

Relevance of Verbal Testimony (Śabdapramāṇa or Śabda): In Indian Religious Culture & Scriptures

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Abstract

Indian culture is the rich source of traditions, culture, heritage, scripture, and religion so on. The historic background digging out then we find Indian culture have heavily influenced by the dharmic religions. It is the country which has various religions and varied from one another. All these religions have their own philosophy, scriptures and their ideology. Śabdapramāṇa (Verbal Testimony) is one of the pramāṇa in almost all the orthodox schools of the Indian systems. It is defined as the word which has valid means of knowing. It is the authority or reliability of the person which is competent to express valid means of knowledge. It is the evidence or proof of the words. In this paper, I propose the relevance of the Śabdapramāṇa (Verbal Testimony) in the Indian Culture particularly in the Religious culture and scriptures. The objectives of my paper to investigate the various forms of Śabda (Verbal Testimony) in the religion are relevant in the modern society or it is just a śabda in the religious texts.

KEYWORDS: Śabdapramāṇa, Verbal Testimony, Pramāṇa, Śabda, Scriptures.

1. Introduction

India is the multi-religious country. It is a secular state with no state religion. It is the country which has four religions well flourished and rich in culture and scriptures are born in it. It is characterized by the various religious practiced and beliefs. The major religions in India are: Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, and Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and some of the tribal religions also. It is a land where different religious people are live in harmony and happily. Furthermore, these religions have their own religious texts and scriptures in which number of rules and beliefs are mentioned in it. Hinduism has Bhagavad Gita, Islam has Kuran, Christianity has Bible, and Sikhism has Guru Granth Sahib as their religious texts.

On the other side, Śabdapramāṇa has a very wide concept in the Indian Philosophy. It is considered as a pramāṇa (means of knowing) in almost all the schools of IP¹ except Buddhism and Vaiśeṣika but this discussion is not relevant in this article. Śabda pramāṇa is the right assertion which is uttered by the reliable person or the reliable speaker. Taking this concept and applying on the religious text of almost all the religions. The main thirst of this research to know whether these types of beliefs are remains same in the modern world.

1.1.1 Religious Culture and Scriptures in India

Religion is the basic roots in our Indian secular state. Every people belong to some religion and follow their beliefs, worships and practices. The

¹ IP means Indian Philosophy.

birthplace of the four major religions in India namely: Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity. From the research of 2011 census, 79.8% population of the Hinduism practices, 14.2% practices Islam, 2.3% population practices Christianity and 1.7% adhere to Sikhism². Even the constitution of India gave the right freedom of Religion as the fundamental right. Apart from all the religions I mainly focus on the Hindu religion and scriptural texts because the importance of śabda came from this religion and later on it is necessary for all.

Hinduism is the oldest religion in India. It is named as Hinduism in the 19th century. Before that in the 2nd-3rd Millennium BCE it is known as Indus Valley Civilization. It is also known as the *Sanatan Dharma*. The ancient text known as *Veda* is also consider as Vedic religion in Hinduism. The religious texts in Hinduism are Bhagavad Gita, Veda. Bhagavad Gita written by Veda Vyasa and Veda has no author but some says it is the words of God. These are the scriptures in the Hinduism and the cultures which they follow are mentioned in the Vedas and Bhagavad Gita. Vedas, the religious text is the divine origin and it is not a human agency. Vedic mantras, Hindu prayers, religious functions are mentioned in it. Even the other religious texts from other religions have also their religious prayers, their functions and the belief of God mentioned there. Now, these ideologies of religion are in the form of words (śabda) and each and every person follows their religious beliefs. Those words are not the words of the common man but the words of authoritative person (like God). My contemplation here is that śabda present over the years in the form of religious texts, culture, scriptures and so on then now a days or we can say present era also rely on that or it is just a myth.

1.1.2 Background of Śabdapramāṇa

Śabdapramāṇa is recognized as a unique source of knowledge by the Nyāya and the Mīmāṃsā systems and among other schools of Indian philosophy. The Nyāya system deals with the nature of valid knowledge (*pramā*), its instruments, extrinsic validity and invalidity of the knowledge, and the tests of the truth (*prāmāṇyagraha*). According to this system, *śabda* is a valid source of knowledge and is defined as the statement of a trustworthy person (*āptavākya*). *Śabdapramāṇa* has even a greater role in the Mīmāṃsā system. It is supposed to provide the knowledge of supra-sensible objects which is produced by the comprehension of the meanings of words. Kumarila, a commentator on Jaiminī's Mīmāṃsā-sūtra, divides testimony into personal (*pauruṣeya*) and the impersonal (*apauruṣeya*). *Pauruṣeya* is the testimony of the trustworthy persons and the *apauruṣeya* is the testimony of the Vedas. Whereas the former is not valid in itself, the latter has self-validity. (Raju, 1985)

'āptopadesah śabdah³', this dictum given by the Nyāya system. It means that śabda is the assertion of the trustworthy person (āpta) – one who knows the truth and convey as it is. This system accepts it as an independent pramāṇa. They also accept the authority of the Vedas which is authorless or the words of God. It is the supernatural power (God) who reveals their teachings and beliefs. Śabda is the intuitive vision of the saint (*yogin*) through which the knowledge intuited us in the form of spoken or

² Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_India

³ It is taken sutra 1.1.8 from the Nyāya sutra by Gautama.

written as *Smṛti* and tradition. Words or śabda is the power of words which mean it is the convention or the will of God⁴. It conveys the meaning of the perceptible things like trees, table, cow but it is also convey the meaning and knowledge of the imperceptible realities like God, prophets' teachings, imaginary worlds, Unicorn, Sky-lotus and so on. They believe that words are not only sounds but that sounds have ability, power to convey meaning of the objects but this sound is not a separate category. It is only a property of words and comes under quality. (Basu, 1913)

This system also have another classification of śabda like the word-meaning , sentence-meaning, forms of words but my objective in this paper only covers the second classification. And how it is related to the religion and their texts? This modern world relates everything with the practical world. Is it possible that the religious trust, beliefs, culture, tradition and the norms should follow in the present world?

2. Śabda in the Scriptural texts

Śabda has important role in all the religious texts. Veda is the most ancient or oldest religious text in the Indian culture. The 'Veda' literally means the knowledge. It is the collection of poems or hymns which is composed in the Sanskrit. The most of the scholars accepted it is in the period of the 1500-1200 BCE. It has been directly revealed to or heard by gifted and inspired seers who memorised all the chants in the most perfect human language i.e. Sanskrit. The Vedic literature ranges from Rig-Veda (1500 BCE) to the Upaniṣads (1000-600 BCE). It comprises into four important Vedic texts: Rig-Veda (wisdom of the verses), Sam-Veda (Wisdom of the Chants), Atharav- Veda (wisdom of the atharvian priests) and Yajur-Veda (wisdom of the sacrificial formulas). The three Veda Rig, Yajur and Sama are the three fold knowledge which known as the 'trayi-vidya'. The Vedic literature like Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aryanakas and Upaniṣads are the constituents which revealed the scripture of Hinduism or the śruti. Basically, all the chants, beliefs, culture of marriage, worship of God, all the priest teaching, scripture and culture etc. of the Hinduism depends on the Vedas. It is the śabda which binds all the religious beliefs in the Vedic religious text. Śabda is nothing but the will of God or we can say it is the convention of God. Vedas are authorless and considered as the śabda of the God. Later on the Rṣis (the seers) chants and preach the Vedas in the form of śruti. It has been millennium years ago and till now the parts of the Vedas are memorized and repeated as the religious act of great merit like the Vedic hymns chants in the marriages, yajna for the worship of Gods, chanting of the mantras in the ceremony of death and in many of the temple rituals⁵.

2.1 Nature of śabda in the Scriptural texts

Language is a symbolic system which is represented as deeper knowledge. It claims to symbolize anything and everything but it is not merely passive or neutral. The word and their meaning are used in the terms of their context. Words are the construction of experience and behaviour. Words, meanings and the judgements are like the concomitant process in which they arise as a

⁴ It is the saying of the Old-Nyayaikas who believe that words are the desire of the God. Later on the Neo-Nyayaikas also given a view on that it is the conventional and the power of the desire of anybody.

⁵ It is retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism/Hinduism-outside-India#ref303599>

tool in the process of purposive behaviour⁶. Buddhist philosophers assert that the conception of the nature of the language is the instinctive and constructive activity which is intrinsically bound with the judgemental faculties. It is not the realistic representation of the external world but it is the construction of the world is subjective. The world of language is subjective and objective then it is the construction and the last it is the pragmatically valid. (Pande, 2005)

Language (śabda) acquires an intrinsically delusive nature. It conveys the eternal truth of things. Through the language we can transaction with world (Vyavahāra / empirical) and it is beyond the language when we are in the free form the world of duality (Pāramārthika / absolutely real). “Whence speech retreats along with thought” this view accepted by both Buddhist and Advaita Vedānta. Apart from these two, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika holds that ultimate reality is as much knowable as it is ‘statable’. It defines the significative power of the words to convey its meaning of the object. It already resides in the mind but it doesn’t the stimulating memory even it produces the fresh knowledge. The old Nyāyikas regarded śabda is the will of God or the original force of any linguistic expression. Therefore, Buddhist views on language is the source of pragmatic knowledge and the transcendental illusion and on the other Nyāya – Vaiśeṣika admits it is the nature of communication and the validity of the knowledge which it depends on the reliability of the person. They strongly admit that the word or words are eternal and have an innate power of revealing the truth. It is same as Vedas are eternally given revelation. It is authorless but their words are the words of God. Mimāṃsa believed that the words are sequence of the ideal unit of sound. These sounds are called ‘varṇa’ like the phonemes except it is an eternal, recognizable identity which is manifested by sound.

On the other, the Grammarians points out that śabda are sphoṭa instead of the Varṇas as an eternal aspect of words. Speech-sounds manifest *sphoṭa* and *sphoṭa* reveals meanings. It is an eternal and infinite word which is the source of all speech and meanings. Bhartṛhari identified it as a śabda-Brahman with the seeing word or Paśyantī. The spoken and audible word is Vaikhari. The mental speech which is inseparable from the apprehension of the meanings is Madhyamā. The stage where all this lies beyond is Paśyantī.⁷

Kashmir Śaivism in a very systematic manner differentiate Parā from Paśyantī. It identifies the Parā with the reflective power or *Vimarśa* of God. The ultimate root of the language is self-consciousness. The self-consciousness makes it expressive and creative. Therefore, the innate symbolism of the language is not external and conventional but it is the expressiveness of the self-consciousness. Mimāṃsa in his Mimāṃsa sūtra holds that language is the religious faith which assumes an eternal word is the source of revelation.

⁶ This ideology of śabda represents the Buddhist epistemology in which they reduced śabda in the inferential process.

⁷ From the views of the Bhartṛhari, Kashmir shaiva came and differentiated the Para and Paśyantī.

Furthermore, “Behind the pattern of the audible sound waves of speech lie the patterns of articulation and neural activity”.⁸ Language has the isomorphic pattern at the various levels: acoustic, articulatory, neural and psychic source. It is the psychic activity which makes language in a communication form. Later on it becomes a process of self-expression and self-recognition. In the early stage of language, it is not the material or external world but it is the psychic meanings. Sañkara holds that language in the ordinary sense has to be transaction with world (vyavahara). It makes both Prapañca and mantra (śruti or Pāramārthika). In the Pāramārthika level, it lies beyond language.

3. Sanskrit as an Indian Culture

Indian Culture and Sanskrit language have been bound together from the millennium years. Sanskrit is the oldest language in which all the ancient texts, religious texts, Vedas, Indian philosophical systems, Upaniṣads etc. are written. It is the true symbol of great Indian tradition and thought. It is known as ‘devabhāṣā’ which means the language of God. It is not only classical language but it is the part of our cultural heritage. Sanskrit literature is the mother of all knowledge (vidyas). Vedas is the storehouse of all the knowledge in which mention all the healthy way of living in a society. So, it enriches our thoughts, our ideology, and our style of living.

Sanskrit is the root of all sciences including Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Agriculture, Geometry, Metallurgy, Medicine etc. even it is separately mention in other texts and commentaries of the vast literature. It is our tradition and Indian culture which maintains all round development of the human beings in the ancient as well as modern time.⁹

Mahatma Gandhi quotes, “Sanskrit is like the river Ganges for our languages. I always feel that if it were to dry up the regional language also would lose their vitality and power. It seems to me that an elementary knowledge of Sanskrit is essential. It is not sentiment on my part that makes me so, but practical consideration of the utility to our country of this great language and the vast knowledge held by it”.

Linguistic symbols and cultural values are parallel to each other. Sanskrit language nature is like the articulation of the Indian Psyche. Perhaps, it is the culture of that psyche. It has been characterized in a well defined phonetic system. Sanskrit language lays stress on the principles of the *sandhi* and the accent of pronunciation which differentiate it from other language. Many scholars said that it is the eternal language and the language of the Divine.

This language is in the transparency form, its structures, formations are the efforts of the Grammarians. It is formulated in such a flow and the rules of the words which are derived from the verbal roots from the thousand years ago. Basically, it reflects the Indian psychology, culture and the scriptures. This is not the construction of the beings but it is the convention or the will of God.

⁸ Pande, G.C. ,’The Life and Death of Language’, *Diogenes*, pp 193-94

⁹ This modern world is the world of technology in which Sanskrit plays an important role. Computer Programming and operations are also in Sanskrit Devanagari scripts.

Later on its formulation and rules of the grammar flourish again by the authoritative persons like the Grammarians, Rishis, and Scholars etc. Navyanyaya (later nyaya) develops it in the analytical and abstract form of modern logic with the help of this language. (Pande, 2005)

Furthermore, we can say Sanskrit literature is vaster than the ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew literature. It is like the Golden thread which binds all the Indian culture, scriptures and modern language. It is the permanent achievement and the universal heritage of the Indian Civilization. Now a days, Sanskrit is not only taught and read in India but it flourish in all over the world. Almost 14 universities teaching Sanskrit in the world like Germany, Switzerland, and Italy and so on. We conclude this section by the quote of Liza Elizabeth Poor in her Book ‘Sanskrit and Its Kindred Literature- Studies in Comparative Mythology’ –

*“I propose to write about the literature of different nations and different centuries. I wish to show that this literature is not many but one; that the same leading ideas have arisen at epochs apparently separated from each other; that each nation however isolated it may seem, is, in reality, a link in the great chain of development of the human mind; in other words to show the unity and continuity of literature...”*¹⁰

4. Guru’s (teacher) Śabda importance in Scriptural texts

*“Guru Brahma Guru Vishnu Guru Devo Maheshwara Guru Saakshaat ParaBrahma Tasmai Sri Gurave Namaha”*¹¹

With this quote, we start this section by saying that śabda is the words of God and the presenter of this śabda is the Guru (Teacher). In the ancient times, Guru is the only mediator of the knowledge of the scriptural texts and at that time there is only the one way of teaching i.e. Śabda uccāran. Many Rishi’s, scholars, philosophers mediate and chants of the mantra (i.e. śabda) alone and then gain the knowledge of the Veda. This knowledge taught in the form of śabda to the others only in the verbal form. This kind of knowledge was given by only the authoritative person i.e. āpta.¹²

In the layman language, Guru is the one who remove the mental and spiritual darkness with his teaching and conduct. According to the Hinduism, guru is a living God who access the knowledge of the God and liberation. Guru has a lot of influence on the society, as role model and experts in the knowledge of the Self.

In the Vedanta Saṅgraha mention that a person (Guru) who has the capacity to free from sin, spiritual aspirant, control of the mind and the senses is the eligible for the study of the scriptural texts which leads to the liberation. He is the one who has performed niṣkāma karma such as yajña, withdrawn from the external things

¹⁰ This quote of Liza Elizabeth Poor taken from her book ‘Sanskrit and Its Kindred Literature- Studies in Comparative Mythology’, it is taken from the Sanskrit magazine www.sanskritmagazine.com

¹¹ It means that ‘ the teacher is like Lord Brahma as He Generates knowledge within us, like Lord Vishnu as he Drives ideas and knowledge into our mind unto the right path, and like Lord Mahesha [Shiva] as he Destroys the ill-conceived ideas that come from our knowledge, while enlightening us and helping us stay on the right path. Thus the teacher is like our ultimate God and we should pray and respect to our teacher’.

¹² This is the views of the Nyāya Philosophy in his Nyāya Sutra.

(uparati), forbearance (titikṣa), self-settledness (samādhāna), and faith (śraddhā). In order to attain the knowledge of viveka, the eligible person should go to the teacher alone, “Carrying faggots in hand, and one should go to a teacher learned in the Vedas and who is in contemplation of Brahman”. It is stated in the śruti. So, we can say that only through teacher we can attain the knowledge of the Mahāvākya (śabda of the Brahman). (Balasubramanian & Revathy, 2014)

Bhagavad Gita (6.45) says that, “A *spiritual aspirant, who strives with assiduity, purified from sins and perfected in the course of many births, then reaches to the supreme goals*”. From all these points, it is necessary one has attain all the fourfold means of eligibility can be undertakes the study of the Vedānta and the Brahman-realization can be attained. The Advaita tradition follows the rule that eligible person should go to the teacher (Guru) learned Vedas and attain the contemplation of the Brahman. There is only teacher through one can attain the knowledge of the Mahāvākya.

5. Divine knowledge obtained only through Śabda

Brahman is non-dual, eternal and infinite, it can be known only through the śabda pramāṇa (verbal testimony). It is of two kinds in the Advaita Vedānta: empirical and scriptural. The empirical śabda has no scope of knowing the Brahman. Now they classify the Vedic or scriptural statements into three: injunctions (vidhi), prohibitions (niṣedha) and Brahman related texts (Upaniṣads). From these first two parts, injunctions and prohibitions belong to the earlier part of the Veda which has no scope of Brahman. The remaining text of the Veda (Upaniṣads) alone is useful for the knowledge of the Brahman. This text directly conveys the knowledge of the Supreme Atman which is free of qualities and bondage; also have the nature of infinite knowledge and bliss. It conveys the knowledge of the Brahman through the principle of superimposition (adhyāropa) and subsequent denial (apavāda) and others through implication (lakṣana). Vedas are authoritative not because they are words of trustworthy Divine person, but because they are not known to have been created by any person (apauruṣeya) and are eternal. *‘Tacca svataḥ pramanam vakyajanyam jnanam hi divividham’*.

According to other Naiyayikas, it can be classified into the secular (Laukika) and the Scriptural (Vaidika). Secular testimony is the testimony of human beings and may therefore be true or false. Only that which proceeds from trustworthy person is valid but not the rest. In Vaidika testimony, we have the words of God. The Vedas are created by God and are, therefore valid on all points. The former relates to the sensible objects of the world and reliable statements of ordinary persons, sages and scriptures. The latter relates to imperceptible objects e.g. the reliable assertions of religious teachers, prophets and God etc. Secondly, according to this modern school classification, knowledge based on testimony is of two kinds, namely Vaidika or scriptural and laukika or secular. The scriptural testimony includes the words of God. God according to Nyāya is extra ordinary person or perfect person. He is the author of Vedas which are also perfect. So scriptural testimony includes the perfect and infallible Vedic sentences which are uttered by God himself. The secular testimony is the statement of human being. It may be true or false. It is true where it is uttered by a trustworthy person, otherwise not. Two different views have been offered in

regard to the origin of statement that plays a significant instrument role in our acquisition of knowledge. Ancient Nyāya logicians, like Vātsāyana and Prasahtapada, have attributed the ancient Hindu scriptures or Vedas to great seers and sages, which Gangesa and others of the modern school of Nyāya assert that God alone could be the author of the Vedas. This difference in opinion led to a distinction between "the statement of seers and sages, and statements of human origin" (laukika) and "the statements of divine origin" (vaidika). Accordingly, since no human being is perfect, laukika testimony is believed to be fallible, while vaidika testimony because of its divine source is believed to be perfect and infallible. Thus, the statement of scientists with regards to electrons, protons, and so on, statements regarding virtue, vice, or liberation, belongs to the category of adrstartha. Secular (laukika, ordinary) and Scriptural (vedic, vaidika) laukika (ordinary words are created by human beings for this reason, Vedic words are completely free from defects and delusions. Ordinary words can be true as well as false. The utterances of reliable individuals are treated as true. The texts of the Vedas are all statements of God, and therefore their testimony is infallible. Not so are secular words. The Vedic testimony is based on the words of God. Since God is perfect and infallible, all Vedic testimony is necessarily perfect and reliable but secular testimony has its obvious limitations, because it finds its source in human beings. Vaidika or scriptural testimony is thus perfect and infallible by its very nature. But laukika or secular testimony is not all valid. It is the testimony of human beings and may, therefore be true or false. (Rambachan, 2014)

6. Śabda in other Religious text

As I mentioned earlier in the first section, there is also other religion and their texts in the Indian Culture and Scriptures. These texts are also written by the authoritative person, priests, Guru. These religions have its values and culture written in śabda only and the people follows it. There is no discrimination between the religions and their scriptures. In these text may be culture, beliefs, customs, worships are different but God is one, His name different but the teachings of God is one. He is omnipotent, creator, destroyer, omnipresent etc. like the same as Allah, Jesus Christ, Guru Granth sahib, Īśvara. All the religions have its own philosophy to reach the Ultimate God. It may have the paths are different but the destination is the same as other religion. Supreme Self or God is the ultimate aim of life in each and everyone's life. This is the beauty of culture and scriptural text of India.

7. Conclusion

Śabda pramāṇa or śabda is as important in the ancient as well as present world. It is the only way of knowledge through which all the scientific, practical, preaching can display or known. In this modern world, where everyone busy in the running social as well as professional work but at the same time they follow the religious norms, culture and values. Śabda has its own capacity to represent anything in the world. It can link not only to the empirical world but also connect to the Brahman (GOD) knowledge itself. It works both in the direct and indirect way of knowing. Our religious, scriptural texts give us the knowledge the way of living even in this modern era. Religion have its own importance in past, present and future era. So, we can conclude this by **Mahatma Gandhi** quote, "*Religion is one tree with many*

branches. As branches, you may say, religions are many, but as tree, religion is one". We, the people can know religion only through śabda and scriptures. We are in the zone of birth and death, rebirth and liberation but the scriptural text and the śabda never dies, it remains in the millennium of years before and ago. Śabda are immortal in all the Religious texts.

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