

Chapter-IV

A comparative study between the *Śabdabrahman* of Bhartṛhari and *Brahman* of Śaṅkarāchārya

In this chapter an attempt has been made to show a comparative study between *Śabdabrahman* of Bhartṛhari and *Brahman* of Śaṅkarāchārya. Though Śaṅkara in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* argues against Bhartṛhari's notion that the *sphoṭa* is directly perceived but it is true that *Advaitism* of Śaṅkara is identical with linguistic monism of Bhartṛhari. *Advaitism* claimed that reality is one and any form of multiplicity can be ultimately resolved in that one reality¹. Bhartṛhari developed the *Advaitic* trend in philosophy in a unique way and it is otherwise known as *Śabdādvaitavāda*. He claimed that the world itself is the manifestation of *Śabdādvaita*. So, it can be said that Bhartṛhari's philosophical thought is very close to the *vedāntic* form of *Advaitism*. Actually, Bhartṛhari is regarded as one of the earliest *Advaitins* among the grammarians. Bhartṛhari in his *Vākyapadīya* claimed that *Brahman* is identical with language and *AUM* is the basic manifestation of that language. Bhartṛhari in his *Vākyapadīya* described *AUM* as the source of all scriptures and the common factor of all original causes.

Śaṅkara developed non-dualism or spiritual monism as the main teaching of the Upaniṣads². According to Śaṅkara the individual letters of a word are combined through the inferential activity of the mind. For him, only the individual letters of a word are perceived. Śaṅkara claimed that the psychological process is one of the inferences but not the perception. The error of *anumāṇa pramāṇa* is to be overcome by a new inferential construction of mind or by super-conscious intuition of *Brahman*³. But Bhartṛhari opined that the overcoming of error is a perceptual process. So, it can be said that the position of Śaṅkara and the position of Bhartṛhari are not same because Bhartṛhari claimed that the overcoming of error is a positive

perceptual process admitting of degrees whereas Śaṅkara opined that it is a negative process of inference admitting of no degrees. Śaṅkara claimed that nothing can be inferred as the cause of *Brahman* due to its self-evident Omniscience and Omnipotence⁴. Bhartṛhari carefully distinguished between evolution of the world from *Brahman* and evolution of the world from *Śabda*. He asserted that, *Brahman* is both the efficient and material cause of the world whereas *Śabda* is only an efficient cause⁵. Experience shows us that in doing something we first remember the significant words and then act accordingly. So, it can be said that before creation the *Vedic* words became manifested in the mind of the creator and the creator created things corresponding to those words. Thus, *Śabda* is seen as the efficient cause of creation. However, Śaṅkara takes us a step further to take it as the material cause. The originating will which lies behind *Śabda* was the mysterious desire of *Brahman* to get into diversity from unity and this was the direct cause of creation. In agreement with the *Mīmāṃsā*, Śaṅkara maintained that *Śabda* is eternal. He argued that meaning results from the comprehension of an aggregate of letters by the *buddhi* and not from the manifestation of some mysterious *sphoṭa* manifested by the group of letters as is argued by the grammarian school. In this way the metaphysical achievement of Śaṅkara rests on the intensity of thought with which the search for reality is conducted.

Śaṅkarāchārya claimed that the empirical world appears to be different from *Brahman* due to *māyā*⁶. After breaking the fetters of *māyā* human beings achieve self-realization and after achieving this state human beings experience supreme bliss during which all the distinctions between him and rest of the world disappear. Śaṅkara asserted that *Brahman* is immutable, ineffable and has no links with anything which human mind can cognize, conceive and imagine⁷. Śaṅkarāchārya ascribed the creation of the world from *māyā* which has many attributes of divinity and he deems it as neither real nor unreal. It is an integral part of *Brahman*. Here one question may arise how could *Brahman* create the world as it remains

unchanged? In reply to this question it is said that there is no creation in the real sense. Following Śaṅkarāchārya it can be said that the world does not exist on the same ontological level as *Brahman*. Actually, the existence of our very world is the creation of *māyā*⁸. So, the question of reconciling the immutability of *Brahman* with the ephemerality of the world does not arise at all. But the question is how *māyā* transforms *Brahman* which is undifferentiated, partless and immutable into our phenomenal world marked by plurality? In reply to this question it is said that this is simply because *māyā* is ineffable and totally beyond the ken of human cognition. According to Śaṅkarāchārya the two levels of reality are one is *pāramārthika* (ultimate) and another is *Vyāvahārika* (Practical). At the ultimate level of reality there is only *Brahman* while at the practical level of reality there is our world. It is the power of *māyā* which links these two levels of reality. Śaṅkarāchārya used the term *Brahman* to refer to consciousness in its purely transcendental state which is conceived as the utter perfection of non-duality. For him, the realization of the identity of the self with transcendental consciousness is the highest goal of human life. Śaṅkara said that pure consciousness has no distinguishing mark such as name, or form or action or species or qualities⁹. The validity of Śaṅkara's transcendental argument rests on the qualification that the cause of the totality of phenomenal reality which remains constant throughout the creation and destruction of the universe must neither be limited by its opposite nor confronted with duality of any kind. In this sense there can be nothing outside ultimate reality, even the non-existence of the phenomenal world is included in the existence which is the essential nature of consciousness.

Bhartṛhari's conception of *Brahman* as the word principle is an inheritance from the *vedic* tradition. Bhartṛhari stressed upon the importance and significance of all thought and all knowledge being intertwined with the word. Here he deviated from other like the Naiyāyikas who held that it was possible to have cognition of the pure object which is free from

intermixture with the word. But for Bhartṛhari there is no thought or knowledge which is not intertwined with the word. But if consciousness or awareness of all kinds is thus intertwined with the word, the question naturally arises as to whether the two are different from each other or identical. Bhartṛhari asserted that what is called awareness is the fact of having the form of the word. Consciousness in all Beings never goes beyond it, that is, it is never different from this fact of having the form of the word. Therefore, when Bhartṛhari said that *Brahman* is *Śabdatattva*, the word principle, he implied that it is consciousness.

So, it is seen that both Bhartṛhari and Śaṅkara logically searched for the attainment of the same goal, but only their starting point is different. Bhartṛhari started with the impermanence of the language or word from its empirical point of view which can be rectified by the grammar. As a successor of Bhartṛhari Śaṅkara started with the impermanence of world and establishes the eternity of *Brahman*. He realized *Brahman* through momentariness of the appearance of the world. Bhartṛhari said in the same way that is through the universal conditions like *Kāla*, *Sādhana*, *Sambandha*, parts of speech etc, we can understand the whole world and realize the word principle or language. Language becomes meaningful and communicable through above elements. Although Śaṅkara appeared to differ from Bhartṛhari on many points, yet the ideology on which he has based his theory is same. Śaṅkara's theory can be called "ontological monism" and Bhartṛhari's theory can be called "linguistic monism"¹⁰.

In this chapter I have also mentioned that the desire for the knowledge of *Brahman* follows upon something else which one must have already accomplished in order to qualify oneself for this enquiry¹¹. In order to bring out the specific requirements for this enquiry, it is compared and contrasted with the enquiry about *dharma* or religious duty¹². Neither *dharma* nor *Brahman* is an empirical object and we never come upon them in the course of our ordinary experience¹³. We know about them only through the *Vedas*. Bhartṛhari and

Śaṅkarāchārya both opined that our ignorance goes away only through *Veda* and only through *veda* one must realize the ultimate reality i.e *Brahman* or *Śabdabrahman*. So the study of the *Vedas* is necessary for realizing *Brahman*. We should like to know here what, besides a study of the *Vedas*, is specifically required for an enquiry about *Brahman*.

It may be supposed that what is needed in the present case, in addition to the study of the *Vedas*, is the knowledge of various religious duties or rites, in the performance of which the Vedic religion largely consists¹⁴. But such a supposition would not be right, in as much as a man who has studied the *Vedānta* may very well desire to know *Brahman*, even before, or without, desiring to know *dharma* at all. There is no relation of necessary sequence between an enquiry about *dharma* and an enquiry about *Brahman*. It cannot be made out that one enquiry is part of the other enquiry or that one is competent to ask about *Brahman* only when one has already known about *dharma*. Besides, we know that these two enquiries have different objects as well as different results. What results from a knowledge of *dharma* is well-being or prosperity, whether in this life or in the next, and that, too, is dependent upon our actual performance of *dharma*. What results from the knowledge of *Brahman* is the highest end of our life or liberation, and it does not depend on any other performance. The *dharma* which is sought to be known does not yet exist when we merely know about it. It has to be brought about by some action of a human agent. In the case of *Brahman*, what is sought to be known is the existent reality, which, being eternal is never dependent upon any action of man.

Moreover the *Vedic* injunctions or declarations, from which we learn about *Brahman* and *dharma*, differ in their significance¹⁵. What a religious duty or *dharma* is, is determined by the *Vedic* injunction alone. Our religious duties are what the *Vedas* enjoin. Such an injunction is intelligible only as a direction to perform the particular action enjoined. But the *Vedic* declaration about *Brahman* gives us only knowledge about *Brahman* but no direction

whatever for any action. Knowledge is never produced by an injunction. It arises automatically when its particular conditions are fulfilled, as we see in the case of our perception of an external object, which results automatically from its contact with our senses, without any direction from anybody.

So our main question remains: what are the preconditions of an enquiry about *Brahman*? Really we want to know what qualifications are needed by an aspirant after attaining the knowledge of *Brahman*, so that his enquiry about *Brahman* may be fruitful.

These qualifications are fourfold. First one is the discrimination between what is eternal and what is not eternal. One should realize that the self alone is eternal, while the world and all its objects are perishable and impermanent. Secondly, one must give up all desire for objective or sensuous enjoyment, whether in this world or in the next. Thirdly, one must have self-control, control over the sense as well as the mind. Lastly one must have a real desire for absolute freedom or liberation. Having acquired these qualifications one may very well enquire about *Brahman* and know it, even before or after an enquiry about *dharma*. But without these qualifications it is not possible to know *Brahman* and there would be no sense in an enquiry about it. So, the enquiry about *Brahman* is to be made after one has acquired these qualifications.

The *Vedas* themselves declared that the different sacrifices which we are enjoined to perform in order to achieve some good cannot lead to any permanent result. Even if we go to heaven we can stay there only for a time and have to come down again when the merit we acquired through sacrifices is exhausted. *Veda* also says that we can attain the ultimate end and achieve permanent satisfaction by the knowledge of *Brahman*. So one should enquire about *Brahman* after one has acquired the aforesaid qualifications.

Brahman is the direct object of our enquiry. The word *Brahman* here means the absolute being. An enquiry, as the etymology of the word (*jijnasa*) shows, really means a desire for knowledge. Desire is always directed towards some result to be achieved¹⁶. Here the object of desire is knowledge which is not merely *veda*, but a direct intuitive realization. What is sought to be realized through valid knowledge is *Brahman*, and the realization of *Brahman* is the ultimate goal of man which removes the great evil of ignorance, the root cause of our worldly existence as well as of all our sufferings. It is on this account that *Brahman* has to be enquired about and known.

Now the question is whether *Brahman* is something already known or not known at all. In the first case, there is no need to enquire and in the second case, it is not possible to enquire. We not need to enquire about things we already know, nor can we enquire about those which we do not know at all. The difficulty is solved when we realize that although we know *Brahman* in a general way, we are in the dark about its specific character. By the word *Brahman*, as its etymology suggests, we understand an eternal being which is pure, conscious and free as well as omniscient and omnipotent. And as it constitutes the self of all, its existence is, of course, known, because everybody is conscious of his own existence and nobody says ‘I am not’. If the self were altogether unknown, everybody would realize that he is not. Now, if the self is *Brahman*, and if in knowing the self we know *Brahman*, then, no doubt, *Brahman*, in effect, turns out to be known already: but still we have to carry our enquiry further about it, because although we know the self in a general way, there is a good deal of misunderstanding and difference of opinion about its specific character.

Ordinary people and some philosophers, who are materialists, take the self to be the body only, endowed with the attribute of consciousness. For others the self is but the senses, which are conscious. For some the mind is the self. Some (e.g. some Buddhists) take the momentary state of consciousness to be the self. For others (e.g. *Mādhyamika* Buddhists), the self is a

mere vacuity (*shunya*), void of all contents. Many (e.g. *Naiyāyikas*) regard the self as distinct from the body and object to transmigration, and also capable of acting and enjoying. Thus there are so many different concepts regarding the self. Such being the case, if anyone accepts any of these views without due considerations he is liable to miss the goal of his life and suffer evil consequences. By premising an enquiry about *Brahman*, what is really begun here is a discussion of *Vedāntic* texts with arguments, which are in keeping with the spirit of the *Vedāntis*, with a view to determine their exact and true significance. Such determination is felt to be necessary for the attainment of the highest goal of life or *Mokṣa* which cannot be attempted, far less realized, without proper scriptural guidance.

Bharṭṛhari and Śaṁkarāchārya both opined that *Brahman* or *Śabdabrahman* is the source of the world. So, we should seek to know *Brahman*. But what is meant by *Brahman*? We have already come to know the view of Bharṭṛhari in our previous discussion. Now I have mentioned the view of Śaṁkarāchārya on *Brahman*. Śaṁkarāchārya claimed that *Brahman* is the ultimate Reality from which the entire world we see with its multifarious contents of different names and forms has arisen. How such a world is made and how it operates is really beyond the conception of any human being. *Brahman* is the all-knowing and all-powerful cause of this world and it is *Brahman* again who maintains it in existence and into whom it will ultimately disappear. It is not possible to conceive that a world of the above description can proceed from unconscious nature or atoms or mere non-being or a finite person, as some philosophers suppose. The origination, subsistence and dissolution of the world require an all-knowing and all-powerful being who is none other than God. The phenomena of the world cannot be explained by mere unconscious nature. Because they take place at determinate times and places and follow from definite causes, indicating thereby clear regulation by some supremely intelligent and powerful being. Those who believe in God, as distinct from finite individuals, make use of this kind of inference to prove His existence.

The knowledge of *Brahman* is to be brought about through a firm determination of the meaning of *Vedāntic* texts, resulting from such discussions. This knowledge cannot arise from inference or any other source of empirical knowledge. When there are *Vedāntic* texts relating to the origin, subsistence and dissolution of the world, one may no doubt make use of inference or reasoning in order to understand clearly and determine firmly their true significance, taking care, of course, that such reasoning does not militate against the spirit of the *Vedānta*.

In an enquiry about *dharma* our only source of knowledge is Scripture, but not so in an enquiry about *Brahman*. Here our own direct experience as well as scriptural revelation has to be availed of as far as possible, not only because the knowledge of *Brahman* has ultimately to mature into our own immediate experience, but also because it relates to an existent reality. In regard to a religious duty which has to be performed, we do not depend on our experience but on a scriptural injunction which directs us to perform it. Moreover, a duty, for its realization or performance, depends entirely on a personal agent. A duty after all is some act to be done ; and an act, whether religious or secular, can be done in one manner or in another or left wholly undone, just as a man may go to a place on horseback or on foot or not go at all. So also, we find sometimes a ritual is prohibited and sometimes it is enjoined. This involves no contradiction, because the injunction and the prohibition may apply to different cases, under different circumstances. So alternatives and exceptions are quite possible and intelligible in regard to subjective acts and Vedic injunctions. But in regard to a real existing thing, we cannot conceive of any alternatives. We cannot say that it is such or not such or even not there at all. Such alternatives are purely conceptual, i.e. are fabrications of human intelligence and do not exist in reality.

The knowledge of things as it is, is not determined objectively by the intelligence of an individual subject but by the nature of the thing itself. In regard to a man-sized tree, our true

knowledge is not expressed by saying that it is either a tree or a man. It is surely false to say that it is a man or something else. The true knowledge being that it is a tree and not anything else. Thus we see that the validity of our knowledge of something real is determined by the nature of the thing itself. So the knowledge of *Brahman* is also determined by the nature of reality (and not by any injunction), as it relates to something real.

It may be supposed that if *Brahman* is something real, it may as well be an object of some ordinary means of knowledge such as perception or inference. So it can be said that a discussion of *Vedāntic* texts in this connection would be rather pointless. But such a supposition would be wrong. *Brahman* is certainly not an object of our senses and we cannot possibly perceive its relation with anything whatever. Our senses are naturally turned towards external objects and not towards *Brahman*, i.e. inward. If *Brahman* were an object of sense-perception, we could see objects, which are its effects, as related with it. But we see merely objects or effects and can by no means determine whether they are related with *Brahman* or with something else. Śaṅkarāchārya claimed that *Vedāntic* statements described *Brahman* as the cause of the world. Actually, the *advaitic* trend of Śaṅkarāchārya claimed that *Brahman* is the ultimate ground of the world which is eternal, pure, free and all-knowing.

Śaṅkarāchārya have shown that *Brahman* is the cause of the world and, so, implied that it is omniscient. For him, scripture is the source of our knowledge of *Brahman*. By the word 'scripture' we understand the *Vedas* and other inspired writings from which all our knowledge is ultimately derived. We know, on scriptural authority, that the *Vedas* have come from God, without any special effort being made on his part for this purpose. They came as easily and effortlessly from him as the breath of a man flows from his nostrils. It is common knowledge that an author always knows more than what is contained in his books and so it goes without saying that the great being which could produce so effortlessly what is in fact the mine and source of all knowledge should itself be all knowing.

Following *Veda* Śaṅkarāchārya opined that the scripture is the source of our knowledge of *Brahman*. So, it can be said that both Bhartṛhari and Śaṅkarāchārya have given importance on scripture which is the valid source of our knowledge of *Brahman*.

Like Bhartṛhari, Śaṅkarāchārya also accepted the identity relation between individual and the Absolute i.e *Brahman*. Śaṅkarāchārya accepted the complete identity of *Brahman* and the individual self. To suppose that *Brahman* is the creator of the world is really to suppose that the individual or the embodied self is the creator. This means that the individual has created the seat and source of all its troubles. This is quite implausible. No conscious being, who is a free agent, will consciously and willingly enslave him and make a veritable prison house for himself to cause him endless troubles and sufferings. When a man does anything he normally remembers that he has done so, just as a magician knows that he has put up a magical show and if he finds it in any way painful to him, he forthwith withdraws the show quite easily. But we neither remember that we have created the world nor can we unmake the world, not even a small part of it which constitutes our bodily self. We are made to suffer in spite of ourselves, which shows clearly that I am not the creator of the world, that is, *Brahman* as identified with me is not the creator.

The solution of this difficulty lies in the fact that the creator is different from the embodied self. The all-knowing and all-powerful *Brahman*, who is eternal and pure and ever free, is believed by us to be the creator of the world; and it, is different from the individual embodied self, who is not supposed to be the creator of the world. For the individual self there may be something harmful or beneficial. If he is the creator of the world, he would no doubt be liable to the charge of doing something harmful to himself. But there is nothing harmful or beneficial to *Brahman* who is beyond good and evil and is eternally free. There is nothing harmful to him to be avoided and nothing beneficial to be sought after, and so the charge of having created a world against his own whatever. That *Brahman* is different from the

embodied self is clearly known from the scriptural injunction that the highest self or *Brahman* has to be sought after and heard and known for the object of our spiritual search and knowledge must be different from ourselves who are to seek and know it. The object is always different from the subject of any act, whether knowing or any other. But there is a difficulty. Just as distinction is implied in the above injunction, identity is also clearly asserted when we are told 'thou art that'. How can there be both identity and difference, they being contradictory of each other? The difficulty is solved by the analogy of space as universal and as enclosed within a limited object like a jar. Space is no doubt one and the same. The space enclosed within a jar is not anything other than space as such, and still we understand it as distinct, owing to the limiting condition. In the same way, although the self is no doubt one and the same, the embodied self is understood as distinct from the absolute or supreme self on account of the limiting adjuncts of our body and mind.

Moreover, when one is made to realize the identity of the individual with the absolute on hearing the scriptural declaration 'thou art that', one ceases to be subject to the worldly life. In fact the world ceases to be these, and *Brahman* is no longer conceived as the creator of the world. All our conceptions of distinction and difference, and so of the world and its creator, are really born of our perverted false notions, and they are completely removed on the rise of true knowledge. And so there is really no problem of creation or of doing something contrary to one's interests. We have repeatedly asserted that the world or the entire creation does not in reality exist but is a mere illusion, due to the non discrimination of the self's adjuncts like the body etc., which are constituted by mere names and forms presented by *avidyā*. The creation being not there at all, the question of there being something done contrary to one's interests does not arise at all. As long as the illusion persists and is not removed by right knowledge, the question, no doubt, is pertinent and is bound to arise, and it is to be solved by the suggested difference between the embodied self and the supreme self.

One may still be troubled by doubt as to how the world of infinite complexity and variety is to be explained by the one unitary principle of *Brahman*. But there are various analogies available which should help to dispel the doubt—the analogies of stones etc. Stones are nothing but some modes of earth or solid matter and are possessed of a single common nature. But still we find a great variety among them in kind; quality and value. Some are very precious and rare, while others are lying in plenty by the wayside. Similarly seeds sown on the same plot of land give birth to plants of various kinds, differing in their flowers and leaves etc. Also the same food substance, when eaten, gives rise to various effects like blood, bone etc. In the same way, although *Brahman* is a unitary principle, it can account for all its various effects, and so there is no room for any suspicion of inconsistency in our theory as alleged by our opponents.

I have already discussed how *Śabdabrahman* can create the world. Now the question is how can *Brahman* described by Śaṅkarāchārya create the world out of itself or out of nothing?

It is urged by some people that whoever makes or does anything does so with the help of some suitable means which are used as the material or instrument of action. For example, a potter makes pots with the help of clay, wheel, stick etc., and a weaver makes cloth with the help of thread, shuttle, spindle etc. But *Brahman* is absolutely alone and so quite helpless.

The difficulty is solved by the consideration that there is a number of things in the world which of themselves undergo modifications and result in their appropriate effects, without resorting to any external means. Milk, for instance, changes into curd without any instrument for this purpose. Our opponent may say that even milk requires external heat to change into curd. But we may point out that what the external heat does in the case of milk turning into curd is merely to accelerate the process of change and is not at all responsible for the particular effect, which would ensue sooner or later without the application of external heat.

If it were not in the nature of milk to turn into curd, heat would never make it do so. We can never get curd out of air or ether by means of external heat. If heat does anything, it is merely to add to the capacity of milk, which is already there, to turn into curd. Such addition to power is not, however, possible in the case of *Brahman*, which is absolutely perfect and does not lack anything. Thus *Brahman* by its own infinite capacity, without taking any external help, can account for all the various effects which issue out of it.

Some people objected that the case of *Brahman* and that of milk are not similar. Milk is something material and can of itself change into some material effect. But *Brahman* is an intelligent principle and, like a potter (who is an intelligent being), would need some instrument for its action and creation. We are helped out of this difficulty by many instances found in our ancient literature of gods and men of superhuman power, producing wonderful things by their mere will without employing any external means. They are known or, at least, said to be able to make for themselves human bodies, buildings and chariots of wonderful structure by themselves. They too are conscious and intelligent beings like potters and weavers. The critics may urged that although the superhuman beings are conscious and intelligent, they are not mere consciousness or intelligence like *Brahman*, but are possessed of their characteristic bodies which, even though subtle, are after all material in some sense. They may be helped by their bodies in their creative activity, where as *Brahman* has no body at all, and is therefore quite helpless. Our reply is that we have cited the instances of gods and other superhuman beings merely to bring out the great difference between their method of work and that of ordinary potters and weavers. Weavers and potters require external help but gods and other superhuman beings do not. This is enough to show that what is true in some cases of intelligent beings need not apply to all. So *Brahman* need not make the world in the way a potter makes his pots. So, it can be said that according to Śaṅkarāchārya *Brahman* is the material and efficient cause of the world. In the same way Bhartṛhari also claimed that

Śabdabrahman is both the material and efficient cause of the world and I have already discussed about this in my previous chapter.

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