

## THE ROLE OF MEMORY IN HINDU EPISTEMOLOGY AND ITS RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS

### I

Memory plays an important role in Hindu epistemological thought both in general as well as specific ways. The general consideration in which it plays an important role relates to the question : What is knowledge or *pramā*?<sup>1</sup> "Pramā is generally defined as a cognition having the twofold characteristics of truth and novelty".<sup>2</sup> It is in relation to the second characteristic that discussion on the point touches on memory, the crucial question being : is memory a source of knowledge? As D.M. Datta remarks :

The material part of the controversy turns upon the question whether memory should be admitted to have the status of knowledge. If truth be the sole characteristic of knowledge, memory, in so far as it is uncontradicted or undoubted, has to be called knowledge. But there is a peculiarity about memory that deserves special consideration. The only claim of memory to belief lies in its explicit reference to a past experience which it professes to reproduce faithfully. A remembered fact is believed to be true just because it is regarded as identical with the content of a past experience which it claims to represent....

.. Thus the question of treating memory as a distinct type of knowledge does not at all arise, being barred *ex hypothesi*. The only kind of knowledge is, then, the knowledge of the already unacquired. But though memory is not a distinct source of knowledge, it is still a distinct experience that has to be distinguished from knowledge and given a separate name. The experience in which the new emerges (i.e., knowledge proper) is called *anubhūti*, whereas reproduced knowledge is called *smṛti*.<sup>3</sup>

The issue, however, is not as simple as might appear at this point. For it may be asked : "When I keep looking at a table for some moments continuously, my experience of the first moment, as

an acquisition of the 'new', is of course to be called knowledge. But what about the experiences of the subsequent moments? Can they also be rightly called knowledge, seeing that they only reveal to me what has been already acquired at the first moment and lack thereby the quality of novelty?"<sup>4</sup>

Now this "question is answered in the affirmative by all schools of thinkers".<sup>5</sup> The arguments in favour of the affirmative reply may be presented as follows. If we take a dynamic view of the object and look upon it as changing from moment to moment, then obviously it could be argued that it is perceived anew each time. If we take a more stable view of the object and look upon it as identical in existence through the various moments, then it could be argued that although the object remains the same, the time-frame changes from moment to moment and this provides the element of novelty. It could also be argued that the proper unit of perception is not a moment but consists of the entire period for which the object is perceived. Not only is the object identical, so is the process of knowing it over various moments of time. But if this is accepted then the question arises : how is memory different from persistent recognition? The answer given is that "In memory novelty is said to be absent, in the sense that memory is wholly a reproduction of a past knowledge; it is solely caused by the impression of a past experience (*saṃskāra-mātra-janya*). In a persistent knowledge the knowledge of the second moment is not a reproduction of the knowledge of the previous moment; it is caused not by the impression of the previous experience, but by the very objective conditions which cause the first knowledge. So while memory by its very nature falls back on a past experience, and entirely rests thereon for its validity, the knowledge at subsequent moments of a persistent cognition stands by its own right and makes a demand for its independent validity. It is in this important respect that memory has to be distinguished from a persistent cognition, and it is in virtue of this very important distinction that the one has to be excluded from the definition of knowledge and the other has to be included therein."<sup>6</sup>

It should thus be noted that the validity of memory is not being questioned; it is its claim to being an independent source of knowledge which is being disputed. For, to say "that memory is valid is not the same as to say that memory is an independent

source of knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> Such is the generally accepted position on the relation of memory to knowledge in Hindu thought.

## II

Not only is memory important in a general discussion of epistemology, it also enters into a discussion of the four main means of valid knowledge according to Nyāya, namely : *pratyakṣa* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), *upamāna* (comparison) and *śabda* (testimony).

The role of memory in the case of perception may be illustrated by the example of *recognising* a table as a table. Now “in the case of recognition, there are two sources of knowledge operating viz., memory and perception.”<sup>8</sup> Perception is an independent and valid source of knowledge; memory is a valid, but not an independent, source of knowledge; the two together generate recognition.

The place of memory in *anumāna* or inference is fairly obvious. “The classic example of Indian inference is the following :

1. The hill has fire (*pratijñā*).
2. Because it has smoke (*hetu*).
3. Whatever has smoke has fire, e.g., a hearth (*udāharaṇa*).
4. This hill has smoke which is invariably concomitant with fire (*upanaya*).
5. Therefore, this hill has fire (*nigamana*).<sup>9</sup>

The role of memory in invoking the invariable concomitance (*vyāpti*) and the example (*udāharaṇa*) is fairly obvious.

In the case of *upamāna* or comparison the role of memory becomes clear in the discussion on the topic in Pūrva-Mimāṃsā, wherein its conception differs from that in Nyāya. “Its conception here is different. It consists in cognizing anew in an object, not presented to the senses, similarity to an object which is being actually perceived. Thus when a person sees a gayal and is struck with its similarity to a cow which is familiar to him, he is able to conclude therefrom that the cow also resembles a gayal. This view supposes that the similarity in the two cases is numerically distinct. That is, it takes for granted that if A is similar to B, the similarity of A to B is not identically the same as the similarity of B to A. This *pramāṇa* is not perception, since the cow, in which the similarity with the

gayal is found, is not perceived at the time of forming this judgement. It is not inference, for, if it were, it would mean that one of the two similarities involved was the sign or mark of another. But neither can serve that purpose, for the similarity of the gayal to the cow is not, as a mark should be, in the cow which is the 'minor term' or the subject of the conclusion; and the similarity of the cow to the gayal remains yet to be known at the time. Nor is it mere *memory*, for the simple reason that the similarity in question, by hypothesis, has not been previously apprehended. We may point out, however, that though this *pramāṇa* is not syllogistic inference, it reduces itself to what in *modern logic* is described as 'immediate inference by reciprocal relations.'<sup>10</sup>

In the field of *śabda*, memory enters the discussion in the following way. It is pointed out in this context that "Sometimes single words may convey information, but then one or more other words are always to be understood from the context. Thus the unit of significant *śabda* is a sentence. But what is the nature of the information which such syntactically conjoined words convey? It cannot be merely the meanings of the various terms, because they are already known and so are only *remembered* at the time. It is some particular relation among the things denoted by the actual words forming the sentence. When we say "The book is on the table," it is a specific relation between the table and the book that is made known to the listener. The relation in this specific form is not the meaning of any single word used in the sentence, the preposition 'on' signifying only location in general; it is none the less known. Hence the import of a proposition is commonly stated to be relation (*samsarga*); and this holds good of the logically valid proposition as of that which is not."<sup>11</sup>

### III

We may now turn to some of the religious implications of the discussion of memory in Hindu epistemology. These can be highlighted by drawing attention to the thought of Śāṅkara (788-820 A. D.) and Rāmānuja (1017-1137 A. D.).

Hindu scriptures are traditionally classified into *śruti* and *smṛti*. "The foundational Scriptures of the Hindus are the Vedas. They are usually designated '*Śruti*' while all the other scriptural texts go under the omnibus term '*Smṛti*'. The authority of the

*Śruti* is primary, while that of the *Smṛti* is secondary. *Śruti* literally means what is heard, and *Smṛti* means what is remembered. *Śruti* is revelation; *Smṛti* is tradition. As between the two, *Śruti* is primary because it is a form of direct experience whereas *Smṛti* is secondary, since it is a recollection of that experience."<sup>12</sup> This last sentence provides the transition to Śāṅkara's statement that *śruti* corresponds perception or *pratyakṣa* and *smṛti* to inference or *anumāna*.<sup>13</sup> In order to see the connection of *smṛti* to *anumāna*, the earlier discussion on the place of memory in inference as a *pramāṇa* may be of some help.

In *Rāmānuja* again the importance of memory may be seen in the same context, i.e., a discussion of the classification of Hindu scriptures into *śruti* and *smṛti*. Now as opposed to Śāṅkara, *Rāmānuja* sets less store by the distinction between *śruti* and *smṛti* in the context of *bhakti*. As is well known, *Rāmānuja* followed a long line of Vaiṣṇava thinkers. A number of poet-saints poured out their devotion in the form of songs in Tamil. These were collected later into what is called the *Nālāyira-prabandham*. Since these songs constitute the basis of Viśiṣṭādvaita, equally with the Upaniṣads, *Rāmānuja*'s system is known as *Ubhaya Vedānta*.<sup>14</sup> Besides, in what "are called the three secrets (*rahasya-traya*)" of his cult no Vedic mantra as such seems to be included. Rather the third secret consists of the *caramaśloka* or the supreme verse, which in fact is the 66th verse of the XVIIIth chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā*! What makes the situation of interest from the point of view of our discussion is that this blurring of the distinction between *śruti* and *smṛti* in *Rāmānuja* goes hand in hand with his emphasis on *bhakti* rather than *Jñāna* as the ultimate means of *mokṣa*. And *bhakti* is defined by *Rāmānuja* as *dhruvānusmṛti*<sup>15</sup> or the constant remembrance of God. This may be contrasted with Śāṅkara's definition of *bhakti* as an investigation into the nature of the Self! What is being suggested is that the enhanced status of *smṛti*, as the essence of *bhakti*, may have been responsible for the scriptural upgrading of the category of scriptures known as *smṛti*. Soteriology may have had implication for epistemology.

#### IV

In this last section, I would like to suggest that the status of *smṛti* in Hindu epistemology needs to be re-examined for the following reasons.

(1) In Hindu, specially Advaitic thought, the three states of consciousness : waking, dreaming and deep sleep, are examined in some detail. In this connection attention may be drawn to two aspects : (a) that memory is the only internal means of knowing whether we have slept<sup>16</sup> (or dreamt) and (b) that it is the memory of the dream which enables us to distinguish between it and the waking state.<sup>17</sup> Is it not a source of valid knowledge as well as new knowledge in these cases ?

(2) A thing may have been known in the past and then forgotten. When one remembers, after a lapse of time, what was known in the past then is the *knowledge that one had knowledge*, not *new knowledge* ?

(3) "According to one view the truth of knowledge consists in its practical value. A true cognition is, therefore, variously defined as that which reveals an object that serves some purpose (artha or prayojana) or leads to the achievement of some end, or which favours a successful volition ( samvā dipravṛtya-nukūlam). This view will at once be seen to resemble the modern pragmatic theory of the West. It is mostly held by the Buddhists, but other writers also occasionally support it."<sup>18</sup> Now let us suppose I forget that I have to deliver a paper at a conference at a certain hour. And then, close to the actual time of the presentation, I suddenly remember about it and therefore deliver the paper on time. If I had *not* remembered, I would have failed to deliver the paper. I remembered and that *remembrance* led to successful activity. Then would not memory by this test represent a *true* cognition ? It could be argued that this is really a case of *re-cognition* but in as much as a forgotten cognition could not lead to successful activity, should it not then be called false cognition by this test ? In that case *re-cognition* would really represent true cognition.<sup>19</sup>

Deptt. of Religious Studies,  
The University of Sydney,  
Australia.

ARVIND SHARMA

#### NOTES

1. D. M. Datta, *The Six Ways of Knowing* (London; George Allen and Unwin 1932) p. 20.
2. *Ibid.*



3. *Ibid.* p. 20-21. "Smṛti or memory is the reproduction of past experiences without any alteration or innovation" (Satishchandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta *infra* p. 296).
4. *Ibid.* p. 23.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.* p. 24-25. D. M. Datta adds that this is the Nyāya solution to the problem (*ibid.* p. 25). He then goes on to offer the Advaitic solution which has been anticipated above.
7. P. K. Sundaram *Advaita Epistemology* (University of Madras 1968). p. 9. "The result of so defining truth is to exclude from the category of *pramā* all knowledge pointing to what has been known before including *memory* which presupposes former experience. This does not, however, mean that such knowledge is not serviceable or that its object is false but only that the doctrine attaches no particular epistemological significance to it". (M. Hiriyanna *Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (London : Unwin Paperbacks 1978) p. 143 emphasis added).
8. P. K. Sundaram *op. cit.* p. 22.
9. T. M. P. Mahadevan *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay : Chetana Limited 1960) p. 102.
10. M. Hiriyanna *op. cit.* p. 141; emphasis added.
11. *Ibid.* p. 102 emphasis added. For the role of memory and *anupalabdhi* see P. K. Sundaram *op. cit.* p. 169.
12. T. M. P. Mahadevan *op. cit.* p. 28.
13. See Sankara's *bhāṣya* on Brahmastra I. iii. 28.
14. T. M. P. Mahadevan *op. cit.* p. 150.
15. See M. Hiriyanna *op. cit.* p. 185.
16. Satishchandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (University of Calcutta, 1968) p. 295-296.
17. P. K. Sundaram, *op. cit.*, p. 216.
18. D. M. Datta, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
19. For some of the issues involved see Sabujkoli Sen, on Jayanta Bhatta's Notion of Memory (Smṛti), *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* (New Series) VII (2-4), pp. 29-33.

The first part of the book is devoted to the study of the history of the...

The second part of the book is devoted to the study of the history of the...

The third part of the book is devoted to the study of the history of the...

The fourth part of the book is devoted to the study of the history of the...

The fifth part of the book is devoted to the study of the history of the...

The sixth part of the book is devoted to the study of the history of the...

The seventh part of the book is devoted to the study of the history of the...