

## **BHARTRHARI : A UNIQUE WAY OF LOOKING AT LANGUAGE**

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### **Introduction**

In the last few decades, philosophers attention had turned to some important questions: 'what is language?, what is meaning? How do we communicate our thought through the words? How does the language function? etc. In fact the bygone century has been described as the 'age of analysis'. The conception of logical analysis championed by Russell, the Oxford school of ordinary language philosophy as lead by John Austin; the principle types of conceptual analysis by Wittgenstein and examination of the various semantical questions about reference and truth belonging to the sphere of philosophical logic are a few instances of this analytical upsurge. In other words, linguistic turn has been the major outcome of this analyticity. Linguistic philosophy primarily is the name of a method of solving the classical philosophical problems by paying attention to the ways in which certain philosophical concepts are used. Wittgenstein of Tractatus, Russell, Fregey, Strawson, Grice- all the adherents of Analytical school try to explicit the logical structure of language and the issues related to proposition, truth, reference etc; in their own ways. However the development of thoughts during the last two decades shows that the boundaries between linguistic philosophy, philosophical logic, and philosophy of language are gradually becoming fluid.

Focusing on Indian epistemology, Grammarians (Vaiyākaraṇās) and advocates of Literary Criticism (Sāhitya) also

are directly interested in language problems including semantical and philosophical issues. The Grammarians have also claimed the status of an independent darśana for themselves. They articulated the importance of language as an instrument in human speech, behavior and communication of cognitive understanding. Bharṭṛhari was one of such Grammarian and a significant one from a philosopher's point of view. Bharṭṛhari raised the question of the relation between knowledge and language, and language and reality. And in his Vākyapadīya, Bharṭṛhari addressed these kinds of linguistic problem.

### **Linguistic Turn in India.**

Language has been one of the fundamental concerns of Indian philosophy and has attracted serious attention of all major thinkers of this land. J.F.Stall, in his 'Sanskrit Philosophy of Language', very aptly observes, "..... Excessive pre-occupation with language on one hand and with philosophy on the other, may indeed be regarded as a characteristic of Indian civilization"<sup>1</sup>. This comment though slightly exaggerated is somewhat justifiable, when considering the fact that starting from the earliest scripture namely Rgveda itself contains innumerable, insightful remarks about the nature of language (śabda) and speech (Vāk).

The analysis of language, acquires a new dimension in philosophy of Grammar. Pāṇini, Patañjali and Bharṭṛhari, the famous Grammarians deeply analyze this term. Among them, Bharṭṛhari is considered as a uniquely original thinker in India's splendid grammatical tradition. He over reached the limits of language analysis by his predecessors like Pāṇini and Patañjali.

### **Bharṭṛhari as a Linguistic Philosopher.**

In Vākyapadīya of Bharṭṛhari, we can see a completely new way of handling the concept of language or śabda. As the title

suggests, the text should have been on 'words' and 'sentences' . Vākyapadīya treats the concept of śabda as the ultimate concern. Bhartrhari also discussed śabda as a pramāṇa like other classical philosophical systems. He accepted Pratyakṣa and anumāna also as the relevant methods of valid knowledge. But he also mentioned the limitation of these methods.

We can see that the term śabdapramāṇa acquires a new dimension in the philosophy of grammar. Bhartrhari derives his philosophical inspiration from Pātañjali's Mahābhāṣya. Bhartrhari's concern with śabda has many areas common with what has been discussed by classical Indian systems within the scope of śabdapramāṇa. All of them analyze the nature of language and meaning, word-world relationship, the primacy of either word meaning or the sentence meaning, and the different dimensions of meaning. But Bhartrhari's method of approaching language is different from others. Bhartrhari presents the entire gamut of human understanding by analyzing the structural conditions of language. His job is not only confined to the analysis of language but also to work out the boundaries of what we can do and cannot do with language. Bhartrhari's analysis of language involves an explication of two-fold relationship, that is, the relation between word and thought, and, the relation between word and world (referent).

### **Sphota theory of language**

All the Vaiyākaraṇās have accepted that, there is an entity called Sphōta and it is the origin of all śabdās, and therefore they become famous as Sphōtavādins. The concept of sphōta as the ultimate principle of linguistic communication is unique and novel in many respects. Matilal very rightly points out that, "The Indian Grammarian's theory of sphōta has been acclaimed as one of the most important contributions to central problem of general linguistics as

well as philosophy of language. ”

The concept of sphōta is not originally offered by Bharṭṛhari. The roots of sphōta theory were already there in ancient time. We can see difference of opinion about sphōta among Mīmāṃsakas, Naiyāyikās, Vedāntins and Buddhists. But Bharṭṛhari can be considered to be the first to elaborate, propagate and accentuate the theory. Latter Grammarians have successfully developed the theory further, but have done so only on the basis of the groundwork provided by Bharṭṛhari.

It is very difficult to translate the sphōta. It has been varyingly, translated as the real word, Real language, logos, the bearer of language etc. the term sphōta which means bursting forth or which has a tendency to manifest itself. We can see that Patañjali who explicitly discusses about sphōta in his Mahābhāṣya. According to him, sphōta signifies speech/language and the audible sound (dhvani) is it's special quality. The audible noise may be variable depending on the speaker's mode of utterance, where as sphōta as the unit of speech is not subject to such variations. But Bharṭṛhari develops the idea of sphōta in a completely different way. He ascribes to it a unique philosophical dimension. For him, sphōta is neither a meaning bearing unit nor a linguistic sign. It is something more than that.

Language-in-use involves a complex network of elementary factors. First our linguistic utterance involves the use of audible noise through vocal organ. But any and every audible noise is not language. The sounds and syllables uttered have a form of their own, which only make some audible sounds a part of language. For Bharṭṛhari, language is not simply analyzable in terms of phonetics, syntax, grammar and semantics. Language is above all, meant for communication. It is inter-subjective, where both speaker and hearer

have an active role of play. There fore Bharṭṛhari takes care to analyze the multiple nuances of language. Not only he explains these varied dimensions of language but offers a coherence account of it.

Bharṭṛhari starts his work, Vākyapadīya with a statement on the transcendence as well as the immanence of the ultimate reality in the system of his philosophy. As for it is transcendence, he states a number of characteristics: Anādinidhana, Brahman, śabdatattva and akṣara . All these characteristics are looked upon as the highest conceptual designations of 'the one' which strictly speaking, is an indescribable identity. As for it's immense, Bharṭṛhari tells us that, the same is the genesis of the cosmic world.

Anādinidhana is the supreme reality, that is, without beginning (ādi) and end (nidhana). Bharṭṛhari used the second designation, Brahman, quite freely. In one verse, Brahman is described as immortal (amṛta). In another place he says that a reverent study of grammar leads to the realization of parabrahman, the supreme reality.

In the Upaniṣads we find a reference to two levels of Brahman, śabdabrahman and Parabrahman. Obviously the former is of a lower order, the realization of which helps one in the attainment of latter which is the higher one. But Bharṭṛhari tells us that Brahman he speaks about is the supreme one. Even though he had not referred himself as an exponent of the doctrine of śabdabrahman his critics belonging to other schools of thought have mentioned him as a śabdabrahmavādin.

The third designation is śabdatattva. In the opinion of Grammarians, śabdatattva or śabda means both the perishable sound and the imperishable word. When the absolute is described as śabda it means sound. According to Bharṭṛhari, śabda is the significant word only (upādāna śābda) and not unmeant sound of any description. He states that in each significant word there are two elements, the

elements of sound and the elements of logos. The former is variable and which the latter possesses significance, a meaning of its own. The logos are ever present in our mind and unless it is communicated to another mind by means of appropriate sounds it is never possible for the latter to apprehend it. Bharṭṛhari upholds the unitary character of a significant expression even on the empirical plane. The significant word according to him is unit indivisible and sequenceless. Such a unit in the system of Bharṭṛhari is called Sphota or logos that stand for a word as well as an idea, because it represents the fusion of the two.

Bharṭṛhari begins his discussion on the nature of language by distinguishing two aspects of language. One is the root cause of the manifestation (nimitta), and the other is the applied, when manifested to convey meaning. The latter element is called sphota and the former is Nāda/Dhvani. Sphota is the real basis of language, the very linguistic potency which is manifested by dhvani. Dhvani is the audible sound pattern, without which, the very potency of meaning and its expressibility is impossible. That is why audible speech, which is presented sequentially syllable by syllable, is called the nimitta (cause) of the manifested meaningful expression. The Sphota is defined as indivisible, partless, sequenceless whole. All the grammatical and syntactical divisions are discernable only when the thought is translated in to the audible sound pattern. At this stage, the language becomes applicable, because along with the phonetic elements, it also expresses the meaning. The unit of meaning, expressed by the sound pattern is there in the verbal dispositional ability of the speaker as well as the hearer. In the commentary on Mahābhāṣya, Bharṭṛhari says, "The sequenceless nature of the Vāk (Speech), which means sphota both the power, ie, the power to be articulated in the sound (audible form), and the power to convey meaning lie intermixed"

Bharṭṛhari

According to him, sphota implies the 'total unit of linguistic potency' – which when expressed is diversified in to two elements, sound – word and meaning – word. This is the invisible, changeless sphota a two-sides of a coin. One of its dimensions is the sound pattern and the other is the meaning bearing unit. It is believed that sphota along with expressing the meaning also expresses it self.

The concept of sphota has been explained by Bharṭṛhari through many such analogies. They sometimes, lead to confusion regarding the exact significance of this term. So there is no unanimity of opinion regarding the exact significance of sphota admits the scholars. B.K.Matilal offers the most balanced and plausible explanation of what Bharṭṛhari means by sphota. According to him, sphota is the real substratum, proper linguistic unit, which is identical also with its meaning language is not the vehicle of meaning or the conveyor belt of thought. Thought anchors language and the language anchors the thought. Śabdāna (linguaging) is thinking, and thought vibrates through language. In this way of looking at things, there cannot be any essential difference between a linguistic unit and it's meaning or the thought it conveys. The sphota refers to his non-differentiated language principle.

Then we turn to the role of sphota in explaining the nature of language. In case of linguistic communication, the speaker is the person who expresses what he intends to say and the hearer is the person who is supposed to understand what the speaker means to say. Unless the hearer grasps 'the meaning conveyed' by the speaker, the communication fails. But the question that how does the speaker transfers the meaning to the hearer? Bharṭṛhari would say that such an issue is an unanswerable as long as think that the meaning is directly transferred from one person to another the ability to express in speech-form as well as the ability to discern meaning both are the

two dimensions of the linguistic potency possessed by all conscious beings this potency is otherwise known as śabda or sphota.

The fundamental idea is that, both the 'expressive word' and the 'meaning expressed' are present in the consciousness of the speaker and the hearer. In other words, the hearer and the speaker and the speaker share the same sphota. When the speaker desires to say something he grasps the unit of meaning first and then expresses it in sequential form of utterance syllable by syllable. The hearer on the other hand grasps the sequential and audible words first and these words evoke his linguistic potential and through it he understands what the speaker intends to say. This awakening of the hearer's sphota causes the comprehension by the hearer of the sentence uttered. Thus the process of communicability can be seen from two standpoints the speakers' and the hearers'. Thus we can say that in the process of linguistic communication both the speaker and the hearer have to use their potential linguistic power which as we have seen implies both the power to use audible words forms and the power to convey meaning. And this is what same sphota by the speaker of the same sphota by the speaker and hearer. Bharṭṛhari express it as the potency of the language is like a pea-hen's egg. All the colors of a fully grown pea-hen is potential there in the egg these colours are manifested when the pea-hen comes out of the egg. Similarly sphota or śabda is the potential stage in which the linguistic forms along with its powers to mean are already presented in all languaging being. This is Bharṭṛhari's explanation regarding the problem of transferability of meaning from the speaker to the hearer.

Thus, Bharṭṛhari raised the relation between knowledge and language and language and reality. He went so far as to identify knowledge with language and language with reality such that one's knowledge qua language is that of reality itself. Of course this is a gross simplification of rather more sophisticated 'holistic' theory



that Bhartṛhari present in his famous Vākyapadīya.

The holistic analysis of language that Bhartṛhari advances, as a thorough master of the classical linguistic works of Patañjali, is a contribution that no serious student of Indian thought and linguistics can afford to ignore. Quite apart from the intriguing metaphysical foundation of his theory the numerous epistemological insights that he makes are illuminating.

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