hence it is delimited by ignorance. Instead of saying that it is delimited by ignorance, which is not correct, one must stipulate that it is enabled by ignorance. It transpires therefore that neither of the above two Advaitin's senses of I is found in Kant, a conclusion, which clearly takes us beyond Pradhan's reflections. Hence the similarities must be toned down in the above specific ways.

While for Hiriyan, witness-Consciousness is identifiable with the Husserlian Transcendental Ego (*Jiva* is an empirical Ego), for Bina, we compare it only with a certain qualification suggested by Fink's reconstruction of Husserl (quoted by Bina p.131). In this, Fink distinguishes three types of Egos (the empirical, the transcendental and the disinterested) and only the third type (disinterested Ego) comes nearer to Witness-Consciousness. This looks innocuous, to say the least. Besides, this looks substantive. The reason why it is not agreeable is that still this is not to be regarded as final since it is constitutive which already presupposes a disinterested spectator. So we need a substantial entity plus a disinterested spectator. Bina argues that what we need on the other hand is what is not presupposed that is something, which is very much non-constitutive as well as un-Kantian. Bina's reasoning is to suggest that if this distinct spectator were to remain as a presupposition of the constitutive level, it has to make a distinction between empirical and the transcendental level. It must therefore be non-constitutive and it bears similarity to Heideggerian non-constitutive sense, and non-transparent as read

by Kockelmans and even this is only partially true, because it must support a sort of transparency which is what constitutes Witness-Consciousness. So what we need is not that which lacks the pre-reflective transparency. It is exactly here that Bina has succumbed to the temptation of aping the West.

But on Bina's reflections, this is traceable to Sartre's reflections on phenomenological ontology. So, it is suggested, one must look to Sartre for the type of transparency that must accompany witness-Consciousness, to which it has several similarities (159). The only hurdle is that we have to posit ignorance which does not go well with transparency, but which is nevertheless consistent with Freud's distinction between the Id, Ego and the Super Ego. Bina therefore tells us that we have nothing to worry because Sartre does not accept Freudian concealment. Thus we have arrived at what is called positional transparency (160) that goes into the world. But this is only comparable therefore to *aham*. But what we need is non-positional transparency so as to make it common for Sartre and Advaitin. It is non-positional in the sense that it cannot go into the world and hence it is not pre-reflexive as well as non-constitutive. We are thus forced to modify Sartre's critique of pre-reflexive cogito, and thus we arrived at the substantiation of the idea that no articulate consciousness *ex cathetra* is present. There is no such precondition (165) but there is no lacking of consciousness of self consciousness that is translucent (165). It is obviously not a predicate state. What is it then?

We must now begin to understand the general structure of Bina's pattern of argumentation, which shoves us around in a vain effort to fit this into a mould that we have inherited from the West. It leads us towards a no-man's land. Nevertheless, she bears a strong contrast with Pradhan's shoddy way of comparison. Her intention however to free the phenomenology of consciousness from the vestiges of culture stems from her stern belief that by making it culture-laden we make it contradictory. I am for one who believes that she does not contradict but nevertheless she could not succeed to overcome relativism. Here is not surely a vantage point outside cultural relativism and hence it misfires.

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