

# Discernment of Silence - The Advaitic Insight

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In Advaita Philosophy discourses bear an important place. Advaita declares that discourse is primarily concerned with individuals and finally emphasizes the identity of the individual with Reality. Its analysis commences with empirical existence and culminates in the essence - declaring that the two are not different. In Advaita, all linguistic expressions directly and cognitively assert the Reality described in the scriptures as "एकमेवाद्वितीयम् ।" <sup>1</sup> According to Advaita terminology, the first level of language is a literal expression directly encompassing the universe with all its diversities. For revealing the nature of the objective world, language with its premium factor of word is utilised according to the convenience of mankind. Thus the present world witnessed the origin of numerous languages peculiar to specific places and times. Second level of language is more prominent being produced from exhaustive efforts to disclose deeper intentions in the way of self-realization in the scheme of the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. The language used in many a context in the Upaniṣadic literature embodies indirect, symbolic and figurative expressions.

Advaita employs technique of prior superimposition and subsequent denial (अध्यारोप , अपवाद ) for arriving at the most definite conclusion on non-dualism. As the First step, qualities and relations like Omniscience, Omnipotent, Omnipresence, causality etc. are superimposed upon the Absolute so as to enable one to understand the non-objective principle. Then gradually these attributes are negated as deeper and deeper analysis is brought out. From the familiar, one is led to the unfamiliar. From the known, one is led to the unknown. Advaita precedes

the method of negative implementation of dialectics. The Br̥hdāranyaka Upaniṣad says that - नेति नेति नह्येतस्मादिति नेत्यन्यत् परमस्ति ।<sup>2</sup> Now therefore the description of Brahman is 'not this' 'not this'. Because there is no other, the more appropriate usage of word is "not this".

Śankara commenting on this passage: He says that the Absolute can never be properly denoted by any word- including the word 'Absolute'. Thus the only appropriate word to indicate Brahman is to say 'not this' 'not this'. Though no positive description of the Absolute is possible, Śankara claims that a negative characterization may be comprehensible. Its importance is to reveal that there are no characteristics applicable to the Absolute as well as to indicate the impossibility of attributing any conceptualization to It. Thus it becomes a particular linguistic device for dispensing of all kinds of categorical mistakes. It is a methodological application of language-symbol which draws attention to the ineffability of the Absolute. Thus नेति नेति has been called a way or a schematic manner of expounding the Truth.

Discourse is a conceptualization of that Reality and will be destroyed as soon as it is cognized in the realm of experience. Yet conceptualization is necessary and cannot be avoided for the self-knowledge to arise. Another technique consists in the use of metaphor and rhetoric. Brahman is said to be known through implication. Words can indicate a class characteristic, a quality, an action or a relation. None of these factors are present in Brahman. Therefore Brahman cannot be known by the expressed meaning of words. Thus it is concluded that statements made in the scripture must be interpreted in their secondary meaning of implication. Even such positive expressions as 'Brahman is Reality, Knowledge and Infinity' are to be interpreted as being positive only in form.

Another method of conveying the knowledge of Brahman is through a direct hearing of purport full scripture. For an adequately competent person, hearing the scriptures possessed of meanings beyond common understanding (अखण्डार्थवाक्य) may produce direct knowledge. According to Advaitins, there is another possible technique of having the use of etymology. The word Brahman is

etymologically derived from a root signifying greatness. Greatness implies limitlessness, eternity and purity. By amplifying this train of thought, one comes to know more and more about Brahman - that is, one approach closer and closer to the Knowledge of Brahman. This approach of further enquiry will lead to the realization of Brahman itself. Finally for conveying Brahman, knowledge reaches to the state of 'Silence'. "गुरोस्तु मौनं व्याख्यानम् । शिष्याः संछिन्नसंशयाः ॥" <sup>3</sup>. Thus 'Silence' is the best conceivable means to convey this wisdom. All else will only increase one's illusion and delusion. Silence is eloquent because it exactly characterizes the Reality. Discourse is fruitful in removing all the false notions superimposed upon the Reality. 'अविद्याकल्पितभेदनिवृत्तिपरत्वाच्छास्त्रस्य'<sup>4</sup>. | In Kenopaniṣad, it is said that- "यद्वाचा नभ्युदितं येन वागभ्युद्यते । तदेव ब्रह्म त्वं विद्धि नेदं यदिदमुपासते ॥" <sup>5</sup>

That which is not uttered by speech, that by which speech is revealed that alone is to be known as Brahman. It is also explained that "It is not perceived by the mind, and that by which the mind produces thoughts. It is said that the Reality cannot be presented positively as 'this' or "that". The Reality is not an object of religious discourses in this sense. However, Brahman is known from the hearing and listening of the Great sayings. The apprehending consciousness cannot comprehend an inexpressible principle to the words like Brahman. The mentation 'I am Brahman' destroys all ignorance concluding the apprehending consciousness attempt to reveal Brahman. Thus all ignorance is removed through mentation and Brahman alone exists.

It is a curious matter that philosophers from ancient times up to the present day speak of the ineffability of philosophical discourse in some form or other. Though it is true that the Upaniṣadic sages spoke differently on the contention that runs throughout various philosophical discourses, 'Silence' is unanimously accepted as the most eloquent statement about the Ineffable and philosophical discourses have no use in that context.

The subject matter of philosophical discourse is indeed ineffable, it leads to the unknown domain of speech extending towards silence. Śankara refers:- The seeker, Baṣkali, questions his teacher Bahva, about Brahman. Three times the



question is put forward and three times Bahva remains silent. Finally, Bahva says, Reality is un teachable, I am teaching you indeed, but you do not understand. Silence is the self<sup>6</sup>. This implies that there is a Reality, that this Reality is teachable, and that the nature of Yajñavalkya becomes between the horns of a dilemma. If he explains what Brahman is, he will be guilty of contradicting what he has already stated about the ineffability of Brahman. And yet if he doesn't answer the question from Gārgi, he will be open to the charge of non-comprehension. To escape this dilemma, Yajñavalkya gives the famous reply 'नेति नेति' (not this, not this) and declares that this is what the knower of Brahman has to realize. "स होवाच, एतद्वै तदक्षरं गृहिं ब्राह्मणा" ॥<sup>7</sup>

The non-dual Brahman is indicated by the negations or nos:

“अस्थूलमनण्वह्रस्वमदीर्घमलोहितमस्नेहमच्छायमतमोऽवाध्वनाकाशमसङ्गमरसमगन्धमचक्षुष्कमश्रोत्रमवागमनोऽतेजस्कमप्रामममुखममात्रनन्तरमबाहाम्” ॥<sup>8</sup>

It is beyond all the relative categories of thought. It is easier spoken of by what it is not than by what it is. Thus it is called indeterminate (निर्गुण) only to distinguish it from all attributes. निर्गुण means that it transcends the phenomenal domain. It is indefinable and unknowable. This means that it is too great for words to describe and the finite mind to pierce. The Reality is defined as 'not this', 'not this' only to point that, there is nothing with which Brahman is compared to. The negative definition of Brahman should always be kept in mind. This negative definition of Brahman is conceptually the most competent one possible. This logic of 'नेतिवाद' does not involve any superimposition. Brahman is not the agent of knowing, and therefore Brahman cannot even be expressed by the word 'knowledge'. Brahman is indicated, but not expressed by the word 'knowledge', which bears only a semblance of Consciousness and which assumes the form of an attribute of the intellect. But Actually It is devoid of such attributes and categories, which render the use of the word possible. So Brahman is not expressed even by the word, since It is devoid of all distinctions by Its own nature. These words are mere instruments for distinguishing Brahman from other things. Brahman cannot be designated by these words. These words, without giving up their own meaning, indicate the na-

ture of Supreme by eradicating everything alien to His nature and removing the ignorance which is the root of all illusion. Hence Brahman is an indescribable Reality which is indicated in the Upaniṣads. Here comes the importance of expression of Brahman by the negative indications or silent manifestations. Actually Brahman cannot be designated by any word. The words which delineate to show the nature of Brahman are only semblances. The Sruthi passage ' यतो वाचो निवर्तन्ते ॥ ' shows that the words return back along with the mind without attaining the Brahman. Here Sruthi declares the unspeakableness of Brahman by words. No words can denote Brahman as He belongs to no particular genus and is devoid of qualities.

When mind thinks of things, it thinks of them as of 'this' or 'that' form. In neither way can Brahman be thought of. Therefore mind recedes from Brahman. This idea has been expressed in the Pancakośavivekaprakaraṇa of Pancadasi as

“सर्वबाधे न किञ्चिच्चेद्यन्न किञ्चित्तदेव तत् ।

भाषा एवात्र भिद्यन्ते निर्बाधं तावदस्ति हि ॥”<sup>10</sup>

“अत एव श्रुतिर्बाध्यं बाधित्वा शेषयत्यदः ।

स एष नेति नेत्यात्मेत्यतद्व्यावृत्तिरूपतः ॥”<sup>11</sup>

There is nothing when we discard the names and forms. This is the knowledge of nothing empirical, which denotes the existence of Brahman. When we discard all the attributes, then exists the Reality only. And when we discard all then there is nothing. The state of nothingness and the knowledge that Brahman alone exists, are revealed by the same consciousness. So when we say 'nothing remains', it means the existence of Brahman. So we can say that the 'silence' is a positive entity indicating the Absolute. The realization of Brahman is attained through its silent expressions. So Advaita declares that the Brahman is inaccessible to words as well as mind. It means that Brahman is beyond the language and thought.

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