

Johannes Bronkhorst (transl. and ed.). *A Śabda Reader. Language in Classical Indian Thought*. pp. 376. New York: Columbia University Press 2019.—Reviewed by Anita Maria Borghero (University of Naples ‘L’Orientale’/University of Cagliari)

The book under review, *A Śabda Reader. Language in Classical Thought* (transl. and ed. by Johannes Bronkhorst), is the third fascinating volume in a highly awaited series, *Historical Sourcebooks in Classical Indian Thought*, basically “the brainchild of Sheldon Pollock” (Olivelle 2016: ix). The series was launched in 2016 with *A Dharma Reader. Classical Indian Law* (transl. and ed. by Patrick Olivelle), which was followed, in 2018, by *A Rasa Reader. Classical Indian Aesthetics* (transl. and ed. by Sheldon Pollock).

As is well known, and as Coward and Raja (1990) recapitulate, in India, the concept of communication has been explored not only by the grammarians; deep interest in the field has been displayed even earlier, as a part of the momentous Vedic experience. In fact, in the Ṛgvedic pantheon, the presence of Vāc is extremely important due to the creative, all-pervasive power expressed through her renowned self-assertion:

*ahám evá váta iva prá vāmy ārabhamānā
bhūvanāni víśvā* |¹ ṚV 10.125.8ab

Just like the wind I go forth, taking hold of every world.²

Vāc represents the divine and ritual language, with the everyday language of the mortals considered nothing more than its broken mirror. Think of the following evocative question:

kvā svid asyāḥ paramāṃ jagāma | ṚV 8.100.10d

Where did the best of her go?

Vedic interpreters have long striven to comprehend the scriptures, which are means of cognition so close at hand but so elusive at the same time: one only needs to recall lengthy debates on the meaning of Vedic *mantras*, or ancient etymologists' search for a common thread holding the words, thread spun out of numerous suggestions and similarities: a sort of echo of Yāska's philosophical interests, in contrast with Pāṇini's tendency towards more formal analysis, a fact pointed out also by Scharfe (1977). Be that as it may, Kahrs rightly observed (1998) that a great number of descriptive methods might have been shared by the earliest Nirukta and Vyākaraṇa traditions.

In Indian thought, the longing to investigate reality—in its manifold aspects—is strictly connected to linguistic reflection: this is due to belief that control over the eternal language of the Vedas translates into dominion over things, as happens in the Brahmanical *Weltanschauung*; or else, according to the philosophy of the Buddhists of Gandhāra, crystallizes into an understanding that language defines one's perception of

¹ Vedic text of the quotes from *Rgveda* is based on the edition by Sontakke and Kashikar 1933–1951 (rep. 1983).

² All the translations are mine.

the (ultimately non-existent) reality. A ‘chariot’ is, in fact, nothing but a word, something that King Milinda came to realise thanks to the venerable Nāgasena as given in an enlightening and well-known passage found in Part II (*Reader*), alongside large selection of other, often commented upon, textual material (offered in translation). Thus, Part II concretises the theoretical concepts of Part I (*Introduction*), both parts complementing each other. The plus point of using this particular anthological template is that it allows both the reader and indeed, the source text itself, a certain degree of independence. As Bronkhorst observes, there is an acute need for the moderns to understand the thought process of the ancients without the interference of the present day ‘mental equipment’ which is grounded in a totally different environment. The template chosen for *A Śabda Reader* helps in this sense and offers suggestions that are not conclusive in themselves: just think about the quoted passage of Vātsyāyana’s *Nyāyabhāṣya* on the individuals and universals, or consider the enigmatic Nāgārjuna arguing against the correspondence principle in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*; in other words, it is the very voices of the ancient authors that lead the curious reader towards the adventurous world of Indian philosophical and technical literature.

Part I brings into focus major issues to be addressed in the book which are then illustrated in Part II by excerpts from the original Sanskrit texts, providing depth to discussions advanced by different schools of thought through questions that crowd the centuries long story of the philosophy of language: Bronkhorst analyses various reasons for the historical and contextual implications that led Indian thinkers to develop very different concepts. While the first four chapters (*The Brahmanical Background* [Chapter I]; *Buddhist Thought: Sources of Inspiration* [Chapter II], *The Grammarian Patanjali* [Chapter III]; *The Special Place of Sanskrit and the Veda* [Chapter IV]) revolve around certain religious ideas and historical figures seen as pivotal to the development of the notion of *śabda*, the following four chapters deal with more specific technical themes, i.e. *Self-Contradictory Sentence* (Chapter V), *Do Words Affect Cognition?* (Chapter VI),

Words and Sentences (Chapter VII), *Other Derivative Functions of the Word* (Chapter VIII), which mention theories that eventually move away from Pāṇinian linguistic interpretation (the author's concern on this point has already emerged in Chapter II, namely in the overview of Patañjali's ideas on the grammatical derivational process). The book is furnished with a special section that provides further information which is of great relevance especially in view of the collection of original texts presented in Part II or *Reader* (which is in its turn made of eight chapters matching those of Part I to a large extent), namely *The Texts and Their Dates* (p. 313–322), followed by a particularly useful inventory, *Tentative and Approximate Chronological Table of Authors and Works* (p. 323–324), and a handy glossary of *Technical Terms and Their Equivalent in English* (p. 329–332).

The only minor shortcoming is the editorial decision (referred to earlier in Pollock 2018: xviii) regarding the non-employment of the diacritics outside the original quotations: on the one hand, this makes the reading definitely less tricky for an average Western reader, but on the other, such a choice appears odd to readers accustomed to the usual Sanskrit transliteration, especially as all quotations are regularly transliterated.

The relationship that Buddhism and Brahmanism have with the language seems to emerge in a special way from the pages of the book and the reader detects that the history of these two pivotal cultural matrices resembles a double-helix structure, with more or less explicit interactions, despite their parallel pattern. By employing such an engrossing approach, *A Śabda Reader* provides a remarkable depiction of different, often conflicting views, e.g. by referring to crucial and mutually exclusive roles played by the Brahmins and the Buddhists in royal courts of the time; in discussing the influence that the idea of *dharmas* had exerted over the grammarian Patañjali; and last, but not least, in showing how all different strands converge in the foundation of the magnificent mental structures of Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya*.

Indeed, Bronkhorst's mastery in elucidating vividly the intricate linguistic and philosophical problems—not to mention the historical

ones—requires no introduction; nor are we strangers to his natural flair for captivating the reader by his narrative style always rich in data and replete with pertinent references. *A Śabda Reader*, a volume of high scholarly value with an obviously didactic slant, its functionality further enhanced by a fine selection of elegantly translated texts, represents a seminal tool for any scholar or student interested in the philosophy of language, else willing to be introduced to it.

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