

THE SILENT SOUNDS OF SANSKRIT

The origin of speech and language has been a fascinating aspect of human evolution and continues to elude researchers and scholars to date. Academicians have presented many theories and hypothesis sometimes based on empirical evidence sometimes biased by cultural and political affections, but our understanding on this subject remains far from complete.

What follows is a reflection on the theory of sound, speech and language. The ideas expressed here have been inspired by the illuminating work of Dr. Sampadananda Mishra in his book- '*Sanskrit and the Evolution of Human Speech*' where he has charted the history of philology (*the study of language*) and the aspects of sound from the point of view of Indian metaphysics. His narrative is in the light of Sri Aurobindo's contributions in bridging the gaps between the material and the spiritual and the in-depth study of Sanskrit as the closest remnant of the original cosmic language, *devabhāṣā*, of which all languages are only imperfect evolutes. The theories and interpretations of the Vedic texts are taken directly from his book, where they have been explained in detail. The references of those here are only to summarise his presentations for building context.

THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE

Language, as described by Sri Aurobindo, has two fundamental aspects. One is the sound vibration, the material aspect and other is the psychological meaning, the mental aspect.

Any scientific study, which by its very scientific nature is objective, will thus be, and hence has been, insufficient in unraveling the mysteries of the origin and development of human language.

As declared by the Vedic *ṛshis*, and later by Sri Aurobindo, Language is not a construct of human intellect. It is a gift from the Divine.

This divine gift was pure and transcendental, the Supreme Truth, the *brahman* itself. Sri Aurobindo calls this divine revelation, the principle language, which was "greatly fluid and richly subtle" as *devabhāṣā*, the language of the Gods, As evolution progressed, many languages, dialects and vernaculars emerged from the *devabhāṣā*, often departing from the true essence of the divinity and purity of the language.

The human intellect developed on what Sri Aurobindo calls the *guṇas* of the seed sounds, the inherent qualities of a sound that attribute a meaning to it, naturally. Or rather the meaning the vibration of the sound evokes in the mind of the listener. This is the *śakti*, the subtle force that a sound carries.

These root sounds would then have been classified and differentiated, conjuncted and formed into more complex structures as the *need* for more words arose in human communication.

Among the ancient languages that retain the structure and meaning of *devabhāṣā* are Sanskrit, Tamil, Latin and Greek.

Of these Sanskrit is the closest in the seed sounds and the seed meanings to the *devabhāṣā*.

Thus, the “majestic and expressive harmonies of Sanskrit”, are not only the closest we have to a divine realisation of sound and speech, but also, because of its “extraordinary initial simplicity and also of extraordinary mathematic and scientific regularity of formation”, Sanskrit can be a tool for us to go deeper into the origins and evolution of language.

THE LIVING WORD

The relevance of the study of language is not merely for mapping its origins, or for communicative and expressive aspects. Beyond the mundane and the intellectual, there is something inherent in the sound of the speech that is often imperceptible. Yet, it exists, as a part of us. As we shall see, this now hidden, quality of language may reveal to us if we dare to go deeper, a Truth, a power of evolution, a reality beyond the material.

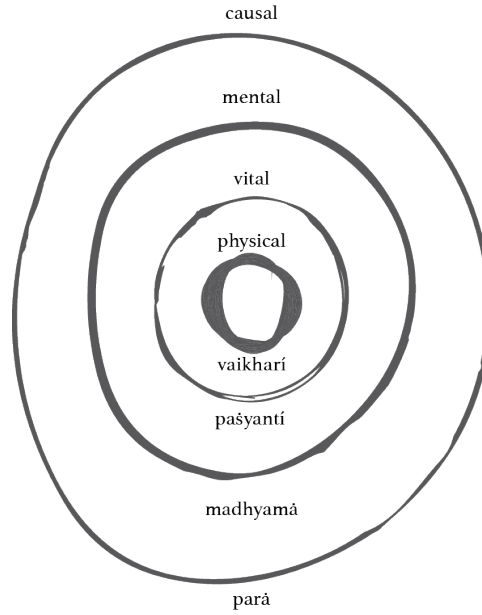
The vedic *ṛshís* were well versed with the creative aspects of the Word. In ancient times, words were more than just symbols of communication. They were themselves living and carried a subtle power, *śakti* or *vāk*. This *śakti* gives life to the Word. The Vedas have described the origins of the universe from the Word. The Word, *vāk*, the divine revelation, the Supreme Truth has been understood as the womb of the universe from which all that is comes forth. This endless soundless sound, *vāk* or *śakti* is itself composed of *śabda* (the sound) and *artha* (the meaning).

As human intellect became more and more analytical, the communicative aspect of Word, the *artha*, became predominant and the loss of the intuitive mind meant a great loss of the creative and living aspect of the Word, the *śabda*.

EVOLUTION OF SOUND

According to Tantric theory of speech, sound in our bodies develops in four successive stages- *parā*, *paśyanti*, *madhyamā* and *vaikhāri*. *Parā* is the sound resting in the *mūlādhāra chakra*, the coccygeal plexus, at the base of the spine. It is the motionless, endless cosmic sound. It is in fact the highest and the purest form of sound. When it starts moving and takes a form, it manifests as *paśyanti* in the *swādiṣṭhāna chakra*, the sacral plexus, from here it picks up a subtle vibration and manifests as *madhyamā* in the *anāhat chakra*, the cardiac plexus. This subtle vibration is what the *ṛshís* have called the *hiranyagarbha*, the golden womb of consciousness. As it moves further, it culminates into the audible and gross *vaikhāri* in the *viśuddha chakra*, the cervical plexus at the throat region, as speech. Thus, sound is created from silence.

These four stages of development of sound according to *Ṛgveda*, from a seed to the fruit, are also the stages of development of our consciousness. The beauty and accuracy of the correspondence between the levels of existence of sound and a human being is represented here,



In the words of Sri Aurobindo, therefore, “Language is the link between different levels of human consciousness”.

As *vāk* evolves from *parā* to *vaikhari*, it becomes more and more differentiated, picking up motion (vibration) and quality (*guṇa*). Thus *vāk* is born internally, as silence and only later manifests externally as speech. This is an important consideration. We have become used to treating language as a material concept, influenced by constructs of only the external world. If language is primarily internal, it must have deep connections with our being and perhaps language shapes us and our cultures as much, if not more, as we have believed that our culture shapes language. This intimate relationship between *sanskrit* and *sanskriti* would need an exploration deeper than the material layers, going to the root of sound itself, as suggested by Sri Aurobindo.

A NEW LANGUAGE FOR A NEW HUMANITY

There are higher dimensions of communication, of which ordinary speech is only one and a limited aspect. Our awareness of these higher dimensions will lead us to the consciousness of our words, thoughts, actions and the inner being, as the sounds they emanate, sometimes audible sometime silent, are, always immortal in the *ākāśa*, the cosmic ether, imprinting themselves in an endless universal cycle of cause and effect. The perception, or even a glimpse of this reality can help us understand the *śakti* of the *śabda*, the power of the Divine Word.

When imagining a better state for the humanity, participating in the evolution of consciousness, the aspect of sound must not be neglected, and its sphere of action around us must be used to help us transcend individually and collectively.

Sri Aurobindo has offered us this possibility through Sanskrit, our way to the *devabhāṣā*.