

# Śabda and Logos in Metaphysical Revelation: When the Word Becomes Flesh and Flash

Jiji Thomas

*Department of Vedanta Sree Shankaracharya university, Kaladi.*

***Abstract***—Within Vedāntic and Western philosophical traditions, the concept of the "Word" occupies a central metaphysical position, articulated through distinct ontological and theological frameworks. In Vedānta, Śabda functions as both an ontological principle and an epistemic vehicle through which Brahman is known. In Christianity, Logos signifies the divine, personal Word through whom creation, revelation, and salvation occur. This paper undertakes a comparative philosophical study of Śabda and Logos, exploring their metaphysical status, epistemological functions, cosmological roles, and soteriological significance. By situating Śabda as the ontological ground of revelation and Sphoṭa as the movement of meaningful manifestation, the study highlights significant convergences in understanding the Word as ultimate reality across both traditions, while respecting their unique doctrinal boundaries. By analyzing these two distinct frameworks, this paper identifies significant philosophical convergences that position the Word as the ultimate ground of reality. It demonstrates that both traditions conceptualize the Word not merely as human speech, but as a cosmic, revelatory force bridging the intellect with the divine. Ultimately, this research respects unique doctrinal boundaries while illustrating a shared metaphysical intuition regarding the divine word.

***Index Terms***—Śabda, Logos, Vedānta, Metaphysics, Revelation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sound is a vital instrument of human expression and communication, permeating every dimension of existence. From ritual chant and poetic recitation to scientific discourse and digital transmission, sound mediates meaning and structures our shared reality. Modern scientific inquiry specifically acoustics—has demonstrated the indispensable role of sound across disciplines such as the earth sciences, engineering, medicine, and the arts. Yet, the philosophical significance of sound extends far beyond its measurable physical properties. Long before the emergence of modern acoustics,

both Indian and Western traditions reflected deeply on the metaphysical status of language and its relationship to reality<sup>1</sup>.

In classical Indian thought, particularly the linguistic philosophy of *Bhartrhari*<sup>2</sup>, language is not merely a conventional tool but the very ground of cognition. In the *Vākyapadīya*, *Bhartrhari* advances the doctrine of Sphoṭa, according to which meaning is apprehended as an indivisible whole rather than assembled sequentially from discrete phonemes. *Śabda* (the Word) is thus understood as an ontologically significant principle—an underlying reality through which thought and the cosmos become manifest. For *Bhartrhari*, language is not secondary to knowledge; it is constitutive of it.

A parallel distinct development occurs in Greek philosophy through the concept of Logos. This concept first seen in Heraclitus<sup>3</sup>, for him *Logos* signifies the rational principle that orders the constant flux of the cosmos. This idea was later transformed within Christian theology, most famously in the Gospel of John, where *Logos* is identified with the pre-existent divine Word: “In the beginning was the Word”. In this context, *Logos* is not merely a rational structure but a creative and revelatory presence that bridges the divine and the human. Ultimately, both traditions elevate the “Word” beyond mere speech, interpreting it as a metaphysical foundation that grounds knowledge, creation, and revelation.

## II. CONCEPT OF ŚABDA<sup>4</sup>

*Bhartrhari* methodically linked Brahman (the Absolute) with *Sabda* in *Vakyapadiya* 1.1, arguing that everything else originates as a manifestation of *Sabda* Brahman, and therefore reality is effable via language. Brahman and language are linked in the Vedic texts.

ओमित्येतदक्षरमिदं सर्वं तस्योपव्याख्यानं भूतं भवद्भविष्यदिति सर्वमोङ्कार एव ।यच्चान्यत्रिकालातीतं तदप्योङ्कार एव ॥ १ ॥<sup>5</sup>

Indian philosophy of language treats *Śabda* (Word) as a fundamental category mediating cognition (*jñāna*), meaning (*artha*), and reality (*tattva*). Far from a mere vehicle for communication, *Śabda* is understood as intrinsically linked to both thought and ontology. Within this tradition, the

<sup>1</sup> Linguistics *MA Sanskrit Sahithya I Semester* (2019 Admn.) (School of Distance Education, University of Calicut, 2019), 12. University of Calicut.

<sup>2</sup> *Bhartrhari*, 5th century CE was a major Indian-Hindu linguistic philosopher, grammarian, and poet from Ujjain. He is best known for his work in *Shabdadvaita* (word non-dualism), which posits that the ultimate reality (Brahman) is identical to the Word Principle (*Shabda-tattva*).

<sup>3</sup> Heraclitus of Ephesus was a Pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, His philosophy centers on the idea that the universe is in a state of constant change, governed by an underlying rational order known as the *Logos*.

<sup>4</sup> In Indian philosophy, *Śabda* (Sanskrit: शब्द) primarily refers to sound, but its technical application varies across linguistics and epistemology. In the context of your inquiry into the *Mīmāṃsā* school, it is defined as verbal testimony—a valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) derived from words and sentences.

<sup>5</sup> *Mandukya Upanishit* 1

linguistic philosophy of Bhartrhari occupies a pivotal position, offering a refined account of the metaphysical status of language<sup>6</sup>. In his seminal work, the *Vākyapadīya*, Bhartrhari advances the thesis that language is an indivisible, holistic reality (*śabda-tattva*), rather than a mechanical aggregation of discrete phonemes.

Bhartrhari says that the very Being of everything is the *shabdabrahman* “Word-God”(Vakyapadiya 1.1). Further, he states that “there is no cognition in the world that is not associated with a word-form”<sup>7</sup>

He famously declares:

न सोऽस्ति प्रत्ययो लोके यः शब्दानुगमादृते ।

अनुविद्धमिव ज्ञानं सर्वं शब्देन भासते ॥<sup>8</sup>

“There is no cognition in the world that does not follow the path of the word; all knowledge appears as if permeated by language.”

For Bhartrhari, meaning is not constructed sequentially; rather, it is apprehended instantaneously through *Sphoṭa* the "flash" of undivided meaning that manifests through articulated speech. Language is thus not merely expressive but constitutive of cognition itself. At its highest level, the ultimate reality Brahman is identified with *Śabda* in its undifferentiated form (*Śabda-Brahman*)<sup>9</sup>. In contrast, the *Mīmāṃsā* school adopts a more phonocentric and realist account. The *Mīmāṃsakas* regard *Varṇa* (the phoneme) as the primary unit of *Śabda*. These phonemes, though manifested through articulatory effort, are considered eternal (*nitya*) and all-pervasive (*vibhu*). They combine to form *pada* (word) and *vākya* (sentence), generating meaning through syntactic unity. The *Śābara Bhāṣya* on the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* (1.1.5) defends this position, asserting the intrinsic validity and eternality of the Vedic Word as a sequence of enduring entities.

Furthermore, the *Nyāya Sūtra* (1.1.7) defines *Śabda* as *āptavākya*—the testimony of a trustworthy person—and recognizes it as one of the four valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). For the *Naiyāyikas*, language is primarily epistemological rather than ontological. Meaning arises from the sequential combination of words, and its validity depends upon the reliability (*āptatva*) of the source.

Thus, classical Indian thought offers a spectrum of interpretations: Bhartrhari’s *Śabda* as an ontological absolute, *Mīmāṃsā*’s *Śabda* as an eternal phonemic reality, and *Nyāya*’s *Śabda* as authoritative testimony.

---

<sup>6</sup> Bhartrhari. *The Vākyapadīya of Bhartrhari with the Vṛtti: Chapter I*. Translated by K. A. Subramania Iyer, Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute / Motilal Banarsidass, 1965, pp. 136-137) The vakyapadiya: A Treatise on the

<sup>8</sup> Bhartrhari. *The Vākyapadīya of Bhartrhari with the Vṛtti: Chapter I*. Translated by K. A. Subramania Iyer, Deccan College, 1965, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Bhartrhari. *The Vākyapadīya of Bhartrhari with the Vṛtti: Chapter I*. Translated by K. A. Subramania Iyer, Deccan College, 1965,78.

### III. CONCEPT OF LOGOS IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The Greek term Logos carries a rich semantic range: word, speech, reason, account, principle, and rational structure. From its earliest philosophical usage, Logos signified more than articulated language; it denoted the intelligible order underlying reality.

Different philosophies had the question regarding the source of all things. One of the concerns of ancient Greek philosophy is answering the metaphysical question of the beginning of existence. Early Greek thought has focused on asking questions on reality that pertain to understanding it and the essence of the existence of beings.<sup>10</sup>

In Western philosophy, Logos serves as a bridge between language and cosmic order, evolving from a term for "speech" into a sophisticated principle of universal reason. Heraclitus first identified it as the objective law governing a world in flux, providing an epistemic ground for human understanding. This concept was systematized by Plato and Aristotle, who viewed reality as a rational structure defined by formal causality, and later by the Stoics, who envisioned Logos as an imminent, "seminal reason" animating the material universe. Finally, Philo of Alexandria synthesized these Greek ideas with the Hebrew creative Word (*dābār*), establishing Logos as the essential intermediary linking a transcendent God to the physical cosmos.

### IV. EMERGENCE OF LOGOS IN CHRISTIANITY

The concept of Logos reaches its most decisive theological development in Christianity, where it becomes central to doctrines of creation, revelation, and incarnation. By striving to bridge the gap between Hebrew and Greek thought, Philo of Alexandria established the groundwork for Christian philosophy and theology. His idea of logos served as a bridge connecting the two. He brought the Greek idea of logos, which Heraclitus and the Stoics developed into Judaism to create a bridge between the Greek and Hebrew worlds. The idea was revolutionized by the Gospel of John, which identified Jesus Christ as the Word of God made flesh. The interaction between Greek philosophy and Christianity enabled theologians to acknowledge the limitations of human comprehension in comprehending the divine Mystery while using philosophical ideas to defend and clarify the secrets of faith.

The opening verses of the Gospel of John—often called the Johannine Prologue declare: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1)<sup>11</sup>. Here, Logos is explicitly identified with the pre-existent Christ<sup>12</sup>. Drawing upon Greek philosophical

---

<sup>10</sup> W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greek Philosophers: From Tales to Aristotle* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 20.

<sup>11</sup> John 1:1, NRSV.

<sup>12</sup> The Gospel According to John, 1:1, in *The New Revised Standard Version Bible* (New York: National Council of Churches, 1989).

vocabulary while remaining rooted in Jewish scriptural theology, the Gospel presents Logos not merely as rational principle but as divine person.

Christian theology therefore affirms several interconnected claims. First, Logos is eternal and divine: the Word exists “in the beginning,” sharing in the very being of God. Second, Logos is the agent of creation: “All things came into being through him” (John 1:3), echoing the Genesis account of creation through divine speech. Third, Logos enters history; divine transcendence does not remain abstract but engages concretely with human time and space.

The most radical and distinctive affirmation follows in John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh.”<sup>22</sup> With this proclamation, Christianity advances an unprecedented theological claim. Logos becomes incarnate in the historical person of Jesus Christ. No longer solely cosmic reason, ordering principle, or mediating wisdom, Logos assumes human nature. The eternal Word becomes visible, tangible, and relational.

Finally, Logos is salvific. The incarnation is not merely revelatory but redemptive: through the embodied Word, humanity encounters divine grace and truth (John 1:17).<sup>13</sup> This marks a decisive shift from Greek philosophical abstraction and even from Jewish wisdom theology. The Christian reinterpretation transforms Logos into a personal, incarnate, and saving presence uniting metaphysics, history, and soteriology within a single theological vision.

## V. THE PRIMORDIAL WORD: A COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS OF ŚABDA AND LOGOS

Both the Indian and Christian traditions elevate language to a primordial metaphysical foundation, yet they articulate its power through distinct philosophical lenses. In the linguistic philosophy of Bhartṛhari, specifically the *Vākyapadīya*, Śabda is presented as an ontological ground—an eternal, indivisible linguistic absolute (Śabda-Brahman) through which reality is both manifested and known. Meaning is not a mechanical sum of sounds but a sudden revelation of unified sense known as Sphoṭa. Thus, language is constitutive of all cognition and inseparable from the Absolute.

In contrast, Christian theology centred on the Gospel of John identifies the Logos as the pre-existent Christ. While both traditions affirm the Word as coeval with ultimate reality and the primary agent of creation, Christianity introduces a radical shift: the Incarnation. The proclamation that “the Word became flesh” transforms Logos from a cosmic principle into a personal, historical presence. Consequently, while Śabda remains an impersonal, “ontological sound” that reveals Brahman through cognition, the Logos becomes a “redemptive person” who saves humanity through history. This marks the decisive divergence between the epistemic revelation of Indian thought and the soteriological mission of the Christian vision. While Indian traditions debate whether Śabda is ontologically fundamental or epistemically functional, Western philosophy approaches language, reason, and cosmic order through the concept of Logos .

---

<sup>13</sup> John 1:17, NRSV.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Both Śabda and Logos demonstrate that language is far more than a conventional instrument of communication; it functions as a bridge between the human and the ultimate. In the Indian tradition, especially in the thought of Bhartṛhari, Śabda is grounded in an ontological theory of sound and meaning, where language constitutes the very medium through which reality becomes manifest and Intelligible. The doctrine of Sphoṭa affirms that truth is not assembled discursively but revealed in an immediate flash of understanding.

In Christian theology, the concept of Logos, articulated most profoundly in the Gospel of John, presents the Word as divine reason incarnate. Here, language is not only revelatory but redemptive: the Word becomes flesh and reconciles humanity to God. The Christian vision thus integrates metaphysics with history, affirming that ultimate reality is personally self-communicative.

A cross-cultural exploration of Śabda and Logos enriches both traditions by illuminating their shared intuition that Word and reality are inseparable. At the same time, their differences deepen philosophical reflection on the nature of revelation, mediation, and transformation. The Word emerges not merely as speech, but as manifestation—whether as ontological sound or incarnate reason—capable of transforming human understanding and existence itself.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Bhartṛhari. *Vākyapadīya*. Translated by K. A. Subramania Iyer. Motilal Banarsidass, 1981.
- [2] Diels, Hermann, and Walther Kranz, eds. *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Vol. 1, 6th ed., Weidmann, 1952.
- [3] Turner, John D. “The Concept of Logos in Greek and Jewish Thought.” *Studia Philonica Annual*, vol. 10, 1998.