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## ADVAITA CRITIQUE OF THE SPHOTA AND SABDABRAHMAN

### Introduction

One of the general assumptions that underlies the different philosophies of language in the 'āstika'<sup>1</sup> tradition is that *śabda* is eternal. What they mean to say is that while natural languages are subject to both growth and development, language in the primary sense of *śabda* is 'eternal. This idea, tacitly accepted in most of the philosophies, indeed, is as old as the *Vedas*.

The eternity of *śabda* is described under various names in the *Vedas*, the *Brāhmanas* and the *Upanishads*. In the *Rg Veda*, *Vāc* is conceived as the active power of *Brahman* as God himself and is personified as a creative principle (*Rg. Veda*.X.125). In the *Śatapatha Brāhmana* the primeval waters are considered to have been created out of *Vāc* by Prajapati (*Śat.Br.* VI.1.9). The eternity and infinity of *śabda* is even more expressly stated in the *Taittirya Brāhmana*<sup>2</sup>:

The word is infinite, immense, beyond all this....all the gods, the celestial spirits, men and animals live in the Word. In the Word all the worlds find their support (*Tait. Brah.*II.8.8.4).

The *Upanishads*<sup>3</sup> present *Vāc* as *Brahman* and as the source of everything. In the instruction given to King Janaka by Yajnavalkya it is said that

1. By 'āstika' what is meant is the orthodox systems in contradistinction to Buddhist and Jainist theories which are looked upon as non-orthodox-'nāstika'. Cfr. S. Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds., *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 350.
2. As translated by R. Panikkar, in *Mantramañjarī* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1977), p. 107.
3. English translation of the Upanishadic texts are from S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1969).

speech verily, is Brahman . . . one should worship it as intelligence . . . The higher Brahman . . . is in truth speech. Speech does not desert him who, knowing thus, worships it as such (*Brih.Up.IV.1.2*).

Speech (*vāc*) is the basis of everything. This idea is made clear in Sanatkumāra's instruction to Nārada:

Speech assuredly is greater than name. Speech, verily, makes known the *Ṛg Veda* . . . the rites of the Fathers . . . mathematics . . . the science of sacred knowledge (*the Vedas*) . . . if there were no speech neither right nor wrong would be known . . . speech, indeed makes all this known (*Ch.Up.III.2.1*).

Almost all orthodox thinkers accept *śabda* as a source of valid knowledge.<sup>4</sup> *Śabda* is a *pramāna* for the Sāṃkhya, the Yoga, the Nyāya, the Mīmāṃsā and the Vedānta. These schools and the Grammarian School recognize the revelatory power of the word. It is one of the important sources of knowledge of ultimate reality and indeed, according to most of them, the only means of access to truer knowledge.

The seed concepts of *śabda* found in the Vedic literature thus is developed and subject to interpretation by different philosophical schools. Of the several questions that were raised in connection with *śabda* is the one about how the uttered word comes to denote meaning. What component of speech may be viewed as the primary unit correlated to meaning? In their grappling with these questions about *śabda* the Grammar School of Bhartrhari is well known for its theory of *sphoṭa* and the doctrine of *śabdādvaita*. The Mīmāṃsā-Vedānta tradition while according a high valuation to *śabda* is nevertheless critical of the position of Grammarian School. What follows is an attempt to focus on the Advaita criticism of the *sphota* and the *śabdabrahman*.

The article is divided into two major parts. The first one outlines the theories of *sphoṭa* and *śabdabrahman* which are the key concepts of the Grammarian philosophy of language. Attention is given to *Vākyapadīya*, the chief text of Bhartrhari who may be credited with

4. *nāstikas* do not accept *śabda*; *āstikas* with the exception of Vaiśeṣhika accept *śabda* as a source of valid Knowledge.

the position of being almost the creator of the concepts.<sup>5</sup> In the second section of the same part we also make use of Maṇḍana Miśra's *Sphoṭasiddhi* to elucidate these concepts because Maṇḍana, even though an Advaitin, gives a more articulate and logically worked out exposition of the theory involved. In the second part, the Advaita critique of the *sphoṭa* thesis and its underlying ontological notion of *śabdabrahman* is presented. The most natural place to look for it both for an unambiguous formulation as well as for discerning the motive for the critique is Sankara. Accordingly Sankara's arguments for non acceptance of the point of view of Grammar School are given first and thus is followed in the same section by an account of Vimuktātman as a sample thinker of post-Sankara Vedānta. Vimuktātman, the author of *Iṣṭa Siddhi* gives some additional interesting arguments presupposing the main stand taken by Sankara. In the concluding section, I have focused attention on the crucial points at issue in this debate and have indicated my preference for one of them.

### Sphota and Śabdabrahman

The transcendentalist explanations of language of the *Rg Veda* and the Upanishads gave rise to the *sphoṭa* theory of the grammatical philosophers, particularly Bhartṛhari who explained how word is apprehended and meaning formed from words. The theory surely has had its antecedents in *Pāṇini* and *Patañjali*. But it is Bhartrhari's *Vākya-padīya* that is acknowledged as the basic text expounding this philosophy of words.

*Sphoṭa* is the doctrine that the real expressive word is an indivisible entity which is over and above the sounds (*dhvanis*) which are many in number and are uttered by the speaker in a temporal sequence in order to manifest the *Sphoṭa*, the real expressive 'word', which has usually the form of the sentence and which is an indivisible unity.<sup>6</sup>

How do we understand the meaning of a word? For example, the meaning of the word 'cow' is cognized by everyone. Does this cognition come from letters in their individual or united capacity? That it

5. For an investigation into the question of the antecedents of *sphota* theory see Joshi, S.D. *Sphotanirṇaya* (Poona: University of Poona, 1967), pp. 1-20.

6. K.A. Subramania Iyer, *Bhartṛhari* (Poona: Deccan College, 1969), p. 157.

is not a trivial question may be shown by seeing that there are inherent difficulties in answering the question along either of the two alternatives. The more obvious answer suggested to us is that letters in their unified form denote meaning. But then letters are momentary. They perish as soon as they are uttered. Consequently how can there be a unity of the letters to function as a unit of meaning? The other alternative that letters in their isolation, i.e., in their individual capacity denote meaning is manifestly absurd. Unless all the syllables and phonemes or letters are held together one cannot get the sense of the word.

The one way out of this *impasse* seems to be to understand meaning in the light of cumulative impressions left by the letters. By the help of impressions (*saṃskāra*) left by the earlier letters together with the last letter, one may understand the meaning. But one does not actually apprehend the impressions themselves and, secondly, impressions can only give rise to a reinforcement of that of which they are impressions viz letters. They cannot give rise to a new entity. Therefore, according to the Grammarian, the *Sphoṭa*, the eternal sound, distinct from the letters and *revealed* by them, is the cause of cognition of the meaning.

The knowledge of meaning of word was the main concern of the *sphoṭavādins*. The syllables of a word, as we saw, do not directly present the meaning of the word. If, however, we take it as a process by which meaning becomes unveiled, it makes sense. The revelation of meaning starts with the first syllable. The first syllable rouses the latent knowledge in the mind vaguely and then the succeeding syllables draw the knowledge more towards the focus of consciousness until finally the last syllable fully reveals the complete knowledge to consciousness. Thus, *Sphoṭa* is the knowledge of meaning through a gradually consummated process beginning from complete ignorance, passing through partial knowledge and ending in complete knowledge. In this process, we shall see three levels. The *vaikhari* level is the stage of manifestation of word which is produced in the cavity of the mouth. It is purely physical and is recognized by an external sense organ. The *madhyamā* (midway) level is a stage of thinking of what is articulated. The *paśyantī* is one, indivisible and non-sequential level; it is indestructible and unchangeable and verbal in nature. As we shall see, language at this level is the same as consciousness and is called *śabdabrahman*.

Consciousness thus being the same as *Vāc* (speech), one may see that all expressive words express Brahman in the end. What expresses and what is expressed ultimately are one. The idea that lies behind the *sphoṭa* in simple terms is: word and meaning are indivisible units. The indivisible unit of expression is *sphoṭa* and the indivisible unit of meaning is also called *sphoṭa* (also called *pratibhā*).<sup>7</sup> The *sphoṭa* theory thus culminates in the ontological notion of *śabdabrahman*.

The opening chapter of *Vākyapadīya* known as *Brahmakānda* discusses the nature of the *śabda* or *sphoṭa* and its relation to sound (*dhvani*, *nāda*). But the opening verse of the chapter is a crucial statement about the transcendent reality which is beyond all limitations of time and space. It is labelled significantly as *Brahman* as well as *Śabdātattva*.

anādinidhanam brahma śabdātattvam yadaḥṣaram  
vivartate arthabhāvena prakriyā jagato yataḥ

The Brahman who is without beginning or end, whose very essence is the word, who is the cause of the manifested phonemes, who appears as the objects, from whom the creation of the world proceeds (*VP*. I. 1).

The *Śabdabrahman* here is said to be without beginning and end. It is both *anādi* and *ananta* (*a-nidhana*). *Akṣara* means that it is pervasive alike of space and time. It refers to the immanent aspect of *śabdabrahman* while *anādinidhanam* refers to its transcendent aspect. It is important to note this because Bhartṛhari does recognize a non-immanent aspect of *śabdabrahman*, even though in thus labelling it he views it as still identical with *śabda*.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of cognition calls forth the primacy of the word. We cannot cognize an object through the word without cognizing the

7. Ref. *ibid.*, pp. 87.

8. Gaurinath Sastri in his more recent volume *A Study in the Dialectics of Sphoṭa* (p.89) makes a valuable suggestion in this context. The first five verses, says he, should be taken as syntactically connected as forming a *kulaka* describing the transcendent and immanent aspects of the Ultimate Reality. He construes the first half of the opening verse as *yad anādinidhanam, brahma, śabdātattvam, akṣaram* and draws comparison with *mahāvakyas* of Vedānta.

word itself first. This cognition thus reminds us also of a sense of identity. When we cognize an object through the word, our cognition involves inescapably some identity. For example, when we say "this is a jar," the word 'jar' is identified with cognition as well as with the object which figures in it. Hence the Grammarian concludes that the object is not really different from the word. Again, the objects and cognitions are essentially derived from the word, that they are the products of the word. Consciousness of the word is integral to and indeed constitutive of our knowledge of objects.<sup>9</sup>

In *Vākyapadiya* I. 1, we noticed Bhartṛhari's identification of *śabda* (word) with Brahman. All manifestations of Brahman are similarly intertwined with the word and so it is concluded that their root cause, Brahman, must be of the nature of word (*śabdatattva*). K.A. Subramania Iyer, referring to *Vṛtti*, explains the reason why Brahman is considered to be the word-principle.

... this universe is really Brahman who creates all objects and phenomena in the form of words. Just because all that Brahman creates has the form of word, therefore, Brahman itself must be of the nature of the word. The fact that Brahman is called *akṣara*, phoneme is also an indication of its being the word-principle. As everything else, the phonemes also emerge out of Brahman. They exist potentially within the individual, as one with the self, without any sequence. In that form they cannot be used for communication. So they are manifested outwards, by a process which involves the *prāṇa* and the points and organs of articulation. That is, they are uttered. Brahman is called *śabdatattva* because all phenomena assume the form of the word and also because it manifests itself as the uttered phonemes for the purpose of communication. The phonemes are a kind of overflow of the subtle word within.<sup>10</sup>

*Śabdatattva* (the Supreme Word or the Word-essence) assumes all verbal forms (*sarva śabda rūpatā*), and objects signified by all verbal forms (*sarvaśabdopagrāhyatayā*). It is called *śabdabrahman* because it is not determined or limited but it is ubiquitous encompassing both

9. K.A.S. Iyer, *Bhartṛhari*, p. 100.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

the spheres of *rūpa* and *upagrāhya*.<sup>11</sup> The *śabdatattva* (*śabdabrahman*) lies beyond time and space.<sup>12</sup> This supreme word is neither an articulate word-form nor does it mean 'sound' which is viewed as the medium of manifestation of the transcendent principle on the empirical plane.

The ultimate reality is One. But it manifests itself as many because of its many powers. This manifestation does not mean that it loses its Oneness. *Vivarta* (manifestation/modification/transformation) is real in Bhartrhari and one does not need *anirvacantyata* for understanding it.<sup>13</sup> Following Yāska, Bhartrhari believes that all actions are transformations of Being (*bhāva*). Being is manifested in six forms, expressed by words *jāyate* (birth), *asti* (existence), *viparivartate* (change), *vardhate* (growth), *apakṣīyate* (decay), *vinaśyati* (destruction).<sup>14</sup> These transformations of being into action are real because it is the Power of Brahman on account of which actions appear with sequence within them. As these actions appear in sequence and sequence is the essence of Time<sup>15</sup> such transformations are real.

As we have seen, supreme word is a monistic principle and the pluralism is only a logical construction serving as the explanation of phenomenal plurality.<sup>16</sup> The continuity of supreme word in the phenomenal world proves that the world is transformation or appearance of *śabdabrahman*. The eternal principle existing in all individuals as self-identical principle is the unchanging and steadfast spiritual light. It is the source of the phenomenal world of plurality, subjective and objective alike.<sup>17</sup> The identity between the individuated self with the Absolute is well described by Punyarāja in his commentary on *Vākyapadīya*:

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11. Gaurinath Sastri, *The Philosophy of Word and Meaning* (Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1959), p. 1.
  12. Bhartrhari, *Vākyapadīya*, I.19 as trans. by K.A.S. Iyer, *The Vākyapadīya of Bhartrhari with the Vytti* (Poona: Deccan College, 1965), p. 23.
  13. Those who want to view the distinction between *śabdāvaita* and *suddhāvaita* of the Advaitin as only nominal would naturally overplay the *vivarta* sense here. Cfr. G. Sastri, *The Philosophy of Word and Meaning*, p. 44.
  14. Cf. *Vākyapadīya*, I. 3; also see K.A.S. Iyer, *Bhartrhari*, pp. 247.
  15. The power of Brahman itself is called Time. Depending on the Time-power (*kālaśakti*) the six transformations, birth etc. become the cause of all variety in Being. Cf. *Vākyapadīya*, I. 3; also see K.A.S. Iyer *Bhartrhari*, p. 247.
  16. *Vākyapadīya*, I. 3.
  17. *Ibid.*, I. 32.

The aspirant reaches the essence of speech – the Pure Verbum, which lies beyond the vital plane, by withdrawing his mind from external objects and fixing it upon his internal nature. This entails the dissolution of temporal sequence of thought activity. The purification of the Verbum (i.e., the eternal light of consciousness which ever shines within the subject) results from this and the aspirant enters into it after having severed all his ties with the material objective plane. This leads him to the attainment of the internal light and freed from all bonds and limitations he becomes identical with the Supreme Light- the Eternal Word-Principle – the undying and undecaying spirit called *śabdabrahman* or the Word-Absolute.<sup>18</sup>

According to Bhartṛhari, then, absolute reality is absolute consciousness and word is identical with consciousness – both are interchangeable entities. Secondly, the plurality of powers are inherent in and identical with the Absolute. The powers have no independent being apart from the Absolute Word; they are eternally real and eternally present in the relation of identity. Thirdly, the absolute of Bhartṛhari seems to be a dynamic principle, which produces the universe out of itself. To use the language of Advaita, he is the material and efficient cause. It is useful to bear in mind these important points of the Grammar School when we advert to the Advaita criticism of the *sphoṭa* theory and *śabdabrahman*.

It will be interesting to turn to another exposition of these same concepts at the hands of an early Advaita thinker who also zestfully endorses the thesis and sees no incompatibility between it and Advaita. Maṇḍana Miśra outlines the theory of *sphoṭa* in this *Sphoṭasiddhi* and in the *Brahmasiddhi* he elucidates *Śabdādvaita* making use of the Upanishadic term "*akṣaram*" in the opening verse of *Brahmasiddhi*:

ānandam ekam amṛtam aḥam vijñānamakṣaram,  
asarvaṁ sarvamabhayam namasyāmaḥ prajāpatiṁ

I salute Prajāpati who is Bliss, One, Immortal, Unborn, Consciousness, Imperishable (*akṣaram*) everything, (and) not everything, (and) fearless.

(BS.1)

18. Punyarāja's Commentary on *Vākyapadīya* as quoted in G. Sāstri, *The Philosophy of Word and Meaning*, p. 17.



The essence of *sphoṭa*, as we saw, is the idea that the word (in the form of the sentence, individual word and the phoneme) is an entity over and above sounds. This is an indivisible entity which already exists in everybody. The speaker manifests it when he utters the sound. This entity, over and above the sound, is the *sphoṭa*. This view of Maṇḍana is contrary to the Mīmāṃsā-Vedānta view, according to which the word is nothing more than a collection or group of phonemes and it is with this collection that meaning is associated. But for Maṇḍana letters cannot convey the entire sense of the word either individually or collectively. According to him, if individual letters convey the meaning, other letters become useless. Letters come in succession and they do not exist together at the same time. "There is neither simultaneity in time nor togetherness in space for them."<sup>19</sup>

In the *Sphotasiddhi*, Maṇḍana's main concern is whether the word which conveys meaning is an entity over and above the sounds or phonemes. As already stated, it is an entity for Maṇḍana. He establishes it following the *Vākya-padīya*. Meaning derived from words is something over and above the phonemes. The sounds uttered by the speaker manifest *sphoṭa* which is within him and within the hearer. Once manifested, it conveys the meaning. Each sound of a word, uttered by a speaker reveals the *sphoṭa*. It is a progressive revelation. Once a word is uttered, it is cognized vaguely at start, later more clearly and finally helped by the impressions left by the previous cognitions, the meaning is revealed in all its clarity and distinctness.<sup>20</sup> This is substantially the same as explained by Bhartṛhari.

Maṇḍana establishes his theory of *śabdadvaita* explicating the sense of the term "*akṣaram*". The Upanishadic texts<sup>21</sup> "*Om iti Brahma*," "*Om iti idam sarvam*" are taken to establish the identity of *Praṇava*<sup>22</sup> with Brahman (Contra-Sankara) and thus supports *śabdadvaita*. Maṇḍana takes the word "*akṣaram*" to show that Brahman is of the nature of sound. This view is supported by scriptural declaration "the

19. Gopalika on *Sphotasiddhi* quoted in P.K. Sundaram, *Advaita Epistemology* (Madras: University of Madras, 1968), p. 137.

20. Maṇḍana Miśra, *Sphotasiddhi*, 18; as translated by K.A. Subramania Iyer, *Sphotasiddhi of Maṇḍana Miśra* (Poona: Deccan College, 1966).

21. *Tait. Up.* 1.8.

22. In the *Rg Veda* 1. 164. 39 there is reference to the syllable. The syllable is *praṇava*, the mystical sacred syllable *Om*.

higher and lower Brahman, that is *Omkāra*." The suffix "*kāra*" is to signify that Brahman is not merely designated by the word "*Om*" but that "*Om*" is the very nature of Brahman.

The problem here is that in the Yoga tradition "*Om*" is a symbol standing for Brahman to meditate upon. If it is something specified, it cannot be Brahman because Brahman is beyond all specifications. But Maṇḍana solves this problem by saying that in declarations, like "Meditate on the Self as *Om*," "Concentrate on the Self as *Om*," it, generally, is the case that "*Om*" is for meditation and there is no identity. But there are also statements without the word "concentrate," and these are meant for identity. For example: "*Om* is Brahman," "*Om* is all this". According to Maṇḍana, *Om* here is the Self of all things. This is known through the Scripture and not through sense perception nor other *pramāṇas*.

Speech or *Om* is the self of all. The *Rg Vedic* and *Upanishadic* texts already quoted may be referred to here. The 'speech' is the cause of the world manifestation. The world of names and forms is accompanied by the form of 'speech.' Thus world is conceived either as the material transformation or an illusory manifestation of 'speech'.

Through *śabda* we apprehend the form. The object is apprehended as of the form of sound. For instance, "This is pot," "This is fire". Here we have non-difference (identity) of the word from the object it denotes. It is because the objects are in reality of the form of sound or word. It shows the inseparable character of sound and objects in the world. Objects are of the nature of sound by the fact that one has to utter the cognition in words only (e.g., "this is pot," etc.). In other words, cognition of the object follows the word. In this sense, Maṇḍana explains the world of names and forms as manifestations of the *śabda* (in the sense of *vivarta*) and objects of experience have only empirical reality because they are manifestations of the reality of 'sound'.

Cognitions are determined by words and so this determinancy through word is superior to all other apprehensions. The superiority of cognition is thus associated with word. The very intellegizing of intelligence is through the function of the control of 'speech.' When

there is no word, what is intelligized becomes non-intelligized as it were, by its absence.<sup>23</sup>

For Maṇḍana, the objects of the world are illusory appearance of *śabda*. It is an illusory manifestation of "akṣaram" (the Reality). The world cannot be a material transformation because it will make the Reality non-eternal (*anitya*). In brief, according to Maṇḍana, Brahman is of the nature of sound and he is *akṣaram*. (BS.1)

### III. Advaita Criticism of the Sphota and Sabdabrahman

Even though Maṇḍana finds no problem in assimilating *śabdādvaita* into the structure of Advaita of which he is among the leading expounders, the generality of Advaita thinkers do not seem to think along his lines. The lead for this negative attitude draws from Sankara.

Sankara's refutation of *sphoṭa* and *śabdabrahman* is found in his commentary on *Vedānta Sūtras* from I.3.24 to I.3.39. Sankara, quoting Bhagavan Upavarṣa<sup>24</sup> says that the letters only are the word (*varṇa eva tu śabdaḥ*). It is against the *sphoṭa* theory because for the Grammarian letters are momentary. Letters, says Sankara, are not momentary. They are persistent inasmuch as they are recognized each time they are uttered. The letters, in fact, take the place of words and they are recognized as the same each time they appear. For example, when we pronounce the word "cow" twice, we do not think that two different words have been pronounced. What is done is that we have pronounced the same word repeatedly. For Sankara, letters do not really pass away. If they do, we will not be able to speak of the similarity of things.

According to Sankara *sphoṭa* is a gratuitous and narrow explanation because letters themselves are enough to cause the apprehension of the word sense. What we perceive and cognize is because of the letters and not of the *sphoṭa*<sup>25</sup>. For example, when we articulate a word, what we get is an aggregate of letters which constitutes the word. In the final cognition of the word, what is comprehended is that

23. *Brahmasiddhi*, 19. Cf. Madeleine Biardeau, *La Philosophie de Maṇḍana Miśra* (Paris: Ecole Française D' extreme-Orient, 1969), pp. 164.

24. Bhagavan Upavarṣa was one of the earliest commentators on *Brahma Sūtras*.

25. *Brahma Sūtra Sankara Bhāṣya*, I.3.28; as trans. by V.M. Apté, p. 193.

aggregate of letters that actually constitutes the word. So final comprehension of word is not because of *sphoṭa* but it is because of the letters that constitute the word. If it were *sphoṭa* that gives the final comprehension, the letters of a word would remain unconnected.

Another argument of the *sphoṭavādins* was that the plurality of letters cannot be the object of one mental act. But according to Sankara it is not impossible because letters of word can form the object of a mental act. For instance, words like army, forest, or numbers like "ten" or hundred", where there are several entities, come to be known by a single mental act. In the instances given, the word is comprehended as one whole and it also shows the unitary sense of the word conveyed by letters.

Letters, according to Śankara, which form the word, are capable of giving meaning. Here he brings the apperceiving role of *buddhi*. The letters of which word consists, assisted by a certain order and through traditional use, have entered into a connection with a definite sense. At the time when words are employed, *buddhi* apprehends several letters in succession and synthesizes them. This is Sankara's theory of intellect which has the power to perceive a whole series and synthesize it into a single notion. This is stated as "*Samasta pratyaya vimarsini buddhiḥ*."<sup>26</sup> A knowledge of the manifold, as Kant says, is made possible by the transcendent unity of apperception.

Sankara admits that the world originates from *śabda*. But his interpretation is different from that of Bhartṛhari. "He . . . brought about the union of speech by mind" (*Brih.Up.* 1.2.4); "the several names, actions, and conditions of all things he shaped in the beginning from the words of the *Veda*" (*Manusmṛti*, 1.21) and according to *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, he created the earth uttering "*bhūr*" (*Tait. Br.* 11.2.4.2); Bhartṛhari takes these passages to show that world surely has its origin from *śabda*. But Śankara will object to taking 'word' literally as the cause of the origin of the world. *Śabda* cannot be taken to mean the material cause of creation as Brahman is. For example, a poet who composes a poem, first remembers the words denoting his ideas and then puts his ideas corresponding to those

26. *Ibid.*, 1. 3. 28.

words. Similarly, the *Veda* being revealed the Creator, proceeds to create things corresponding to these words. We have some idea in the *Smṛti* where in the beginning, Maheśvara shaped from the words of the *Veda* the names and forms of all beings and procedure of all actions.

Thus according to Śankara, *śabda* cannot be the cause of the origin of the universe and thus he denies the concept of *Śabdabrahman* as the Absolute Reality.

Another Advaita thinker who continues this line of debate and disregards the synthesis of Maṇḍana is Vimuktātman, the author of *Iṣṭa Siddhi* (12th Century). He is squarely within the *Śankara-Prasthāna* like Sarvajñātma Muni, Citsukha, Madhusudana and others all of whom in this respect are outsiders to *Maṇḍana-Prasthāna*.

Vimuktātman's is a polemical treatise like the generality of all post-Sankara Advaita works, a strategy necessitated by the exigence of establishing the theory of *māyā*. The exigence arising from confrontation with dualist theories and refutation of duality (*dvaita nirākaraṇa*) meant establishing the 'neither real nor unreal' character of phenomenal world (*anirvacantīyata* of *māya*). It is good to keep this general context in mind to appreciate the more pointed rejection of the *sphoṭa* thesis and the use of dialectical arguments i.e making use of the opponent's statements themselves to refute them.

According to Bhartrhari (*VP.1.1*) word is Brahman and from word appeared the world. Vimuktātman denies the identification of word with Brahman. The self is not word because Brahman is not an object of cognition. He is non-apprehendable. Word, being avowedly an object of cognition and apprehension, is not Brahman. Vimuktātman supports his argument with scriptural texts:

That which is not expressed through speech but that by which speech is expressed (is Brahman) (*Kena Up. 1.5*)

That which is not heard by the ear but by which the ears hear (is Brahman) (*Kena Up.1.8*)

That which is not breathed by life, but by which life breathes (is Brahman) (*Kena Up.1.9*)

From these passages it is clear that Brahman cannot be the word. Vimuktātman takes these texts to show that there is no non-duality for word (*śabda*).

Vimuktātman's concern is to confirm that the non-duality of the word cannot be established. This is the sole purpose of the verses I.72-78 in the *Iṣṭa Siddhi*.<sup>27</sup> Of the various intricate arguments that he uses, one may be singled out for our exposition here. Vimuktātman builds up his position by way of a reply to the argument of the opponent. The argument is briefly stated as follows. If the non-duality of the word cannot be established, the non-duality of self also cannot be established because the self strictly is not Brahman, in the sense that the two are not synonymous. Why can the self be not Brahman? The self (*ātman*) is presented as "I". But Brahman is not similarly presented in cognition. One may say that self as 'ego' is only the secondary self while the primary *ātman* alone, indeed, is Brahman. In the same way one may concede that words like Brahman, etc., convey Brahman but only by implication and not in the primary sense because words are said to return powerless from Brahman being unable to reach it (*Tait.Up.* IV.1). Then, the opponent argues that the *sphoṭabrahman* is also likewise primarily Brahman but not primarily expressed. And so non-duality for *sphoṭabrahman* can be established without contradiction.<sup>28</sup>

Vimuktātman's reply to this objection is the explanation of his own understanding of the relation between *śabda* and Brahman. According to him, there is on the one hand no proof for the Brahmanhood for the 'Word' while, on the other, there are sufficient proofs for 'word' not being Brahman. As it is already stated, Brahman is unapprehensible while the 'word', being a word, is apprehensible. The following Upanishadic texts show the Brahmanhood for *ātman*: "Self is Brahman", "this *ātman* is Brahman", etc. Reference to the non-Brahmanhood for *ātman* is lacking in Scripture.

Further, *Ātman* is non-experiencer and unknowable while 'ego' is what experiences pain and pleasure. Thus 'ego' and *Ātman* are not the same. Self is Brahman and not the 'ego'. *Ātman*, here, is devoid of class-character, attributes and action. He cannot be expressed by words. The Upanishadic text like "*Satyam, Jñānam anantam brahmaḥ*" is to be taken in the secondary sense. They have no primary application.

27. Vimuktātman, *Iṣṭa Siddhi*; as trans. by P.K. Sundaram, *Iṣṭa Siddhi of Vimuktātman* (Madras: Swadharmaswarajya Sangha, 1980), pp. 176.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

The *Mahāvākya* "I am Brahman" is interpreted by secondary sense in order to bring out the identity. In the primary sense, 'I' here stands for 'ego'. The 'I' which is qualified by 'egoity' and Brahman (pure consciousness) can not be identical. So we have to seek the secondary meaning (*Jakṣyārtha*) in order to find the identity between 'I' and Brahman.

Word is always apprehended and is external and so Brahman is not implied in the word. If it is implied, selfhood for Brahman will not be stated. As word is external it enlightens the ignorant only about the non-selfhood as in the case of 'the branch is the moon'. When one wants to point on the sky to the all but invisible crescent moon in its early digits one draws the attention of the bystander who wants to watch it first to the tip of the branch of a tree that is in the straightline of the vision to the moon and says "the yonder branch is the moon". But the branch is not the moon but merely a pointer of the direction. Similarly, the word, like the branch, is external to Brahman but is helpful to enlighten the ignorant. The ignorant is not competent to know the 'selfhood' of Brahman from the word as such. Indeed from the word 'branch' what the moon is in its own term is never apprehended.

When scripture says that 'word' is Brahman the unenlightened still under the effect of illusion thinks that the objective Brahman is stated but not Brahman as identical with the self. This is not the apprehension of "I am Brahman". Hence arises, the need for first stating that self is Brahman and then making the intelligible momentous scriptural declaration "I am Brahman" and "That Thou art".

Vimuktātman thus shows how on the one hand non-duality of the Self is established and for the very same reason the non-duality of the word has to be rejected.

#### IV. Conclusion

It is evident from our discussion that there are two different evaluations about *śabda* in its role of understanding the Reality. The nature of explanations given by Bhartṛhari and the Advaitins may prompt one to ask the question: are these differences ultimately only

terminological or is there more to it, that is, there is a conceptual difference. At issue here, it seems to me that it is a conceptual problem pertaining to how language stands in relation to Reality.

That, a leading Advaita teacher like Maṅḍana has not only subscribed to the Grammarian theory but has even given a systematic defence of it in a separate work shows, that the difference between the two viewpoints is not terminological but it is ontological. There is no essential difference between the two theses of *śabdabrahman* and *nirguṇabrahman*. In the light of the sustained critique of *śabdabrahman* the Advaita thinkers like Sankara and Vimuktātman and others have made, as outlined above, I am inclined to think that there is a basic ontological issue that divides the two positions.

According to Bhartṛhari speech in its essence, what may rightly be called the primordial language, is reality or being itself. He identifies *śabda* with Brahman, the Ultimate Reality (VP.I.1). Language is intrinsic to the apprehension of Ultimate Reality and in this sense what one means by Ultimate Reality is identified with language in its transcendent depth. Reality can thus be described significantly as speech reality. Realization of this reality as the very quintessence of language is the goal of Bhartṛhari's philosophy of language interpreted by him in soteriological term as *śabdapūrvayoga*.<sup>29</sup>

While turning to the Advaita thought we see here a different ontology at work. Although Sankara accepted the eternality (*nityata*) of *śabda*, it was in the qualified sense of its being non-originated by an agency, i.e. *apauruṣeya*, which is essentially, though not entirely, the same as the *Mīmāṃsā* thesis. Ontologically *śabda* is not the supreme principle. In the *Vedānta Sūtra Bhāṣya*<sup>30</sup> Sankara wrote: "the knowledge of everything has to be explained through the relation of material cause and effect (the knowledge of cause implying the knowledge of effect)." Sankara's gloss about the upanishadic phrase '*nāmarūpa*' (name and form) is here significant. What he concludes there is that name and form is of Brahman, but not *vice versa*, that is, Brahman is not name and form:

29. See Gaurinath Sāstri, *A Study in the Dialectics of Sphota* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), p. 79.

30. *Brahma Sūtra Sankara Bhāṣya*, II.3.6.



ato nāmarupe sarvāvasthe brahmaiva ātmavati; na brahma tadātmakam.<sup>31</sup> (Then in all states, the name and form are of the nature of Brahman. (But) Brahman is not the nature of that (name and form).

The cause of name and form, language and world is *Īsvara* who is none other than Brahman but conceived relationally in the role of cause of the phenomena. In the cause-effect relation, effect is only secondary in ontological significance in relation to cause. What is secondary to a cause cannot literally be identified with the cause. This is what is called *satkāraṇa vāda*, technically to be distinguished from *satkāryavāda*. The identification of cause and effect can only be in the sense "illusory identity" (*mithyā tādātmyam*).

Language in the primary sense of revealed word (*śruti*), indeed, is the one and only avenue of knowledge of Brahman. *Śruti* is taken as a transcendental entity, i.e something not man-made or determined by convention and as something given without the help of which one can not approach Brahman. Still, from the very nature of Brahman, no approach to it from without in a literal sense is possible. That is to say *śruti*-understanding is not adequate for the realization of Brahman:

na dharma jijñāsayāmiva srutyādaya eva  
pramāṇam brahmajijñāsayām; kim tu  
srutyādayo nubhavādaycha yathāsambhavamiḥ  
pramāṇam, anubhavāvasānatvād bhūta vastu  
viśayatvācha brahmajjñānasya

Nor is it that, as in the desire to know Religious duty, Scripture etc., alone are the authority, in the case of the desire to know Brahman; on the contrary, here Scripture etc., as also experience etc., are means of valid knowledge, as and when applicable, since the *knowledge of Brahman culminates in experience* and has existent object for content.<sup>32</sup>

Brahman as Supreme Truth (*Paramārtha satya*) is ultimately a matter of realization (*anubhava*). This realization of Brahman is beyond

31. *Sankara Bhāṣya on Tait. Up.* II.6.

32. S.S. Suryanarayana Sastri, ed. & trans., *The Bhāmati of Vācaspati on Sankara's Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1933), p. 130.

the capacity of language, even of language in its primordial sense. This limitedness of language (word) is well expressed in the Upanishads:<sup>33</sup>

Wherefrom words turn back  
Together with the mind, not having attained  
The bliss of Brahman he who knows  
Fears not at any time

(Tait. Up.II.4.1.)

Pure transcendental Consciousness is as much 'objectless' as it is 'wordless'. The Reality above words and above language can only be 'expressed' by silence, the inexpressible expression, the most impregnated expression. This of course is a paradox; which only means that *Ātman* is beyond expression in the ordinary sense of the term. It can only be experienced. Brahman is *avāk* (non-voice) and *aśabdām* (non-word) "there the eye goes not; speech goes not, nor the mind" (*Kena Up.*I.1.3).

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33. Also cfr. *Meit. Up.* VI. 22; *Mund. Up.* III.1.8; *Ait. Up.* I.3.3.