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**Theory of Meaning: An Analysis of Śabda Pramāṇa from the Nyāya and
Mīmāṃsā Perspectives**

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Abstract: No one can deny the necessity of the śabda or a word in acquiring knowledge along with perception, inference etc. There is innumerable valid knowledge which is attained by only uttered or written words. But the question is raised from ancient times in philosophy even in general: How can we achieve valid knowledge (pramā) from śabda? We may notice that a word holds different meanings in different sentences and we also come across some ambiguous words in our vocabulary. Therefore they almost create ambiguity. So the problem arises: How can we understand a particular meaning from a particular word? There are vast debates in Indian philosophy to resolve this problem. In this paper I shall try to discuss the nature and the problem of the meaning of a particular word from the standpoint of the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā theories. I shall also consider here which one of the theories regarding the achieving of knowledge can be acceptable.

Keywords: Śabda pramāṇa, Testimony, Denotation, Potency, Anvitābhīdhānvāda, Abhihitānvayavāda

Introduction: The discussion and analysis of Śabda as a source of valid knowledge has attracted the attention of philosophers throughout ages. There are some schools in Indian philosophy who do not accept śabda as a pramāṇa or a source of valid knowledge whereas many schools consider śabda as a pramāṇa along with perception, inference etc. But its utility in life as a means of acquiring knowledge cannot be denied. Of the numerous facts which a person knows, it is only a small portion that he can perceive or infer. For the rest, he has to depend entirely upon the śabda which comes to him through spoken or written words. I

would not discuss here whether a school accepts śabda as a pramāṇa or not and why they do or don't. This paper should be limited only for discussing: How does śabda (word) convey its meaning (artha) according to the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā perspectives. Most of the discussion will be presented on the basis of *Tarkasamgraha* of Annaṁ Bhaṭṭa. Of course I have to have other related readings in this matter to discuss their views.

Meaning of Śabda: Deliberation should be considered here at first: What do we mean by śabdapramāṇa? It can be said in answer to this question that there are two aspects of śabda. “When we hear a sentence uttered, there is a certain impression produced on our mind through the auditory channel. That is perception and what we apprehend then are sounds occurring in a certain order. Śabda as a pramāṇa does not, of course, mean this, which rather a prameya. There is another, the expressive and semantic aspect of it, and śabda as we are now thinking of it is of this later kind.”¹ So śabda pramāṇa means verbal testimony or such kind of source of valid knowledge by which the knowledge about this objective world is derived from words. On the other hand, the knowledge derived from verbal testimony is called śabda-bodh or śabda-pramā (comprehension of the meaning of a sentence).

Maharṣi Goutama defines śabda as “*Āptapodesah śabdah*”². Annaṁ Bhaṭṭa also defines in his *Tarkasamgrah* “*Āptavākyaṁ śabdah*”³. So they mean śabda as the assertion of a trustworthy person. If we can use testimony as a synonym of śabda pramāṇa, we should translate the definition as such ‘testimony is the assertion of a trustworthy person’. So there are two words ‘āpta’ (trustworthy person) and ‘vākya’ (assertion) in the definition that we should have to explain to comprehend śabda pramāṇa. Vātsyāyana, the commentator of *Nyāyasūtra*, explains *āpta* or trustworthy person as such, “*āpta khalu sāṅgātṛtadharmā yathādr̥ṣṭasyārthasya cikhyāpayiṣayā prayukta upadeṣṭā*”⁴. Vātsyāyana explains ‘āpta’ in his commentary of *Nyāyasūtra*, “*sāṅgātṛtadharmā yathādr̥ṣṭasyārthasya cikhyāpayiṣayā prayukta upadeṣṭā*”⁵ that means the person

who perceives objects by a strong and valid evidence and who has the ability to assert the knowledge is considered as a trustworthy person or *āpta*. To explain *āpta*, Jadunath Sinha writes “trustworthy persons are those who perceive objects as they exist in their real nature and communicate their right knowledge to others for their benefit out of compassion for them. They are free from attachment and aversion and have immediate knowledge of eternal varieties that exist in all times.”⁶ So it may be said that “the assertions of those who are ignorant of truths but speak what they know are not valid. The assertions of trustworthy persons which are not fit for guiding persons in the performance of right actions and the non-commission of sins are not testimony.”⁷

Now we should understand the meaning of *vākya* or an assertion. It has been mentioned above that the Naiyāyikas define *śabda pramāṇa* as ‘*Āptapodesah śabdah*’ that means the statement of a trustworthy person or *āptavyākṛti* is called verbal testimony or *śabda pramāṇa*. We have discussed above the meaning of the term ‘*āpta*’ or trustworthy person, now we need to understand what a statement or *vākya* means. Here it will be discussed on the basis of *Tarkasaṃgraha* of Annaṃ Bhatta and its commentary written by him *Tarkasaṃgrahadīpikā*. Neo-Naiyāyika Annaṃ Bhatta defines *vākya* as “*Vākyaṃ padasamūhah*”⁸ that means a sentence is a combination of words (*pada*) having a certain meaning. But any combination of words does not make a meaningful sentence. When all its words in a sentence are mutually related, that mutual relation forms a significant sentence. A word cannot by itself express a full meaning. The expression of the meaning of a sentence requires the factors of *ākāṅkṣā*, *yogyatā*, *sannidhi* and *tātparya*. These factors are explained as follows-

Ākāṅkṣā (Expectancy): Annaṃ Bhaṭṭa defines *ākāṅkṣā* or expectancy as such “*padasya padāntaravyatirekaprayuktādvayānanubhāvakatvamākāṅkṣā*”⁹ that means if a word cannot convey its meaning for the absence of another word, there is the expectancy between them. Dharmarājadhara also writes in his *Vedānta Paribhāṣā* that expectancy is the capacity of

the meanings of the words to become objects of enquiry regarding each other.¹⁰ For example when one hears a word i.e. 'bring', he at once will ask in his mind 'what'. Only 'bring' may not convey complete meaning, it should be related in a logical manner to other words to bring about complete sense. The verb 'bring' expects to fill a sense some other word or words i.e. 'a horse'. The sentence 'bring a horse' conveys cognition to the hearer. The words 'bring' or 'horse' alone cannot generate the cognition. Thus the expectation of a word or some words is regarded as a factor to make a sentence meaningful.

Yogyatā (Fitness): Mutual fitness of words of a sentence is another kind of quality of the intelligibility of a sentence. Yogyatā or fitness is defined in *Tarkasaṃgraha* as such "*arthāvādho yogyatā*"¹¹ that means if the meanings of the words of a sentence is not contradicted to other meanings of the words of that sentence, the word is regarded to fit for conveying the meaning. Dharmarāja also defines it as a mutual fitness which avoids contradiction in the relation of objects denoted by a sentence.¹² It may be explained by example that the sentence 'quench your thirst with fire' cannot convey any cognition due to the inherent contradiction between 'fire' and 'thirst'. So the constituent words of a sentence should be compatible with one another to construct a meaningful sentence. The word 'thirst' is compatible with water not fire. So if we use the word 'water' instead of fire in the sentence, the sentence will convey a sense.

Sannidhi (Proximity): Sannidhi is another condition of verbal cognition. The author of *Tarkasaṃgraha* defines Sannidhi, "*padānāmavilamvenocāraṇam sannidih*"¹³ that means the utterance of words in a sentence without long intervals is called proximity. The author of *Vedānta Paribhāṣā* also says that the intelligibility of a sentence depends on the continuity of its constituent words with one another in time or space.¹⁴ It may be explained with illustration of a sentence 'Bring a horse'. In this sentence, if the words 'bring', 'a', 'horse' are uttered at long intervals of time, they cannot convey any sense. Similarly, written words also if

separated by long intervals of space cannot make a meaningful sentence. Thus proximity generates sense in the mind by words without any interval of time and space.

Tātparya (The intention of the speaker): Though the author of *Tarkasaṅgraha* does not define tātparya, the Naiyāyikas admit tātparya or the intention of the speaker as a cause of acquiring knowledge of a sentence. They accept that “the comprehension of the meaning of a sentence depends upon the knowledge of the intention (tātparya) of the speaker.”¹⁵ That means the intended meaning of the writer or the speaker is the fourth condition in creating of verbal cognition. There are many ambiguous words which cannot convey any sense of a sentence clearly. Some words may have two separate senses. Consequently the hearer or reader has to confuse to make out the sense of the sentence. In this case previous context or intention of the speaker is helpful to make out the sense. The example given by Naiyāyikas is the following: the word ‘*saindhava*’ means salt as well as horse. So the meaning of the sentence ‘*saindhava ānay*’ may be either ‘Bring a horse’ or ‘Bring some salt’. In this situation to make out of a sense of the sentence we have to depend on the intention of the speaker. If a person while eating ask for ‘*saindhava*’, he of course means salt not horse. On the other hand when a person gets ready for starting a journey, he will mean by the word a horse not salt. In this way, tātparya may be explained as the intention of the writer or the speaker and it is also inevitable to find out the true import of a sentence.

The Nature of Word: We have seen above that a sentence is recognised as a collection of words which is properly arranged and is qualified by expectancy, fitness, proximity and the intention of the speaker. Then the question may be raised: What is word (*pada*)? Annam Bhatta defines word as “*śaktam padam*”. That means a *pada* or a word is that which is qualified by śakti or denotative potency. The potency which is capable of denoting its meaning is called śakti. Here the denotative potency means the capability of generating knowledge. A particular *pada* or a word generates knowledge of a particular type of object. A

particular word cannot generate any kind of knowledge. In other words, a particular word cannot mean all kinds of objects. So the words ‘man’, ‘cow’, ‘dog’ etc. can denote a particular predetermined meaning of itself. Thus the word ‘man’ has the power to denote man and ‘cow’ can denote the cow. In other words, ‘man’ cannot denote the cow and ‘cow’ cannot denote man. So it may be concluded in this discussion that there is a relation between the word and its meaning and the relation is that which control about the comprehension of the meaning of the word. For this reason a word cannot denote any kinds of meaning. As words cannot be related with all kinds of meaning and as a particular word is related with a particular meaning, the relation is regarded as the controlling power to denote a meaning. So the capability of generating knowledge is regarded as śakti or denotative potency. “Prabhākara recognizes the eight categories of substance, quality, action, community, inherence, potency, number and similarity.”¹⁶ That means Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas admit that the relation between the word and its meaning is a denotative potency which is a separate entity. But Naiyāyikas opine that the denotative potency of words is the convention or the will of God that particular words denote particular kinds of objects. ‘Denote this sense by this word’ – this convention of God is called saṃketa. By this convention according to Naiyāyikas, each word can denote its meaning respectively.¹⁷

The relation between the word and its meaning is meant by the word ‘vritti’ or function. This function is of two kinds – śakti and lakṣaṇā. Śakti is the primary function of a word and what is meant by śakti is called śakyārtha. Lakṣaṇā is the secondary function or vritti of a word and that which is meant by lakṣaṇā is lakṣyārtha. Now the question need have to be considered: Which is meant by the denotative potency (śakti) of a word? In other words which thing (padārtha) is denoted after listening the ‘cow’, ‘horse’, ‘man’, ‘woman’ etc. All philosophers concern about the question but no philosophers agree with each other to answer this question.

There are mainly three theories regarding the answer about the question. We will consider them one by one after Annam Bhatta.

Some philosophers maintain that a word denotes an individual (vyākṛti).¹⁸ For example, a word such as 'cow' is meant an individual cow. So the individual cow is the denotation of the word 'cow'. The second view holds that a word denotes a configuration (ākṛti).¹⁹ They opine that a particular kind of individual has a particular arrangement of parts. A word i.e. 'table' denotes a particular form, configuration or arrangement of parts. A table is known by its configuration and it also understands as a separate thing by only its configuration. That means we can know a thing as a table and not a chair by its configuration or ākṛti. One who does not apprehend the difference between the configuration of a table and a chair can never identify the thing as a table or a chair. It is also said that when one hears a 'word' cow, the configuration of a cow is apprehended to his mind. Here an objection may be raised, "An individual which is the substrate of a genus, is denoted by a word. A genus does not subsist in a configuration, which has no relation to it. But an individual which has a configuration and which is related to a genus is denoted by a word. 'A cow is white'. Its configuration is not white but both it and white colour subsist in an individual. So a word does not denote a configuration."²⁰

The Mīmāṃsā School of philosophy holds that a word denotes a genus (jāti).²¹ In the sentence 'Bring the cow' the word 'cow' denotes the genus cowness (*gotva*). They maintain that a word denotes neither an individual nor its configuration but genus. According to them the individual cow or its configuration should not signify the denotation of the word 'cow'. If an individual cow is admitted to the denotation of the word 'cow', numerous denotative power of a word has to be admitted. So the theory will be vitiated by admitting unlimited power. There is a saying that if an explanation can be possible by admitting a little number of things, it will be meaningless to admit more number of things. If an individual is denoted by a

word and if a word is meant all individuals of present, past and also future then numerous denotative powers should be accepted for denoting each individual. On the other hand, if configuration is the denotation of a word, a real cow as well as an earthen cow should be denoted by the word 'cow', because the configuration of an earthen cow looks like a real cow. But they are really different which is not appeared in this theory. So the Mīmāṃsākas say that neither an individual nor a configuration is denoted by a word. Only genus to them is denoted by a word. They also say that though in some cases a word can denote an individual or configurations, it more meaningful in admitting genus to be a denotation of a word. The knowledge of an individual or its configurations can be generated in other means. So they are not accepted to be a denotation of a word. It is saying that '*ananyalabhyah śabdārthah*' – the meaning which is attainable by any other means, should not be regarded as a denotation of a word. If a meaning can be attainable only by a word, the meaning should be regarded as the denotation of the word. So, individual cow or its configuration should not be accepted as a denotation of the word 'cow'.

An objection may be raised against this Mīmāṃsāka view that in the case of 'A group of cows' means a group of individual cows, because the genus 'cowness' is one. We know that the genus (jāti) is one. In the statement 'He is donating a cow to a Brāhmaṇa' – an individual cow can be given, because the genus cowness is incorporeal and so incapable of being donated. An individual cow can be donated but the genus cowness cannot be donated. So in this case, the individual cow is the primary meaning of the word 'cow'. On the other hand, when we indicate 'cow' in a photo, we actually mention the configuration of a cow. So here the configuration is the primary meaning of the word 'cow'.

In answer to this objection the Mīmāṃsākas say that a word can only denote the genus (jāti). To support this Mīmāṃsā position, Annaṁ Bhatta says "*viśeṣaṇatayā jāte prathamam upasthitatvat*".²² That means the denoting power of a word is acceptable in the genus, hence

the genus which is a qualification is appeared at first and it is also comprehended before the comprehension of an individual and its configuration. An individual cannot exist without its genus. An individual can be known as a thing which is qualified by its genus. So the individual cow can be known as an individual which is qualified by its genus cowness. Now if the denoting power of the word 'cow' is accepted in an individual cow, in acquiring the knowledge of an individual cow depends upon the knowledge of its genus cowness (gotva). A qualification (*viśeṣaṇa*) is the cause of the knowledge of a qualified object (*viśeṣya*). Since the genus cowness is the qualification of an individual cow, the genus cowness is the cause of the knowledge of an individual cow. So if the denoting power is admitted in individual cow, the knowledge of the individual cow will not arise in the absence of reason, the genus cowness. So it is admitted that the denoting power of the word 'cow' subsists in the genus cowness. It is also concluded that if the denoting power subsists in the genus cowness, all individual cow will be denoted by the genus only. So the fallacy of admitting innumerable denoting power of every individual cannot be taken place.

To refute this Mīmāṃsāka view of denoting power of a word in genus Annaṁ Bhatta says that nobody can understand the genus cowness without the knowledge of the individual cow and also its configuration. In the usage of elder persons, 'Bring a cow' etc. the action is possible only in individual cow. So the denoting power should be accepted in the individual cow qualified by genus cowness. The comprehension of genus cowness depends upon the knowledge of individual cow and its configuration. So genus should not be regarded as the denotation of a word. It should be regarded as "*vyaktyākṛtijātayastu padārthah*"²³, that means no one separately among the individual (*vyākṛti*), the configuration (*ākṛti*) and the genus (*jāti*) should be regarded as the denotation of a word, rather they all together will be the denotation of a word.

We have known from above discussion that a word can denote a thing by its denotative potency. This denotative potency may be a convention or will of God that this word will mean this thing or object. When we hear or read a word which is learnt before from the usage of elders, we can remember its meaning. The same matter is taken place when we hear a sentence. A sentence is a combination of well-ordered words and each constituent word of a sentence denotes its meaning and their meanings are recollected in our mind. That means when we hear a sentence, we understand its meaning. But the knowledge of the connected meanings of the constituent words of a sentence is a precondition of producing the knowledge a sentence. But if each constituent word of a sentence by its denotative potency denotes its meanings separately, how do we comprehend the connected meanings of the sentence? If the relations among the constituent words cannot be known, the connected meaning of the sentence cannot be apprehended. Then the question may be arisen: How are the relations among the constituent words of a sentence appeared? Does a word when it is used in a sentence denote only a thing separately or does it denote a thing as related to another thing? Or if a word denotes singly its meaning, how are the meanings of a sentence produced?

There are two main theories regarding the import of a sentence meaning viz. *Anvitāvidhānavāda* and *Abhihitānvayavāda*. The Prābhākara Mīmāṃsākas advocate the *Anvitāvidhānavāda* according to which the words denote a unitary meaning of a sentence enjoining an action, which is different from their separate meanings.²⁴ To point out the Prābhākara view, Annam Bhaṭṭa says “*itarānvite śaktih iti Prābhākaraḥ*”²⁵. That means, the words convey their individual meaning not in isolation but along with the construed meaning of the sentence in a syntactical relation. For example, in the sentence ‘Bring the cow’ the word ‘cow’ means not only the cow as such but also the object of the verb ‘bring’. Thus, a meaningful sentence essentially possesses a relation of the words with one another and produces the construed meaning of the sentence as a whole. No doubt the words individually

denote their own meanings, but they collectively convey the meaning of a sentence. The Naiyāyikas do not accept this view. They raise an objection that “If the entire meaning of a sentence is learnt from the usage of elders, the meaning of the same word occurring many times in different sentences has to be learnt afresh every time, which is not possible.”²⁶ The meanings of sentence cannot be learnt in this way. So ultimately this would make language useless.

The Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsākas, the Naiyāyikas etc. advocate the *Abhihitānvayavāda*, according to which the words denote their separate meanings which being related to another by their mutual expectancy, proximity and compatibility produce the knowledge of their interrelation. To mention this theory, Annam Bhaṭṭa says, “*anvayasaya vākyārthatayā bhāṇasambhavādanvayāṃśe’pi śaktirna kalpanīyā iti Gautamīyāh*”²⁷. That means, according to Gautama, though the meaning of the words and its relations to others is essential to understand the meaning of a sentence, the knowledge of the relation of words does not arise any constituent words of the sentence. The relation of words should not be included in the purport of a word. The knowledge of the relation of words arises actually from the sequential order of the words. It has to be admitted that the sentence of which words are not arranged in proper order is not convey any real meaning. So the knowledge of a sentence depends upon the sequential order of the words. The rule of syntax does not arise any word of a sentence and it is not the denotative potency of a word. So it may be said that like Mīmāṃsākas relation is not a separate category (*padārtha*), rather it arise from the sequential order of the words.²⁸

Śabda or testimony is an instruction which is expressed in a statement. “The knowledge of a proposition is testimony (*pramāṇa*) and the knowledge of its meaning (*artha*) is the result (*pramiti*)”²⁹. There are two kinds of testimony, viz. knowledge relating to perceptible objects

and the knowledge relating to imperceptible objects. The former objects are found in this world whereas the later objects are found in the next world like heaven, hell.

Conclusion: The modern Naiyāyikas divide testimony into secular (*laukika*) and scriptural (*vaidika*). They opine that the secular testimony is not infallible because all men are liable to error. On the other hand, the scriptural testimony is created by God who is not liable to any error. So the scriptural testimony is perfect and infallible. In this connection it is needed to say that according to Naiyāyikas testimony creates from person, human or God. That means they admit personhood of God. So testimony in them is always personal.

Mīmāṃsā philosophers particularly Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas accept two types of testimony viz. personal (*pauruṣeya*) and impersonal (*apauruṣeya*). The words of trustworthy persons and all other personal words are considered as fallible because these are uttered by a person who is associated with many types of defects. On the other hand Vedic words are called impersonal (*apauruṣeya*) because these are not created by a person. Prābhākara holds that the word of a person cannot be accepted as śabda pramāṇa. He opines, “All words used by persons denote things that can be known by perception and inference also. But the meanings of the Vedic texts are not known by inference. They are not inferred from the knowledge of the invariable concomitance between the constituent words and their objects.”³⁰ Prābhākara also holds that the *pauruṣeya* words are not beyond doubt and they may be contradicted after words. So he says that only Vedic words which are not *pauruṣeya* can be considered as śabda pramāṇa and from these words therefore we can attain śabda pramā or valid knowledge.

The Mīmāṃsā view that the Vedas have not been composed by any person is not accepted by the Naiyāyikas. Udayana, an eminent Naiyāyika, has told that the scriptures themselves declare the divine origin of the Vedas. The scripture says, “Then the Vedas came out of His mouth. I am the composer of the Vedānta and I am the knower of the Vedas.”³¹ But it seems

according to the Naiyāyikas, the Vedas were made and revealed by almighty God. It should not understand that God composed the Vedas as a set of books. God only revealed the Vedas which existed in the previous cycle (kalpa) also.

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