

Is sabda pramana an antyam pramana? An analysis

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Abstract

Sabda pramana is accepted as one unchallengeable and conclusive source of knowledge in many major systems of thought of Indian Philosophy like Nyaya, Samkhya, Mimamsa, Vedanta, etc.. Especially in the Vedantic framework and for Sankara it is almost considered as the antyam pramana or the final proof. In the paper along with the discussion of the views of Naiyayikas and Vedantins on sabda pramana to what extent the sabda pramana can be treated as an antyam pramana has been examined. It has been pointed out that as a pramana it is very much important as it emphasizes on the analysis of language for knowledge. The analysis of language helps in bringing clarity in the understanding but does not provide conclusive knowledge. So it is pointed out that it is an ongoing process which is highly important but need not be treated as antyam.

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Introduction

According to orthodox understanding *sabda pramana* is primarily understood in the sense of the authoritativeness of the Vedas. And here 'Sabda' refers to the utterances of God. Since Vedas are considered as '*apauruseya*' (not authored by humans) those are treated as divine utterances. Vedantin Madhva considers Vedas to be eternal (*nitya*), self evident (*svatah pramana*), devoid of errors (*nirdosa*) and impersonal (*apauruseya*). Purva Mimansakas also hold similar view that if anything is in accordance with the Vedas then that is acceptable, and if anything contradicts Vedic stand is not acceptable. Thus in this understanding *sabda pramana* stands for scriptural authority and Vedas are taken as scriptures.

This above understanding is found in more rigorous form in the religious frameworks. Divine origin of religious scriptures is very common in most of the religions of the east and the west. A questioner to such scriptural authority is treated as a sinner in the religious framework. However, besides the orthodox and the religious understanding of *Sabda pramana* scholars of philosophy have also discussed about *Sabda pramana* as a source of philosophical knowledge. It is in the sense that not only Vedas, but also various *Sastras* and the views of different acclaimed authorities can be treated as one of the sources of knowledge. *Sastras* can be understood in the sense of authoritative books of various discipline and such books are also the source of knowledge. One who discovers a truth he is known as *apta*. His deliberations (*apta vacana*) can be taken as dependable knowledge.

In this context it may be remembered that obtaining knowledge is one ongoing process. Whatever was treated to be true many years back that may be proved to be false in the later period? Nothing can be claimed to be acceptable for all time to come. Necessary modifications take place and it is welcome in the field of acquiring knowledge. It happens more in sciences and advancement in science on past knowledge is quite conspicuous. Similarly in philosophy revisions take place through conceptual analysis that helps in the enhancement of knowledge.

So far as the view of Acharya Sankara is concerned primarily he seems to have accepted three *pramanas*, namely, *Pratyaksa*, *Anumana* and *Sabda*. But in later texts of his followers *Upamana*, *Arthapati* and *Anupalabdhi* are also figured. However, *Sabda pramana* is accepted in the Vedantic framework and for Sankara it is almost considered as the *antyam pramana* or the final proof. It is important to note that when Sankara admits Vacaspati's saying that thousand scriptures cannot make a jar into a cloth, he does not seem to have advocated *Sabda* in the sense of authority of Vedas as the scriptural authority. The scriptural evidence may be utilised but it is not the end of the process.

Whatever is to be reasonably accepted as knowledge, the ground of such knowledge-claim would be in accordance with the views of scriptures. In other words, whatever is to be accepted reasonably should not be contrary to the established truths of the scriptures. It is the proper significance of the expression *Satyanugrahitā*. Whatever findings are available, out of those one has to bring out a rational comprehension, a harmonious product as acceptable knowledge. In other words, there must be harmony between the present knowledge content and the established truths. It is clear from the expression (*Tattu Samanvayat*). It does not refer to dogmatic acceptance of each and every statement of Vedas and the Upanisads. There might be certain cases where one part is found to be contrary to another part. A seeker of knowledge should apply his reasoning to reach at a harmonious rendering of the scriptures. Sankara considers that there are certain cases where the knowledge may not be available through empirical means but can be obtained through Sruti (scriptures). While commenting upon 'Bhagabat Gita' (18.66) he says : *Pratyakhyadi Pramananupalabdha hi visaye Srutih Pramanyam na pratyakhyadi Visaye*. It shows that he admits the importnace of Srutipramana refering to the limitations of perception and the other sources in certain cases.

So far as the views of *Vedanta Paribhasa* are concerned, here Sabda is used in the sense of verbal testimony that includes the analysis of language. Of course, it is to be noted that Prof. G. Mishra claims that sabda pramana stands for the analysis of language even for Sankara. Since we find that at certain cases for knowledge-claim or validity Sankara has taken resort to the analysis of language, it is quite obvious that such a view can be accommodated under 'sabda pramana alone, neither perception nor inference. For example, the statements expressing verifiable facts and the statements concerning Brahman are certainly different. The validity and acceptance of the latter category can only be possible through Sabda pramana, not through perception or inference. The statement that Brahman is infinite cannot be established through perception or inference. Here the triviality of the statement can be shown through the analysis of language.

Thus, for Sankara, scriptural evidence is the early stage in the process of acquiring higher knowledge. But it is not the end of the process. It follows the steps like making a reflection on the language itself. It may be concerning the syntactical semantic aspect of the statements used for the purpose. And finally the state of being fully convinced about the authenticity of the knowledge gained (self realization). All the three steps come under the ambit of *Sabdajnana*. The *Mahavakyas* are the *akhandarthaka vakyas* (analytic statements) which are acceptable only on the

ground of its logic of language.

Naiyayikas have accepted Sabda pramana or Verbal testimony to be a distinct source of *prama* which is quite different from other sources like pratyaksa, anumana and upamana. The distinctness of this pramana lies on the condition that this pramana tries to emphasize on the knowledge through *sabdajnana*. So it is very important to spell out what is sabda for Naiyayikas. Naiyayikas have attached emphasis on the meaning of a sentence in the context of sabda pramana. They have given their views about the logical structure of a sentence. For them a sentence is a group of words (*pada*) arranged in a certain way. Any combination of words cannot lead to a meaningful sentence. They have specified four conditions of one intelligible sentence. Those are *akanksa* , *yogyata* , *sannidhi* and *tatparya*.

(a) *Akanksa* - It is the natural need that the words of a sentence have for one another in order to express a complete sense. For example, the word 'bring' does not convey a full sense. 'Bring the pen.' makes a complete sentence.

(b) *Yogyata* - It refers to the mutual fitness. When the meaning of a sentence is not contradicted there is yogyata or fitness among the words of a sentence. To say 'Bring the uncoloured red shirt' shows that the mutual fitness is lacking here.

(c) *Sannidhi* - It consists in the proximity between the different words of a sentence. For example, spoken words in a long interval cannot lead to meaningful expression.

(d) *Tatparya* - *Tatparya* as a condition of verbal knowledge stands for the meaning intended to be conveyed by a sentence. A word may mean different things in different cases. So the understanding of a sentence depends upon the understanding of its *tatparya*.

Naiyayikas have also accepted verbal knowledge or Sabda of two types, namely, *drstartha* and *adrstartha*. The first one is about perceptible objects and the second one is about imperceptible objects. The assertions of trustworthy persons about the objects of the world are *drstartha*. But the trustworthy assertions about imperceptible objects, like about atoms , ethers , vitamins etc or concepts like God, freedom, immortality, etc are examples of *adrstartha*.

According to another classification Verbal testimony can be *laukika*(secular) or *Vaidika* (scriptural). The assertions found in the scriptures like Vedas, Upanisads, Gita, etc are treated to be valid cognitions. In case of *laukika* testimony, only the testimony of trustworthy persons is taken as valid.

In *Tarka Samgraha*, Annam Bhatta says that '*Apta vakyam sabdah*'; that means sabda stands for the sentence (*vakya*) uttered by an *apta* (trustworthy person). In other words, a sentence uttered or spoken by a trustworthy person can

be treated as a valid verbal testimony.

Annam Bhatta has also made it clear who can be treated as *apta*. He speaks: '*Aptastu yathartha vakta*'. That means an *apta* is he who makes the right (*yathartha*) deliberation. He makes the right deliberation in the sense whatever he speaks that is acceptable from knowledge stand-point. His spoken sentences are in par with the reality. He has the right knowledge on *vakya* that it is the collection of meaningful words. So the sentence conveys a definite meaning, and man has the power to understand it and accept it as the content of knowledge. This is how *sabda* as a source of valid cognition consists in understanding the meaning of the statement spoken by a trustworthy person.

Thus it is seen that *Naiyayikas* have attached sufficient emphasis on *sabda* as a distinct source of knowledge but have never treated this source of knowledge as a sort of final proof or *antya pramana*.