

THE ENIGMA IN THE ANCIENT  
LITERATURE OF INDIA

Following the Grammarians, the Poets in ancient India concerned themselves with certain problems of semantics, the solution of which, they felt, would make possible a better perception of the relationships between language and thought. Thus they distinguished the meaning of words, depending upon whether it was directly expressive or indirect and allusive. The indirect meaning, they said, is introduced whenever the primary meaning has been hampered by some sort of incompatibility. At times it retains its connection with the primary sense: this is precisely what is termed "metaphoric" meaning; at others, it frees itself from the primary sense entirely or in part, and this constitutes the gamut of "implicit" meaning. In addition, the indirect meaning is "internal"; the other is "external." This, to be sure, can signify that one is concealed and the other apparent; but what is indicated above all is that one is profound or essential while the other is superficial or minor.

Perhaps ideas such as these seem to us to be pure scholasticism. They

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

are nonetheless enlightening whenever they are correlated with literary works. In this respect we must point out the remarkable fact that, in the opinion of these theorists, implicit meaning is achieved as a result of tradition—in other words, its resources stem from that background of religious or metaphysical speculation which defines Indian tradition. On the other hand, the direct or primary meaning of words is merely the consequence of a convention, of a tacit agreement fixed outside linguistic diachronism, even as it is alien to analytical thought. These are singular viewpoints, indeed, but an examination of literary texts—lyric poetry or novels—seems to confirm their fruitfulness.

Let us begin with Sanskrit literature of the classical age, from the start of the Christian Era until the end of the first millennium. Here, the principal phenomenon is the development of the *ḥāvya*, an elaborated, polished style which rests on the meticulous application of the canons of rhetoric. It is quite true that in all countries an elaborated style, especially as encountered in lyric poetry, utilizes the indirect values of the vocabulary. Because of the extraordinary polysemia inherent in it, Sanskrit, more than other languages, permits writers a maximum of play as regards semantic inflections without having to resort to the barbaric method of puns or alliteration. The *ḥāvya* is characterized precisely by the use of the semantic superimposition, what is called the *clesha*, or “coalescence.” It consists in this: two or sometimes three shadings of meanings are attributed to a single and identical word, each of these meanings being compatible with the context so that other words of some importance in the same sentence can also encompass two or three superimposed meanings. In addition, it is a fact that, of these superimposed meanings, only one is “direct,” the other or others representing secondary metaphoric or implicit values. The artificial nature of the method is of little moment—artificial solely from *our* point of view. What does matter, for poetic ends, is that the language by itself makes possible the splitting-up of the vocabulary, so to speak, the establishment of two parallel interpretations: one following usage, the other, less apparent, more concealed, resting upon the utilization of a symbol.

There is a second characteristic of the *ḥāvya* which evolves, thanks to the very pliancy provided by the *clesha*: often sentences or stanzas (in poetic works) suggest an enigma to the reader, and it is up to him to divine its meaning, unless—as often happens—the key is furnished within the immediate context. I will give one example out of thousands.

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A fire is described which does not destroy the forest or dry up the waters. What can this fire be? A subsequent passage makes plain that it is the “radiance” of the hero walking in the jungle, crossing the rivers. The word “radiance,” which is a well-worn metaphor in our language, has enough vigor in Sanskrit to evoke—precisely secondarily—the picture of a “fire” that burns; at the same time it preserves the primary attribute of abstract meanings—“prestige” or “power.” In this way the enigma is linked to the semantic dissociation we have observed. The reader is led to wonder about the innumerable sentences of the *ḥāvya* and how the natural order of things is thus disturbed. What is the cause of this miracle? The answer is that the miracle resides in the words themselves. The disturbance is the result of a semantic ambiguity.

Can we say that the natural polysemia and the penchant for the enigma were exploited in ancient India for purely literary purposes? Are we to look upon these as nothing more than a gratuitous preciousness of the kind that, in India as elsewhere, followed or preceded the dawn of great classical art? Not at all. We find the same sort of polysemantic enigmas in the oldest literary monuments of India, in the basic texts of Brahmanism called the *Vedas*.

Let us take the *Rig-Veda*, the major and earliest text, a collection of hymns to the divinities of the “Vedic” cult. In contrast to scarcely perfected poems where direct values prevail, where allusions and enigmas are avoided, there are others in which indecisive meanings give rise to varied interpretations. In these, every suggestion is a palimpsest to be read on two levels: one directly expressive, the other evocative. When the poet gives instructions: “Build a ship, harness the plough, take the horses to forage, mend the armor!” he intends, to be sure, to use these formulas concretely, or at least he *also* gives us so to understand, but what matters primarily to him is to describe, with the aid of these images, the carrying-out of the ceremonial, the preparation for the Sacrifice, as if he were dealing with a martial expedition or farm work. He does not say: “Prepare the Sacrifice as one prepares a ship, as one harnesses a plough!” Nor does he suggest that a “ship” or a “plough” is a metaphor for “sacrifice.” The two actions evolve in a parallel fashion; the enigma resides in the very shadow the words cast upon each other. The basin in which the priest pours the oblatory liquid is called “ocean”; the stone that is used to squeeze juice from the sacred plant (the *soma*) is called “mountain.” Does this mean that within a freely phrased con-

text the word for “basin” also denotes ocean (or the inverse), that “armor” or “horse” is the ordinary term employed to describe this or that portion of the liturgical act? No, but, as a secondary attribute, each suffices to evoke that ambiguous domain in which it discloses fresh resonances while retaining its own quality. Formerly the expression “Vedic balderdash” was used because the principles of the sacramental enigma had not been understood. Bergaigne, who coined the phrase, intended it to mean an irrational combination of images which evoked connections between the ritual and the human world. For example, a literal translation of the *Rig-Veda* is of little interest save from a pedagogical point of view:

The two carvings shaped the bull  
The stone carries the horse on its back.

Or Bergaigne’s typical example (unfortunately, philologically vague): “The fire suckling at the breast of deception” (*Rig-Veda*, 10. 79, 3). Or, again, the hymn (l. 164) which is but a string of enigmas:

In the distance I saw a steam of manure in the midst of that low area,  
With her thousand syllables the female buffalo bellowed to the highest  
firmament . . . etc.

This kind of literal translation is on a level of what Indians denounce as empirical knowledge. To summarize briefly, the poetry of the Veda, however lacking in polish its form might be, tends naturally to the use of the enigma; and the enigma, in essence primarily liturgical (or at least containing almost necessarily a liturgical incidence), derives its explicit power from the utilization of a certain semantic duality.

Long after the era of the Veda, philosophical schools (the *Mīmāṃsā*) pondered the significance of the old hymns or, rather, the formulas that compose these hymns (the *mantras*), for, in order to meet the needs of the cult, the hymns had been cut up into formulas. It is upon these that henceforth all thought is concentrated. In these circles one encounters the complaint that the Vedic formulas are stripped of all significance because they speak of things that do not exist or because they attempt to reconcile irreconcilable elements—in short, that they are essentially unintelligible. The philosopher replies that these formulas become clear if one accepts the presence of a secondary meaning. He recalls the customs of the *ṛāvyā*, where a river is described in the very terms one would use to depict the beauty of woman. For example, the curve of riverbanks is

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called “the hips” or the “hindquarters.” A palpable link therefore does exist, not only for us who are outsiders, but for the Indians themselves, between the semantics of the *ṛgveda* and that of the Vedic hymns. Furthermore, from the earliest times, these liturgical or speculative commentaries, which the *Brāhmanas* or the *Upanishads* truly are, have continuously attempted to isolate secondary qualities. Indeed, when they have ceased describing rites, these texts have come to grips with some relationship of cause and effect, or they have taken into account the esoteric correlations between the sacred and the profane (“for the gods,” they say, “love that which is concealed”); inevitably, they have relied upon the symbolic forms of the language, upon the “implicit” vocabulary.

It is also in these works that enigmatic phrases, paradoxes, and irrational pronouncements inherited from Vedic poetry have taken on consistency, giving impetus to games, to a matching of wits, the theme of which is almost invariably drawn from the liturgy. Similarly, a concern for liturgy, which, as we have seen, determined the poetic enigmas, has given birth to philosophic thought with the aid of an intermediary, the setting where the enigma and its solution comprise the entire plot and denouement. These games appear for the first time, however inadequately elaborated they might seem, in the esoteric section of the *Satapatha-Brāhmana*, the chapter of the *Agni-rah-asya*, the secret instruction (*méta-rituel*) regarding the altar of the fire.

But there are more rudimentary types. These are the accumulation of interwoven questions and answers; in other words, the key to the enigma is given (as in the *ṛgveda*) immediately following its appearance, and the answer contains—just as in the catechism—all the words of the question. The participants are anonymous and, it would seem, interchangeable; everything takes place beneath the eyes of a mute arbiter. Let us give as an example the exchange (consisting always of four questions and four answers) that terminates the contest of enigmas in the *Vājasaneyi-Samhitā*.

“I ask you what is the very end of the land. I ask you where is the navel of the world. I ask you what is the sperm of the male horse. I ask you what is the supreme firmament of the word.”

“The very end of the land is the Altar that is here. The navel of the world is the

Sacrifice that is here. The sperm of the male horse is the *soma* that is here. The supreme firmament of the word is the *Brahman* that is here.”<sup>1</sup>

With this rough outline, the mere raw material of those who seek enigmas, more lively scenarios can be contrasted. In them we find an interrogator and an examinee (Indian scholarship has always been conducted by the questionnaire method). Occasionally several actors appear on stage simultaneously or successively. It sometimes happens that the interrogator becomes the examinee and that the reply is transformed into a snare and is made to give the impetus, on the rebound, to a series of questions pitched on a higher plane. This is no longer a game but a test, the consequences of which are often dire. The protagonist is not necessarily a priest but perhaps a layman, that is to say, a prince who owns a rich domain. It is interesting to see these laymen not only sponsoring contests of enigmas but also taking part in them, just as later on we shall see kings and Maecenas participating in similar contests among poets or scholars.

Thus we are shown a priest offering his services to the master of the house, the latter questioning him to determine how extensive is his knowledge and, finally satisfied, accepting the cleric as tutor or chaplain of his home. Or perhaps the head of the family wants to make a sacrifice; the priest who comes to him is put to the test. He answers the questions correctly at first and then, faced with more difficult ones, admits defeat (this is like the final stage of the Socratic dialogues). Two almost invariable signs follow this admission. One is silence, which in religious India plays diverse roles; at times it is a weapon of the ascetic who refuses to answer, at others, as now, it is an admission of defeat. “To reduce the enemy to silence” has always been the great objective of Indian dialectics. Their literature bears witness to the fact that Indians “entertain the firm belief that language can be sufficiently perfected and polished to become transformed into an infallible lasso which never misses its objective when tossed into the firmament of thought.”<sup>2</sup> The second sign of defeat is the request made by the loser: “Allow me to become your disciple, allow me to be instructed by you!” The so-called dialogues of Buddha consist of an exchange of questions and answers

1. Quoted by R. Caillois at the end of the very noteworthy development entitled “L'Énigme et l'image” in his book *Art poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), p. 170.

2. Kuppaswami Shastri in his preface to the edition of the *Trimcac-chlokt*.

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which inexorably reduces the examinee to silence and leads him to make the final supplication.

Other more substantial scenarios contain diverse variations. Five theologians who cannot reach agreement promise to serve a layman if he succeeds in allaying their doubts. The layman attempts to do so by questioning each theologian until each in turn is reduced to silence. In the *Upanishads* "of the Great *Aranyaka*," who follows the esoteric teachings of the *Satapatha*, King Janaka, wishing to put to the test some Brahmans of whose services he doubtless intends to avail himself, begins by having his personal officiant direct the interrogation. But the whole affair turns out badly; one of the Brahmans immediately takes up the challenge and is rough in his handling of the interrogators, who, meanwhile, had been thrown in the tilt yard; he reduces them to silence. The last man is to have his head shattered into a hundred pieces because he has asked forbidden questions, has "overinterrogated," led on by his companions to "pull the coals out of the fire" for them (a variant of our proverb "to pull someone's chestnuts out of the fire"). This is the punishment reserved for presumptuous controversialists, a punishment the precise counterpart of which is to be found in the Buddhist dialogues. It is true that the victorious Brahman is none other than the formidable Yâjnavalkya, the infallible interpreter of the Yajur-Vedic liturgy.

Elsewhere we find this same King Janaka taking over the interrogation; but Yâjnavalkya, who is his opponent, easily triumphs over the king and is granted the honor of receiving him as his disciple. Janaka fares better in another controversy in which, interrogated by Yâjnavalkya, he is able to "dislodge him from every position." Yet, because of his rank, the king escapes the sorry punishment reserved for the man who has "overinterrogated."

The distinctive feature of these competitions, which always pertained to liturgy, was that the customary theme contained words with double meanings, figurative expressions that were, in one way or another, enigmatic. Specious scholarship stops at the literal meaning; true scholarship seeks out the implications. The victor is the *evamvid*, "he-who-thus-knows," who "realizes" (in all the senses of the word) the accumulated energy in the formula: the energy which stems precisely from the double meaning, from the basic ambiguity, from this power that direct meanings possess of leaving the field free to implicit perspectives. He who has answered well is placed in possession of what he knows; he

will be “constructed” (so reads one text) in the same manner as the Altar of the Fire—in other words, the very subject suggested by the enigma.

The *Katha-Upanishad* contains a moral that is reminiscent of the spirit to be found in the Vedic controversies. Yama, the king of the dead, bestows his favors upon a young Brahman, Naciketas, after having unwittingly slighted him by failing to fulfil the duties of hospitality. Naciketas, therefore, is granted the uncommon privilege of interrogating Yama. He asks for information about the nature of the “fire that leads to heaven”—in other words, the sacrificial fire, thanks to which man, purified by the rite, gains access to the joys of the next world. But the final favor is an “overinterrogation.” Naciketas would like to know whether or not a human being, once he is dead, continues to live on; and this is a question one should not ask. Yama tries to divert the young Brahman from this subject. He puts him to the test by dangling before his eyes a picture of terrestrial pleasures, the boons of wealth and a long life. Naciketas will have nothing to do with these and persists in his questions until the god, moved by his insistence, finally imparts to him the supreme information. Instead of terminating the competition in the customary fashion, the dialogue opens up an unforeseeable domain, that of the *Upanishads* itself, the science of the Absolute. But here, as elsewhere, the point of departure is a game of questions and answers.

In present-day India one can occasionally still witness erudite controversies. They deal, in Sanskrit, with an improvised subject and take place between two competitors who must maintain opposing views; the discussions are conducted by the question-and-answer method and are subject to the arbitration of a jury. Facing each other in a hieratical pose like the one described in ancient texts for the recitation of the Veda, their arms crossed, they stand still and, with unbelievable rapidity, successively exchange questions, answers, objections, and counterobjections. The defeated, reduced to silence, yields his place to another contestant who vies with the victor until the latter either triumphs or, in turn, yields his place. The final position, the *siddhânta*, is far less important in these games than skill in refuting, in counterattacking. It often happens that in the ancient texts no final result of the controversies is given. Once the arguments on both sides have been exhausted, it is up to the audience to draw its own conclusions. But it is delightful to witness a



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revival of the spirit of ancient times in these peaceful contests which take place on the very spot where King Janaka of the *Upanishads* used to match wits with the Sophists.

When the philosophical schools (to which we have already alluded) focus attention upon the religious vocabulary, one can discern among propositions regarded as conclusive those that have a prescriptive character endowed with direct qualities alone, like all things that have a practical purpose, and those, on the other hand, that are causal or descriptive and admit of secondary values. When these schools specify what such secondary values consist of, one is reminded of the poets who attempted to circumscribe the structure of poetic language. We are told, for example, that a secondary meaning appears whenever certain conditions are favorable: the tendency of a word or a sentence to abandon the primary sense or to combine it with a fresh nuance, the similarity between one usage and the other, the relatively slight knowledge or relatively rare use of the secondary meaning, which facilitates the esoteric intrusion.

The most characteristic philosophy of India, the Vedanta—half-metaphysical, half-theological—bears the imprint of these same preoccupations, at least in Sankara, the founder of the *advaita* (non-dualist) branch. What is the Sankarian Vedanta but a total adherence to the letter and the spirit of the “great propositions” contained in the *Upanishads*? The initial principle is that these propositions must necessarily teach the Absolute as the sole reality and assimilate to it the immaterial Self which resides within each human being. However, it is patent that most Upanishadic propositions make use of both images and fiction. Does it then follow that they are lacking in authority, that they belong to a category of discursive knowledge? No; rather they express the supreme truth but on an implicit plane: they use the artifices peculiar to ordinary language in order to achieve this truth on another level. Since the Absolute is not designated by a direct term (and how could it be?), everything that serves to evoke it necessarily belongs to a secondary or implicit semantics. The Sankarian Vedanta is based on a certain ambiguity arising from the language. It would not be too difficult to demonstrate the continuation of these tendencies in tantrism and its linguistic esoterism.

Traditional India is conversant with disciplines in which the direct qualities of the language prevail: positive and applied sciences, descrip-

tive ritual, realistic philosophical systems, and, finally, in the literary sphere, non-stylized works beginning with the epic. But modes of thought characterized by indirect values or, if you will, by a double semantics are more numerous and perhaps of greater importance. Such are, successively and sometimes interrelatedly, the old hymns of the Veda, tantrism, linguistic philosophy, poetics, basically conventional (*Mīmāṃsā*) or speculative (Sankarian Vedanta) systems, and, in the realm of literary creativity, the *ḥavya*. Thus there has been a super-semantics, an overtaxing of the language, either because an ambiguity had been deliberately accepted (in hymns as, for example, in the *ḥavya*) or because there has been an attempt to unify dissimilar ideas (as in the *Upanishads* or the Vedanta). An original solution is the Buddhist one which rejects both primary and secondary meaning in order to contrast their “emptiness” with the fulness or ultra-fulness of Brahmanic theses. Normative disciplines assume an intermediate position; for example, juridical thought seeks a unity of doctrine by relying upon the opportunity that semantic indecisiveness affords while adhering in other respects to that univocity which contact with experience demands. Grammar (a major branch of learning in ancient India!) is also univocal insofar as it is based upon usage and equivocal and implicative, since, according to the reasoning of its dialecticians, it is linked with systematic interpretations.