

INAUGURAL LECTURE

THE DOCTRINE OF SPHOTA

Pathiaraj Rayappan

Allow me to say a few words about Bhartrhari. He is a great philosopher of the 5th century B.C., belonging to the grammarian school. *Vākyapadīya* is a monumental work by the great grammarian, in which he dealt with such topics as grammar and philosophy. He in fact, evolved a philosophy that is called *Sabdādvaita*, or *Sabdabrahmavāda*, which, in English, is rendered as verbal monism. This theory holds that *Brahman* is identical with the speech principle.

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

Having now acquainted ourselves with Bhartrhari, let us inquire into the doctrine of *sphota*, to which he gave a new interpretation and made it very popular. *Sphota* theory, we must note, is an attempt at answering a linguistic problem. What is that linguistic problem?

There is the word 'chair' and there is the object 'chair'. There exists a certain relation between these two, the word and the object, that as soon as one is grasped the other is presented to the mind. This relation between

the word and its meaning is called *vrtti* or the designatory function.

In order to grasp the meaning of the word, the word has to be grasped in one single perception. Let us take the example of chair. The meaning of 'chair' can be grasped only if the word 'chair' is perceived as a whole in one single perception. Similarly the meaning of 'gauh' (cow) will be grasped only if the word 'gauh' is perceived or grasped as a whole, in one single perception. But the word 'gauh' cannot exist as a whole because the sound units g, au and h, which make up the word 'gauh', are produced in a sequence, one after the other. And likewise, each letter or sound unit (syllable) is destroyed soon after it is produced because they 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 unit 'g' is destroyed and 'h' is not yet 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 it is our day to-day experience that we grasp the meaning from such a word, i.e., though

we do not grasp the word in one single perception, we understand the meaning from that word. How is that possible? There seems to be an effect without the cause. How do we account for this? Philosophers in India were trying to solve this problem and it has resulted in a galaxy of theories. *sphota* theory is one such. How do the upholders of *sphota*, get over this problem? They say that between the word and meaning, there is a intermediary called *sphota*, which is a unity. The sequential sounds reveal the *sphota* and *sphota* in turn reveals the meaning of the word.

What is *sphota*? The word '*sphota*' is derived from the sanskrit root '*sphut*' which means 'to burst', 'to reveal' or 'to manifest'. Therefore *sphota* would mean 'that from which meaning bursts forth'. It is an entity that reveals the meaning. Bhartrhari defines *sphota* as the timeless and indivisible meaning bearing symbol which manifests the meaning of the word or sentence, itself being manifested by the letters or the sound units uttered sequentially,

Going back to our example of *gauh* the three syllables or units, 'g, au and h' reveal the *sphota* having the three units in one. And this *sphota* reveals the meaning of the word and we thus grasp it. Therefore the linguistic dilemma of which we spoke in the beginning, they claim, is solved.

The *sphota* theory is not as simple as this. It is much complicated especially because Bhartrhari identifies *sphota* with Brahman. Without going into its intricacies let us take the question that critics raised against the upholders of *sphota*.

The *sphota*, we said, is an indivisible, changeless and timeless unit. If it is so, how is it revealed by a sequential sound stretch, say 'g, au and h' in the case of *gauh*. Since *sphota* is a unity (devoid of parts) it has to be grasped in a single perception (at one shot). If so, at which point of the sound stretch is it grasped? Is it at the first or the second? or is it at the third? If we say that it is by the first then the rest of the syllables are unnecessary? If by the last, then the preceding sounds become redundant. We are in a fix.

Bhartrhari says that all the syllables are necessary for the manifestation of *sphota*. How? Each sound helps in manifesting the same *sphota*. The first one manifests the *sphota* 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. Thus even though each letter or syllable reveals the same *sphota*, the complete and distinct manifestation of the *sphota* is effected only at the last sound unit.

Sesakrsna in his *sphotatattvanirūpana* gives an example to illustrate this point. 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" 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. Thus all the syllables are necessary. We can compare this to a series of glass plates placed in succession before an object that at the removal of each, the object becomes clearer and clearer till the removal of the last, when it becomes manifested distinctly.

Mīmāṃsakas and the Naiyayikas were probably the formidable critics of the *sphota* doctrine. They are of the opinion that *sphota*

is an unwarranted assumption. They say that the whole word is presented to the mind at the last sound unit with the help of the memory impressions of the preceding sound units. This presents the meaning to the hearer. Therefore, we understand the meaning of the word not via *sphota* but directly from the sound units themselves.

The criticism levelled against the *sphota* doctrine does not in any way diminish the genius contribution of Bhartrhari to the field of language philosophy. He needs to be applauded and appreciated.

REFERENCES

- Sastri, Gaurinath. *The Philosophy of the Word and Meaning*, Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1956
 Bhattacharyya, Gaurinath. "A study in the Dialectics of *sphota*," *Journal of the Department of Letters*, Calcutta University, 1937.