THE CONCEPT OF AVAKTAVYA IN JAINISM

R. K. TRIPATHI

JAINISM IS a realistic system. It not only holds that reality is pluralistic, but also that reality is many-faced (anantadharmātmakaṁ vastu). In order to sustain this position Jainism develops a logic of sevenfold predication (saptabhaṅginaya or syādavāda). The development of this logic, in turn, depends principally on the concept of avaktavya (the unspeakable). As Satkari Mookerjee notes: “It is the concept of avaktavya . . . which gives the Jaina philosophy its distinctive character and individuality.”

In spite of the great importance of this concept, it is surprising that the accounts of it given in most books on Indian philosophy are rather scanty, and what is worse, the accounts are contradictory. According to Hiriyanna, the concept of avaktavya “must be expressible as neither.” Another author seems to follow him when he says, “If we deny both existence and non-existence, if we negate the two different aspects of being and non-being together, the thing baffles all description. It becomes indescribable i.e. neither real or unreal.”

It may be pointed out at once that this seems to be quite a wrong interpretation of avaktavya. Apart from the fact that the Jaina texts do not support this view, it is possible to show that it is incorrect on purely logical grounds. To say that a thing neither exists (asti) nor does not exist (nāsti) is sheer skepticism, and the Jaina would never accept it as a bhanga (predicate), and as one of the mūlabhāṅgas (primary predicates) at that. Further, if avaktavya means “neither,” it cannot be combined with the first three bhāṅgas and so
cannot give rise to the other bhaṅgas. This is nothing short of sabotaging the saptabhaṅgināya itself. What is worse, the interpretation of avaktavya as "neither" would make it indistinguishable from the fourth kōti (alternative viewpoint) of the Mādhayamika catuskōti, as also from the anirvacaniya (indescribable as either being or non-being) of the Vedānta.

An interpretation which is quite contrary to the above is found in the Sarvadarśana Saṅgraha, which says, "When you wish to establish both at once, let it be declared 'indescribable' from the impossibility to describe it."\(^5\) Dr. Satkari Mookerjee agrees with this view and regards the avaktavya as the compresence of the two, asti and nāsti. But his remark that in the avaktavya "the two attributes are dissolved into one"\(^6\) is rather confusing, because the Jaina does not believe in any dissolution. Dr. Mookerjee seems to regard the avaktavya as a kind of synthesis of asti and nāsti.\(^7\) A quite serious objection to this view would be that it does not allow the avaktavya to remain a mūlabhaṅga but one dependent on or derived from asti and nāsti. The mūlabhaṅgas of the Jaina are different from those of the Mādhyaṃika. If the Jaina has to start with two bhaṅgas they would be vaktavya and avaktavya, and the former would be subdivided into asti and nāsti; otherwise the Jaina would have three mūlabhaṅgas. Either way avaktavya remains primary. So a correct view would emphasize the primary character of avaktavya. The other difficulty is that the interpretation which regards the avaktavya as a synthesis of two contradictories would throw us directly into self-contradiction.\(^8\) The third bhaṅga, namely, asti ca nāsti ca (is and is not) does not involve us in self-contradiction as the two contradictory predicates are asserted successively (kramārpana) and not simultaneously. But in the avaktavya the two contradictories are asserted simultaneously (sahirārpana) and hence the question as to what the Jaina does to avoid this self-contradiction arises.

Does the Jaina blatantly accept self-contradiction or does he avoid it by inventing some device? No system of philosophy can afford to accept self-contradiction as valid, because if self-contradiction is accepted as valid without any qualifications, then there remains no weapon for criticism; anything which is said will have to be accepted, because even self-contradiction is valid. It is certain that the Jaina does not take leave of logic and consistency; he does criticize others by pointing out self-contradiction. Every system of philosophy has its contradictory which is regarded as false. This is why when a system has to accept a synthesis of contradictories as valid, it has to invent one device or

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\(^6\) Mookerjee, op. cit., p. 143.  
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 114.  
\(^8\) Hiriyanna, op cit., p. 165.
another which at least seems to take off the edge from the contradictories. Hegel, who is the most outstanding believer in the synthesis of contradictories, has a saving device which works as a pinch of salt with which the contradictories are taken. According to him the contradictories are synthesized not as they are; there is a transformation which takes place in the moment of synthesis and this makes the thesis and antithesis harmonious. The problem that Hegel has to face regards the identity of the contradictories in the two states, namely, before and after the synthesis. If the contradictories are transformed they do not remain the same; if not, there is no harmony.

The Jaina too has to avoid self-contradiction, but not in the manner in which Hegel does, for the simple reason that the Jaina is not an idealist but a realist. It appears therefore that Mookerjee comes dangerously near Hegelianism when, in trying to meet the difficulty regarding the concept of avaktavya, he says, "The concrete unification of being and non-being is not a mere mechanical juxtaposition but a transformation of the two with their individualities unannulled. The Jaina does not find a logical contradiction in this act of synthesis, since he does not take it to be a logical process but an ontological fact which can be realised by intuition alone."9 The Hegelian influence is obvious, but it is also obvious that the Jaina cannot accept this view of avaktavya. Being a hard realist, the Jaina cannot regard knowledge as a transforming process; an idealist like Hegel could do that. Mookerjee makes the avaktavya an extra-logical thing or an object of intuition, and yet he calls it a synthesis. The point we have to note is that the avaktavya is not a synthesis of opposites. If it were a synthesis there would be no point in again combining it with asti and nasti. The Jaina introduces this concept because there is something which is not brought out either by asti or nasti or by their successive combination; this is why this something is once again combined with asti, nasti, and their combination.

The only view of avaktavya which is free from the above difficulties seems to be that of K. C. Bhattacharyya; for him the avaktavya is the non-distinction of being and negation. "The given indefinite—the unspeakable or avaktavya as it has been called, as distinct from the definite existent, presents something other than consecutive togetherness; it implies sakārpaṇa or copresentation which amounts to nondistinction or indeterminate distinction of being and negation in the above sense."10 Mookerjee quotes Bhattacharyya with approval and yet regards avaktavya as a synthesis; there seems to be an obvious confusion between non-distinction and synthesis. While non-distinction is

9 Mookerjee, op cit., p. 114.
prior to distinction, synthesis is posterior to it; while the former is a kind of potentiality, the latter is a kind of achievement. If there is no contradiction in the avaktavya it is not because the contradictories have been transformed or opposition overcome, but because there is no distinction of the contradictories. Therefore avaktavya is not a synthesis of contradictories, but their inexpressible non-distinction. The implication is that only what is expressible can be self-contradictory and not what is inexpressible or indescribable. It is this view of avaktavya alone which can enable us to have the following: (1) the distinction of the avaktavya from skepticism or the fourth koṭi of the Mādhyamika, (2) the distinction of the avaktavya from the Hegelian synthesis, (3) the freedom of the avaktavya from self-contradiction, and (4) the preservation of avaktavya as a mūla or underived bhaṅga. The Jaina is not guilty of accepting blatantly the validity of self-contradiction or contradictories. If the avaktavya has to be rejected, it must be pointed out that there lurks a kind of inconsistency in accepting this concept even in the sense of non-distinction, just as we have shown that there remains an inconsistency in Hegel even after the synthesis of the contradictories is accepted.

All the systems of Indian philosophy have criticized the concept of avaktavya because it is uncomfortable for them. But the concept is especially dangerous for the Mādhyamika, because the admission of avaktavya threatens the very structure of the dialectic. As is well known, the Mādhyamika thinks of four and only four—neither more nor less—alternative standpoints or drṣṭis not reducible to each other. But avaktavya opens the possibility of there being more alternatives than four. Probably this is not a very serious difficulty. The more serious point is that it is a concept which is impregnable to dialectical criticism. The Mādhyamika therefore rejects avaktavya as a possible drṣṭi, even as the Jaina rejects the fourth koṭi of the Mādhyamika as mere skepticism. Now the question is: Is the Mādhyamika justified in rejecting avaktavya?

The Mādhyamika and the Jaina both agree that many views of reality are possible, but the difference between the two is that for the former these views are just views and not truths about reality, while for the latter these views are

11 The orthodox Jaina view is that there is no contradiction in the avaktavya because the contradictories are not absolute but relative to conditions. Cf. Syādvādamaṇḍari, stanza 24, upādihkṣetopahitam viśuddham. But the point is that even if the contradictories are relative, they are simultaneous and hence there will be at least relative contradiction.
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acceptable truths about reality. For the Jaina, thought represents reality; for the Mādhyamika, thought misrepresents reality. But we are not concerned here with the question of whether thought represents or misrepresents reality. Our problem is: in how many possible ways can thought do so? The Mādhyamika begins with two mūladṛṣṭis and comes to have four in all. The Jaina begins with three mūlabhaṅgas and comes to have seven types of predication in all. The difference is obviously due to avaktavya.

We have drawn some distinctions about avaktavya above; additional distinctions must be drawn before the question of the legitimacy of the concept of avaktavya is taken up, because some other systems too seem to accept something like avaktavya or the inexpressible. On the face of it, the Advaitic conception of Brahman and the Mādhyamika conception of śunya seem to be avaktavya or inexpressible inasmuch as they are beyond all thought and speech. But the avaktavya is undoubtedly different from Brahman or śunya for the obvious reason that no claim is made for its being transcendent; the Jaina avaktavya is not inaccessible to thought but only to speech. If so, can it be compared to the misperception of a rope as a snake or the prātbhāsika (empirical illusion) which is said to be anirvacaniya or indescribable? The rope-snake is said to be indescribable because though it appears in consciousness, it is not real; it can be characterized neither as sat nor as asat, nor as both. We have already rejected the view of avaktavya as “neither sat nor asat”; avaktavya is both sat and asat, and so it is clear that it cannot be compared with the rope-snake which is sad-asad vilakṣana or neither and hence anirvacaniya; it is not only a case of non-distinction, but an admission of another category different from both. Moreover, the rope-snake is cancelled when the error is recognized, but the avaktavya is not. Like the anirvacaniya, the avaktavya is different from both sat and asat, but unlike that category, it is a copresentation or nondistinction of the two terms. Like the fourth koṭi of the Mādhyamika, it is different from a synthesis of sat and asat, but unlike that, it is not a denial of sat and asat, but mere non-distinction. How is this non-distinction different from the concept of non-distinction (akhyāti) of the Prabhakaras? The difference is that in akhyāti the terms are distinct, but there is no consciousness of the distinction; but in the avaktavya the terms are non-distinct. Again, the terms of akhyāti are not necessarily contradictories, as is the case with avaktavya.

Having made the above distinctions clear, let us now proceed to see whether avaktavya can legitimately be accepted in philosophy. We are here reminded of the famous words of Wittgenstein: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof

14 Murti, op. cit., p. 128.
one must be silent.” To this Gellner retorts, “That which one would insinuate, thereof one must speak.” The inexpressible has been insinuated both by mystics and critical philosophers, but they have chosen to be silent. Plato held that the highest truth could not be really written, as it is a communion between two souls. Plotinus and Eckhart thought in the same manner. Kant was silent about the thing-in-itself and so was Buddha. The sīśa of the Upaniṣads too advise silence. But it must be clearly noted that the inexpressible in these cases is quite different from the avaktavya. The inexpressible in the above-mentioned systems is transcendent to thought and not to speech only, and is therefore merely hinted at; the transcendent is not an alternative thought or view, and in this sense the Mādhyamika too accepts the inexpressible. But the peculiarity of the Jaina is that he wants to admit the inexpressible even on the empirical level, that is, as a view of reality. The inexpressible of the Jaina is neither transcendent nor a mere postulate, but something thinkable and knowable but not expressible. The transcendentalist’s inexpressible is beyond thought and is unthinkable. Can we accept something which is thinkable, but not expressible?

K. C. Bhattacharyya says, “The commonsense principle implied in its recognition is that what is given cannot be rejected simply because it is inexpressible by a single positive concept.” Now the point is whether the inexpressible is really given. Probably Bhattacharyya takes avaktavya as a continuum like the avidyā of Advaita Vedānta, but for obvious reasons the Jaina cannot take avaktavya as a continuum or background, because for him avaktavya is a particular view or aspect of reality like asti and nāsti. The Jaina takes avaktavya as thinkable, but not expressible. Can thought accept it without making it expressible in the process? Is it merely a handicap of language that the avaktavya cannot be expressed? If so, can the inexpressible be at least thought, if not actually expressed? The dilemma is this: if it can be thought it can also be expressed; if it cannot even be thought, it cannot be regarded as a view or aspect of reality. The Mādhyamika rejected the Jaina avaktavya as it cannot even be thought. The unthinkable cannot be accepted in philosophy as a viewpoint; it can be accepted only as transcendent. The Jaina does not insinuate it or hint at it; he takes it as a viewpoint and regards it as thinkable but not expressible, and that is the contradiction or impossibility in his posi-

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16 Cf., Taittiriya Upaniṣad II. 4: yato vaco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha.
17 The viśeṣas of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and the āvalokanaś of the Buddhist are also inexpressible because they are absolutely particular and unique, but they are not empirical entities.
18 Bhattacharyya, op. cit., p. 341-342.
19 Dhrupa, op. cit., p. 127. tādṛśāsyā sabdasya asambhavāt avaktavyam.
The inexpressible or the avaktavya cannot be equated with asti and nasti as a position; thought must be thoughtless here. It may be asked whether this criticism applies to the anirvacaniya of the Vedānta. Can anything which is not transcendent be regarded as anirvacanīya (inexpressible)? The Vedāntin would say that there is no harm in accepting the anirvacanīya as a concept describing the unreal because the worst that can be said against it is that it is unreal, and the Vedāntin would jump with joy to see that you have caught the point. The difficulty arises only when the anirvacanīya or the inexpressible is taken as real; and not only real, but even as empirically real. This is what the Jaina does. Hence the avaktavya should either be given up by the Jaina, or he should be a transcendentalist.