BEYOND PERCEPTION AND INFERENCE: THE ROLE OF VERBAL TESTIMONY IN INDIAN THOUGHT

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Abstract

Indian epistemology (pramāṇa-śāstra) is often introduced through its two most widely discussed sources of knowledge: perception (pratyakṣa) and inference (anumāna). Yet the tradition devotes equally rigorous attention to a third: verbal testimony (śabda, āptavacana, āgama). From early sūtra texts to the Navya-Nyāya scholastics, from Mīmāṃsā to Vedānta, Buddhist logicians to Jaina philosophers, testimony is analyzed as a distinctive, often indispensable, route to true cognition. This paper synthesizes classical debates on (i) whether testimony is an independent pramāṇa or reducible to other means, (ii) what conditions make testimony authoritative (āptatā, reliability of speaker and sentence), (iii) how semantic theories (abhidhā-lakṣaṇā-vyañjanā; sphoṭa) underwrite testimonial cognition, and (iv) how disputes on intrinsic/extrinsic validity (svataḥ/parataḥ-prāmāṇya) shape the status of scriptural and ordinary testimony. Alongside doctrinal exposition, the paper compares Indian treatments of testimony with contemporary social epistemology, explores disagreements about the Veda's authority (apauruṣeyatva vs. Īśvara-author), and contrasts affirmative Nyāya-Mīmāṃsā positions with Buddhist reductionism and Cārvāka scepticism. The conclusion argues that Indian thought yields a sophisticated, norm-governed model of testimonial knowledge-recognizing dependence on social competence while resisting simple reduction to perception or inference-and that it remains strikingly relevant to digital-age concerns about trust, expertise, and the circulation of knowledge.

Keywords: pramāṇa, śabda, testimony, pratyakṣa, anumāna, Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, Buddhism, Jainism, sphoṭa, āpta, apauruṣeya, social epistemology

1. Introduction: Why Testimony Matters

Every day of life is saturated with testimony. We learn our mother tongue from caregivers, geography from teachers, medical regimens from physicians, and most of our history and science not by direct observation but through reliable reports and texts. Indian philosophers recognized this pervasive dependence and asked: Can words-uttered or written-independently generate knowledge? If so, what distinguishes *knowing through words* from simply *believing* what someone says?

Classical Indian schools articulate precise answers within the shared framework of pramāṇa, which refers to the instruments or sources that *produce* veridical cognition (pramā). While all schools accept perception and most accept inference, their accounts of testimony diverge:

- Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika affirm śabda as an independent pramāṇa grounded in a competent speaker's assertion and the conventional power of words.
- Mīmāṃsā elevates Vedic testimony via the doctrine that the Veda is authorless (apauruṣeya) and intrinsically valid, while also theorizing ordinary testimony.
- Vedānta inherits Mīmāṃsā's hermeneutics but reorients authority toward metaphysical ends (Brahman-knowledge).
- Buddhist logicians (Dignāga, Dharmakīrti) usually reduce testimony to inference and perception, denying it independent status.
- Jainas accept āgama among pramāṇas, relating it to omniscient or authoritative sources within their many-sidedness (anekāntavāda).
- Cārvākas are famously sceptical, often rejecting testimony (and even wide-scope inference) as a source of knowledge.

By studying these debates, we uncover a deeply social picture of cognition: testimonial knowledge turns on the virtue of speakers, the competence of hearers, the conventions that give words meaning, and norms of sincerity and truthfulness. Far from being a passive reception, understanding testimony is an achievement.

2. Mapping the Terrain: Pramāṇa Taxonomy and the Place of Śabda

Classical lists of pramāṇas vary:

- Nyāya: pratyakṣa (perception), anumāna (inference), upamāna (comparison), śabda (testimony).
- Mīmāṃsā (Bhāṭṭa/Prābhākara variants): commonly include pratyakṣa, anumāna, upamāna, arthāpatti (postulation), anupalabdhi (non-cognition, esp. in Bhāṭṭa), and śabda.
- Buddhist pramāṇa school: pratyakṣa and anumāna only; śabda is derivative.
- Jaina: perception, inference, testimony (āgama); detailed sub-classifications apply.
- Cārvāka: perception primary; testimony rejected or significantly curtailed.

Even when accepted, testimony's *independence* is contested. Nyāya argues that *even if* testimony depends causally on the speaker's prior perceptions and inferences, the hearer's knowledge arises *from words as presently understood*, not by re-performing the informant's inferences. Hence, śabda is epistemically basic for the hearer.

3. Nyāya on Testimony: The Competent Speaker and the Power of Words

3.1. Defining Śabda

Classical Nyāya defines śabda as the statement (vākyam) of a trustworthy person (āpta), where āpta is someone knowledgeable and truthful, intending to communicate facts accurately. Nyāya treats scriptural testimony (vaidika) and ordinary testimony (laukika) within a single framework: both produce knowledge when the speaker is reliable and the sentence is properly understood.

3.2. Conditions for Knowledge from Words

Nyāya identifies necessary conditions for testimonial cognition:

1. Speaker reliability (āptatā): knowledge and sincerity.

2. Linguistic conventions (saṅketa): stable word-meaning relations within a community.
3. Proper sentence comprehension (vākya-bodha): syntactic and semantic integration of word-meanings into a meaningful proposition.
4. Absence of defeaters (bādhaka): no overriding evidence of falsehood or insincerity.

Under these conditions, the cognition produced by understanding a sentence is pramā (valid knowledge). The causal role of words is central: the knowledge is not inferred by the hearer from the speaker's reliability; it arises directly from comprehending a competently uttered sentence.

3.3. Parataḥ-Prāmāṇya and Demonstrating Validity

Nyāya holds that knowledge's validity is extrinsic (parataḥ)-established by later verification or the absence of defeaters. This differs from Mīmāṃsā's svataḥ-prāmāṇya. For testimony, Nyāya emphasizes practices of cross-checking, coherence, and track records of speakers to secure reliability.

3.4. Navya-Nyāya Refinements

From Gaṅgeśa onward, Nyāya develops exquisitely fine-grained analyses, distinguishing between primary meaning (abhidhā) and secondary/indirect meaning (lakṣaṇā) and suggestion (vyañjanā); specifying the mental episode (vṛtti) that yields propositional grasp; and cataloguing defeaters, such as metaphorical misunderstandings, ellipsis, or speaker irony. Testimony is thus not a blunt appeal to authority but a *norm-governed linguistic process*.

4. Mīmāṃsā: The Authority of an Authorless Veda and Everyday Words

4.1. Veda as Apauruṣeya

Mīmāṃsā famously argues that the Veda has no human author. Since human authorship introduces the possibility of error or deceit, *authorlessness* ensures that Vedic sentences, correctly parsed, are intrinsically authoritative regarding dharma (ritual and ethical injunctions unavailable to perception and inference). This protects scriptural testimony from scepticism not by appealing to omniscience, but by removing the very risk associated with person-based authorship.

4.2. Intrinsic Validity (Svataḥ-Prāmāṇya)

Mīmāṃsakas hold that cognition is presumed to be valid unless it is proven to be invalid. The onus is on the sceptic to produce a bādhaka (defeater). This applies to ordinary testimony as well: linguistic understanding normally yields knowledge *without* needing an external certificate of reliability, provided nothing cancels it. Where Nyāya seeks positive warrants for reliability, Mīmāṃsā stresses default entitlement: cognition is valid unless overturned.

4.3. Hermeneutics and Sentence-Meaning

Mīmāṃsā elaborates robust hermeneutic tools-upakrama-upasaṃhāra (intro-conclusion concord), abhyāsa (repetition), apūrvatā (novelty), phala (result), arthavāda (eulogic passages), and upapatti (reasoning)-to determine sentence meaning and resolve conflicts. Bhāṭṭas and Prābhākaras differ on how sentence meaning (tātparya) is grasped, but both insist that properly interpreted words convey knowledge uniquely accessible by testimony.

4.4. Arthāpatti and the Scope of the Verbal

A signature Mīmāṃsā contribution, arthāpatti (postulation), often arises in *verbal contexts* when what is said requires positing an unseen fact to preserve coherence. For example, "Devadatta does not eat by day and yet grows fat" motivates the postulate "he eats at night." While not itself testimony, arthāpatti shows how linguistic understanding triggers distinct pramāṇas-underscoring that verbal cognition organizes much of our epistemic life.

5. Vedānta: Testimony Oriented to Brahman-Knowledge

Vedānta inherits Mīmāṃsā's hermeneutic sophistication yet redirects it toward metaphysics: the Upaniṣads are said to reveal Brahman, a reality not available to perception or inference. The indispensability thesis emerges clearly: some knowables (*alaukika*, supersensible) are testimony-only. For Advaita, mahāvākyas ("tat tvam asi," "aham brahmāsmi") function as pramāṇa-vākyas whose comprehension, with sublation of superimpositions (adhyāsa), yields liberating knowledge (mokṣa). Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita contest the Advaitic purport but agree that śruti is the decisive pramāṇa about ultimate matters.

6. Buddhist Reductionism: Testimony as Inference or Perception

Buddhist epistemologists typically accept only two pramāṇas. On this view, testimony does not *independently* generate knowledge; at best, hearing words is a kind of perception of sounds, while grasping their propositional content is mediated by inference-often from speaker intention and linguistic conventions. The hearer, in understanding "There is fire on the mountain," effectively infers the content from learned associations and the presumption of a competent informant. The Buddhist thus maintains simplicity but may overlook the social immediacy of testimony acknowledged by Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā.

A related concern is momentariness and apoha (exclusion) semantics: words do not attach to real universals but operate through exclusion of what they are not. That shifts the burden to conceptual construction and inference, making testimony seem derivative.

7. Jaina Perspectives: Āgama, Anekāntavāda, and Contextual Authority

Jainas recognize āgama as a pramāṇa, based on the authority of kevalins (omniscients) and the community of teachers. However, influenced by aekāntavāda (many-sidedness), Jainism emphasizes that statements are factual from specific viewpoints (naya). Testimony is, therefore, authoritative but also dependent on context; understanding it requires considering standpoint, scope, and intent. This approach prevents absolutism while maintaining the practical significance of reliable reports.

8. The Cārvāka Challenge: Scepticism about Words

Cārvākas resist extending knowledge beyond direct perception, viewing testimony as hearsay vulnerable to error, deceit, and superstition-especially in support of ritual injunctions or metaphysical claims. This scepticism usefully presses other schools to (a) articulate conditions of reliability and (b) distinguish testimonial knowledge from mere belief. Indian debates thus sharpen as they engage with the Cārvāka critique: if testimony is to count as pramāṇa, its norms must be made explicit.

9. Semantics and Testimony: How Do Words Convey Knowledge?

9.1. Word-Meaning and Sentence-Meaning

Across schools, three mechanisms often feature:

- Abhidhā (denotation): primary conventional meaning.
- Lakṣaṇā (secondary/indirect indication): when literal meaning fails (metaphor, ellipsis).
- Vyañjanā (suggestion): aesthetic or suggested import (prominent in poetics, recognized variously).

Nyāya analyzes how these mechanisms combine to yield a *proposition* graspable by the hearer; Mīmāṃsā crafts rules (tātparya-lakṣaṇa) to extract intended meaning from complex corpora; Alaṅkāraśāstra and Bhartṛhari explore how sentences present unified meaning.

9.2. Bhartṛhari's Sphoṭa

Bhartṛhari's sphoṭa theory proposes that while we hear sequential sounds, understanding is of a unitary burst (sphoṭa) of sentence-meaning. If adopted, testimony's epistemic act is a direct grasp of a holistic content, not merely a piecemeal assembly. Though debated by Nyāya, sphoṭa underscores that linguistic cognition has its phenomenology-supporting the intuition that śabda is sui generis.

10. Authority, Trust, and Norms: What Makes Testimony Knowledge?

10.1. The Āpta Ideal

Many schools converge on the figure of the āpta-a person who (i) knows the relevant subject, (ii) communicates truthfully, and (iii) intends to inform. The hearer's entitlement derives from this relational structure: a reliable speaker, competent uptake, and the absence of defeaters.

10.2. Vaidika vs. Laukika

- Vaidika (scriptural) testimony concerns supersensible domains (dharma, Brahman) not reachable otherwise; its authority is grounded either in apauruṣeyatva (Mīmāṃsā/Vedānta) or divine author (Nyāya).
- Laukika (ordinary) testimony handles everyday affairs: geography, medicine, law, science. Here, track records, expertise, institutional vetting, and coherence with other evidence function as reliability markers.

10.3. Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Validity

- Mīmāṃsā: Cognition-including testimonial cognition-is prima facie valid (svataḥ-prāmāṇya); doubt or defeat must be shown.
- Nyāya: Validity is established extrinsically (parataḥ) by further checks. This divergence shapes the burden of proof that rests on speakers and hearers.

10.4. Defeaters and Error

Indian authors catalogue defeaters (bādhakas): speaker bias, metaphor mistaken for literal, ellipsis unnoticed, jargon misunderstood, contradiction with more substantial evidence, testimony from non-experts, and so on. The result is a normative map for responsible uptake.

11. Contemporary Relevance: Testimony in a Digital World

In our age of open platforms, AI-generated text, and information cascades, ancient insights are timely:

- Credentialing āpta: We need transparent expertise markers and conflict-of-interest disclosures-modern analogues of āpta.
- Default entitlement with safeguards: Treat everyday testimony as prima facie acceptable, but build systems for rapid defeat (fact-checks, reputation systems).
- Hermeneutic literacy: As with Mīmāṃsā's canons, users must learn context, intent, and genre to avoid literalism or manipulation.
- Plural standpoints: Jaina sensitivity to naya helps navigate partial truths across disciplines.
- Reductionist alerts: Buddhist reminders against over-credulity-demand cross-evidence in high-stakes contexts.
- Ethics of speech: Cultivating speaker virtues-accuracy, clarity, fairness-is as crucial as refining algorithms.

Indian thought, then, offers both epistemic principles and ethical disciplines for responsible testimonial exchange.

12. Conclusion

Indian philosophers never treated *words* as mere airwaves. They viewed testimony as a structured, norm-laden source of knowledge-distinct in its causal pathway, pervasive in human life, and indispensable for domains inaccessible to perception and inference. Nyāya models its independence through speaker reliability and linguistic convention; Mīmāṃsā secures its intrinsic validity and deploys hermeneutics; Vedānta demonstrates its indispensability for ultimate matters; Jaina thought situates it within a contextual pluralism; Buddhists and Cārvākas refine the discussion by urging parsimony and scepticism.

The upshot is neither blind deference to authority nor atomistic autonomy. It is a social epistemology avant la lettre: knowledge through words is a *collaborative achievement* sustained by virtues, institutions, and interpretive arts. By closely attending to who speaks, what is said, how it is meant, and what could undermine it, Indian thought provides a durable blueprint for navigating testimony-whether in the guru's hall, the court of law, the seminar room, or the algorithmic feed.

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