

A SHORT REVIEW OF ŚABDA BRAHMAN IN VEDIC LITERATURE

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Introduction

The uniqueness of Bhartṛhari's philosophy of language is evidently seen in his exposition of the concept of 'Śabdabrahman' in relation to 'Nādabrahman' in terms of language. It is widely held that the former is a reference and the latter is a representation of the vedāntic concept of 'Brahman', the non-dual, one without a second.¹ But from the view point of language these two terms become the expressors of 'Brahman' the Absolute. However there is no doubt that the concept of Śabdabrahman and Nādabrahman is an evolute of vedāntic

Brahman, as is affirmed by Bhartṛhari himself in the opening verse of his famous work Vākyapadīya.

अनादिनिधनं ब्रह्म शब्दतत्त्वं यदक्षरम् ।

विवर्ततेऽर्थभावेन प्रक्रिया जगतो यतः ॥

This verse, though superficially, appears truly vedantic in its elaboration. But by a deeper penetration into the theory of language expressed through the verse, it has to be understood that there is a marked difference between the approaches by Śāṅkara and Bhartṛhari. An analysis of the ideas of the later, particularly, Śabdabrahman, as it is adopted on in the grammatical thought, it is clear that there is verbal-articulation as has defined śabda in 'śrotropalabdhirbuddhinirgrāhya prayoginābhijvalitā ākāśadeśaḥ śabdah'²

The implicit meaning of śabda is that it is sky pervading, manifested through utterances, receptive to the auditory sense, and understood by the mind.

According to Bhartṛhari while interpreting śabdabrahman, the materialistic manifestation of śabda (or word) and its phonetic representation has no relevance, rather importance should be accorded to śabda which is retained in the mind and this is precisely called as 'Buddhistha'. It is that which is referred to and explained as eternal. This leads to a question whether the mind or buddhi in itself is an eternal element like that of Ātman or not?. It is obvious from the

analysis of Bhartṛhari's theoretical proposition that the concept of śabdabrahman appears to be more associated with the concept of consciousness and self and not merely with the phonetic representation or even the mentally retained form of the word or speech element. This is in accordance with the view expressed in Vākyapādiya 1/44. The śabda or the expression is in fact a totality of two-the inner meaning revealing unit (sphoṭa) and the verbal articulation. The former is of the nature of awareness (consciousness) as its revealed being and the latter is a medium (tool) that manifests consciousness.

The word or speech element carries as a medium all the knowledge that is intricately related with consciousness which in itself is an eternal element. It consists of only of the threads of knowledge because these two are interdependent, interwoven and interrelated. In this sense, Bhartṛhari affirms that 'the eternal knowledge is omnipresent like consciousness'³ चैतन्यमिव यश्चायं अविच्छेदेन वर्तते ।

For Bhartṛhari consciousness (Caitanya) cannot exist without the co-operation of the knowledge element, which in turn cannot exist without taking the form of knowledge. Again, this knowledge cannot remain without taking the form of the words. So, if caitanya is eternal and immortal, the word must also be eternal and immortal ie. the expressed is eternally related with the expresser. There is no room for distinctive proposition for linguistic and non-linguistic character. Knowledge ceases to be so if any distinction between expresser

(language) and its meaning (expressed) is brought about. Knowledge should be infused with language.

The above proposition does not mean that Bhartrhari denies or overlooks the metaphysical concepts like 'Brahman', 'World', 'soul', 'space', 'sky', 'time', etc. as they are expressed by language in the mind. But he categorically asserts that physical and psychological entities are also known as the ontic substratum (tāttvikasāmānādhikaraṇa) of the inner beings. He classifies that these concepts have to be looked upon as they are revealed when presented in the mind by language.

The present observation of Bhartrhari clearly points out the 'concept of Brahman' propounded in a unique way in the Vedas that had become the real source of vedānta (meaning-the innate ideas of the Vedas).

Brahman and the concept of śabdabrahman in Vedas.

A discussion on 'Brahman' as a metaphysical entity necessarily requires an empirical or transcendental expression. But is there any ground in order to be known or expressed? A philosophical outlook from the vedic point of view towards 'Brahman' traces its multiple meanings as a progressive conceptualization of thoughts. The first reference of the term in Ṛgveda (4th ṛk of the 10th hymn of I maṇḍala) as 'vasu', implying the knowledge content (beholders of knowledge) discloses a closer relation between knowledge and

Brahman. In subsequent time the word is used in the sense of 'Kṣetra' that stood for 'knowledge' and physical strength. Another important purport of the word is an ever-expanding (Bṛhat) principle, the source of all consciousness. However it is significant to note that there are two contrary concepts of 'Brahman' and 'Ātman' that shows an intrinsically coherent relation but a superficial differentiation. Though, the word 'Brahman', was without doubt, used for the supreme self⁴ The word 'puruṣa' also implied the same meaning.

Knowledge, for the vedas, is in close interrelationship with Brahman⁵. There is also a close relationship between Brahman and Brahma (the creator god); Brahma and speech, and Brahman and Knowledge. An analysis of the above RK elaborating on who is Brahma, it says the four horned meaning one who has mastered all the four divisions of the veda or the four steps of the speech. The word 'Gaura' means the master of speech. Both these words stand for Brahma who has been mentioned in the foregoing part of the RK. It is this Brahma, who speaks out or vomits out this very knowledge in the form of the Vedas.⁶ Thus the wholesome knowledge was handed down by 'चतु शृङ्ग ब्रह्म' in the form of four divisions or compositions of divine knowledge. In this way Brahman and Brahma appear to be intrinsically related, the existence of the latter depending on the former.

Now, returning to the dispositions on 'Gourah', the word is used in the sense of 'speech'. Another word 'Vṛṣabha' is used in some places instead of 'Gourah'. Patañjali correlates this with speech element or 'śabda' itself. He also beacons śabda as Mahādeva; Mahādeva is Brahma. Thus, the words 'Gourah' and 'Vṛṣabha' connote the same meaning-speech element. 'Gourah' stands for the word itself and renders Gourah to mean the master of the words. Brahman is the knowledge contained in speech form which is called here as Vṛṣabha. It is this idea that lies at the root of the concept of 'Śabdabrahman' according to Bhartṛhari which developed later into a crystallized form.

A Śabda, thus, shows two fold articulations-as verbal articulation (Vaikharī) and the expresser (Sphoṭa, the madhyamā śabda). Here the meaning revealing unit (sphota) is the word and the expresser revealed is Brahman. An investigation into the inner meaning of Śabda thus involves three elements-1). Sphoṭa (the inner meaning revealing unit), 2). Pratibhā (the meaning revealed non-differently by it in the mind) and 3). The natural relation between the two. Thus, the Bhartṛharian approach denies that knowledge and language are two distinctive propositions. Instead, he says, even the metaphysical concepts in the manner they became revealed in the mind are by way of language only. Also since the unconditioned, transcendental principle is not reachable by any category of speech (because of non-duality), it can only be thought of as this or that

infused by language. From this view point Śabdabrahman becomes the manifest form of the unconditioned and is said as eternal.

Brāhmaṇās

The word 'Brāhmaṇa' itself means 'the branch' or book dealing with the 'Brahman'. Here the word 'Brahman' has been explained at many places in many ways. For example the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa says:-

..... वाग्वै ब्रह्म । तस्यै वाचः । सत्यमेव ब्रह्म...⁸ etc. Here the Vāk has been explained as the 'Brahman' while Brahman has been equated with the truth. Indra is said to be 'The Ādipathi' or Lord of the Vāk. Indra has elsewhere been explained as Ātman. Vāk resides in this Ātma. Thus the concept of speech, Brahman, truth, Indra, Ātman and śabda have been described in the Brāhmaṇas as not only co-related but also co-existent. If we try to analyse it any further we shall find certain other statements in other Brāhmaṇas also relating to the aforesaid concept of 'Śabda Brahman'. In the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, the word Brahma is used in the sense of 'holypower'. Bṛhaspati is the holypower. The holypower born first in the east. This royal one is speech, he places speech in his. This means Brahma himself is speech. It is said all is speech and speech is Brahman.

Upaniṣads

The Upaniṣads have also detailed upon the concept of the eternity of speech element. But they assisted in developing the idea of śabda Brahman in a particular way. There are the words like śabdah,

swara etc in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. The Chāndogyopaniṣad calls 'Aum' as the monosyllabic structure and equates it with Brahman. ओमित्येतदक्षरमुद्गीथमुपासीत.....⁹

In the Upaniṣads, the words like Manas, Vāk and Ātma, etc. are all explained as co-related elements. The word 'Sphoṭa' also occurs in the Upaniṣads. But the word 'Sphoṭa' here has been used in its original sense of an explosion in the mind. It is also noteworthy that the Upaniṣad like Aitareya and Bṛhadāraṇyaka interconnect the speech, Mind, Ātman etc. Later on all these ideas were developed to lead to the ultimate concept of 'śabdaBrahman'.

Vedāṅgas

Under the over-all heading of 'Vyākaraṇa' the 'Prātiśākhya's' fall under this topic. The Prātiśākhya's chiefly dealt with the various Sandhis, Phonetic doubling, etc. as occurring in the textual readings. We do not find much details in them about the concept of śabda Brahman. Speech has been analysed there but particularly it has been associated with the metrical language as found in the Vedas.

In the śikṣas, it has been said that the speech phenomenon starts from the Ātma and it gradually comes down to mind, etc. This Ātma was later called as Vāgātma.¹⁰ Other Vedāṅgas do not deal with the concept of śabdabrahman.

The Grammar and the Grammatical Philosophy

Among the Sanskrit Grammarians, Vyāḍi is one who has discussed the philosophical aspect of Grammar. He has discussed the eternity and indestructibility of word. Next Audumbarāyaṇa stressed on the unitary nature of word ie-speech and the sentence. According to him speech is permanent in the organs only. It was really at the hands of Pāṇini and the Grammarians posterior to him, that the grammatical philosophy took its own shape. Though Pāṇini was not directly connected with the idea of śabdabrahman, but he contributed in an indirect way. In the Mahabhāṣya, Patañjali has discussed the definition of śabda, nityatā of śabda, etc. He is the first to pronounce the concept of śabdabrahman in a grammatical form. Katyāyana also discusses the relationship of the word, the purpose of the word etc.

It was in the hands of Bhartṛhari that the concept of śabdabrahman comes into its full development. The first complete postulation and discussion of śabdabrahman according to Sanskrit Grammarians is given by Bhartṛhari in his Vākyapadīya. According to him speech is the unifying link of the world. He speaks about Brahman as the ultimate source of everything. His main ideas are given in the first eleven kārīkas of Vākyapadīya. The central idea of Bhartṛhari is that the Ultimate Reality is śabdātattva or the word Principle.

References:

1. Vākyapadīya-1-1
2. Mahābhāṣya, P 4 .I Āhnika, (tra) Charudeva Sastri, MLBD,1988.
3. Vākyapadīya-1-41
4. YajurVeda.10.5.8.
5. Ṛg Veda 4.58, 1-3.
6. ibid.4.58.2.
7. ibid. 4.58.3 as quoted in the Mahābhāṣya of Patañjali at MB 1.1
8. Śatapaṭha Brāhmaṇa-2.1.4.10
9. Chāndogyopaniṣad-1.1.1
10. Pāṇinīyaśikṣā-6