Crossing Time and Space: Bakhtin’s Dialogic encounter with the Sanskrit Philosopher-Grammarian Bhartrhari

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For Bakhtin, creative understanding emerges at the threshold of competing and contrasting ideas (1986), especially when they encounter “foreign” meanings. The necessity of rupture in both time and space for creative activity was recognized by Bhartrhari — the Sanskrit grammarian and philosopher, who probably lived between 450-500 A.D. — when he pointed out that “the intellect acquires critical acumen by familiarity with different traditions” (VP II: 484).1 For Bakhtin and Bhartrhari such encounters with otherness are necessary for “true understanding” so that they can surmount the “one-sidedness” of meaning. Similarly, according to Bakhtin (1981), even meanings from the past, including inscriptions on stones or those written on paper, must enter the living daylight of the present, so that a meaningful exchange can take place between “work” and “life.” Bhartrhari equates the “past” with darkness and inertia. In turn, the present — in all its fullness and vitality — must cast light on meaning thereby bringing about its transformation.

Both of these thinkers, from different continents and very different historical periods (in fact the approximate dates of Bhartrhari’s life are unavailable), were steeped in their respective literary traditions and both wrote about language, history and cultural reality. Bringing Bakhtin into a polyglottic culture like that of India is not an impossible task, nor can India represent totally unfamiliar territory for Bakhtin. Nevertheless, a dialogue between Bakhtin and Bhartrhari can be no less challenging than it is productive.
The dialogue will take place around valuable exercise, a linguistic and literary feat called “Avadhanam” — “Acts of a Learned Scholar”. Amidst the multitude of languages in India, this event’s origin is in Telugu (a language spoken in the southern part of India) and is considered to be language’s crown jewel. Its parent language, Sanskrit, also assimilated this exercise from Telugu. Although Sanskrit is the parent language, this literary event achieves greater elegance in Telugu because of the latter’s linguistic structure and the mellifluous character of its built-in cadences. In relation to its parent, Telugu is the “child” and thus has greater freedom to “play” — to break words, toss concepts around and twist meanings thereby creating new formations. This event is a literary kaleidoscope through which the pundit displays various configurations of grammatical rules, rhythmic patterns of poetry, incidents from classical scriptures, contemporary tensions, and the poet’s capacity to remember both remote and immediate events, etc. The audience is equally active in demanding specific designs and patterns in the kaleidoscope. With respect to our contemporary discussions on narrative, history, and cultural reality, this event beckons us to consider the non-dualistic nature of langue and parole — law and lived history.

Background knowledge on Bhartrhari and Bakhtin

Before I delve into this literary game, let me set the stage by discussing a few key points from Bhartrhari’s doctrine of language and reality. In his classic work Vakyaapadiya (Vakya translates into “sentence” and pada into “word”), Bhartrhari discusses the interrelationships between parts (phonemes, morphemes, and words) and the whole (sentence). The term “sentence” must not be taken literally: it is perhaps equivalent to Bakhtin’s “utterances” or his “genres”. For Bhartrhari, the meaning-bearing unit is Sphota — described as being partless and indivisible. Even the term “meaning-bearing unit” is rather inadequate to the task of describing Bhartrhari’s Sphota because the latter is not a “conveyor belt” that transmits meaning, but a “real substratum, a proper linguistic unit, which is identical also with its meanings” (Matilal 1990: 85). For Bhartrhari, language is an activity (in Sanskrit, it is called Sabdana Vyapara — the “business of language”) and therefore his explanations are filled with images of a bustling market place where the game of “languageing” is carried out. This game is the very Spanda (vibration) of consciousness. In the Hindu Pantheon, the goddess of knowledge, Saraswati, is also called Vak Devi — the goddess of speech. Language, therefore is identical with the divine, while on another plane, especially in the state of ignorance, it is also a means to understand the divine. While Bhartrhari asserts that the distinction between the signifier and the signified is a fiction, he also observes that the imagined duality is Vikalpa — a convenient fiction which facilitates the process of understanding and creative activity. In other words, the imagined duality is not a useless fiction, for it is both a ploy and a game. As such, the created split it represents has some truth value during play, but not after the game is over (Matilal 1990). Like the Vygotksian child (1987) who needs “private speech” as a stepping stone for the development of thought, Bhartrhari’s subject needs to engage in the “convenient fiction” to construct reality.

Bhartrhari repeatedly argues against reductionism in the study of language. He does not hold the view that a “word” bears the same meaning in a sentence as it does in isolation; instead, he argues that the unity of sentence precedes division, which, according to him, is fictitious. In other words, for Bhartrhari, as a “collection of words,” only the sentence is capable of expressing “inalienable meaning” (VP II: 56). The “word” in its own right does indeed bear some meaning, but when strung together with other words in a sentence, it becomes a whole indivisible unit assuming different intonations and connotations.

Bakhtin’s approach towards language is similar in resisting reductionism and in opposing the treating of language as “abstract grammatical categories.” For both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari, a “word” cannot exist in isolation, and like human beings, must seek others of its kind to form a whole. Bakhtin writes: “[for the word (and consequently, for a human being) there is nothing more terrible than a lack of response” (Bakhtin 1986: 127). This position reminds me of Bhartrhari’s view that the isolating of words represents a terrible state of ignorance when he states: “[just as the meaning of the word is not understood from each phoneme, in the same way the meaning of a sentence is not understood from each word” (VP II: 60). Thus, Bhartrhari refutes any absolute eternity for the relation between a word and its meaning. Instead, he insists that a word’s meaning can only be understood in contact with other words in a particular context. The speaker and the listener must understand the purpose of an utterance on a particular occasion. Likewise, Bakhtin argues that language must be considered as a “live event” which ensures “mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life” (Bakhtin 1981: 271).

Thus, for both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari, language is not a closed formal system, but a live event that human beings engage in. This activity is called “languageing” by Bhartrhari while Bakhtin refers to such social exchanges as “utterances” which combine “thematic content, style and compositional structure” (1986: 60) into an inseparable whole.

The activity of “languageing” has many facets for Bhartrhari. First, it is an indispensable part of our cultural lives. Bhartrhari observes that the “soul of word-meanings” emerge through Vyavahara — communication (VP II: 437) — and that the meaning of communication is further determined by time and place, not exclusively by its external form (VP II: 314). Bakhtin’s observation that the meanings of utterances develop “on the boundary between two consciousnesses” (Bakhtin 1986: 232 Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry
106) is pertinent here. For both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari, a given utterance could have different meanings at different times for the same individual just as different individuals can perceive different meanings for the same utterance at any given moment. However, Bhartrhari goes a step beyond this position and says that learned sages are beyond Vyavahara (social discourse or communication). Bhartrhari’s distinction between the learned sage and the learning individual is rather instructive for the understanding of human transactions. On an empirical level, Bhartrhari observes that both sages and ordinary human beings perceive objects with their sense organs and the mind and that they describe such perceptions and their subsequent understanding of them through words. Bhartrhari explains that both may perceive the “sky as a surface” and the “firefly as fire” even though there is “no surface in the sky nor is [a] firefly fire” (VP II : 139-140). Bhartrhari cautions, however, that while the sage must re-examine and reflect on his perceptions (which are always intertwined with words), he must not refrain from using normative definitions “adopted by men of the world” (VP II : 142). In other words, the sage must use available cultural sign systems to understand and explain difficult concepts. Here Bhartrhari seems to be referring to the inexhaustibility and potentiality of “words” for cognitive acts. Bakhtin explains the “word potential” in a similar manner, when he writes: “The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction.” (Bakhtin1981 : 280)

Both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari argue that the “word” is always directed towards the future and that it is unfinalizable. The inexhaustibility of the “word” brings us to the second facet of language in Bhartrhari’s view: the distinction between sentient and non-sentient beings. Words of any kind, including animal sounds, coos and infants” babbling are the cause of Pratibha — a “flash of understanding.” However, Bhartrhari explains that, in dealing with animals or infants, perceptive human beings use “fixed words or sounds” to communicate even as our communication with fellow intelligent beings is full of multiplicity (VP II : 117). Likewise, Bakhtin observes:

The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgements — that is, precisely that background that, as we see, complicates the path of any word toward its object. (Bakhtin 1981 : 281)

Fixed meanings are as problematic for Bakhtin as they are for Bhartrhari because they impoverish the “word” and are incapable of mediating cognitive acts. Bakhtin goes further in this direction and points out that monologic discourse also translates into hegemonic discourse and is thus exploitative and tyrannical.

The third facet that Bhartrhari observes is that all awareness, including sensory awareness, is intertwined with language. He argues that tactile awareness — “raw feels” or sensory experiences — falls under pre-linguistic awareness and, as such, is not awareness in the full sense until we become capable of verbalizing it. Bhartrhari observes that there cannot be any meaningful manifestation of thought and awareness without the illuminating capacity of language. Even Bakhtin equates the “word” with “intelligibility” because once consciousness emerges through words, even the physical world around us radically changes. Bakhtin explains that, with or without words, “a stone is still stony and the sun is still sunny” (Bakhtin 1986 : 137), but once we begin to cognize actively — something that can happen only through words — our “earthly existence” moves to a higher plane. We become both “the witness to and the judge of” these physical events, and the latter cease to exist in and of themselves (or for themselves) as they become meaningful for the “other” — the cognizing subject. This coming into meaning enriches and transforms all the parties involved.

Bakhtin draws finer distinctions for understanding the nature of the “word”. How do “words” enhance or inhibit potency and brightness? Bakhtin points out that inert and authoritarian words have a tendency to “retard” or “freeze” thought, whereas “words” that operate in cultural systems that are “open, becoming, unresolved and unpredictable, capable of death and renewal” (Bakhtin 1986 : 135) are capable of generating sufficient energy to propel thought in new directions.

The fourth facet studied by Bhartrhari involves the observation that language operates on two levels: on the level of private meanings or inner speech (arth — meaning), and the other, on the level of public expression achieved through audible sounds (sabda — sound). The latter is an active transformation of the former. Bhartrhari claims that a sage who has mastered the “Sabdayoga” — the disciplined process of verbal testimony — possesses the valid means to true knowledge. In short, Bhartrhari claims that thought is limited without the power of “sabda” — the audible sound or word expressed in public. Similarly, Bakhtin (1981) avers that a thought is alive, not when it is possessed solely by the thinker, but when it is oriented towards the other and when it seeks a response from him/her.

Lastly, for Bhartrhari, language is a cosmic power. It is Anadi — it has no beginning and no end and its potential is infinite. That is why, for Bhartrhari, language is the “imperishable Brahman” — the Absolute Truth — which is incarnated in various forms in order to facilitate the world’s functioning. In the Hindu cosmos, the Brahman is incarnated in various avatars to meet the specific needs of the moment. Each incarnation is distinctly different during the course of action taken.
Ethical thoughts are propounded and challenged, as all these are dependent on the surrounding characters, their motivations and powers, and on specific occasions. Meaning, therefore — or "truth" — is realized in and through various areas of human activity in a particular context at a particular time. In short, the "Absolute Truth" or "Law" to be realized must both absorb and create history.

How and why must the "universal law" branch out into competing histories? Bhartrhari explains this question through the **Sphota** (meaning) / nada (sound) distinction. Bimal Krishna Matilal observes that "nada is the sound, the "bang", the sonority of language, while sphota by way of contrast means literally the language in the form of an "explosive" — the explosive power prior to the bang" (Matilal 1992 : 365). Bhartrhari posits three stages of "languaging". The first is the **Pasyanti** — the non-verbal stage in which thought and language are identical. In the next intermediate stage — Madhyama — neither the speaker nor anyone else sees the difference between his/her thought and the language through which s/he wants to convey it. Finally, there is the Vaikhari, or verbal stage, when speech itself becomes audible. This stage arrives when the listener enters the picture and radically changes the preceding situation. At this point, the **Sabda Arth** — the meaning of sound, or the literal meaning of the word — contributes to the creation of multiple layers of meaning in the **Vakya Arth** (sentences). For Bhartrhari, the "word" has multiple powers and the speaker can use a word effectively for a number of purposes at the same time; it is "like the fire that can be used at once for its heat and for its light" (VP I : 472). Lev Vygotsky expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote that the "meaningful word is a microcosm of human consciousness" (Vygotsky 1987 : 285). Just as human consciousness can be cognizant both of itself and others, and just as light can reveal itself and other things in its range, so too does the word have the power to signify itself and to symbolize other things. That is why language has unlimited potentiality. Bhartrhari equates language as a formal system to the dormant "yolk of peahen's egg" (VP I : 51) and once it is hatched in the "languaging" activity it displays its variegated colors and obtains finer parts and sequences and even imperfections, depending on its usage by human agents.

To conclude this first section, it is worth noting the differences that exist between Bhartrhari and Bakhtin even though both thinkers invite us to study and understand language as it is used in the social context of human activity. Bakhtin (1981) explains that at any given time in any given place, there will be a whole range of conditions — social, political, historical, and even climatic — that determine an utterance's meanings and ensure the primacy of context over the text itself. Thus Bakhtin defines heteroglossia through a **sociological thesis**. Bakhtin also observes that strict authoritarian societies neither permit nor validate a variety of "social dialects," "languages of generations," "professional jargons" or other "political slogans." In his view, only the dialogic word can permit a variety of voices to be heard.

Bhartrhari, on the other hand, presents a **cosmological thesis** in explaining multiplicity in language. The very first verse in *Vakyapadiya* reads as follows:

> The essence of language has no beginning and no end. It is the imperishable Brahman, the ultimate consciousness, which is transformed in the form of meanings, and which facilitates the functioning of the world. [VP I : 1]

In the form of Brahman, language must therefore take several avatars in order to respond to specific "earthly" conditions and to create other conditions on earth. Since the cosmic principle is such that even the Brahman must respond to specific historical conditions and display its inexhaustible power, Bhartrhari feels no need to discuss the sociological conditions that produce multiplicity. Sociology is thus absorbed into cosmology.

The colors displayed and the sequences achieved in "languaging" are brought about by the power of "Time," which, for Bhartrhari, is both eternal and transformative since Time is the Supreme Being — the Brahman who has the capacity to manifest himself in various forms. Since language and Time are aspects of Brahman, their capacity is infinite. Bhartrhari offers various images for describing the nature of Time. In one description, he likens it to the "wire puller of the world machine" (VP III : 4), a comparison which explains why it has a capacity both to display and to hide objects and meanings. Elsewhere, Time is the "current of a river" (VP III : 41) that displaces certain things onto the river banks while it absorbs others into its flow. The exchange in the coastal regions brings together fragments from various time periods.

Like Bhartrhari, Bakhtin emphasized the importance of temporal categories for understanding texts in an ever-changing world, although not as a cosmic principle. Bakhtin coined the term "chronotope" to describe and to categorize various types of spatio-temporal relations in texts. In this time-space co-ordinate, Bakhtin's concern was mainly with the dynamism of time and its ability to let several fragments interact. Bakhtin writes: "[c]hronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships" (Bakhtin 1981: 252). How and why do these multiple chronotopes collide with one another and form complex interrelationships? Bakhtin explains that an author situated in his own time and space creates the text that is read by readers in entirely different time-spaces and that, out of these chronotopes, the chronotopes of the world represented in the author's work are understood and recreated.
Therefore no categorial boundaries can be drawn between the chronotopes of the author, text, and readers.

Since Bhartrhari’s thesis is cosmological, he explains that “eternal and all pervasive Time” operates like a water wheel that pushes the water and other particles within it acquiring the name Kala—time (VP III : 14). Therefore, Time, for Bhartrhari, is both monochronic and heterochronic. The given system must be posited in a different light and it must display its innumerable capacities.

The Event of Avadhanam

In this second section, let us examine how the pundit in the literary exercise of “Avadhanam” functions as a water wheel and creates waves in the calm waters of language as it presents its aesthetic potential and thereby appeases the goddess of knowledge through its creative power. The literary event “Avadhanam” — the “Acts of a Learned Scholar” — is a public event in which the pundit’s penetrating and imaginative power, his scholarship and memory, are examined by other equally erudite scholars. Conventionally, there are either eight challengers to the pundit (in which case the event would be Ashta Avadhanam) ; one hundred challengers (in which case the event is Sata Avadhanam) ; or two hundred challengers (which bear the name Dvi Sata Avadhanam). More recently there occurred an event with one thousand challengers (Sahasra Avadhanam) which ran for fifteen days. According to the specifications demanded by his challengers, the pundit is obliged to compose extemporaneously a single quatrains for each of the challengers. In other words, if there are one hundred challengers, he must compose one hundred quatrains. The pundit carries neither pencil nor pen nor any other device to aid his memory. The task at hand would be relatively simple if he were allowed to compose a poem after each challenger gives his or her specifications. But this is not the case. After each challenger gives his/her question and specification, the pundit delivers the first line and goes on to the next challenger. After completing the first round, he comes back and delivers the second line ; in the third round the third line ; and in the fourth round the last line. Only in the first round do the challengers ask their questions, and in the next three rounds, the pundit must remember the specifications of each and every challenger. After the four rounds, he once again recites each poem in its entirety and may even offer a commentary.

Further, the pundit and the challengers must be well versed in the rules of grammar and poetic construction. There are various types of rhythmic metres and the poet must be able to integrate rhythm, words, emotions, melody and meanings, and still be able to meet the demands of the challengers and please the spectators.

The challenge to the pundit comes in many forms. Some common features are as follows:

1. **Vyasthakshari or Nyasthakshari**
   **Presence and Positioning of a Phoneme**
   
   In this case, the challenger demands the presence of a particular phoneme, for instance pa in, say, the eighth position of the first verse, and ga in the third position of the second line, and so on. The challenger may also specify a broad theme, for example, a verse in praise of a given god or goddess. By making such specifications, the challenger restricts the available pool of words, and the pundit must also play a quick mathematical game of positioning his alphabet or by drawing a mental crossword puzzle in order to construct a meaningful poem while adhering to general rules of verse.

2. **Nishidakshari**
   **Absence of a Phoneme**
   
   Here the demand is the elimination of a phoneme.
   
   (In both cases, the pundit’s knowledge of the “formal structure” or the “science of language” is put to test.)

3. **Varnana**
   **Description**
   
   This aspect gives greater freedom to the pundit because the challenger asks him/her to describe, say, a particular incident from a scripture, a popular myth, or even a contemporary scene. For example, in a recent event, one challenger asked the poet to describe the thoughts of a mischievous youngster who sees a very old couple holding hands while walking in a garden.

4. **Aakasa Puranam**
   **Recognition**
   
   In this instance, the challenger reads a stanza from the literary canon and the pundit must recognize the author and the context in which the stanza was written. This aspect serves to test the pundit’s breadth of scholarship. During the course of the event, the pundit can boast about having memorized 40,000 to 70,000 stanzas from various scriptures and literary texts.

   It must be noted that in the “oral” and yet “literate” culture of India, recitation is of paramount importance, especially in classical traditions. The general attitude is that writing is for someone who is too slow—
witted to remember. The pundit must have verses at his/her finger tips. From the standpoint of India, Matilal (1990) points out that the centrality of this sonic element in language does not translate into logocentrism in the Western sense. In other words, the graphic element (writing) is neither inferior nor superior to the sonic element. Matilal explains that in Bhartrhari's view, both speech and writing are “illuminators” of the Sphota (meaningful units) and both can equally distort meaning, though not necessarily in a pejorative sense. Both have the capacity to transform the given, and in Bhartrhari's holistic view of language, speech and writing can be in perfect harmony.

5. **Aasuvu**

**Instant Poem**

Here, the poet himself suggests a theme and delivers a whole poem.

6. **Dattapadi**

**Presence of Words**

This is a complex and challenging feat for the poet. Here, the challenger gives four words, and requests a poem on a particular theme. The words may come from Telugu, Sanskrit, or any other language. The poet may or may not use the words in the literal sense; instead, he may suspend the meaning (arthi) and concentrate on the sound (nada).

To understand this feat, we must recognize the unique linguistic features of Telugu and Sanskrit. When words are juxtaposed in these two languages, at certain points they intersect (Sandhi); “at” and “out of” this junction, complex meanings evolve and unique sounds emerge. In other words, “words” are so potent that they are not linked mechanically, but their collision brings about change both at a highly abstract level (meaning), and at a very sensory level (sound). The following quotations from Bhartrhari (VP II : 298-301) explain the (side) effects that are produced when words collide:

298. Just as a lamp reveals, in an object like a jar, through association (or proximity) other things than that for the illumination of which it was employed [...]  
299. In the same way, a word conveys, from among the things which are connected together, those that are different from the one to convey which it was used.  
300. Though the churning of the ignition sticks (arani) is done for producing fire, it produces the unintended smoke in the same process.  
301. In the same way a word, when a particular meaning is meant to be conveyed, denotes by association, an unintended meaning also.

In “Avadhanam” — the literary exercise — the pundit is fully aware of the multifarious capabilities of the word, and s/he uses them effectively. The task becomes challenging when words proposed come from other languages. In such cases, the poet concentrates on sound. For example, in another recent event (held in the United States), one challenger asked that the poet use the words “Clinton, Gore, Dole, Kemp.” The pundit is not interested in who these people are or in what they might signify. His task was to bring these sounds into the poem he was to compose. Fortunately, in Telugu, the word “Gore” means colour or brightness; the word “Dole,” drums or any rhythmic act; and the word “Kemp,” the colour red. “Clinton,” then, was the challenge (having no corollary in Telugu). The poet brought out the sound by juxtaposing two words: chamak, which means sharp or sparkling; and Intan, which means “at home.” When these two words chamak and Intan collide, the sound produced is chamakintan. It must be noted here that there are rules regarding the sounds that emerge when words collide. These sounds depend in turn on the preceding sounds as well as on those that follow. When translated, the poem reads in English as follows:

Sharp wit at home

Chamakinton

In the garden beauty of the red (Kemp) rose crystallized

Look, with a bright (Gore) face

with pleasure he is floating (Dole), can you guess who it is?

If the words are in Telugu — or any other allied language — the poet deploys the words both at the level of sound and at the level of meaning, thereby creating multiple layers of significance. The poet is thereby appreciated because it is heteroglossic. Since Bhartrhari also privileges multiplicity in all meanings, he points out that the relationship between the word and its meaning is neither entirely real nor unreal, nor is the word the same in all its meanings, nor is it different in each of its meanings. Instead, the meaning of a word is determined by the context in which it is used: the purpose of that usage; and its contact with other words. All these factors determine the word’s meaning on a particular occasion. Even standard Vedic Mantras assume different meanings depending on the occasion. Richness in language comes, in Bhartrhari’s view, through Anekasabdadarsanam — the display of several sounds and meanings — over ekasabdadarsanam — the display of single sound and single meaning. Every twist in the literary kaleidoscope must present unique configurations and meanings and the poet achieves these through his eloquent and ornate diction.

The poet is aware that words are not isolated entities and that, when they come together in a sentence, they produce a phenomenon and an epiphenomenon. The words “Clinton,” “Gore,” “Kemp,” and “Dole” are epiphenomena for the poet and his task consists of the creating of a phenomenon. He operates in reverse gear and displays his Pratibha — his “intuitive flash of creative power”.
7. Samasya Puranam

Problem Solving

So far in this literary and linguistic game we have seen specifications for the presence or absence of the smallest linguistic unit — the phoneme — and the presence of yet another larger unit — the word — both of which are used as "sounds" by the pundit. In the case of problem solving, the challenger provides the last line of the poem that is to be composed. Often the line is illogical, or factually incorrect. The pundit's task is to take this "meaningless" line and to write the preceding three lines which will create a context to make the meaninglessness sensible. The problematic line often challenges or disrupts our logical sensibilities and defies our common sense. For example, once a challenger presented the expression "herd of mighty elephants get into the neck of a mosquito". The pundit, very thoughtfully, composed a poem about an incident from the epic Mahabharath in which the mighty emperors — Pandavas — after being stripped of their glory, needed to seek refuge in a very small and insignificant kingdom. The mighty emperors disguise themselves as ordinary citizens when seeking refuge and they eventually end up protecting this small kingdom against invasions. The poet brings out life's irony and absurdity through the poem about the Pandavas' predicament:

Having lost their glory and having been humbled by the foes,

Pandavas have to settle at Virata court.

Oh! Sanjay, what do I say about fate?

Herd of mighty elephants get into the neck of a mosquito.

Thus, even lengthy phrases that are senseless become sensible when cast in a meaning-giving context. The casting of a phrase is not mechanical. If nothing else, the poet achieves a beautiful metamorphosis of the final phrase and captures its irony in an eventful life.

8. Aprasustha Prasangam

Crooked and Contemptible Conversation

Lastly, the most important aspect of this literary event is the challenge posed by designated participants whose goal is to distract the pundit periodically, and to entice him into crooked and mindless conversations that are often coarse, dirty, and rampantly physical. They create a carnival space as they attempt to disrupt the thought processes of the pundit. From the vantage point of the pundit, however, this distraction is convenient and fruitful. While engaging in this "trivial" conversation (often of sexual and scatological nature), the pundit buys time to compose his poems. He activates other creative channels while engaging in this "unofficial talk". The challengers are often cunning and their goal is, of course, to trap him — or at least to embarrass him.

The pundit willfully enters this beguiling maze and uses the opportunity to trick others by tossing their words back at them in a humorous or even outright blasphemous tone. For example, consider the way in which the pundit composed another poem about "herds of elephants entering the neck of a mosquito":

Having smoked pot,

have you tasted liquor in alien company?

oh ! bastard, how did a

herd of elephants get into the neck of a mosquito?

The periodic insertion of this type of "folk humour" revives the atmosphere of high intellectual activity. The language is raunchy, ribald, abusive, and insulting. Like the Rabelaisian world that Bakhtin discusses, classical philosophy and the literary tradition in India have also recognized the significance of comedy in religious gnosia (in fact, it is the aesthetic mode of attack on culturally esteemed objects, and even gods are not spared from these degrading vulgarities). The Great Sage Bharatha, who wrote the treatise on dance (Natya Sastra), said: "[o]nce they had mastered the Scripture of Dramatic Arts, my sons began to ridicule everyone in the entire universe with farces... and soon they performed a satire of the Divine Sages, a play full of vulgarities" (quoted by Siegel 1987 : 57). The satirical laughter that is inserted into serious cerebral activity must ring with primordial abusiveness. In Indian philosophy, such ritual malediction is at once a degradation and an awareness, because the phenomenal world is frequently described as Maya — an illusion, a hoax, or a joke. Getting the ultimate joke means to be able to see through metaphysical film-flam and epistemological bamboozlement, and thus attain liberation. The Pundit and the challengers are aware that total comic relief would mean total cessation of their activity: they therefore go back and forth from the delightful folly of "folk culture" or "popular culture" to the exalted world of literati.

It is this kind of "play," carried out in the "Avadhanam," where the challengers seek the pundit's opinion on a scantily clad heroine or on a popular film song that is vulgar. In one such event, the pundit used the opportunity to discuss the finesse with which writers like Kalidasa, Vatsayayana, Annamacharya (among others) have described the physical subtleties of amorous play, as well as their candour and boldness in describing a goddess breasts and buttocks. The challenger deliberately tried to drag the pundit into a conversation about a "popular dirty song," but, instead, the pundit elevated the conversation by reciting quotation from great sages and thinkers who concurrently experienced the sensual pleasures of the body in the fullness of the world, and the anxiety and repugnance over the cruel and transient nature of beauty. By pointing out the ineluctability of this tension, the pundit observed that even the goddess of knowledge, Saraswati, does not spare anyone claiming ignorance on sensual matters. The pundit narrated another story of
“Avadhanam” — a debate between the goddess of knowledge, Saraswati herself, and the great philosopher Sankara, who was a celibate mendicant. Sankara answers all the questions posed by the goddess and pleads ignorance on sensual matters. In order to win the match, he renounces his body temporarily and his soul enters the body of a dying king to experience the delights of *Srîngâra* — erotic love. He eventually won the match.

Erotic devotion in classical Indian philosophy has multiple meanings — it operates both on visceral and spiritual levels. In some instances, celibacy is seen as a mere ploy, a spiritual means to carnal ends. Sanskrit literature is replete with satiric laughter aimed at the lustful ascetic who pretends to have the vision of a god. Bhartrhari, the poet, captures this particular hypocrisy of the mendicant:

Mendicant, who carves his name in the body,

Whose mouth is a sore with wisdom,

Who can really forsake the hips

Of beautiful women bound

with girdles of red jewels?

The sonorous sages are just canting frauds

In the ways they try to revile young beauties

They want heaven from ascetic fevers

Just for the nymphs up there! — those vain deceivers!

Bhartrhari (1968) *Srîngâra Satakam*

While the mendicant in Sanskrit literature, in pursuit of wisdom, resists the lustful advances of the celestial nymph, the pundit in the “Avadhanam” actually engages in this seeming distraction. He turns the tables around and displays his knowledge of scriptures purchasing the necessary time to compose the required poems.

**Conclusions**

Because of the wholesome way in which it uses language in creative activity, the literary event “Avadhanam” becomes an interesting way of observing points of convergence and divergence between Bhartrhari and Bakhtin. As a grammarian and a philosopher, Bhartrhari approached language at many levels — phonological, syntactic, semantic, and ultimately cosmological — all of which are tightly intertwined. As we saw, the kind of linguistic feat which occurs in “Avadhanam” is possible only in Telugu and Sanskrit because of the unique features of their structure. This literary event clearly upholds Bhartrhari’s holistic doctrine on language — that is, the inseparability of *langue* and *parole*. Its principal task consists in the composition of meaningful poems which respect the rules of grammar and poetry. As a broad principle of philosophy, its emphasis is not on the “secular knowledge” of language but on its connection with meaningful life pursuits, since (as the philosopher Sankaracharya puts it), “rules of grammar offer no salvation” (Sri Sankaracharya 1978: recurrent verse).

Bakhtin, being a literary theorist — or actually a philosophical anthropologist — does not necessarily discuss phonological and syntactical aspects of language. However, this does not mean that he writes as a dualist. His emphasis is on sociological poetics. Immersed in the debates of his own time, he sharply responded to Formalism which did not admit social and political factors, either in the production or the reception of literature. Bakhtin made a plea for the “resurrection of the word” in all its wholesomeness (Bakhtin and Medvedev).

Even within the Indian context, the merit of “Avadhanam” in literary scholarship is not without its share of disputes. Some scholars argue that no “great” work of scholarship has emerged out of this exercise because the pundit faces severe constraints both in the time and in the specifications imposed on him. For these scholars, the pundit is nothing but a literary juggler or acrobat who provides instant and cheap amusement at the literary market place. Others hold that “Avadhanam” is a visible and condensed version of creative activity itself which occurs not in a vacuum with unlimited freedom, but amidst constraints where the artist responds to specific circumstances and creates new events. I would argue that both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari would endorse the latter view. The “Avadhanam” is emblematic of the “fullness of time” that Bakhtin discovers in Goethe’s creative writing where there are important interconnections of the past, present, and future. The pundit taps into “great time” in which scriptural plots and historical events have been concealed in diverse languages. He recasts them in yet other genres and gives new twists and turns to their meanings. This kind of “creative necessity” is more than a sociological process for Bhartrhari: it is, in fact, a “cosmic principle,” and therefore, even Brahman must incarnate in order to respond to specific needs. Such diversity does not weaken the “Absolute Truth.” In fact, the latter is energized by it. This cosmic principle is explained in *Bhagavad Gita* : “[w]hen the Lord takes up a body and when he abandons it, he goes forth taking these [the senses and the mind] with him, as the wind carries with it the perfumes from their retreats” (*Bhagavad Gita* 1992: Chapter 15, Stanza 8). Likewise, for Bhartrhari, when words coagulate with other words in sentences they carry unique intonations and fragrances with them to be utilized in still forthcoming contexts. Thus, the inexhaustibility of the word is appreciated by both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari. However, the difference between the two can be best seen in the fact that, while Bakhtin vociferously argues about the merits of sociological poetics over formal methods, Bhartrhari considers linguistic and social evaluation as common denominators in artistic creation.
Notes

1 To refer to The Vakyapadiya of Bhartrhari, the abbreviation VP will be used in this paper, followed by the number of the chapter (I. II or III) and the pagination.

2 Here I am referring to Bhartrhari the poet, the author of Subhasitastriyat (1968). Some scholars of classical Indian philosophy hold the view that the poet Bhartrhari and the grammarian Bhartrhari are one and the same person, while others argue that they are different individuals. Not wishing to enter into this debate — as it goes beyond both the scope of this study and my personal expertise — I merely point out this dispute.

3 I am grateful to Professor Vemuri Ramanadham, an economist, a Telugu poet and a literary critic for his assistance in preparing this essay. As a scholar who is at home in the world of literature and other worldly affairs, his advice was truly invaluable.

References *


* Excerpts taken from "Avadhanam" events performed by the scholars Medasani Mohan and Madhugula Nagaphani Sarma were witnessed by the author.

Abstract

This article explores the points of convergence and divergence between Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), and the Sanskrit grammarian and philosopher Bhartrhari, who probably lived between A.D. 450-500. Although these two thinkers came from different continents and lived in entirely different historical periods, there are striking similarities in their writings on language, history and reality. Both argued that a “word” cannot be understood in isolation, but in relation to other words. Bakhtin’s emphasis was on discourse, and Bhartrhari concentrated on the "languaging" activity. Yet, there are also differences between them. While Bakhtin argued in favor of sociological poetics, Bhartrhari presented a cosmological thesis on language. The cosmic principle allowed Bhartrhari to integrate la langue and la parole — law and history. In this paper, a dialogue is set up between Bakhtin and Bhartrhari through a discussion on a unique and valuable literary exercise and linguistic feat called Avadhanam.

Résumé

Cet article met en lumière les points de convergence et de divergence entre les théories respectives de Bakhtine (1895-1975) et du philosophe et grammairien sanskritiste Bhartrhari, qui a probablement vécu entre 450 et 500 de notre ère. Bien que ces deux penseurs soient apparus à des périodes historiques tout à fait différentes, malgré qu'ils proviennent de continents distincts, leurs écrits sur la langue, l'histoire et la réalité affichent plusieurs similarités. Les deux soutiennent, par exemple, qu’un "mot" ne peut être compris de manière isolée, mais seulement en relation avec d'autres mots. Cependant, il y a également lieu de remarquer des différences entre eux. Si Bakhtine, dans ses recherches, a mis l'emphasis sur la notion de discourse, Bhartrhari s'est davantage intéressé au phénomène de l'inscription langagière ("languaging") : alors que Bakhtine a défendu une poétique sociologique, la thése de Bhartrhari est sur la langue s'avère cosmologique. Ce principe cosmique inhérent à sa langue permis à Bhartrhari d'intégrer la langue et la parole — la norme et l'usage. À partir d'un exercice littéraire unique, appelé Avadhanam et consistant en de véritables prouesses linguistiques, cette étude met en place un dialogue entre Bakhtine et Bhartrhari.

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