

## Conceptualism in Buddhist and French Traditions

*Signification in Buddhist and French Traditions*  
 by Harjeet Singh Gill  
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The author begins on a light note with three dedications: the first in the domain of profane, to his wife, Danielle, and their grandchildren, Jaspal and Nilam; the second in the domain of sacred, to his spiritual gurus, Abelard and Heloise, who dared to enlighten the dark Middle Ages; and the last is a severe indictment of his adversaries (. . . and for all those who still refuse to abandon the universe of facts for the universe of ideas). The cover bears a corresponding attractive painting by Sandrine Gill entitled, the sacred and the profane, depicting, in one half, a yogi in an animated conversation with his guru, and in the other, a young girl pining for her lover (who is in fact the yogi seeking the blessings of the guru for his love).

Within this semiotic frame the book is a dense philosophical discourse with its focus on 'signification'. The first four essays represent a revised version of a series of lectures delivered by the author at the College de France, Paris, in december 1998. They are followed by a paper, *The Abelardian Tradition of Semiotics: Abelard, Condillac, Merleau-Ponty*, presented at the *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme*, Paris, in 1993, and lastly, *Abelard's Tractatus de Intellectibus*, rendered into English during the author's Fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. Apart from the fact that the author is fluent in French and has adequate knowledge of Latin, the language of Abelard, Professor Gill's life long engagement with the French thinkers, particularly Abelard, makes him a competent authority for this daunting task. This is so far the only rendering in English of this dense text. The book coincides with the nine hundredth birth anniversary of Abelard.

Making a bold departure from the

traditional Marxist-historical analyses, the book presents an extensive typological intertextual comparison between the Buddhist logicians, Dignaga and Dharmakirti, of the sixth and seventh centuries, and the French philosophers of language, Abelard in the first half of the twelfth century, Condillac in the eighteenth and Merleau-Ponty in the twentieth century. According to the author, a "meeting of the minds" of thinkers is very much possible despite being situated in diverse geographical, cultural and temporal spaces. The book, however, devotes more space to the French than the Buddhist tradition.

The author argues that in the context of signification there are two main traditions in India. To begin with, there is the tradition of the grammarians whose main preoccupation was to present and preserve the purity and the sanctity of the language of the scriptures as the sounds of the Vedas were eternal and so was their significance. It led to the emergence of great grammarians like Panini (about fifth century BCE) who gave to the world one of the most precise descriptions of the phonology and morphology of any language. This tradition culminated in Bhartrhari (about fifth century CE) who emphasized the unity of the sentence in his well-known theory of *sphota*. For Bhartrhari, the individual words derive their significance from the sentence they are a part of. However, as the sentence remains primarily a grammatical construct, Bhartrhari, like Patanjali before him, concentrated on formal semantics. Language was considered to be naturally significant. The relation between the signifier and the signified was fixed in the sense that human beings neither create nor change this relation (Subramania Iyer, 1965. 24). The task of the grammarians is to describe and

explicate this formal aspect of their language.

In the Buddhist tradition, grammar does not play the same role. For the Buddhist logicians and epistemologists, language is conventional. The words or sentences derive their significance from the way they were first imposed on the objects, the way these objects were understood. They are general and they refer to the universal characteristics of the objects, and in this sense, they function like logical inferences. The Buddhist logicians, beginning with Nagarjuna (second century CE) to Dignaga (sixth century CE) and Dharmakirti (seventh century CE), consider language as a man made conventional institution. They are interested in the significance of signs in general as conceptual constructs. For them, our senses come in contact with the objects in specific point-instants, the reality being always in flux. At this level, there is no understanding, no analysis. But this initial contact stimulates us to constitute corresponding images of the objects, without being identical with them. It is followed by the process of intellection or the constitution of conceptual constructs which enables us to understand this universe. These conceptual constructs, and the words which correspond to them, do not refer to the empirical reality of the point-instants but as this reality is conceptualised. It can be understood only in the domain of dialectics where each concept is apprehended in terms of another with which it is existentially related. Both derive their being, their significance, from each other. This is the theory of *apoha*, the theory that emphasises the dialectical and dichotomising nature of the universe of signification. Georges Dreyfus has presented this Buddhist theory as a certain form of *conceptualism*.

For Dharmakirti, the conceptual constructs are neither completely arbitrary, as they are for the extreme nominalists, nor do they have the reality of the realists. They are constituted linguistically on the basis of the perceived resemblances between different objects. As such, Dharmakirti's approach is considered conceptualist and constructivist.

The twelfth century French philosopher, Pierre Abelard, explores the universe of signification in a similar manner in terms of *sensus*, *imaginatio*, *intellectus*. There is no equivalent of the Buddhist theory of the universal flux but the point of departure is the same. After the first contact with empirical reality there is the constitution of the corresponding images which are similar but not identical with specific objects. From the domain of imaginaire we go to the domain of intellection where the signification of the universal characteristics is understood. This theory steers clear of extreme realism and extreme nominalism. The individual, specific objects are real but as our intellection operates on the images of these objects, the universal characteristics have a conceptual reality. These concepts are not real as the realists would have it; nor are they unreal as the nominalists consider them. It is for this reason that Victor Cousin denominated the theoretical enterprise of Abelard as *conceptualism*. It may be noted that both the Buddhist and the Abelardian theories of signification emphasize the cognitive importance of language. Concepts and language are mutually interdependent. Words derive their significance from the concepts and the concepts have their source in words, is a famous Buddhist dictum.

Another important point the author highlights is the process of conceptualization of a discourse. The artist or philosopher engages dialectically with his own tradition, comes to terms with the prevalent languages, concepts and ideologies of his times and then after a prolonged period of crystallization proposes his own specific discourse

which could be radically different from the sources from which it draws inspiration. The author explains this phenomenon in the chapter entitled: *The Dialectics of Langue and Parole; parole parlee and parole parlante*. The author appears to be particularly fond of these Saussurean terms followed by those of Merleau-Ponty for they are referred to in practically every book written by him. In this book his engagement with these terms is most refined: "the world of *parole parlee* is like a horizon that enables an individual to orient himself, to situate things by situating himself with rapport to them. The *parole parlante* on the other hand is the "speech in praxis". It is in "constant flux". The former belongs to the "community" and the latter is "individual". Abelard also proposed a similar formulation in a different metalanguage. The author continues: "In other words, when we deal with the linguistic praxis of *parole parlee* and *parole parlante*, we move from the logical constructs of semantics to the conceptual, constructs of semiotics, where there is no one to one correspondence between the *signifiant* and the *signifie*. This semantic dichotomy is dissolved in the reunion of these two poles of signification. As *parole parlante* deals with existential, experiential significations, the individual intellections are based on the perceptions and the imaginary conceptual constructs of the objects, which are very often, as asserts Abelard, at variance with their physical existence. And, in the ongoing communication system, the intellections themselves become the bases of further dialectical interaction." The author insists that "in the constitution of the discursive formation, in the overall context of the conceptual construct that a discourse represents, we are led to two new propositions. Firstly, the individual words or even sentences do not any more function as isolated signifiers in correspondence with already given signifiers or significations. In fact, it is the discourse as a conceptual whole that functions as a highly complex signifier. The different enunciations form a part of

the emerging signifier which is represented by the newly constituted field of signification. We enter into an architectonic structuration. At this level, the intonation patterns acquire primacy over other features of phonology, and the enunciative patterns over the features of syntax. The conceptual whole is constituted under the overall impact of a certain problematic, its theme, which encompasses the entire field of articulation. In Buddhist terms of *apoha* we can say that everything is then understood in terms of the "other", the other that is correlated with it both structurally and conceptually. Whatever significance there is of the specific enunciations, it is due to these conceptual correlations, which as Sartre has stated earlier, are always in a movement of transcendence. To signify is to generate intellection, said Abelard. To signify is to transcend the given, says Sartre. Both these propositions point to the dialectical nature of the linguistic praxis in the constitution of communicational structures. "The *parole parlee* and the *parole parlante*, the standard given and the hesitating living, are always interlocked in this inevitable dialectics. As such, this transcendence is phenomenological. It has a real basis as a point of departure but it is always active and creative. Linguistic creativity is not an external construction. It functions from within, from the parameters which are already there but it transcends the existing linguistic thresholds to create new fields of signification."

The author shows how categories similar to the French concepts can be traced in the Buddhist tradition of signification, *apoha*. Dignaga and Dharmakirti also rule out the two extreme positions, the external significance of words as well as the fixation of the given a priori authority as propounded by the Indian realists. So both the Buddhist and the French thinkers steered clear of extreme positions and negotiated a middle path which is the object of study of this book. The arguments are well augmented with quotations and references from the Buddhist and the French sources.

Enlarging the scope of his argument, the author takes a dig at the anthropologists who present kinship structures as "frozen", ignoring the conflicts and the upheavals inbuilt in every system. The author puts them on a par with the Indian realists or the western Cartesian linguists who are concerned only with the "formal" description of language, its phonology and grammar, and etymology; in other words, its standardization.

The book is a brilliant tete-a-tete of an oriental philological and philosophical tradition with an occidental without indulging in the cliches of Orientalism and Occidentalism as is common in post-modern studies.

Both the Buddhist and French conceptualism emphasize the creative process of signification. Those who believe in the a priori nature of signification, the fixed semantic structures of the realist thinkers, do not understand the evolutionary process of linguistic and philosophical parameters. If the empirical reality is in flux, in perpetual movement, the thinking process has to be contextualised. Every text is situated, it creates and constitutes its own context. The signifiers are dissolved in the enunciative field. Creativity as such is a dialectical process, situated squarely within the ongoing historical progression.

The book is not meant for readers who are in indecent and perspiring haste. Nietzsche once remarked that "to practice reading as an act . . . one thing above all is needed, precisely the thing which has nowadays been most thoroughly unlearned, a thing for which one must be almost a cow and in any event not a modern man : rumination." This quotation aptly applies to the book under review. Professor Gill has always been a teacher advocating slow and close reading of narratives and this is what *Signification in Buddhist and French Traditions*, his latest but not the last book demands of its readers.

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