

THE SPHOṬA DOCTRINE OF BHARTṬHARI

INTRODUCTION

The linguistic theory of *sphoṭa* is chiefly associated with the grammarian Bhartrhari, although he is not the propounder of the doctrine. He gave *sphoṭa* a metaphysical significance and defended it against its critics.

One can trace the use of the word '*sphoṭa*' in the ancient writings, around the time of Pāṇini. It is doubted as to whether Panini himself knew of such a thing as *sphoṭa*, though the words '*sphoṭāyana*' appears once in his work, *Aṣṭādhyayī* (6.1.123). Anyway we don't know the propounder of the doctrine. It was Patanjali who, (in his *Mahābhāṣya*), for the first time, made a distinction between *sphoṭa* and *dhvani*. The sound that is produced when the word is uttered he called *dhvani*. It is ephemeral. The permanent element in the word, which is not affected by the peculiarities of the individual speaker, he called *sphoṭa*. The *sphoṭa*, in Patanjali's system, is an unchanging unit of sound. It may be an isolated letter (*Varnasphoṭa*), having a normal and fixed size or a series of such letters (*Padasphoṭa*).¹ This is quite different from Bhartrhari's concept of *sphoṭa*.

The claim of Bhartrhari is that "a sentence is to be considered not a concatenation made up of different sound-units arranged in a particular order but mainly as a single meaningful symbol."²

LINGUISTIC UNITS

The fundamental linguistic unit is the sentence, says the grammarian. The sentence is indivisible. It cannot be divided into words and letters. But don't we speak of words and letters as constituting the sentence? For Bhartrhari, however, letters and words are not real. They are only abstraction from the fundamental linguistic fact, the sentence. Gaurinath Sastri says that the terms into which the sentence is shown to be divided are merely "shadows of similar forms and never identical with them"³ Bhartrhari claims that they don't have independent existence apart from the sentence. "By

what is called the *apoddhāra* method, i.e., the 'process of constant and progressive extraction, comparison, analysis and abstraction', we extract parts or pieces, and turn them into separate wholes and assign 'metaphorical existence' to them (*Upacāra-sattā*). In other words, we create, 'abstract' entities from the given concrete whole by breaking it into pieces and then we reify them."⁴ This is done to facilitate language learning and for other grammatical purposes. In the actual language situation, however, there are no letters in the word and no word in the sentence.⁵

For the sake of convenience, Bhartṛhari continues his discussion about *sphoṭa* and meaning, treating the words as wholes.

THE LINGUISTIC PROBLEM

There is this word, 'chair' and there is this object 'chair'. There exists a certain relationship between them that when the word is grasped the other is presented to the mind. This relation between the word and its meaning is called *vṛtti* or the designatory function. *Vṛtti* is further divided into *śakti* or denotative function or primary meaning which is nothing but the lexical meaning of the word, and *lakṣanā* or the secondary meaning which is the metaphorical meaning of the word.

Let us take the example of the word "*gauḥ*". The word "*gauḥ*" has its denotative function in the animal which we call 'cow'. The meaning of the word "*gauḥ*" will be grasped only if the word "*gauḥ*" is perceived or grasped as a whole, in one single perception. But the word "*gauḥ*" cannot exist as a whole (the combination of letters is physically impossible) because the letters or the sound units, 'g', 'au' and 'h' are produced in a sequence, one after the other. And likewise, each letter or sound units is destroyed soon after it is produced because the sound units are ephemeral. Thus, there is not a single moment when all the sounds are perceived together. When the speech is in the first sound 'g', it cannot be in 'au' or 'h'. When the speaker pronounces 'au' the preceding sound is destroyed and 'h' is yet to be produced. Similarly at the time of the pronunciation of 'h' the preceding sounds 'g' and 'au' are no more. Thus, we are led to conclude that words can never be grasped as a whole.

In spite of the above mentioned problem, we grasp the meanings of words and sentences. How is this possible? How do we account for this fact? Since the meaning is understood, there must be a cause which accounts for this fact. The grammarians say that it is done through *sphoṭa*. They posit an indivisible word which is distinct

from the pronounced sounds. This indivisible unit is called *sphoṭa*.

WHAT IS SPHOTA?

The word *sphoṭa* is derived from the root *sphut* which means 'to burst'. Therefore, *sphoṭa* is defined as, 'that from which the meaning bursts forth'.⁶ It is an entity which reveals the meaning. Bhartrhari defines *sphoṭa* as the timeless and indivisible meaning bearing symbol,⁷ which manifests the meaning, itself being revealed by the letters or sound units uttered sequentially.⁸ For Bhartrhari, the 'meaning bearing symbol' is a wrong term. "*Sphoṭa* is the real substratum proper linguistic unit which is identical also with its meaning (at the *pāśyanti* stage)."⁹ "It is a metaphysical entity, neither an object of construction nor abstraction" and it lies 'embedded in the intellect.'¹⁰

Sphoṭa is self revealing in nature. In verse 1.55 of the *Vākyapadīya*, Bhartrhari states that just as fire manifesting itself reveals objects within its range, so also *sphoṭa* manifesting itself, manifests sounds." And it is only through these letters (sound units), we come to perceive mentally the *sphoṭa*. Gaurinath Bhattacharyya makes a comparison between the *sphoṭa* and the *Brahman* of the Vedantins.¹² Both are described as self-revealing in nature. But we cannot have a vision of the ultimate reality, *Brahman*, without the help of the cognitive instruments (*Pramāṇa*) that remove the veil of *avidyā* that shrouds it. Likewise *sphoṭa* cannot be cognized by us unless sound reveals it.

THREE ASPECTS OF THE LANGUAGE SITUATION :

Bhartrhari identifies three aspects in the language situation, from the point of view of the hearer. They are *vaikṛtadhvani*, *prākṛtadhvani* and *sphoṭa*.

(i) *Vaikṛtadhvani*

Let us take the situation where the speaker utters a sentence to a listener. The sounds produced by the movement of the vocal organs at the time of utterance is called *vaikṛtadhvani* or *nāda*. *Vaikṛtadhvani* is characterised by the intonation, tempo and pitch which are peculiar to each speaker.¹³ The sounds 'g', 'au' and 'h' are the *vaikṛtadhvani*-s. It has a time series: words and letters are produced rhythmically one after another. 'G' comes before 'au' and 'au' comes before 'h'. Those who do not know the language, hear only these sounds.

(ii) *Prākṛtadhvani*

A speaker utters 'gauḥ' and the hearer hears the utterance. But soon, the sounds that were produced by the speaker ('g-au-ḥ') disappear because the sounds are temporal. After the disappearance of the sound the form of the word " gauḥ " remains in the mind of the hearer. By form we mean the permanent letters that remains in the mind after the sounds disappear. We can take them as the memory impressions (*saṁskāra-s*) left behind by each sound unit. *Prākṛtadhvani* still has the time sequence attached to it because we remember "gauḥ" in the same order it was uttered and heard, although the tempo and pitch and the other peculiarities are no more present.

If we can attempt at an analogy, the *vaikṛtadhvani* can be compared to the sound which arises at the hammer's contact with the nail and the *prākṛtadhvani* can be compared to the hole made by the nail.

(iii) *Sphoṭa*

Sphoṭa is that changeless and sequenceless integral linguistic symbol manifested by the *prākṛtadhvani*.¹⁴ It has no time sequence and is indivisible. It is this *sphoṭa* which conveys the meaning, the thing meant by the word.

These three stages leading to comprehension of the meaning of the uttered word can be represented as follows:

<i>Vaikṛtadhvani</i> ----> <i>Prākṛtadhvani</i> -----> <i>Sphoṭa</i> -----> <i>Artha</i>
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In the mind of the hearer.

MANIFESTATION OF *SPHOṬA*

In the manifestation of the *sphoṭa*, a process similar to the reversal of the process explained above takes place. *Sphoṭa* manifests itself. It is asserted by Bhartrhari that *sphoṭa* contains "an inner energy (*kratu*) that seeks to burst forth into expression."¹⁵ The manifestation of the *sphoṭa* passes through the following stages : *paśyanti*, *madhyamā* and *vaikhari*.

(i) *Paśyanti*

It is the non-verbal stage. At this stage the *sphoṭa* is identical with

its meaning. There is no real distinction between the two. The identity of *sphoṭa* and its meaning conveys is like the yolk of a peahen's egg. In it all the variegated colours of a full grown peacock lie dormant in potential form.¹⁶

(ii) *Madhyamā*

It is the pre-verbal stage. The *sphoṭa* and *artha* are still one and undifferentiated, but the speaker sees them as differentiable. "It is psychological in its nature and can be comprehended by the intellect. All the elements linguistically relevant to the sentence are present in a latent form at this stage."¹⁷ The speaker is able to recognize the verbal part, which he is about to speak out as distinct and separate from *sphoṭa*.

(iii) *Vaikhari*

It is the verbal stage. These are the actual sounds spoken by the speaker and heard by the listener. It is the same as *vaikṛtadhvani*. At this stage *sphoṭa* stands differentiated from *nāda* or words.

Gaurinath Bhattacharyya likens these stages to a sprouting of a seed. "*Paśyanti* is the seed about to sprout. *Madhyamā* is the particular stage when the seed has burst open and two small leaves have just appeared, and *vaikhari* is when the leaves are separated but joined at the root."¹⁸

HOW IS *SPHOṬA* COMPREHENDED FROM A SEQUENTIAL SOUND - STRETCH ?

We have seen that *sphoṭa* is revealed by sounds uttered in a certain sequence. A problem arises. *Sphoṭa* is a unity. If it is revealed by the sequential sound-units, at which point is the *sphoṭa* (the indivisible unit) revealed? If by first sound, then rest of the sound-units are unnecessary. If by the second or the last sound unit then the preceding sounds become redundant.

Bhartrhari says that all the letters or sound units are necessary for the manifestation of the *sphoṭa*. It is a unity and is revealed by all the letters. How? Each sound helps in manifesting the same *sphoṭa*. The first one manifests the *sphoṭa* vaguely, the next one a little more clearly, the following one still more distinctly and so on and so forth until the last one, which, aided by the memory impressions of the preceding perceptions, reveal it clearly and distinctly.¹⁹ Thus even though each letter reveals the same *sphoṭa*, the complete and distinct

manifestation of the *sphoṭa* is effected only at the last sound unit.²⁰ Hence all the letters are necessary.

The comprehension of *sphoṭa* from sounds passes from the indeterminate cognition to the determinate cognition. It begins from complete ignorance, passes through partial knowledge and ends in complete knowledge. Bhartrhari explains this with illustrations. A tree may appear as an elephant when seen from afar. But on careful observation it becomes clear that it is a tree, its true identity. Another example he gives is that of a student who is trying to learn a verse by heart by reading it repeatedly. It is the last reading, aided by the memory impressions left behind by the previous readings, that helps the student to know the verse fully.²¹

Śeṣakṛṣṇa in his *sphoṭatattvanirūpaṇa* gives an example.²² Let us say that a man begins the utterance by saying "ka.." We know that he is trying to utter a word which begins with "ka". Thus the whole word is vaguely suggested by the first syllable itself, for it gives a clue to the identity of the word. When the speaker utters the next syllable "ma" the field is still narrowed down to those words which begin with "kama" only. But still we are not sure what the word is going to be. It can be "Kamalam" (lotus) or *kamanam* or a whole lot of words beginning with "kama". When the last syllable "lam" is also uttered, the word is known fully and clearly.

CLASSIFICATION OF SPHOTA

Nagesabhaṭṭa in his *Paramalaghumañjūṣā* mentions eight types of *sphoṭa*: *Varnāsphoṭa*, *padasphoṭa*, *vākyasphoṭa*, *varṇajātisphoṭa*, *padajātisphoṭa*, *vākyajātisphoṭa*, *akhaṇḍapadasphoṭa* and *akhaṇḍavākyasphoṭa*. Among these eight varieties *akhaṇḍavākyasphoṭa* is the true *sphoṭa* in the light of Bhartrhari's explanation. The other seven are the creations of grammarians for the purpose of enabling the student to comprehend the nature of *akhaṇḍavākyasphoṭa*.²³ *Akhaṇḍavākyasphoṭa* is the sentence considered as an indivisible and changeless unit.

CRITICS OF SPHOTA

Mimamsakas (Kumārīlabhaṭṭa) and the Naiyayikas (Jayantabhaṭṭa) were probably the most formidable critics of the *sphoṭa* doctrine. Grammarians asserted that the *sphoṭa* is an entity which is distinct from the letters that reveal them. Naiyayikas, however, say that the word is composed of many letters and hence a composite fact. A composite fact cannot be entirely different from the letters that

constitute them (If a composite fact is held to be entirely different from the constituents any word can mean anything. And consequently communication would be impossible). Moreover, it is our linguistic experience that we do not perceive anything apart from the letters (as distinct from the letters). Therefore, Naiyayikas hold that the postulation of *sphoṭa* as an entity entirely different from the letters, that reveal it cannot be justified.²⁴

Kumārīlabhaṭṭa posited a power for the memory impressions by which they are related to the other impressions. By this power of cohesion,²⁵ memory impressions themselves generate one cognition having all the letters as its content. This directly yields the meaning. Hence, there is no necessity for postulating *sphoṭa*. This he claims is better than the position of the grammarians because *sphoṭa* theory involves two assumptions (the indivisible *sphoṭa* and its power to convey meaning) whereas the model presented by him generate a single cognition).

Śankara too rejected the *sphoṭa* doctrine. He says that the apprehension of the temporal series of sound-units can be explained by the synthesising activity of the mind without having recourse to *sphoṭa*. He asserted that it is our experience that in all cases of temporal or spatial series, we have knowledge of the whole.²⁶ Therefore, that there is knowledge of the whole from a temporal and spatial series is taken for granted, on the basis of experience. Auditory perception of sound units leaves behind memory impressions which, by the synthesising activity of the mind are combined together. This recollective cognition leads to the comprehension of the meaning.

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NOTES

1. Cf. K. Kunjunnia Raja, *Indian Theories of Meaning*, (Madras: Adyar Library, 1963), p. 102. (Hence forward this book will be referred to as ITM)
2. *Ibid.*, p. 97
3. Gaurinath Sastri, *The Philosophy of the Word and Meaning*, (Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1959) p. 87

4. B.K. Matilal, *Perception*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 393
5. Cf. K. Kunjunni Raja, *ITM.*, p. 140
6. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 98
7. Cf. *Ibid.*, p.124
8. B.K. Matilal, *The Word and the World*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 85.
9. *Ibid.*, p.90
10. Gaurinath Bhattacharyya; "A Study in the Dialectics of *sphota*," *Journal of the Department of Letters*, (Calcutta University, 1937), p.17.
11. Cf. B.K Matilal, *The Word and the World*, p. 87.
12. See Gaurinath Bhattacharyya, "A Study in the Dialectics of *Sphota*," pp. 15-16
13. K. Kunjunni Raja, *ITM*, p. 142
14. Karl Potter, *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, Vol. V Philosophy of the Grammarians*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990), p. 68
15. *Ibid.*, p.68
16. See B.K. Matilal, *The Word and the World*, p. 68
17. K. Kunjunni Raja, *ITM*, p. 148.
18. Gaurinath Bhattacharyya, "A Study in the Dialectics of *Sphota*," p. 12
19. K. Kunjunni Raja, *ITM*, pp.125-126.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
21. *Ibid.*, pp.125-127.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
23. See Gaurinath Bhattacharyya, "A Study in the Dialectics of *sphota*," p. 90.
24. B.K. Matilal, *The Word and the World*, p. 101.
25. Gaurinath Sastri, *The Philosophy of Bhartr̥hari*, (1991), p. 106.
26. K. Kunjunni Raja, *ITM*, p. 133.