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Spiritual Fonts of Indian Languages

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Abstract

Language provides a genuine insight into the inner recesses of individuals. Similarly, at the macro level, it is a reflection of the cultural peculiarities of a society. Language ability presupposes embedded structure and lexicon at the conscious level, or to be specific, *Anta Karana* (subtle body). Richness and variety of the lexicon depend on the cultural and educational standards of the individual concerned. At a macro level, it reflects the cultural progression of the society. Indian languages, whether Vedic, Classical Sanskrit or vernacular, are semantically more inclined towards spirituality not only in the sacerdotal texts and philosophical discourse, but also in the colloquial expressions of the laity. Rules of syntax (grammar) got the highest priority right from the days of ṛig ved. *Munithrayam* (the trio of sages), namely, Panini, Patanjali and Katyayana, laid the foundations of Sanskrit grammar. Patanjali elevated grammar to a philosophical level in his commentary on Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*. So did Bhartruhari through his spot theory. For the Hindus, philosophical discourse is essentially metaphysical and therefore, Sanskrit and other Indian vernaculars do have a tinge of spirituality. The current article examines this aspect of Indian languages. **Methodology**: This paper attempts to compare the Semantics of Sanskrit and other Indian vernaculars with English. It is a study of cultural semantics. The position of the Sanskrit language is unique because, with a lexicon that can be committed to memory, language capability is dependent on the speaker's competence to coin words according to the rules of syntax. Therefore, there are discussions on Sanskrit grammar.

Keywords: *Brahman*, Philosophy, *Samadhi* (Ecstasy), Sphota Theory, Supra-conscience, Vedanta, Vidhya, Philology

1. Introduction

Language is a genuine insight into the inner recesses of the speaker, and at the macro level, language, to be specific, literature is the unique cultural heritage of each society. Modern Linguistics, or the study of languages, is comparatively too young to fall back on any tradition that is more than two centuries old. Comparative philology became relevant only when the Western world discovered the masterpiece of Panini and several commentaries thereon. The latest linguistic theory that matters is Chomsky's work. Chomsky also concedes that children acquire vocabulary. Obviously, the environment influences the learning process and the quality of the spoken or written expression.

2. Language and Spirituality in the Vedic Context

Historians concede that our Aryan ancestors composed the Vedas in 1500 BC. The syntax of the composition is well developed. Its theme or philosophical discourse is so serious that it certainly testifies sublime intellectual development of the society. Like oil in the gingelly seeds, Vedanta is present in the Vedic verses. The entire discourse of philosophy in its sacerdotal verses is on a substratum of spirituality. Thus, from the very beginning, spirituality is the essence of Hindu speech, whether Vedic, Classical or vernacular.

Hindus were busy with logical and philosophical analysis of language right from the days of the Rg Ved, which is the oldest literature of the world. This text says:

चत्वारि वाक् परिमिता पदानि
तानि विदुर् ब्राम्हणा ये मनीषिण:
गुहायाम् त्रीणि निहितानि नेङ्गयन्ति
तुरीयम् वाचं मनुष्या वदन्ति (RV 1.164.5)

Three stages of speech are concealed in the inner realms of the mind or conscience. We only physically feel the fourth stage or the spoken form. The spoken form is physical when the vital air is released through the different organs of speech. The four stages of transaction, as per the Hindu thoughts, are:

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Para - Cause, knowledge absolute, all-pervasive Brahman

Pasyanthi - Spiritual, conceptual, mute

Madhyama - Mental, mute

Vaikhari - Pronunciation, vocal, physical

These four stages are attributes of the Goddess as per *Lalita Sahsranama*:

परा पस्यत् चितीरुपा पस्यन्ति परदेवता
मध्यमा वैखरी रुपा भक्तमानस हम्सीका

3. Sphota-Sidhanta of Bhartrhari

Bhartruhari in his *Vakyapadeeya* exalted the subject of grammar to spiritual and metaphysical level. However, he is concerned with the three stages only:

अनादि निधनं ब्रह्म शब्द तत्वं यदक्षरम्।
विवर्ततो अर्थभावेन प्रक्रिया जगतो यत्।।

There can be a question as to why the poet-philosopher begins only with the second stage, *i.e.*, *pasyanthi*? The answer is simple. He is a poet and not a *rishi* (seer). For the latter," para" or supra-conscience is the source of inspiration. The record of his communion with the absolute, in a deep state of ecstasy (*Samadhi*), is the Veda. For the laity, the idea originates at the mental or intellectual level (*pasyanthi*). This is the difference between a rik and a verse. The former is inspiration, whereas the latter is imagination. From the conscience level (*Pasyanthi*), the idea enters *Madhyamika* (stage of conception). This is an embryonic stage and has all the features except the voice. When it is pronounced, it is transmitted to the listener through his organs of hearing and the connected faculty of cognisance. This is the Sphota theory (*Sphota siddhanta*) of *Bhartruhari*. The root of the word "*Sphota*" is "sputa-bedne", meaning explosion. The explosion is to unravel the conceptual representation of the object in the subtler self of the hearer. This theory is deeper in substance than the modern linguistic theory of Surface and Deep structure, for the simple reason that the latter one is concerned only with the grammar at the mental level and at the level of actual speech. Grammar only explains the contextual relationship between words in a sentence or phrase, and each unit of that sentence has a meaning with reference to the context. Meaning is variable and precisely not always the same as listed in the lexicon; e.g. "burying" the dead and "burying" the truth are not the same. In the former case, it is an act of charity, a duty as dictated by social customs. In the latter case, it is a deliberate attempt to suppress the truth. In a language like Sanskrit, especially in classical Sanskrit literature, the rhetorical artifice of double entendre (*slesha*) forces us to concede this inherent potency of the words. Maharishi Aurobindo, who questioned the efficacy of modern philology for the first time, asserted while explaining the symbolism in Vedic literature:

"For in the first state of language, the word is as living or even a more living force than its idea; sound determines sense. In its last, the positions have been reversed; the idea becomes more important; the sound secondary" (Aurobindo, Secret of Veda, P/52). Therefore, in the beginning stage of the language, *i.e.*, Vedic Sanskrit, has fewer words representing more ideas. At the latter stage, the intellect in man absorbed the sense association and reactions of the words and solidified them. This is a natural process of progression" from the general to the particular, from the vague to the precise, from the physical to the mental, from the concrete to the abstract" (ibid), the idea became more important than the sound. The deep structure theory fails to explain this potency of the language. *Sphota Siddhanta* is more logical and convincing.

The spoken form, or *Vaikhari,* is when the vital air escapes through the different organs of speech. This being transitory is perishable for the ordinary man. However, for the poet-philosopher, it is imperishable. The word is connected to an idea that never perishes. Albeit the relationship is a mere convention. For Hindus, the idea is inseparable from the word, like *Parvati* and *Parameswara,* who are the mother and father of the World. Poet Kalidasa extols this principle.

वाग्वार्थाविव संपृक्तौ वागर्थप्रतिपत्तये
जगतः पितरौ वन्दे पार्वतीपरमेश्वरौ (Raghuvamsa 1.1)

Meaning assigned to any particular word is conventional and arbitrary. It helps to reveal the object like a torch taken to a dark room. The object is already there. It helps to identify the idea or substance conceptualised at the mental level or *Chit* as per the Hindu philosophy. Human tendency is to identify all the objects in the world, notwithstanding their illusory nature, with a name and a form. In fact, every object is *Brahman* or "*Paramatma*". A Word or speech is therefore the vocal representation of *Brahma*, the absolute.

4. Cultural expressions in Sanskrit and vernaculars

We know that each society, through interactions over millennia, has amassed a social conscience which consists of several images, both pictorial and vocal, myths and narratives. Each individual inherits this social conscience, and his own efforts contribute to his personality. The Hindu philosophy terms it as *Samskara*. This personality finds expression in his speech. That is why literary critics say, "Language is the man". Hence, the choice of diction and vocabulary is not divorced from the cultural and civilizational baggage one carries.

Language and diction reflect on the cultural and intellectual state of the speaker. The vocabulary of any language is an index to the cultural orientation and intellectual achievement of that community. In common parlance, speakers of Tamil refer to death as" *sathu pochu*". The words mean "sathu"(truth), pochu (gone) – meaning what is real is gone. Hindus all over the world, without exception to numerous sub-sects, whose beliefs may vary in some or several aspects from mainstream Hinduism, believe in the immortality of the soul and its departure from the body as an act of transmigration. Even the illiterate is aware of this cardinal principle of *Vedanta*, though he cannot explain it in a philosophic diction. This is a clear reflection of a culture, which has spirituality as its Warf and woof of its social fabric. On the other hand, a sophisticated Englishman will refer to death:" he gave up his ghost". The phrase betrays a predominantly material culture. The Europeans do not believe in the immortality or transmigration of souls. For him, death means simply the termination of life. It differs from the Hindu faith, and therefore, the expression varies. While the Indian expression conveys a metaphysical reality, the English equivalent is concerned with its physical significance.

"*Upanayanam*"(initiation) to celibacy) is an important *Samskara* (compulsory rite) for the twice-born. The preceptor advises the secret formula (*mantra*) in confidence. The mantra enables the initiate to overcome ignorance. Gurustrotram says:

चक्षुरुन्मीलितं येन तस्मै श्रीगुरुवे नमः

cakṣurunmīlitaṃ yena tasmai śrīguruve namaḥ

(I salute the Guru who opens my eyes). Hence, *upanayanam* means a second birth or the beginning of a journey seeking the ultimate. *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) is the first *ashrama* of *varna-ashrama dharma*. The word literally means progression through the path of celibacy to *Brahman* or the ultimate truth.

5. Comparative Reflections on Indian and Western Expressions

A *sanyasi* (renunciate) lives on charity and is not engaged in any economic activity. Having renounced everything, including *Karma* (duty), he is not liable to observe *varna-ashrama dharma*. He is dependent on the alms that he collects from the households. Aadi Sankaracharya had prescribed certain rules of conduct for the *Sanyasi,* including that of begging[1]. *Saṃskruta* term for alms is *Biksha,* meaning a sacramental offering to a *Sanyasi* or mendicant. Even if a householder treats them with a sumptuous meal, it is still termed as "*Bhiksha*". Those who live on "*Bhiksha*" are "*Bhikshu*". In Tamil and Malayalam, the word has undergone severe aberrations, and the word now means an ordinary beggar (*pichhakkaran*). This being derogatory, the Hindu Society changed the form of address of the Sanyasi. In the north, it is "Maharaj" (sovereign). In the south, it is Swami (lord). These terms of address exemplify Indian culture that reverses renunciation. *Sadhu* (साधु) is another synonym for *Sanyasi*. The root of the word (धातु) is साध means spiritual practice. Adding the particle" u", we get Sadhu, and the word means a renunciate and an accomplished spiritual practitioner.

For all countries and civilisations, except Indian, the country of birth or domicile is the fatherland; for us, it is the motherland. This tradition we inherited from the ऋग् वेद् (ṛg ved), where Aditi, the mother of *Devas*, is extolled. Our ancestors knew that Brahman, the absolute, is all-pervasive, formless and the cause of the universe. He is the purusha or primordial force who takes the motherly form to facilitate reproduction. पित्र् Father धातु - पा = पालने = Protection, besides parentage as usually meant in English. The word also means ancestry, in which case, it is gender neutral. In the Semitic region, except for the valley of the Tigris and Jordan, the land is barren and unsuitable for cultivation. The population survived on occupations like shepherding. The shepherd protects the sheep from the wild. Women and children also look upon their father as a benevolent protector. As the priests

of the Church protect the sheep (congregation) from aberration of dogmas, they are also termed as "father". The family friend or relative, who baptises the child, is "godfather. The word in English, therefore, means parentage and protection. मात्रु Mother धातु मा = मान् = Mother is also the nourisher of the child and therefore deserves to be worshipped. Motherland is verily the *Purusha* (primordial force) in the maternal image. She is the universal mother of us all. As per Swamiji, she is an object of worship that is more physical or concrete than the" *ishta devatas*"[2].

Sanskrit as well as vernacular vocabulary, spoken on either side of the" Vindhyan", defy translation into English. We may consider the word "Dharma", for instance. It is loosely translated into English as religion". Religion as an institution is a great unifying force. At the same time, it puts more people on the other side of the fence and ends up as a great divider. Disregarding the organisational hierarchy or dogmas results in penal consequences even in this world, like excommunication, not to speak of the evil consequences in the other world. The root of the word "Dharma", according to Amarakosa, is "drunj", meaning that which bears or sustains the universe. To put it simply, "Dharma" means the moral or ethical foundation of human society. "*Dharyati iti dharma* is the definition.

Another word that defies translation is ऋतं (ṛtaṃ). In this word, the first phone is the liquid "*ru*" and not the alveolar plosive. It means the principle or truth established according to the scriptures, *i.e.*, Sruthi and experience. Maharishi Aurobindo translates it as "right" appearing in the Vedic dictum "*Satyam ṛtaṃ, bruhat*" (truth, right, vast) (P/64 ibid). Simply put, it is the principle that has scriptural or theoretical authority as well as practical applicability. To convey the full meaning, we may have to scribble at least a paragraph. This word appears many times in the Vedas and Upanishads in different contexts. Consequently, the contextual meaning may slightly differ without being mutually exclusive. Why the *Rishis* (seers) in their revelations choose words that have several meanings is a relevant question. According to Aurobindo, in the formative stage of Vedic language, there were more ideas and fewer words.

"The Vedic Sanskrit represents a still earlier stratum in the development of language. Even in its outward features, it is less fixed than any classical tongue; it abounds in a variety of forms and inflexions, it is fluid and vague, yet richly subtle in its use of cases and tenses. And on its psychological side, it has not yet crystallised, is not entirely hardened into the rigid forms of intellectual precision" (P/54 ibid).

In the West, philosophy is an academic discipline. It is a derivation from the Greek word "philosophia", meaning love or pursuit of knowledge. For the Hindus it is तत्व मीमांसा. It is a compound of two stems, *i.e.*, *tad* (that) *tvam* (you) – *that* (Brahman) is you. Our tradition is an enquiry into the reality behind the phenomenal world. Hence, this choice of expression for the subject. The word "*Darsana*" means different schools of philosophy that are an attempt to explain the reality behind the phenomenal world. The rout of this word is Drisyar (द्रुश्य़र् प्रेक्षणे). The noun form Darsan, therefore, means sight or vision. Vision, of course, implies the ultimate knowledge. Therefore, philosophy for the Hindus is not merely a discipline but an enquiry into the absolute. "Yoga" is a term grossly misunderstood by the present generation. Today, it means a form of exercise for the respiratory organs. This word is derived from different stems:

युजिर् य़ोगे
युज समाधौ
युज संय़मने

The three stems mean a conscious effort towards controlling the senses, concentrating on the absolute and attaining *Samadhi* or ecstasy. The stem *Man* (मन) means knowledge, and therefore, mantra is not merely a hymn in praise of the deity of worship but also knowledge as conveyed by the seers who perceived the reality in a deep state of ecstasy. For all societies, "servant" is a person supposed to act in a manner that is acceptable to the master. However, the Sanskrit term भृत्य़ = भृङ – भरणं पोषणं (administration and an act of nourishing) is definitely more respectable. The important aspect to note is that for the Hindu society of yore, a servant, though a subordinate, is a collaborator whose position was not devoid of his individual status and personality. Only a society that considers the entire humanity as a single family can conceive such an exalted ideal.

The ultimate or fourth human endeavour for the Hindu is *moksha* (salvation). The English word "liberation" implies a relief from worldly existence at best. The Sanskrit word is a combination of two roots,

i.e., *moh* desire or illusion) *and* kshaya (destruction). Man is bound to the illusory world by desires. Therefore, *mukti* or liberation is actually freedom from desires. The Sanskrit word *Amrit* can be translated as elixir(a divine drink)capable of preventing death. However, this explanation is superficial. The expression conveys an exalted mental state when it dawns upon him that he is neither the *sthoola sarira* (gross physical existence) nor the *sookshma sarira (subtle body)* nor even the consciousness. He is the very Atman and therefore verily the Brahman – the absolute. In such a state, death, which is the termination of physical existence, is of no consequence. Another Sanskrit word for servant is सेवक. The Latin word" *Servus*" indicates that it is borrowed from the Vedic Sanskrit. The ultimate authority of Hindu philosophy is the Vedas. The Sanskrit stem विद means "to know". Hence, the noun form वेद literally means knowledge. However, for the Hindus, the word gained plasticity as revelations of Brahman through the medium of Rishis.

6. Conclusion

Vedic or classical Sanskrit and the great variety of modern Indian languages have a spiritual content. By ved, we mean the accumulated knowledge. Knowledge is Brahman. The seers in a state of ecstasy (Samadhi) had the vision of the Ved. Therefore, it is *apaureshaya* (impersonal). Badrayana's *Brahmasutram*, the Upanishads, and the Gita constitute Vedanta. In other words, Vedic revelations continued to inspire the Hindu society, whose intellectual transactions were more metaphysical than physical. The point to emphasise is that the written or spoken transactions of the learned and the most rustic expressions coalesce at the underlying philosophical reality. That temperament is, of course, spiritual. Spirituality is therefore our heritage.

For the Hindus, Saraswathy is the patron deity of *vidhdyā*. In the limited context of the world, we can term *vidhyā* as the manifestation of Saraswathy through the written or spoken word. We always hail scholarship, literary and oratory excellence, as blessings of that Goddess. To be precise, the hue of our language is spiritual, and that hue permeates all vernaculars branched out from the source.

7. References

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2. Bhartruhari, Vakyapadeeya
3. Kalidasa, Raghuvamsam with commentary of Mallinatha, Ed by M R Kale 2008, P/2
4. Sri Aurobindo, Secret of Veda 1998, P/52
5. Sri Aurobindo, Secret of Veda 1998, P/64
6. ibid P/54

Notes

1. Adi Sankara authored a manual for the conduct of Sanyasis who belong to his Dasanami Sect. For the Dasnamis, the first Guru is Sadasiva or Sankara, and Adi Sankara is the middle one in that tradition. Sadhana Panchakam is a Manual for mendicants authored by Adi Sankara
2. Ishta Devata is the deity chosen for Sadhana. Guru initiates the seeker to Brahmacharya (celibacy), and advises a mantra(chant) of that deity.