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Word and Meaning in Indian Philosophy : Its Possible Contribution towards Indian Christian Hermeneutics

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Indian Christian theologians have not yet sought proper guidance from the *pramāṇas* or 'sources of valid knowledge' of Indian epistemology in identifying, defining and expounding the sources of authority for the construction of Christian theology in India. To discuss the role of all six *pramāṇas* of Indian philosophy, namely *pratyakṣa* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), *upamāna* (comparison), *Śabda* (verbal testimony or Scripture), *arthāpatti* (postulation) and *anupalabdhi* (non-perception), in Indian Christian theology comprehensively is a task yet to be undertaken by us. Yet the more we delay the matter the more will be our confusion in articulating authentic Indian Christian theological methods. But the purpose of the present article is rather a very modest one. It attempts to identify only some aspects of the understanding and interpretation of just one of the *pramāṇas*, namely *Śabda* (Scripture) and briefly outline a few of its possible contributions towards an Indian Christian understanding and interpretation of the Bible.

Śabda in a wider sense means sound. In the narrow sense it is a sound used as a symbol for the expression of some meaning, and hence stands for a "word". Thus *śabda* means word or words as the source of knowledge. It would then correspond to "authority" or "testimony". *Śabda-pramāṇa* means words as the source of knowledge. Almost all Indian thinkers, except the Cārvākas, the Bauddhas and the Vaiśeṣikas, accept *śabda* or authority as an independent and ultimate source of

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knowledge.¹ By establishing *śabda* as an ultimate source of knowledge, the Advaitins and many other philosophers uphold the authority of the Vedas.

Regarding the subject "the sensation of the sound" in ancient India, we see a distinction being made between the inarticulate and indefinite sounds called *dhvani* and the definite and articulate sounds of human vocal organs called *varṇa*.² When we wish to understand an author through his written symbols, the sensations we have are no longer auditory but visual. For the apprehension of meaning we have to convert the visual sensations into sound-images or auditory sensations³

When we come to the perception or interpretation of the sound-series, difficult questions such as the following arise: "Are all the syllables of a word present to memory simultaneously, irrespective of their successive order, or do they come into memory one by one according to their fixed order?"⁴ It was such difficulties which caused the grammarian philosophers of India to hold the well-known theory of *sphoṭa*.⁵ Patañjali, the great commentator of the *Pāṇini-Sūtras* gives a hint to this theory⁶; the later grammarians like Bhartrhari elaborately discussed and developed this theory. The word *sphoṭa* (derived

1. D. M. Datta, *The Six Ways of Knowing: A critical study of the advaita theory of knowledge*, New and Revised ed., Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1972 (first published in 1932), p. 249.

2. *Ibid*, p. 252.

3. *Ibid*, p. 253.

4. *Ibid*, p. 255.

5. For a detailed discussion on the theory of *Sphoṭa*, of Gaurinath Sastri, *The Philosophy of Word and Meaning: Some Indian approaches with special reference to the Philosophy of Bhartrhari*, Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1959; R. O. Pandeya, *The Problem of Meaning in Indian Philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1963; Ramaswami Sastri (ed.), *Tattvabindu*, Annamal University, 1936, Introduction.

6. Cf. Patañjali *Mahabhasya*, ed. with Kalyatas commentary, Bombay: Nirnayasagar Press, 1951.

7. Cf. Bhartrhari. *Valkyapadīya*, First Kāṇḍa with commentary by Vṛṣabhadeva, ed. by Charudeva Sastri, Lahore: Ram Lal Kapoor Trust, 1934; First & Second Kāṇḍa with the commentary of Puṅgyarāja and third Kāṇḍa with commentary by Helārāja, Banaras: Banaras Sanskrit Series, 1837.

from *sphuṭ*—to express) means that which is expressed by letter-sounds or that which expresses a meaning. According to this theory, the syllables of a word do not directly present the meaning of the word, either separately or jointly. Corresponding to every perceived word, there is an unperceived, partless symbol which directly presents the meaning and this symbol is called *sphoṭa* or *śabda*, the word. The *sphoṭa* is ultimately one and not many though there is an empirical plurality of *sphoṭas*. From the transcendental point of view *sphoṭa* is *one* and the *only* reality identical with Brahman. *Śabda* as *sphoṭa* is both universal and eternal like an idea of Plato and it is this that has a direct and eternal relation to meaning.⁸

The Advaita Vedāntins reject the theory of *sphoṭa*. On the problem of the apprehension of a series of syllables, Śaṅkara would say that the word as a whole with its peculiar internal order can be grasped in memory through the synthetic activity of the intellect, "intellect looking back on past experiences as a whole."⁹ According to the theory of *sphoṭa* the word as *sphoṭa* is self-subsistent but for Sankara it is not self-subsistent but it abides in the self-subsistent Reality, the consciousness of Ātman. For Śaṅkara to say that God is eminently word (*Śabda*) is erroneous if we understand with Bharthṛari that this is the most fundamental notion that we should have of Him, but it is right to identify eminently the whole intelligibility of the world, i.e. all the name-and-forms which are the meaning-contents of words, with His perfect knowledge, and then to identify this knowledge with Himself.

Coming to the question of the "meaning" of words, we see that some important logical problems were raised in Indian Philosophy in this regard. An important problem discussed by almost every school is: "Does a word primarily mean a particular (*vyakti*) or a universal (*jāti*)?" Five different theories came to be held as answers to this question.¹⁰ They are:

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8. D. M. Datta, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-259.
 9. Śaṅkara, *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya*, 1.3.28.
 10. *Op. cit.*, pp. 265-280.

the word means (1) a particular (*sāṃkhyas*); (2) a universal as the mere generic form (the Jainas); (3) a universal as the essential generic character (The Advaitins, the Mīmāṃsakas and the early grammarians); (4) all these three (The Naiyāyikas of the old school, Gautama and Vātsyāyana); (5) lastly, the universalized particular (the renowned Naiyāyikas, Jagadisa and Visvanātha).

In Indian logic words can have at least three types of meanings¹¹: (1) the *mukhya* or express meaning which a word has independently to any context; (2) *lakṣyārtha*, which is a secondary meaning, related to the first and brought out by a definite context according to the speaker's or writer's intention. There are three types of secondary meanings: (a) *Jahad-ajahallakṣanā*, in which case a part of the original meaning is rejected (eg. "my cloth is burned" for "a part of my cloth is burned"); (b) *ajahallakṣaṇa*, in which case the original meaning is fully preserved and the difference that occurs from it is only accidental (eg. "the red runs" for "the red horse runs"); (c) *Jaha-lakṣaṇā* in which case the express meaning is excluded and only an extrinsic relation to it is kept (eg. *dvirepha*-double 'r' comes to mean "bee" (*bhramara*), because *bhramara* contains twice the letter 'r'). The Indian rhetoricians distinguish secondary meanings into those that have been fixed by usage (*rūdhilakṣaṇā*) and those that are occasionally and purposively conferred (*prayo-janamulā lakṣanā*) (3) *vyāṅgārtha* or suggestive meaning cherished by poets but cannot serve the purpose of scientific thought.

Let us pass on to "sentence" and its meanings in Indian Philosophy. The meaning, of two isolated words, i.e., two universals, when combined results in a synthetic meaning, in which there emerges a new grade of knowledge which is termed *Śabda-bodha*. According to Indian logicians this new meaning marks the beginning of a *vākya* or sentence¹². The distinguishing feature of a sentence is the synthesis (*anvaya* of different

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 289-294.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 295-296.

meanings into a single meaning. Opinions differ about the relation of the words of a sentence to the construed meaning of the sentence. Do the words present their individual meanings as well as the construed meaning of the sentence? or do they only present their separate meanings, while these meanings subsequently combine again to produce the single meaning of the sentence? The question is seriously debated by the Prābhākaras and the Bhāṭṭas, the two opposing schools of Mimāṃsā philosophy.¹³ The Prābhākaras held the first view, which was called *anvītabhī-dhāna-vāda*, and the Bhāṭṭas the second, which was called *abhihitānvaya-vāda*. The Advaitins, though usually following the Bhattas on empirical questions, are divided among themselves on this point. The Vivarāna school regards both these views as equally good, while the Bhāmati school favours only the second view.¹⁴ According to *anvītabhidhāna-vādā*, being presented by words themselves, the meaning of a sentence can be known through memory. But according to *abhihitānvaya-vāda*, being *constructed* out of the meanings presented by the words, the knowledge of the meaning of a sentence is a new kind of knowledge and this is called *Śabda-bodha* or "constructive knowledge" of the meanings of words.

In order to arrive at *Śabda-bodha* the following four conditions have to be fulfilled.¹⁵ (1) *Ākāṅkṣā*: there must be a want or a feeling of incompleteness on the part of each constituent word. (2) *Yogyatā* or the potency and compatibility on the part of its fellow to satisfy its want. For the author of the *Vedānta-paribhāṣa* compatibility means non-contradiction of the relation desired to be set up in a combination of ideas, while Madhusūdana Sarasvatī in *Advaita siddhi* omits the word relation and defines *yogyatā* as nearly the non-contradiction of the desired object of combination. (3) *āsatti* or proximity between the two words presented for combination. (4) *Tātparyya-jñāna* or the knowledge of what is intended, what is relevant.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 297-307.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

15. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 307-314.

The universe of discourse, the introduction, the conclusion etc. are some of the signs indicated by the *Ledanta-sāra*, by which *tātpāryya* can be ascertained. These special conditions of *Śābha bodha* distinguish it from both memory-synthesis and inference, in which these conditions are absent

A sentence or *vākya*, according to Indian logic, must contain a subject (*uddeśya*) and a predicate (*vidheya*)¹⁶ and we can identify such a *vākya* with a proposition. The subject must have three characteristics : (1) *uddeśyatva* or the characteristic of being referred to ; (2) *anuvādyatva* or that of being already known ; (3) *viśeṣyatva* or that of being a substantive. The predicate also must possess three corresponding characteristics : (1) *vidheyatva* or the quality of being referred ; (2) *upadeyatva* or that of being newly known ; (3) *viśeṣanatva* or that of being an adjective. The subject is the substantive (*viśeṣya*) and the predicate is the adjective (*viśeṣana*) and the general view of Indian logic on the function of a proposition is that it expresses a relation (*samsarga*) between a substantive and an adjective.

But, according to the Advaitins, there are a few *vākyas* which do not express this general subject-predicate or substantive-adjective relation.¹⁷ They argue that the *Vedānta-statements* containing sentences describing the undifferentiated Absolute cannot be interpreted in the ordinary subject-predicate way. They call these sentences *akhaṇḍārthaka vākya*m or a sentence with an indivisible or non-dual or non-relational meaning, as against the other sentences called *samsargāvagāhivākya*m or sentence signifying a relation. The method by which Advaita Vedantins interpret the *vedānta-statements*, removing the contradictory elements and retaining the common factor is called *jahad ajahal-lakṣaṇā*, of which mention is made above. It would be enriching to understand in this context how Śāṅkara interprets the famous verse of *Chandoya Upaniṣad* 6.8-16 :

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 314-317.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 317-330 ; cf. also, Gaurinath Sastri, *The Philosophy of Word and Meaning*, op. cit., pp. 264-287.

“*Tat tvam asi*” (Thou art that)¹⁸ : *Tat*, the absolute root cause of the universe, and *tvam*, the absolute principle of thy individual self, are (*asi*) one identical supreme Being ; or the Brahman and the Atman are the one identical supreme Being. It would be most enlightening to study the *lakṣaṇa* method as applied by Śaṅkara in the exegesis of all the *Vedānta-statements* and particularly in *Taittiriya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* 2.1 (*Satyam jñānāmanatham brahma*).

So far we were confined to the subjective aspect of a sentence, i.e., to the world of meanings alone. But the terminus of a sentence is not meanings or concepts, but existents or objects. A *vākya* asserting a fact produces belief in the fact. To produce such belief is its objective or intention (*tātparya*). A *vākya* in other words is a source of knowledge about facts. Consequently, *śabda*, as *vākya*, is regarded as a *pramāṇa* or method of knowledge, the *śabda-pramāṇa*.¹⁹ We saw above the four subjective conditions under which the knowledge of the meaning of a proposition takes place. Of these, *tātparya-jñāna* (knowledge of what is intended) and *yogyata* (compatibility) have also their objective aspects, which determine the mental attitude of the hearer to the proposition. We believe in the truth of the statement made by someone, if there is no positive ground for doubting. This is what the Vedānta theory of *śabda-pramāṇa* means namely, that “a *vākya* or sentence whose import (subjective or objective) is not contradicted in any other way is a valid source of knowledge”.²⁰

Some Indian philosophers, e.g., the Buddhist and the Vaiśeṣikas reject verbal testimony as a valid source of knowledge, saying that it must be brought under *anumāna* or

18. For Śaṅkara's method of interpretation of *Sruti* cf. R. V. De Smet, S. J., *The Theological method of Śaṅkara*, unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, 1958 ; K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1974.

19. D. M. Datta, *op. cit.*, pp. 331-332.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 334.

inference, for its validity. This is not correct, for inference can give only the knowledge that a statement is true, not the knowledge of the content of the statement.²¹ The Naiyāyikas and the Sāṃkhyas accept śabda as a method of knowledge, but according to them the validity of verbal knowledge was neither constituted by, nor known from, the intrinsic conditions of the knowledge itself. But, for the Mīmāṃsakas and the Advaitins, who also accept testimony as valid knowledge, even the validity of verbal knowledge is constituted by, and also known or ascertained through, the intrinsic conditions of verbal knowledge itself. The doctrine of the former group is called *prāmāṇya-paratastva-vāda* because according to it knowledge is both made true and known to be true by special conditions, which are external to those that condition knowledge itself. The doctrine of the latter group is called *prāmāṇya-svatastva-vāda*, because according to it validity is conditioned by the conditions intrinsic to knowledge itself and validity is known also from the condition of knowledge itself.²²

For the Advaitins and the Mīmāṃsakas truth is an intrinsic characteristic of knowledge and hence it is falsity that is externally conditioned, whereas validity is conditioned by the conditions of knowledge itself. External verification removes only doubts and cannot establish the validity of any kind of knowledge. Introspection will show that knowledge carries with it an inherent guarantee of its own truth. This can as well be inferred from the behaviour of persons who act unquestioningly on their knowledge of things. Knowledge of validity is effected simultaneously with the act of knowledge. We have to accept any kind of knowledge as true if it is not yet doubted or falsified. Non-contradiction is the guarantee for a judgment of validity. Sooner or later, knowledge itself will vouch for its own truth.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 336-339.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 339-351.

It should be noted in this context that there is a very important difference between the Mīmāṃsakas and the Advaitins regarding the object of the *Vedas*. According to the Mīmāṃsakas the *Vedas* teach ritual duties. Hence the classification of Jaimini that those portions of the *Vedas* which are directly and independently authoritative, comprised all injunctions (*codanā* or *vidhi*) and prohibitions (*niṣedha*) of the *karmakāṇḍa*.

According to the Advaitins the *Vedas* teach the ultimate Reality or Truth and through out the whole *jñānakāṇḍa* of the *Vedas* there is one purpose : to remove ignorance by revealing the true nature of the Brahman-Ātman. Thus we see Śaṅkara reversing the classification of Jaimini and installing the *Vedānta-statements* as primary and authoritative by themselves, and the rest as secondary.²³ According to Śaṅkara, words are connected not with the individuals (*vyakti*) but with their essence of idea (*ākṛti*). Since only the individuals originate, while the *ākṛtis* are external, the connection of the words *vāsu*, etc., with the things they denote, namely, the *ākṛtis* of *vāsu*, etc., is eternal. And hence the objection raised against the eternity of the *Veda* is invalid.²⁴ The word must be identified with its *svarūpa* which is an external unit of intelligibility. The Śruti, in its essential reality, is identical with the absolute Consciousness, and when it is "seen", or "found", it is identical with this pure Consciousness as reflected in the *upādhi of manas*.²⁵

Indian understanding of word and meaning may enlighten us in understanding the interpretation of the Bible. The standpoint of the Mīmāṃsakas and Advaitins, that the validity of verbal knowledge is constituted by and known 'from the intrinsic conditions of knowledge itself, can help us to affirm

23. Cf. R. V. De Smet, S. J., *The Theological Method of Śaṅkara*, op. cit., pp. 198-217.

24. Śaṅkara, *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, 1.3.28.

25. Śaṅkara, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*, 2.3.

that the validity of biblical knowledge is constituted by and known from the intrinsic conditions of that knowledge itself. The Bible which is *Śabda* is a *pramāṇa*, i.e., an independent valid source of knowledge. Truth is an intrinsic character of knowledge, sooner or later knowledge itself will vouch for its own truth. The Bible is valid in so far as it is true and the truth of the Bible is known from the Bible itself. Non-contradiction is the guarantee for a judgment of validity. External verification removes only doubts and cannot establish the validity of the Bible. Hence the role and importance of Tradition is only very slight.²⁶

This is not to claim that there is a single "objective" meaning for the Bible. In the case of *śabda-pramāṇa* no claim of scientific objectivity is made by Indian Philosophy. Scripture cannot define Brahman, it can only indicate It. The Bible indicates Brahman or ultimate reality. This is also not to deny the fact proclaimed by some modern western hermeneutics that "all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice".²⁷ The suggestion India makes to hermeneutics on this point is that our prejudice, if it is legitimate, will have truth as its intrinsic character.

Secondly, *Śabda*, as *pramāṇa*, i.e., as an independent valid source of knowledge of Indian Philosophy, provides a criterion for evaluating Scriptures. Self-validity as mentioned above is this criterion.²⁸ No exclusive claim is made that the

26. The position of Paul Gregorios, "Any fruitful Indian discussion of hermeneutics must take into account the fact that Scripture cannot be interpreted apart from tradition", may not be acceptable from the point of view of Mīmāṃsakas and Advaitins. cf. Paul Gregorios, "Hermeneutics in India today in the light of the World Debate", *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Jan-March, 1979, p. 14.

27. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1975, p. 239.

28. Arvind Sharma's claim, that the criterion for the validity of *Śruti* should be "a communal or collective intuition which comes to be accepted by the 'standard mind of the community' is an idea foreign to the concept of *Śruti* as *Śabda-pramāṇa* in Indian Philosophy. cf. Arvind Sharma, "Can the Tanak, the Bible and the Quran be regarded as *Śruti*?" *The Indian Journal of Theology*, op. cit., p. 38.

Scripture of a particular religion only is valid. The *Vedas* or *Quran* may be as valid as the Bible.

Thirdly, Indian philosophy provides new insights into the relation between the Bible and Brahman. For the Advaitins, Mīmāṃsakas and the early grammarians, 'word' always denotes universal character (*Jāti*) and not the particular. Words are connected not with the individual *vyakti* but with their essence or idea (*ākṛiti*). These essences or universal characters are eternal and according to Śaṅkara, in their essential reality they are identical with this absolute Consciousness. When they are particularised, they are identical with this pure Consciousness as reflected in the *upādhi* (limiting adjunct) of *manas* (mind), i.e., they become the name-and-forms which are the meaning-contents of words. The words of the Bible denote not the 'particular' but the "universal" and in essential reality this "universal" is identical with Brahman. But as written words, they are identical with Brahman as reflected in the limiting-adjunct of mind. An important principle of modern western hermeneutics, that any hermeneut must set aside three common myths, namely the "mind of the author", the "original reader" and the "original meaning"²⁹ was well taken in Indian Philosophy even centuries ago in its quest to transcend the "particular" for the "universal".

Indian Philosophy guides Indian biblical and theological hermeneutics not to be very much worried about establishing accurately the original meaning that the author of the text might have intended, as that effort is futile as well as unnecessary. Our aim is not the "particular" but the "universal". The "universal" is the emergent meaning and significance actualised as a result of the fusion together of the "horizon" of the interpreter and that of the text. The Indian Christian whole-heartedly receives not the "particular" Bible, but the "universal" Bible. The Indian Christian theologian whole-heartedly receives not the "particular Jesus" but the "universal Jesus". The "universal Jesus" is identical with Ultimate Reality, Brahman; but the

29. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, Texas: Fort Worth 1976.

“particular Jesus” is a mere reflection of Brahman in the limiting adjunct of the mind of First Century Palestine.

Again, on the question “What is the object of the Bible”, the Mīmāṃsakas and the Advaitins may be able to give us some guidance. The *Karmakāṇḍa* and *Jñānakāṇḍa* of the *Vedas* are in one sense parallels of the Old Testament and the New Testament of the Bible. It may be said that the former in each is more concerned about the law and ritual duties and the latter in each about the Ultimate Reality or Truth. What the Advaitins proclaim about the *Jñānakāṇḍa*, we may also proclaim as the purpose of the New Testament : to remove ignorance and reveal by indication the true nature of Brahman. And with Śaṅkara we may say that those passages in the New Testament which indicate the true nature of Brahman are the primary texts and all others are only secondary.

Moreover, in the exegesis of Biblical texts, the *lakṣaṇā* method employed by Indian logic for understanding meaning can profitably be used. The conditions which have to be fulfilled to arrive at *śāba-bodha*, especially, *yogyata* and *tātparyajñāna*, may also be helpful.

We would like to remind the reader here that these are but preliminary explorations with regard to possible contributions of this aspect of Indian philosophy to Indian Christian hermeneutics. We hope that others will come forward with further suggestions.