
UNIT 3 HERMENEUTICAL METHOD: INDIAN AND WESTERN

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

While dealing with the question of understanding, we must be able to formulate key guiding principles of hermeneutics. To the extent, through a meaningful dialogue with a text, we understand what understanding a text means, we can articulate more viable hermeneutical principles. That is what we envisage in this unit. However, in the first part, we shall examine hermeneutics from the perspective of Indian Philosophy and we shall limit this to the study of language in Indian Philosophy.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

?Language plays an important role both in the Indian and the Western hermeneutics. In the West we know of Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein who are bent upon extolling the role of language in philosophy. They had influenced the logical positivists of the Vienna circle so much that the logical positivists were keen on constructing a symbolic language free of confusion and dubiousness. Let us now turn our attention to some of the discussions of language in Indian philosophy more specifically in Indian hermeneutics. To dwell at depth into Indian philosophy of language or Indian hermeneutics is beyond our scope. We shall therefore restrict ourselves to the discussions concerning language that emerges from one of the valid means of knowledge (*pramana*) in Indian epistemology

called *sabda*. In this unit we attempt to systematize some of the hermeneutical principles that are at work in the process of understanding.

3.2 SABDA

Sabda is one of the *pramanas* in the Indian epistemology accepted almost by all the important philosophical schools of India. *Sabda* is the means to obtain *sabda*. *Sabda* is the *pramana* and *sabda* is the resulting knowledge of testimony. *Sabda* is a sentence spoken by an authority. An authority is a person who knows the truth and tells the truth (not all truth but truth pertaining to the point). A sentence is a group of words. Word is that which has the power (*sakti*) to convey a meaning. There is confusion because *sabda* literally means word. So this understanding of word includes sentences. There is a lot of controversy between *Mimamsakas* and *Nayayikas* with regard to the definition of a sentence as group of words. The discussion hinges on the question, how do you know the meaning of sentence? According to *Mimamsakas*, we understand the meaning of a sentence when the words in the sentence are connected with the verb. But according to *Nayayikas*, we understand the meaning of a sentence when the words are connected without necessarily being connected with the verb.

The *Mimamsakas* hold that the verb in a sentence is the most important word and without verb we cannot understand the meaning of a sentence. For example 'Devadatta book' is a group of word but we do not understand its meaning unless it is connected with a verb, say for example, brings. Thus 'Devadatta brings book' conveys the meaning. Similarly, 'Devadatta home' has no meaning but 'Devadatta goes home' conveys the meaning of a sentence. Verbs deal with action and according to *Mimamsakas*, the action is the most important thing. The action of 'going' is qualified, specified or limited to this particular person 'goes'. It is the action of going, which has 'Devadatta' as its subject and home for its object. The reason why *Mimamsakas* emphasize verbs is because according to them salvation is attained by ritual works. They are ritual activists. *Upanisads* react against this and say that one must renounce everything and become a *sanyasin*. In *Upanisads*, there are also certain passages pertinent to the ritual works. For *Mimamsakas* these passages are primary and the passages dealing with Brahman are secondary. For *Advaita Vedantins* what is said about Brahman is primary and ritual injunctions are secondary. But according to *Nyaya-Vaisesikas*, we need only connection between words in a sentence and verb is not necessary. They give the example, *Kanchyam Tribhuvanatilah bhupatih*. *Kanchyam* means in Kanch, *bhupatih* means protector of earth, therefore it refers to the king. *Tribhuvanatilah* is the name of the king though his name means climax of three worlds. So the translation is, in Kanchi, King *Tribhuvanatilah*. There is no verb in this sentence, yet meaning is conveyed.

3.3 THE POWER (SAKTI) TO CONVEY MEANING

A word has the power to convey the meaning. Is this power God-made or human convention (for example people agree *kamala* means lotus). There is a controversy between *Nyaya-Vaisesikas* on this point. Ancient *Nyaya-Vaisesikas* say that the meaning is fixed by God, God fixes especially the names

like kamala etc. and personal names are conventions. Some say that God fixes even personal names. Modern *Nyaya-Vaisesikas* say meaning of all words is a matter of convention. *Mimamsakas* say that the power (*sakti*) to convey meaning is a separate category (*padartha*) like dravya (substance). They come to the conclusion by elimination. But *Nayayikas* would not accept it as a separate *padartha* because of some problems. For example, the word *pankaja* means lotus. We *Panka* means mud and *ja* means born, so *pankaja* means that which is born in mud. Not only lotus, but there are other things in mud. If *sakti* is a separate *padartha* we will have to admit different meanings to *pankaja*.

There are four theories: *Kevalavyakti*, *Kevalajati*, *Jati Visista-Vyakti* and *Apoha*. *Kevalavyakti* only the individual (*Kevala* means only, *vyakti* means individual) For example, father tells the son *ghatamanya* (bring the jar). What does the word jar conveys – this particular jar, jariness or jar and jariness? Jar is *Vyakti*: jariness is *jati*. According to this theory, only the individual jar is meant not the jariness. This is a view held by modern *Nayayikas*. They say that suppose jar means *jati*, then *ghatamanya* means bring the jariness. But you cannot bring the jariness, you can bring only the individual jar. Those who say *ghata* actually refers to *jati*, therefore jariness object to this saying, then we will have to have different words for different jars because jariness is not involved. It is not practical, so it refers to *jati*.

Kevalajati is proposed by *Mimamsakas*. The word *ghata* conveys the meaning of *jati* (class). *Jati* also include *vyakti* (individual jar), but the reference to individual jar is only by implication and therefore secondary. *Jati visista-Vyakti* is proposed by ancient *Nayayikas*. The word *ghata* refers to *vyakti* which is qualified by a *jati*. So, both are involved. Thus when the word *ghata* is used it fulfils three functions – it points to a particular jar, it also signifies that this particular jar is similar to all other jars in the world and it also distinguishes jars from non-jars like trees, stones, etc. *Apoha* –exclusion is held by one type of Buddhists who are idealists and believe that we cannot know the external reality. When a person says *ghata*, neither is there jar actually, nor it refers to a *jati*. It is a mere idea, only a concept. What is *ghata* then? It is a word in reference to something which is not actually existing, which separates it from other things. A *ghata* is not a *pata*. Their point is, we cannot know a thing in itself. That's why it is called *apoha*.

3.4 THREE MEANINGS

Every word is capable of conveying three meanings – *abhidha*, *laksana*, *vyanjana*. *Abidha* means primary or direct meaning. *Laksana* means secondary or implied meaning. *Vyanjana* means suggestion. *Vyanjana* is not accepted by *Nyaya-Vaisesikas*. Let us explain it with an example – *gangayam ghosah*. Its primary meaning is village on the Ganges. This primary meaning is not acceptable because village cannot be on the Ganges. This primary meaning is not acceptable, we move to *laksana* or the secondary meaning. Its secondary meaning is village on the bank of the Ganges. Those who accept *Vyanjana* would say that the person referring to the village on the bank of the Ganges suggests the idea of coolness. This is found in poetry. But *Nyaya-Vaisesikas* do not accept this.

The power (*sakti*) to convey the meaning of a word takes place in three ways – *Yoga*, *rudhi* and *yogarudha*. *Yoga* means etymology. Through etymology we come to know the meaning of a word. Such a word is called *yaugika* word.

For example, *pacaja* is derived from *paca*, which means cooking. Therefore *pacaja* means a cook. Here the word *pacaja* conveys its meaning through etymology. *Rudhi* means customary meaning. It is not the etymology that conveys the meaning of a word but people have conferred on it a conventional meaning. The word may or may not have an etymology but it is not significant. *Yogarudha* is combination of etymology and customary meaning. For example, the etymological meaning of *Pankaja* is that which is born in mud but by convention it is confined only to lotus that is born in mud. Similarly the etymological meaning of *madhukara* is one who makes honey and by convention it is confined to bee. The same can be said of *hastin* whose etymological meaning is one who possesses hand and by convention it is referred to elephant.

Laksana means implication and they are of three kinds – *jahallaksana*, *ajahallaksana* and *jahalajahallaksana*. *Jahat* means abandoning so in *jahallaksana* the primary meaning (*abidha*) is totally abandoned. For example, the primary meaning of *mancah krosanti* is beds are crying. But beds do not cry, so the implied meaning is children on bed are crying. Therefore, the meaning of bed is totally abandoned. In *ajahallaksana* the primary meaning is not abandoned but in addition, there is an implied meaning. For example, the primary meaning of *chatunah yanti* is umbrellas are going. What is implied here is human persons carrying umbrellas are going. The primary meaning however is retained because the umbrellas move along with the persons carrying them. In the case of *jahalajahallaksana*, the primary meaning is partly kept and partly abandoned. For example when someone says, This is Devadatta, the meaning of Devadatta is retained while the qualifications of Devadatta of yesterday, etc., are abandoned.

3.5 PRE-UNDERSTANDING

?Understanding presupposes pre-understanding. Understanding is a process and is built upon pre-understanding. Human person is ever becoming and is in the process of growth. Understanding is part of this process. Thus, pre-understanding consists not merely of the acts of understanding but to the whole growth process that is at work in every act of understanding. Understanding something therefore implies understanding it from the viewpoint of certain questions raised by ones pre-understanding. Let us take the simple example of the tree. There are different people who are concerned about it: the botanist, the ecologist, the woodcutter, the carpenter, the tribal, etc. Each one of them understands it differently because each one of them raises questions from different perspective. Thus for the botanist the issue is, what family or species does the tree belong to? For the ecologist, will the tree be cut down by the developmental officers? for the woodcutter, how much money can I gain by chopping this tree? for the carpenter, what kind of furniture can I make out of this? and for the tribal, how can I prevent anyone from uprooting this tree that is the abode of the spirits of my ancestors? Thus the tree will be understood differently - according to each of these questions. Each of them is posed by a different kind of pre-understanding.

In the process of understanding, the thing to be understood strikes the one who understands according to his or her pre-understanding. It is pre-understanding that determines the kind of questions the person who wants to understand raises. Thus no understanding is possible without pre-understanding and the questions it raises. Bultmann expresses this in his *The Problem of Hermeneutics* in the collection of *Glauben und Verstehen*: Every understanding

like every interpretation is continually oriented by the way the question is put and by standpoint. Thus it is never without a pre-understanding of the matter it is questioning the text about. Understanding means precisely responding to the issue that the pre-understanding raises. This explains why we have interest in something and noninterest in other things. Both interest and non-interest are testimonies to pre-understanding itself.

If we wish to understand what is at work in every act of understanding, we must pay attention to our pre-understanding or prejudgments (not yet the final judgment but the stage antecedent to it, in the court of law it refers to the stage where the advocates sum up their arguments). This is because our pre-understanding determines both the choice as well as the direction of our search for meaning. The pre-understanding of Nietzsche shapes his understanding God as the supreme power who makes merry at the fragility of the humans and thus restoring human dignity consists in killing him. Our search for meaning and truth is shaped by and large by our prejudgments. This should help us to be aware that we look at reality from a particular perspective and what is meaningful from one perspective may be absurd from another. We can cite a number of examples from within religious traditions. God as Trinity that is profound and insightful within the Christian tradition is prone to be pointless within the Jewish or Islamic tradition of monolithic monotheism. The point is well made - the point of departure for understanding is pre-understanding. This will help us not to absolutize our way of looking at reality.

3.6 THE SEMANTIC AUTONOMY OF THE TEXT

?If pre-understanding shapes our understanding, the presumption of objectivity (the concern of epistemology) is at stake. There is no such thing as an objective reading of a text. To get to know the mind of the author whether dead or living is naive and inessential. Hence the text as it has come of age must speak for itself. Suppose if the author makes further comments on what he originally intended in his literary work (art, poem, play, film etc.) what status does it occupy? Once the text leaves the desk of the author it is autonomous and his extra-textual comments must be on par with the views of others. ?On the other hand, we should not fall into the trap of what Ricoeur calls the fallacy of the absolute text. A text is not an authorless entity - it remains a discourse said by someone to someone else about something. It is impossible to cancel out this main characteristic of discourse without reducing texts to natural objects, ie, to things which are not man-made but which, like pebbles, are found in the sand. For Ricoeur, there are two extremes and both are to be avoided. One extreme is the dependence of the text on the intention of the author because primarily we can never know the mind of the author and secondly any rich text will have more than one meaning. Another extreme is doing what one wants with the text as if the text has no author at all.

Ricoeur in this context speaks of the semantic axis of the text. There are certain limits within which a text needs to be interpreted. There are two aspects at work in the process of understanding - the semiotic stage and the semantic stage. The semiotic stage is the decoding of the complex set of codes and the semantic stage is where the meaning emerges. (These are not really two stages because meaning emerges in the act of decoding.) It is here that the reader has to apply the hermeneutic of suspicion - whether he or she reads

meaning into the text. For this purpose he or she has to rely on the text as a whole and discover the axis around which the whole text revolves. One can employ any method to study the text as a whole. The semantic axis shows how the text hangs together and what holds it together. But even if an interpretation goes against the original intention of the author it is equally a valid interpretation, provided it is well within the overall thrust of the text. This is to say that we cannot distort the meaning of the text by selective reading, omitting some elements and exaggerating other elements according to our convenience and vested interest. The semantic autonomy of the text is not a pretext to make the text say what one wants according to ones whims and fancies.

3.7 TOWARDS A FUSION OF HORIZONS

?We are indebted to Gadamar for the original and significant contribution of his fusion of horizons. The text has its own horizon and the reader has his or her own horizon. The horizon of the text includes the context and the life situation of the author in which the text emerged and also the successive readings it has gone through. The more a text is historically distant the broader its horizon. The horizon of the present reader refers to the readers life situation inclusive of his or her pre-understanding. ?The semantic autonomy of the text paves way for the fusion between the horizon of the text and of the reader. The reader approaches the text with his own pre-understanding to understand the text and its meaningfulness for him or her for his life in the present situation. ?Thus the preoccupations of hermeneutics have come to a full circle: from the concern of what lies behind the text (the authors intention) to what lies in the text (what the text says) towards what lies in front of the text (the emergence of meaning with the fusion of the horizon of the text with that of the reader).

3.8 THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

Suppose we are given a book written in a totally foreign language (say Hebrew or Greek) we can only stare at it. No understanding is possible because we have no point of entry into the world of the text. On the other hand if it is a simple and plain sentence like 'The Hermeneutics class is interesting,' there is nothing to interpret because the meaning is self-evident in this case. Thus the meaning of a text must somehow be clear but not totally for interpretation to become necessary. Thus says Dilthey in his *Patterns and Meaning in History*, 'Interpretations would be impossible if expressions of life were completely strange.' It would be unnecessary if nothing was strange in them. It lies, therefore, between two extremes. Thanks to the hermeneutical circle we can read a text and widen our understanding or correct our previous understanding of the same.

Understanding, therefore, is basically a referential operation; we understand something by means of something we already know. A whole sentence, for instance, is a unity. We understand the meaning of an individual word by seeing it in reference to the whole of the sentence; and reciprocally, the meaning of the sentence as a whole is dependent on the meaning of individual words. By dialectical interaction between the whole and the part, each gives the other meaning; understanding is circular then. Because within this circle the meaning comes to stand, we call this the hermeneutical circle.

The circularity of understanding implies that there is no true starting point for understanding because every part presupposes the others. It seems to suggest

a logical contradiction. If we need to understand the whole before understanding the parts we would have understood nothing. On the other hand the part can be understood only in reference to the whole. This brings us to the awareness that there is no such thing as having understood once and for all. The analogy of the game given by Gadamer is of great significance here. Understanding can be compared to a game. The game may be played many times but there is no such thing as the final and the definite game. Every time the game is played according to the rules of the game, yet every time played differently, so also is understanding. Every time we play the game of chess, we understand it better, but we will never arrive at a stage where we have understood it completely. We begin with the understanding of the part and grasp the meaning of the whole in the light of our understanding of the part. In the process, the meaning of the part becomes better understood in the light of the whole. So there is back and forth in our understanding and every time we read the same text we discover the emergence of new meanings.

3.9 THE TRUE SCANDAL OF THE TEXT

In the process of understanding in which the fusion takes place, not only the text acquires new meanings but the reader is also challenged by the text. Any text especially the religious text worthy of name must scandalize us. The English word scandal is derived from the Greek *skandalos* meaning a stumbling block. Thus when we speak of a text scandalizing us we mean the text challenging some of our ideas and actions that are dehumanizing. Ricoeur points out that every hermeneutics is, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others. In this context, we can make a distinction between true scandal and false scandal. The true scandal of the text is the meaning emerging from the text having the ability to clarify our pre-understanding and in the process to critically challenge them. What we uphold to be true and correct conventionally may be called into question. We should remember the role of the tradition that influences the way we see reality. We live by certain myths provided by our tradition. These myths are so powerful that they can grip us to the extent that we do not realize them as myths and are to be demythologized. It is Bultmann who introduces this concept of demythologization. He is critiqued on the ground that we cannot live without myths, hence what we need to do is not demythologization but remythologization. But what Bultmann meant by demythologization is not doing away with myths but to identify and recognize them as myths. This will enable us and our presumptions to be challenged by encountering a text, say like the Bible.

In order to understand the false scandal of the text, it is better to make a distinction between what is said and how it is said. What is said is the meaning of the text. How something is said refers to the vehicle by which the message is transported. This vehicle is inclusive of the knowledge of the tradition in which the text came to be. This knowledge is inclusive of cosmology, anthropology, theology and so on. But it is not this knowledge that is communicated but through which something else is communicated. Hence as Ricoeur says, we must make attempts to overcome the distance between the cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself. Thus, on dealing with any text we must take pains in separating the meaning and the cultural vehicle through which the meaning is passed on.

It is in this connection that Bultmann's demythologization becomes important. As we have made reference earlier, his demythologization is more often misunderstood than understood. He does not intend to purge away the mythical elements and reduce the text to shallow literalism. Far from it, he wants to emphasize the original meaning embodied in myths. These myths do not provide us cosmological information but challenge us as powerful symbols summoning us to a radical and new self-understanding.

3.10 LITERARY FORMS

When we glance through a newspaper, we see a variety of literary forms. There is an editorial - a critical analysis of some significant events. Its purpose is not merely to state facts but also to evaluate them from a specific point of view. We find reporting of events, which is aimed to give a factual account of what had happened. It is true that no two newspapers report the same event in the same way. There may be disagreements on what is known as facts but they may not be diametrically opposed to the happening of an event. Thus for instance, the figure of death toll in an earthquake may vary according to different news reports but no paper would refuse that the earthquake took place. There is a special section on comics in every newspaper, of course, meant to make us burst into laughter. All newspapers are flooded with advertisements with an end to sell goods and commodities. Obviously to achieve this end, exaggerated statements are made in advertisements. We are familiar with famous phrases such as the complete man, better than the best, made for each other and so on. We do not take these statements or catchy slogans in the advertisements as gospel truths. When we read the newspaper, we quickly recognize these different literary forms and interpret them accordingly.

From our ordinary experience of reading newspapers, we shall now try to make a workable definition of literary forms. A literary form is a manner or a style by which particular information is passed on to achieve a specific end and is judged by the effective means it applies to realize the end. It becomes clear that the criteria of judging one literary form cannot be applied to another. A good joke is one that makes us laugh and a good advertisement is one that persuades us to buy the commodity it advertises. These are two different literary forms. We don't reject an advertisement because it does not make us laugh or we don't reject a joke because it contains no factual description of an event. It would be a grave mistake if we were to do so. Hence it is important to identify the literary form of a text before we begin to interpret it. Obviously we cannot interpret Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in the way we would interpret Karl Marx's *Das Capital*.

Wittgenstein uses the analogy of language games. Each game has got its own rules. Applying the rules of football to cricket or basketball to judge football would be foolish. Likewise every discipline is a literary form in its own right and the rules of one are not applicable for another. Thus for instance when a poet describes the beauty of a gin by comparing it with the full moon it has to be acknowledged as poetic. We should not apply the rules of astronomy that the gin is a celestial thing. This is all the more important in the religious language that is symbolic and has to be acknowledged as such.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is pre-understanding?

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2) Explain the fallacy of the absolute text?

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3) State the importance of Hermeneutical Circle.

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3.11 LET US SUM UP

We have discussed in the beginning the significance of Indian hermeneutics particularly that of *sabda*. We have also seen how language plays an important role in hermeneutics both from the Indian and the Western philosophical points of view. Some of the key hermeneutical principles are also discussed at length to enable the students to apply these principles in their textual reading and to make an authentic interpretation of the text and deepen their understanding.

3.12 KEY WORDS

<i>pramana</i>	: Means of knowledge.
<i>Sabda</i>	: Verbal testimony.
<i>laksana</i>	: Implication.
Semantic Axis	: The axis which shows how the text hangs together and what holds it together.
The Semantic Autonomy of the Text	: Once the text leaves the desk of the author it is autonomous and his extra-textual comments must be on par with the views of others.

Scandal : The English word scandal is derived from the Greek *skandalos* meaning a stumbling block.

Demythologization : identifying and recognizing myths as myths

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3.13 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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