

WHAT IS SRUTI ?

When I was writing my paper 'Can Śruti be false ?',¹ it occurred to me that it would be more logical to explain my view of śruti and then enquire whether it could be false. Due to pre-occupations I could not do it then, but I felt it as an obligation to the reader to do it whenever possible and hence this paper.

Some of the questions that we would like to consider here are : what is śruti ? Is śruti a pramāṇa at all ? Is the Veda alone śruti or are there other śrutis also ? If there are, what are we to do if the śruti of one tradition seems to differ from or conflict with that of another ? Needless to say that these are important questions specially when we notice the indifference, if not the contempt, of modern philosophers toward śruti.

Contrary to appearances, 'what is śruti' ? is really a metaphysical question. For one thing, before you take a view of śruti, whatever it may be, you are already a metaphysician. It is our prior commitment to some metaphysics that determines our attitude to śruti. For another, unlike any other pramāṇa, śruti or revelation has only metaphysical significance and has no empirical relevance whatsoever. Other pramāṇas have primarily an empirical importance and may or may not have metaphysical use. But this is not so about śruti and so śruti has a unique place in the scheme of pramāṇas. It is not possible to accept śruti and have no metaphysics nor is it possible to reject śruti without a metaphysical commitment.

What has been said above has already indicated to a certain extent the nature of śruti. Śruti may be regarded as that verbal knowledge which relates to the non-empirical or the transcendent. We have amplified rather than modified the mimāṃsā view² of śruti as knowledge which cannot be otherwise had by adding the

expression 'verbal knowledge'; because if we say merely 'knowledge' and not verbal knowledge then the definition would become too wide and would apply even to such *pramāṇas* as *anupalabdhī* which gives us knowledge which cannot be otherwise had. For that very reason, we have made it explicit that *śruti* refers to the non-empirical (transcendent).

Attention may be drawn to some features of the above definition. Firstly, we have taken care not to define *śruti* in terms of any source or author. In other words, we do not want to take a historical view of *śruti*, because that would oblige us to take a narrow view and would also give rise to many other difficulties. *Śruti* is therefore not by any human author. Even the divine author only communicates it and does not produce it. Truth cannot be produced or created and *śruti* as embodying truth cannot be a creation; it is just communication. Secondly, it should be borne in mind that *śruti* is a kind of verbal communication and not a kind of mystical vision or transmission. *Śruti* presupposes the attitude of hearing or openness which makes it significant and relevant. In the absence of this attitude, *śruti* becomes irrelevant.³ The attitude of hearing comes when all other sources of knowledge are tapped and are found wanting or helpless. An intelligent realisation of one's helplessness and an earnest spirit of enquiry are necessary if *śruti* is to be properly appreciated. Thirdly, it should be noticed that *śruti* gives us knowledge and not merely commandments or injunctions as the *Mīmāṃsakas* would like to hold. *Śruti* may give injunctions too but the primary object of *śruti* is to give some kind of knowledge. Finally, the sphere of *śruti* is the transcendent or the non-empirical. This is also the justification of *śruti*. For empirical purposes, the other *pramāṇas* are sufficient and necessary but they are helpless with regard to the non-empirical. Other *pramāṇas* are necessarily tied to the empirical and are fed and sustained by perception. One who does not appreciate the limits of these *pramāṇas* cannot appreciate the importance, nay, the indispensability of *śruti*. The failure to

appreciate the importance of śruti implies not merely the failure to see the limits of other pramāṇas but also the acceptance of the empirical itself as ultimate and absolute. It is seldom realised that the rejection of the transcendent absolute does not mean the rejection of the absolute as such, but means rather the acceptance of the empirical itself as absolute. One cannot get rid of the absolute in spite of one's determined efforts to do so. The only difference is that either we accept the real absolute revealed by śruti or a false one given in empirical life. Further, śruti does not tell us merely about the nature and the existence of the transcendent (non-empirical) but also points out the way we can realise it, a way which can be tested not theoretically but only practically by following it. It is like some one telling us about the existence of a treasure and also the way it can be dug up. There is no help if one does not care for the treasure and wants to be fully assured without digging it up.

II

In Indian philosophy three characteristics of śruti have been mentioned. Firstly śruti should not be contradicted by any other pramāṇa.⁴ This is why it has been said that even if thousands of śruti say that fire is cold, we cannot accept it. The idea is that śruti cannot make such a statement for the simple reason that it is not concerned with the empirical. If and when śruti does appear to go against some pramāṇa, the apparent meaning has to be rejected in favour of the real meaning which is determined by rules of interpretation and other considerations. Śruti is not merely not contradicted by other pramāṇas; it is in fact not contradictable by other pramāṇas. If śruti-knowledge were contradictable by other pramāṇas, then it would also be accessible to other pramāṇas. A pramāṇa can contradict only what it can reveal. This is the point which is brought out by the second characteristic, namely, that śruti refers not to the laukika but to the alaukika or the transcendent (non-empirical). But at the

same time, and this is the third characteristic, śruti does not tell us some thing which is absolutely inconceivable. If that were so, then śruti would be completely unintelligible; śruti only sets at rest our doubts about what we are only able to guess and speculate, by giving us categorical knowledge and assurance. It converts, as it were, the 'may be' into "is",⁵ and even tells us the way to realise it. Śruti is neither anti-reason nor is reason anti-śruti. Reason can at most and at least give us the possibility of the transcendent; but śruti gives us the certainty about that.

III

If the above broad view of śruti is accepted, it would follow that the Vedas alone need not be regarded as śruti. Any text or talk which reveals the transcendent can be called śruti; the Bible, the Quoran, the words of the Buddha and the teachings of Mahavira should be regarded no less as śruti than the Vedas. While this should be so, certain difficulties arise if the above view is upheld. The Vedas are beginningless but the Bible etc. are not so; the latter have a beginning and a human authorship. So it may be objected that if one man (Christ, Mohammad, Buddha, Mahavira) can know and reveal the transcendent, others also could do that. In that case there will be really no need of śruti, no necessary dependence on that. The only way the situation can be saved is that we hold that the above personages were really not human beings but divine beings. So it will boil down to this; śruti is traceable only to a divine being who already knows the truth and does not himself stand in need of any śruti. This is the difference between a divine being and a human being who has realised truth. The former does not depend on śruti or Guru but the latter has to. Only a divine being and not a mere saint can be the source of śruti. If so, we will have to accept the possibility of divine beings in any age and in any country. We cannot accept only one such being and brush aside the others as is done by Christians and Muslims.

The above view can be easily distinguished from the Mīmāṃsā view on the one hand and the Christian view on the other. In a sense both are extremes of two different kinds. The Mīmāṃsā takes śruti as impersonal and as beginningless and regards the Veda alone as śruti. The Christian takes a personal and historical view of śruti and regards the Bible alone as revelation. The Mīmāṃsā argues that the Vedas are free from any defect or error incidental to human authorship just because they are beginningless (apauruṣeya). So for him whatever is due to a historical person cannot be śruti; only Vedas can be śruti. But our view is that Vedas are in one sense personal (pauruṣeya) and in another sense impersonal (apauruṣeya). If by Vedas we mean the truth or the content contained in them, then we will have to admit that they are impersonal. Truth cannot be created and is never personal. Truth transcends personality and is higher than any person just as Brahman is higher than Īśvara in Vedānta. Truth is not what Īśvara knows; rather Īśvara is one who knows the truth i.e. Brahman.

If, however, by śruti we mean not the content but the communication of the content, then we will have to accept two corollaries. Communication is possible only between two persons (I and thou) and so śruti must be in this sense personal. This is what is made explicit in the Sūtra, Śāstra Yonitvāt (Br. Su. I, i, 3). Īśvara is the communicator of truth. This is the epistemological importance of the concept of Īśvara in Vedānta; He is the beginningless knower of truth. The second corollary to be accepted is that the ultimate knower of truth i.e. Īśvara who reveals truth is in no way bound to reveal it only in a particular way or only at a particular time or place or only to a particular race or community. To hold that truth is revealed only in one way is nothing short of what may be called the idolatry of the word. One could not distinguish the form from the content or the word from its meaning, had there been only one form or word. Just as if God had only one form He would be indistinguishable from the form. The very variety

of forms enables us to transcend the forms and to go to the content. The Vedāntin therefore holds that Īśvara can have any number of forms and any number of incarnations and can reveal truth in any number of ways.

It follows that both the views viz. that of mīmāṃsā and of Christians are untenable. The mīmāṃsā seems to be wrong in thinking that there can be only one form of śruti even as the christian is wrong in thinking like that, though the one takes an impersonal view of śruti while the other takes a personal view. Further the mīmāṃsā is wrong in thinking that Śruti cannot be personal, because to mīmāṃsā, the concept of a divine person is unintelligible. The christian accepts the concept of divine personality but goes astray in saying that there can be only one divine form and only one divine revelation. The mīmāṃsā is guilty of the idolatry of the word while the Christian is guilty of the idolatry of the person.

IV

Two difficulties concerning the view that there can be many forms of śruti may be anticipated and answered. The first objection may be that if there can be any number of śrutis, how to distinguish the true śruti from a false one? If some one claims for some thing the status of śruti, how to know whether it is genuine or not? This is like asking: how to tell a genuine prophet from a false one? Our answer is that a genuine prophet is one who not only knows the truth but can also make others know it. One has to follow the prophet even to know that he is a false one. It is only from within a tradition that we can truly know a prophet and not from outside. There is something which can be seen only from within and not from outside. The same can be said about śruti also. There have been false prophets and false teaching also but time eliminated them as they were found

wanting in helping man in realising the transcendent. We can only say that truth endures or wins at the end (satyameva jayate). There can be no external criterion and no guarantee against deception. Even miracles cannot convince a man or help him if he lacks faith.

The other difficulty that may be raised is : what are we to do if one śruti differs from or conflicts with another ? This again is a difficulty raised not from within a tradition but from outside. So far as the follower of a particular tradition is concerned, the question regarding the conflict with other śrutis does not arise for him. This question arises only for one who wants to stand outside of all traditions to be able to sit in judgment over all of them. But one who does not understand even one tradition from within has no chance of understanding any other tradition. Even to be able to understand other traditions, one must have insight at least into his own tradition. So far as differences are concerned, there can be not only between the śruti of one tradition and that of another, but also among the followers of the śruti of one and the same tradition. Here if one takes the attitude of just an external observer, there is no help for him. One has to enter into a tradition and see it from within. No body is balked by differences regarding other matters; everyone follows his own inclinations. One has to do the same in spiritual matters also. After all, no body is called upon to follow more than one tradition. It is idle to argue that since there are many śrutis, none is true; it is a pretext for one's indifference and lack of earnestness. A genuine and earnest seeker cannot argue like that. One suffering from a painful and fatal disease does not argue that none of the systems of treatment (Allopathy, Homeopathy, Ayurveda etc.) is right; one hastens to one or the other. The earnest seeker of truth would be willing to follow anyone who claims to lead him to truth. There is no place for testing in spiritual life also, but that should come after acceptance or faith and not before.

V

But all the above questions, it may be argued, arise only if śruti is accepted as a pramāṇa. How to establish that śruti is a valid source of knowledge ? So far as verbal authority is concerned, no body can deny that we accept it in our daily life. In fact, if we come to think of it, most of our knowledge is derived from verbal testimony. We do regard it as a valid source of knowledge in our daily commerce. If so, is it not queer that we feel doubtful about verbal testimony when it refers to the non-empirical ? It may be argued that we accept verbal testimony in regard to matters empirical, because it is possible to verify it. This is true, though even in the empirical sphere it is not always possible to verify what we learn from a verbal source. But even in regard to the non-empirical or the transcendent, is verification not possible ? We have already said that śruti gives us not only the knowledge of the transcendent but also shows the way to realise it. Do we doubt the authority of the śruti before or after following the way ? If we doubt it before following the way, what is the legitimacy of our doubt ? Following the way is possible only on the basis of faith and faith is needed not any the less regarding the verbal knowledge of empirical matters than it is needed regarding śruti. And just as faith is convertible into knowledge in the empirical sphere, even so faith regarding the transcendent can be converted into knowledge. This is why Śankarācārya tells us that what the Upaniṣads teach is not merely an object of faith but something which can be experienced here and now.⁶

Technically speaking, we should make a distinction between the validity of a pramāṇa and the testing of that validity. Every pramāṇa has, as the Vedāntin puts it, intrinsic validity (svataḥ prāmāṇya); it does not derive its validity from any other pramāṇa or else there will be an infinite regress. The invalidity of a pramāṇa may depend on something else but not the validity. In the case of śruti, even the invalidity cannot be demonstrated in any other

manner, because the object of śruti is not accessible to any other pramāṇa⁷. So if śruti is rejected, one may ask, on what basis is it done ? It can be only on the basis of the lack of faith, and there one cannot be helped.

Banaras Hindu University

R. K. Tripathi

NOTES

1. See my book *Problems of Philosophy & Religion*, B.H.U.1971.

2. Arthe anupalabdhe (*Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* I, 1, 5).

3. In India those who were excessively attached to the empirical were not allowed to read the Vedas. In fact the whole gradation or hierarchy of society was based on the principle of more or less attachment to the world; the lesser the attachment to the world the higher the grade of an individual. Śruti is meant for those who have openness which cannot be had without freedom from attachments and obsessions.

4. *Vedānta Paribhāṣā* IV – Yasya vākyasya tātparyaaviṣayibhūta sansargo mānāntareṇa na bādhyate.

5. Sambhāvanā-mātreṇa līngopanyāsaḥ. Na hi niścaya-katvena tadupanyāsyate. Ānandajñāna's gloss on Saṅkara's Com. on Br. Up. quoted by Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 181.

6. atra Brahma samaṣṇute

7. See my paper "Can Śruti be false ?" in my book *Problems of Philosophy and Religion*. B.H.U. 1971.