

## Purva Mimamsa- Epistemology

### Introduction

The word 'Mimâmsâ' literally means 'revered thought' and was originally applied to the interpretation of the Vedic rituals which commanded highest reverence. The word is now used in the sense of any critical investigation. The school of Mimâmsâ justifies both these meanings by giving us rules according to which the commandments of the Veda are to be interpreted and by giving a philosophical justification for the Vedic ritualism. Just as Sâmkhya and Yoga, Vaishesika and Nyâya are regarded as allied systems, similarly Mimâmsâ and Vedanta are also treated as allied systems of thought. Both are based on and both try to interpret the Veda. The earlier portion of the Veda, i.e., the Mantra and the Brâhmana portion, is called Karmakânda, while the later portion, i.e., the Upanisads is called Jnânakânda, because the former deals with action, with the rituals and the sacrifices, while the latter deals with the knowledge of reality. Mimâmsâ deals with the earlier portion of the Veda and is therefore called Pûrva-Mimâmsâ and also Karma-Mimâmsâ, while Vedânta deals with the later portion of the Veda and is therefore called Uttara-Mimâmsâ and also Jnâna- Mimâmsâ. The former deals with Dharma and the latter with Brahma and therefore the former is also called Dharma-Mimâmsâ, while the latter is also called Brahma-Mimâmsâ. There has been a long line of pre-Shankarite teachers of Vedanta of whom Mandana Mishra seems to be the last, who have regarded Mimâmsâ and Vedânta as forming a single system and who have advocated the combination of action and knowledge, known as Karma-Jnâna-samuchchaya-vâda. According to them, the sûtras, beginning with the first sûtra of Jaimini and ending with the last sûtra of Bâdarâyana, form one compact shâstra. These teachers held that Karma (action) and Upâsanâ (meditation) were absolutely essential to hasten the dawn of true knowledge. Even the great Shankarâchârya who treated action and knowledge as being absolutely opposed like darkness and light and who relegated Karma to the sphere of Avidyâ, had to admit that Karma and Upâsanâ do purify the soul, though they are not the direct cause of liberation and that therefore the study of Pûrva Mimâmsâ, though not essential for the

study of Vedanta, was a good means for the purification of the soul. In this connection it is also important to remember that it is the great Mimāmsaka Kumārila Bhatta himself who may be rightly regarded as the link between the Purva and the Uttara Mimāmsā. Ramanuja and Bhāskara believe that the Pūrva and Uttara Mimāmsās together form one science and the study of the former is necessary before undertaking the study of the latter. Madhva and Vallabha, though they make devotion to God as a necessary prerequisite for the study of Vedanta, yet believe that Vedanta is a continuation of Mimāmsā.

Purva Mimāmsā regards the Veda as eternal and authorless and of infallible authority. It is essentially a book of ritual dealing with commandments prescribing injunctions or prohibitions. Greatest importance is attached to the Brāhmana portion of the Veda to which both the Mantras and the Upanisads are subordinated. The aim of the Mīmāmsā is to supply the principles according to which the Vedic texts are to be interpreted and to provide philosophical justification for the views contained therein. The work of finding the principles for the right interpretation of the Vedic texts was undertaken by the Brāhmanas themselves and mainly by the *Shrauta-sutras*. Mimāmsā continues this work. But had it done only that, it would have been, at best, only a commentary on the Vedic ritual. The main thing which entitles it to the rank of a philosophical system is its keen desire to provide philosophical justification for the Vedic views and to replace the earlier ideal of the attainment of heaven (*svarga*) by the ideal of obtaining liberation (*apavarga*). It undertakes a thorough investigation into the nature and validity of knowledge and into the various means which produce valid knowledge and also into other metaphysical problems. Curious though it may seem, the Mimāmsā has been much influenced by the Nyāya- Vaishesika school, many important doctrines of which it has either borrowed or rejected.

The earliest work of this system is the *Mimāmsā-sutra* of Jaimini which begins with an inquiry into the nature of Dharma. It is the biggest of all the philosophical sutras and discusses about one thousand topics. Shabarasvāmin has written his great commentary on this work and his commentary has been explained by Prabhākara and Kumārila Bhatta

who differ from each other in certain important respects and form the two principle schools of Mîmâmsâ named after them. Prabhākara's commentary Brhati has been commented upon by Shālikanātha who has also written another treatise *Prakarana-panchikā*. Kumārila's huge work is divided into three parts—*Shlokavārtika*, *Tantravārtika and Tuptikā*, the first of which has been commented upon by Pārthasārathi Mishra who has also written his *Shāstradīpikā*. Tradition makes Prabhākara a pupil of Kumārila who nicknamed him as 'Guru on account of his great intellectual powers. But some scholars like Dr. Gangānātha Jha believe that the Prabhākara school is older and seems to be nearer the spirit of the original Mîmâmsâ.

## Perception

Both Prabhākara and Kumārila regard knowledge itself as *pramāna* or means of knowledge. Jaimini admits three *pramānas*—perception, inference and testimony. Prabhākara adds two more—comparison and implication. Kumārila further adds non-apprehension. Let us consider these one by one. Both Prabhākara and Kumārila recognize two kinds of knowledge—immediate and mediate. Perception is regarded as immediate knowledge by both and both admit two stages in perception—indeterminate and determinate. Prabhākara defines perception as direct apprehension (*sāksāt pratītiḥ pratyaksam*). Kumārila defines it as direct knowledge produced by the proper contact of the sense-organs with the presented objects, which is free from defects. Mîmâmsâ broadly agrees with Nyāya in its view of perception. The self comes into contact with the mind (*manas*); the mind comes into contact with the sense-organ; and the sense-organ comes into contact with the external object. We have already dealt with the account of perception in the Nyāya system and need not repeat it here. We may only note the main differences between the Nyāya and the Mîmâmsâ account of perception. The Mîmāhsaka regards the auditory organ as proceeding from space (*dik*) while the Naiyāyika regards it as proceeding from ether (*ākāsha*). Again, according to Nyāya, the indeterminate perception is a stage inferred afterwards as a hypothesis to account for the determinate perception. All perception is determinate and indeterminate perception serves no fruitful purpose; it

is inferred as a necessary earlier stage in the complex process of perception. But the Mimāmsaka regards it as part of normal experience.

It is the vague, indefinite and primitive stage of perception, the awareness of the 'that without its relation to the 'what, which gains clarity and definiteness afterwards when it becomes determinate. But like the determinate perception, indeterminate perception also serves a fruitful purpose. It is the basis of activity for children and animals and even adults whose mental growth is imperfect. Even normal adults act upon it when they are in a hurry and confusion. In determinate perception, the self apprehends the pure object (*shuddha vastu*) and though the genuine and the specific characters are given in it, their relation to the object is not perceived. It is the bare awareness (*ālochana- mātra*) which is non-relational and therefore indeterminate.

## Inference

*Anumāna* means inference. It is described as reaching a new conclusion and truth from one or more observations and previous truths by applying reason. Observing smoke and inferring fire is an example of *Anumāna*. All schools of Indian Philosophy except Charvaka accept this as a valid and useful means to knowledge. The method of inference is explained as consisting of three parts: *pratijna* (hypothesis), *hetu* (reason), and *drśhanta* (examples). The hypothesis must further be broken down into two parts, state the ancient Indian scholars: *sadhya* (that idea which needs to be proven or disproven) and *paksha* (the object on which the *sadhya* is predicated). The inference is conditionally true if *sapaksha* (positive examples as evidence) are present, and if *vipaksha* (negative examples as counter-evidence) are absent. For rigor, the Indian philosophies also state further epistemic steps. For example, they demand *Vyapti* - the requirement that the *hetu* (reason) must necessarily and separately account for the inference in "all" cases, in both *sapaksha* and *vipaksha*. A conditionally proven hypothesis is called a *nigamana* (conclusion).

## Comparison

The Mimāmsā view of comparison or *Upamāna* differs from the Nyāya view. According to Nyāya, comparison is the knowledge of the relation between a word and the

object denoted by that word (*samjnä- samjnisambandhajnäna*). It is the knowledge of similarity of an unknown object like a wild cow with a known object like a cow. The knowledge is like this—‘the perceived wild cow is like the remembered cow (*gosadrsho gavayah*). The Mimāmsaka refutes this account of comparison. He points out that the knowledge of the relation between a word and the object denoted by that word is derived by verbal authority (e.g., by the words of the person who tells that a wild cow is similar to a cow) and not by comparison. It is known through the recollection of what was learnt from the verbal authority of the person. And the knowledge of the wild cow itself is due to perception and not comparison. Hence comparison, according to Mimāmsā, apprehends the similarity of the remembered cow to the perceived wild cow. This knowledge is like this: ‘the remembered cow is like the perceived wild cow (*gavayasadrshi gauh*). It is the cow as possessing similarity with the wild cow that is known by comparison. A person need not be told by anybody that a wild cow is similar to a cow. Any person who has seen a cow and happens to see a wild cow himself remembers the cow as similar to the wild cow he is perceiving. This knowledge of similarity is comparison. It is distinguished from inference because the *vyāpti* or the invariable concomitance is not needed here.

## **Verbal Testimony**

*Shabda-pramana* has got the greatest importance in Mīmāmsā. Testimony is verbal authority. It is the knowledge of supra-sensible objects which is produced by the comprehension of the meanings of words. Kumārila divides testimony into personal (*pauruseya*) and impersonal (*apauruseya*). The former is the testimony of the trustworthy persons (*āptavākya*). The latter is the testimony of the Veda (*Vedavākya*). It is valid in itself. It has intrinsic validity. But the former is not valid in itself. Its validity is inferred from the trustworthy character of the person. It may be vitiated by doubt and error and may be contradicted afterwards. The Veda is eternal and authorless. It is not the work of any person, human or divine. The sages are only the ‘seers not the authors of the Veda. The Veda is not composed or spoken even by God. The Veda deals with Dharma and

the objects denoted by it cannot be known by perception, inference, comparison or any other means of valid knowledge. Hence the Vedic injunctions can never be contradicted by any subsequent knowledge. And there can be no internal contradictions in the Veda itself. Hence the Vedic testimony is valid in itself. Prabhākara admits only Vedic testimony as real testimony and reduces human testimony to inference because its validity is inferred from the trustworthy character of the person. Again, testimony may give us knowledge of the existent objects (*siddhârtha vâkya*) or may command us to do something (*vidhâyaka vâkya*). Kumârila admits the distinction between existential and injunctive propositions and limits the scope of the Veda to the latter (*abhihitânvaivâda*). The Veda deals with injunctions. Prohibitions are injunctions in disguise. The Veda commands us to do certain things and to refrain from doing certain things. It deals with the supra-sensible dharma or duty. If we follow the Vedic commands we incur merit and if we do not, we incur demerit. Action, therefore, is the final import of the Veda. The Veda is broadly divided into *Vidhi- vâda* or injunctions and *Arthavâda* or explanations. The existential or the assertive propositions of the Veda are merely explanatory passages which explain the injunctions of the Veda which are its final import. Prabhākara takes a strictly pragmatic view of all knowledge. Knowledge leads to successful activity. Action is the only import of knowledge. He, therefore, refuses to accept that knowledge deals with existent things. All propositions must be injunctive. All knowledge, whether Vedic or secular, points to activity. The so-called assertive or explanatory propositions in the Veda are authoritative only when they help persons to perform their duties (*anvitâbhidhânavaivâda*).

Testimony is verbal cognition and is derived from the meanings of words which compose sentences. To uphold the eternality and the authorlessness of the Veda, the Mimâmsaka puts forward the theory that words and meanings as well as their relation are all natural and eternal. A word (*shabda*) is made of two or more letters (*varna*) and is a mere aggregate of the letters and not a whole (*avayavi*), though the letters must occur in a particular order. A varna is regarded as an articulated sound. It is eternal (*nitya*),

omnipresent (*sarva-gata*) and integral (*niravayava*). It is different from its sound (*dhvani*) if it is spoken and also different from its symbolic form (*rupa*) if it is written. The sound and the form are merely its accidental features which reveal it. A *varna* is eternal and immutable, while its *dhvani* and *rüpa* are momentary and changing. If many *varnas* are spoken, they are manifested through a temporal series of utterances; if they are written, they are manifested through a spatial series of written symbols. The sound and the symbol are only the vehicles of the manifestation of the eternal *varna*. When a *varna* is pronounced or written in ten different ways, there are not ten different *varnas*, but only ten different manifestations of the same *varna*. Therefore a word which is an aggregate of two or more eternal *varnas* is itself eternal. A word does not signify the particular things which come into existence and pass away, but the eternal universals underlying these particulars. Hence the meanings or the objects denoted by words, being universals, are eternal and unchanging. And the relation between a word and its meaning also, being natural, necessary, inseparable and internal, is eternal and unchanging. This relation is not conventional. It is due neither to God's will nor to convention as the old and the modern schools of Nyäya respectively believe. It is natural and eternal. Language is not a creation of the human or even the divine mind. Philology is a natural science. The conventional element in language is secondary (*sahakäri*) and helps the manifestation of the eternal words and their meanings, just as light helps the manifestation of sight. The Naiyâyika also believes in the authority of the Veda, but he regards the Veda as the work of God and so challenges the eternality and authorlessness of the Veda. According to him, words are not eternal and language is due to the divine will or to convention. The Mîmâmsaka refutes this view and points out that only the sounds and the symbols are created and destroyed, while the real words are eternal. Words are manifested through human efforts. The sounds and the symbols are the vehicles of the manifestation of the eternal words.