

INDIAN GRAMMARIANS AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOUND

The tradition of studying language, sound and communication in India is as old as the subcontinent itself. Vast amounts of works have been written about grammar and its relation to theology by Indian grammarians, beginning centuries before the time of Jesus Christ. Perhaps these accounts of the Sanskrit language—intricately breaking it down into a handful of verbal roots and phonemes—are so meticulous and amazing because the writers believed in the divinity of language and sound; they reverently explored every aspect of the language and philosophically speculated on its connection to the Supreme Being, or Brahman, and through that, liberation (*moksa*). This article examines the contributions of two prominent, ancient Indian grammarians, Panini and Bhartrhari, to the Indian tradition of theologically oriented linguistics. This is followed with a discussion of the connection between sound and the divine as it is conceived in the Hindu tradition.

Panini was a highly influential grammarian who, in the fifth century BCE wrote a monumental work of linguistic analysis known as the *Astadhyayi*. Even to this day, the *Astadhyayi* remains unsurpassed in its comprehensive and complex brilliance. The work is a complete grammar of the Sanskrit language, including classical (or Vedic) Sanskrit, the language in which the Vedas were composed. Sanskrit is highly complex in its organization and subtle in its execution and intonation; there are forty-nine phonemes in the language, divided into vowels, consonants, and diphthongs, or combined vowel sounds. The consonants are structured according to where in the mouth they are produced. For instance, they may be produced in the throat (gutterals), back of the mouth (palatals), with the tongue on the roof of the mouth (cerebrals), with the tongue on the back of the teeth (dentals), or with the lips (labials). There are five different nasal letters (“n” sounds) and three forms of “s” (silibants) (Pathak 35). It consists of

eight chapters, each further divided into four, and contains around four thousand *sutras* (or rules) that reference categories of verbal roots (*dhatu*) (Coward and Raja, 113). Panini's explanation of Sanskrit grammar as it appears in the *Astadhyayi* thoroughly explains the entire organization of the language and it remains faithful to these rules today; it was the first such work to trace an entire language to a small number of verbal roots (Klostermaier 70). The language is categorized into two lists, the *dhatupatha* (the most basic verbal roots) and *ganapatha* (nouns, verbs, etc that are applied to the lists) (Coward and Raja 14). The *Astadhyayi* explains how each word in classical Sanskrit is able to be reached at, beginning with two basic categories—affixes and bases, which are of two types as well, verbal and nominal (*ibid* 15). Panini also uses abbreviations to denote recurring characteristics; the *Astadhyayi* is remarkably systematic and thorough. Panini points out the geographical variances in how Sanskrit is spoken, referring to the different inflections as those of the “northerners” or “southerners” etc. The emphasis is placed, however, on the language as it was spoken by the cultured and educated people of the time (*sista*) as the authoritative version that Panini was most interested in (Coward and Raja, 113).

Panini is well-known for his work because it has been preserved through the years and is still referenced, but he is not the earliest Indian grammarian. In his work he makes note of other linguists before him and many, such as Katyayana, Patanjali and Bhartrhari, have followed him.

Bhartrhari lived quite sometime after Panini, around the fifth century CE. He was also a popular grammarian whose works were very influential. His most notable effort, the *Vakyapadiya*, discusses the philosophic conception of the relationship between the spoken word (“outer form”) and its “inner meaning” (Sivaraman 214). Bhartrhari is credited with developing the theory of language known as *sphota*, from the Sanskrit word *sphut*, meaning whole (Sivaraman, 214). The term *sphota* actually means something like bursting forth. For analogy,

when the seal is broken on a pop bottle, there is an immediate and abrupt release of once-contained air; with *sphota*, the hearer intuitively perceives and understands the meaning of the word in an instantaneous moment. The *Vakyapadiya* expounds on the idea that the spoken word appears to have differentiation but it really does not—it exists in the mind of the speaker as a “unitary gestalt,” or *sphota*. The listener hears the variation in tone and inflection of the spoken word(s), but ultimately perceives the meaning of the whole word, as a unity (Sivaraman 216). The idea is that the meaning exists in the mind of both speaker and hearer, but it is through sounds that the meaning is transferred.

Bhartrhari does not subscribe to this idea fully; he says that the “spoken words serve only as the stimulus to reveal or uncover the meaning which was already present in the mind of the hearer” (Sivaraman 216). Bhartrhari explains this idea by suggesting that the mind understands sound in two aspects: word-sound (*dhvani*) and word-meaning (*artha*). *Sphota* is the undifferentiated whole, of which *dhvani* and *artha* are two sides of the same coin. There is a deep spiritual connection between the communicable word and the thought that inspired it; they develop simultaneously according to this philosophy (Sivaraman 220). Grammarians [of this persuasion] also say that communication is possible among human beings because language and meaning have the same base in a divine consciousness; the Ultimate Reality of Brahman/*atman*. Because spoken sounds have this unique connection to the divine, that the written word does not share, language can function as a Yoga—as a path to spiritual realization (Sivaraman 221).

A prominent idea behind the Indian philosophy of language, as demonstrated in the sources from ancient grammarians like Panini and Bhartrhari, is that the spoken word can communicate what is incommunicable—the divine. In the West, culture is very visually oriented [i.e. to the printed word, documents, films, and other media]; the oral dimensions of knowledge

are often overlooked or undervalued (Beck 2). For their entire recorded history, Indians have been studying language, whereas in the West it has only recently begun. The Indian grammarian tradition has highly influenced the Western study of linguistics (Beck 50). As well in India, the importance of oral knowledge has long been advocated. The Vedas are considered to be divinely revealed to the *rsis* (or seers), who are regarded as spiritually perfected ones—such that “the Divine Word could reverberate [through them] with little distortion” (Coward and Raja 50). Mantras, such as *om* (or *aum*), are common in the Vedas and their repetition is seen as a way to reach high states of concentration and even *moksa*. *Om* [also called the *pranava* or *ur-mantra*] is considered to be Brahman in the form of sound: it is the beginning and ending of all that exists and all that will exist. It is the Sabda-Brahman, the Word-Brahman—the manifestation of the divine in sound. In the letters of the mantra *aum*, as explained in the *Mandukya Upanisad*, the 'a' stands for the waking state, the 'u' for the dream state, and the 'm' for deep sleep, hence *aum* is all-encompassing; the ultimate revelation (Klostermaier 71).

As mentioned previously, sound has a special orientation to the divine. This means that anything recorded is just an attempt to code sound which is too subtle to be fully captured by the written word. To truly understand the word and thereby its entire meaning, it is necessary to memorize the words so that they become part of your consciousness (Coward and Raja 36-37). Oral transmission of the Vedas has thus been a standard orthodox Hindu practice; writing cannot ever cover all of the nuances of spoken language and is therefore a discipline of secondary importance (Sivaraman 212).

Each letter of the Sanskrit language, often referred to as a non-verbal energy, has a numeric connection with the physical and psychic body. *Mantras* are then used in meditation to bring one in closer alignment with the cosmos, speeding one towards *moksa*. It is believed that

each syllable or root sound has a mathematical connection to specific areas of the body, known as the *cakras*, and those areas correspond to the cosmos (Pathak 19-30, 207). Each verse in the Vedas is considered to be a *mantra* because the texts were divinely revealed and the entire sacred universe is present (albiet in fragmented forms) in these sounds. To perfect the proper pronunciation and grammar that is required to gain spiritual merit through the medium of language, as presented by Bhartrhari and others, is quite the feat of intellect. However, full liberation will only take place once one has relinquished any attachment to this feat—and has emptied him or herself like the *rsis* to the divine consciousness of sound (Sivaraman 223-224).

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