

Brahma-Satyam Jagan-Mithyā Jivo Brahmaiva Nāparaḥ Mani Dravid Śāstrigal

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This is a famous couplet in Advaita Vedānta which summarizes the whole teaching into half a sentence. Of this, jivobrahmaiva nāparaḥ is the most important.

While many people are ready to concede that Brahman alone is satyam, they become uncomfortable to hold jagat as mithyā. This is true of people, both of the past and the present, which prompts them to either give up Advaita, or give another explanation to Advaita that is different from Śāṅkara.

Why does jagan-mithyātvam makes everyone uncomfortable; because, such a position implies that Guru, Śāstram and everything else becomes mithyā. If śāstram is mithyā, how can it reveal the satyam? How can one have śraddhā in such a mithyā-śāstram? Many people hold Advaitinsas māyā-vādins – there is no problem there; but they also say, Advaitins are mithyāvādins, which implies that what is spoken by Advaitinsis false. Therefore, there is a need to address some questions such as, what exactly is meant by the Advaitin when he uses the word mithyātvā, what are its possible objections, how they are answered, and what is the intent of the Advaitin when he claims mithyātvā of the jagat.

In the world, everyone is advised to speak the truth, which by implication, suggests that one should not speak the untruth. The antonym of satyam is anṛtam, of which mithyā is a synonym. Therefore, jagat also becomes anṛtam, which is unacceptable. We need to understand what is anṛtam? Suppose someone who knows what is lying on the ground is a rope, but just to cause fear in a boy, says “there is a snake”; he can be said to be lying. Now the boy, in turn, believing it to be a snake and with an intent to warn another boy, says “there is a snake”, he cannot be said to be lying. In both cases, what is, is rope. So, it appears that what is satyam, does not depend upon the vastu, but depends upon the speaker. If one says something which is not true of his knowledge, then he can be held to be lying. But if someone says what is true to his knowledge, even if his knowledge is false, what one says cannot be held to be untrue.

Is this the context in which one must view the statement “Brahma satyam”? No. Could satyam and mithyā be determined based on existence? In the sense that what exists is satyam, and what does not exist, is mithyā, like that of hare's horn? This calls for examination of what exists and what does not exist. That whose existence is not even possible, is what we call as asat. It is unfortunate that what the Advaitins regard as param-satyam (absolute truth), is regarded by opponents of Advaitin as tuccham, who regard that such a Brahman as presented by Advaitin is an impossibility. They hold the anirvacanīyatva of Advaitin, as tuccham. This only goes to show that the determination of what is satyam and mithyā cannot be on the grounds of existence.

Then what is satyam and mithyā? Could they be determined based on cause and effect? Some are of the view that anything that produces a useful effect is satyam (arthakriyā kāritvam satyam). But even this definition does not hold good, since it is seen that a false-snake seen on a rope can cause effective fear.

So, what is satyam? That which was existent even while there was false knowledge, that which subsists on the negation of the false knowledge, that is satyam. Let us now examine this definition. Rope is avyabhicārah (that which does not get negated). Rope was existent even before it was known, while it was known falsely as snake, and continues to exist after the snake is negated and rope is known; so that which does not get negated at all is satyam. Even when the snake is seen, the existence of the snake belongs to the rope. If the rope moves, the snake appears to move; if the rope is removed, the snake appears to have gone.

Advaitin holds that there is a non-dual satyam, on which the entire jagat is super-imposed, from which the entire jagat gets its existence from. It is non-dual, hence there is no parallel one can give to exemplify Brahman. Rope is created, so its satyam (satyatvam) is only relative to the snake that was superimposed upon it. The absolute satyam, Brahman, is revealed by the Upaniṣads to have been existent even before any creation of the jagat began, including space and time. This is the intended meaning of the word satyam by the Advaitin.

Mithyā is that which is different from satyam, as that which is recognized as existent, but which existence is borrowed. Those such as the hare's horn are regarded as asat. 'kvacidapi (space) upādhausatvena (space) pratīyanarahatvam'. Mithyā is that which does not belong to either extremes – it is neither asat like hare's horn, nor non-negatable like satyam-Brahman.

What is satyam is nityam (eternal). What is mithyā is not eternal, for everyone accepts that jagat is created and it subject to destruction. In fact, all darśanas (views) agree that jagat is sad-asad-vilakṣaṇam, nitya-vilakṣaṇam, asad-vilakṣaṇam. Then where do they disagree? They do not agree that jagat is created due to ajñāna. Advaitins hold that it is by adhiṣṭhāna-tattva-jñānam that jagat gets sublated, whereas others object to this. In the view of the Advaitin, it is tattva-jñānam alone that can remove ajñāna, and hence tattva-jñānam alone is the cause for liberation.

Therefore, the jagat becomes ajñāna-vilakṣaṇam, that which is produced through bhāva-rūpa-ajñāna. Jñānam cannot make any change to the object that it reveals – it can only reveal an object as it is. That too, its revelation is limited the capacity of the pramāṇa. For example, in the case where pratyakṣa reveals a pot, it reveals only the front portion and not the back side. There is no pramāṇa which can reveal all the characteristics of a given object. Inference reveals that there is fire on the mountain, based on the smoke that is seen on top of it; but anumāna cannot reveal the extent of the fire. Even śabda cannot reveal an object that has many attributes, comprehensively. However, if there is something which has no attributes, no parts, then śabda can reveal such a vastu in its entirety; such a vastu is one's ātma-svarūpa. 'ato anubhavaḥ eva ekaḥ viśayaḥ ajñāta lakṣaṇaḥ' - here anubhavaḥ means ātma-lakṣaṇaḥ.

So, mithyā can now be understood as that which is negated by jñānam. It is jagat which is anirvacanīya, in which all transactions take place, for there can be no transactions in Brahman. 'satyānrte mithunīkṛtya vyavahārah' says Śaṅkara. Thus, in 'brahma satyam jagat-mithyā', satyam should be understood as that which is non-negatable, and mithyā as that which is negated by satya-jñānam.

(transcribed and translated by Sugavanam Krishnan)