

L. Bandlamudi

Voices and vibrations of consciousness in genres: A Dialogue Between Bakhtin and Bhartrhari on Interpretations

The Word is infinite, immense, beyond all this.... All Gods, the celestial spirits, men and animals live in the Word. In the Word all the worlds find their support.

Taittiriya Brahmana II, 8, 8, 4

The ancient Vedic literature offers one of the most comprehensive accounts on the relationship between Language and Reality. It emphatically states that there are no definitive and absolute beginnings in human history, and therefore impossible to establish primacy between the Word and the World. The Sanskrit equivalent of the Word — *Vāc* has a more complex ring to it, for it is not singular, mechanical or human-made. It is considered identical with the Brahman — the Absolute, all-encompassing Truth. Like the formless and timeless *Brahman* that assumes specific form to suit specific context in order to respond to specific time, the Word in human usage also assumes different shades and meanings depending on the speaker, listener and the context within which the activity takes place. Therefore the Vedic literature considers the liturgical Word to be the Primordial principle at the origin of all human activity. According to the Vedic revelations, *Vāc* is fundamentally feminine, being the domain of the Goddess, complementing and anchoring Creation, which is considered masculine. Raimundo Panikkar explains that, “*Vāc* is really the total living Word, that is to say, the Word in her entirety, including her material aspects, her cosmic reverberation, her visible form, her sound, her meaning, her message”¹. Thus, the Word is multi-dimensional, versatile and inexhaustible because real people, living in real time and space carry out innumerable transactions among themselves and search for myriad pathways to reach the divine through words.

Much of the philosophical discussions on the nature of language in Indian history are built on the Vedic and Upanishadic texts. Among them, Bhartrhari’s treatise *Vakyapadiya* — literally translating into “sentence-word” stands out as the most comprehensive account on the philosophy of language, addressing the interconnections between parts and whole, particulars and universals and Language as an abstract formal system and the activity of “languageing” as a social practice.

In this paper, I want to set up a dialogue between Bhartrhari and Bakhtin to explore amazing similarities and recognize important differences in their theory of living language. Although they came from different parts of the world and lived centuries apart, it would be instructive to bring them to the discursive space to hear the voices

¹ Panikkar R. The Vedic Experience. Mantramanjari: An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration. — Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977. P. 89.

of consciousness that Bakhtin was attentive to and feel the vibrations of consciousness that Bhartrhari was concerned with, in various linguistic genres we produce through human interactions. Bakhtin¹ asserts that creative understanding emerges at the threshold of competing and contrasting ideas, in particular, when they encounter ‘foreign’ meanings. Almost 1500 years before Bakhtin, the necessity of rupture in 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 acumen by familiarity with different traditions” (VP II #484). Thus, guided by their insight, I bring these thinkers for a dialogic encounter to explore the parameters of genre and the possibilities of interpretation in eastern and western traditions. Both these thinkers address their epistemological and metaphysical inquiries through their philosophy of language. They see language in action as the site for all phenomenal multiplicities and changes and proceed to unravel the structures of genres and thought to present a detailed analysis of the nature of utterances.

Words and Meanings Grow...

The metaphysical approach towards the relationship between Language and Reality is evident in the very first verse in Bhartrhari’s multi-volume treatise in *Vakyapadiya*. It says,

*Anadinidhanam brahma sabdatattvam yadaksaram
Vivartate rthabhavena prakriyo jagato yatah.*

Which loosely translates into,

The *Brahman* is without beginning and end, whose essence is the Word, who is the cause of the manifested phonemes, who appears as the objects, from whom the creation of the world proceeds².

In a metaphysical sense *Brahman* means ‘Absolute Truth’ or ‘All Pervading Reality,’ Etymologically, it literally means, “growth, expansion, evolution, development, swelling of the spirit or soul”³. The Formless and Timeless *Brahman* is perennially assuming different forms in a timely manner to respond to specific needs of the hour and the context. Since the Word is identical with the *Brahman*, it also shares the same attributes — that is, according to the context pervades the meaning. The meaning in Bhartrhari’s view is derived from sentence and not the word and hence the primacy of *Vakya* (sentence) over *Pada* (word) in his treatise, the *Vakyapadiya*. The inherent power in the word allows it to manifest itself in different phonemes, to produce different sounds and meanings. It must be noted that phonemes are manifestations of the Word, but phonemes do not add to form the Word. The gestalt principle is inherent in the verse.

How does the Word have the capacity to take on different meanings? Bhartrhari explains that the Word like the *Brahman* has an inherent temporal power to assume

¹ Bakhtin M. M. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays* (V.W. McGee, Trans.) C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Eds.). — Austin: University of Texas Press. 1986.

² Patnaik T. *SABDA: A Study of Bhartrhari’s Philosophy of Language*. — New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 2007.

³ Monier-Williams M. *Sanskrit English Dictionary*. — New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd., 1899.

different forms — that is different meanings. (VP. I #2) He explains that the Word, like the *Brahman* is characterized by three attributes, namely the *Tamas*, the *Rajas*, and the *Sattva*. The Tamasic trait refers to dullness, inertia and formula. Characterized by *Tamas*, the Word is dormant and its range of meanings is restrictive. The *Rajas* trait is dynamic with boundless energy to grow and spread. The Word in this form shows its creative power to expand and displays its versatility. Many factors contribute to the Word's dynamism — other words, speakers, listeners, history and context. The *Vedantic* principle cautions that unchecked power could lead to chaos and destruction. Therefore, the energy of the *Rajas* is checked by *Sattva*, which is marked by dispassion and enlightened calmness. Furthermore, the inherent temporal power in the *Brahman*/Word that contributes to the creation of new form also has the power for dissolution. The logic is that every birth eventually faces its inevitable death. But then, the Vedantic philosophy argues for the law of rebirth, and hence the word meanings are subjected to these laws and therefore hidden or dormant meanings are revived in some place at some time. In short, word meanings have history and are context bound.

What is the purpose behind the multiple avatars that the *Brahman* takes? Bhartrhari explains that the ultimate goal is salvation. (VP I # 5) Since the Word, being identical with the Brahman is divinized, it becomes the goal and the words become the devices for reaching the goal. The product of knowledge and the method to achieve that knowledge are one and the same. Ignorance disappears on reaching the goal and the method to reach the goal — enlightenment — is to cultivate the ability to recognize myriad forms of the Word. Since the pathway are many; words, expressions, utterances take on different meanings in different schools of thought, creating debate and dispute. (VP I # 9. 10) The dialectic between the seeming opposites — the dualities — according to Bhartrhari is necessary to arrive at *Advaita* — Non-dualistic knowledge, which is what the *Brahman* is.

Bhartrhari cautions that multiple pathways in reaching the goal does not necessarily translate into philosophical relativism. (VP I # 14) Grouping of words must follow specific traditions and rules of grammar, prosody, felicity of sounds and flourish of meanings to ensure that speech is free of blemishes. Bhartrhari sees grammar and appropriate positioning of words as the “first rung on the ladder towards salvation”¹. In this manner Bhartrhari integrates law and history, structure and freedom to adhere to the *Vedantic* principle of Non-dualism.

Mikhail Bakhtin also conceived language as a living dialogue. In sharp opposition to Saussurean linguistics, which examined the formal structure of language, Bakhtin was interested in ‘meta-linguistics’ or ‘trans-linguistics’, which examined verbal transactions in action. Unlike the philosophical debates concerning language within the Indian intellectual traditions, which was grounded in the cosmological thesis centering around how to know the ‘Truth’ — meaning ‘God’ — and the challenges in signifying the ‘Absolute Truth’, the debates in the western traditions are grounded in binaries such as synchrony/diachrony, syntagmatic/paradigmatic, *langue/parole* and so on. On one side of the debate is Ferdinand de Saussure who insists that the scope of linguistics must be “to determine the forces that are permanently and universally

¹Subrahmanyam K. Translation and Commentary on The Vakyapadiyam of Bhartrhari: Brahmakanda I. — Delhi: Satguru Publications, 1992.

at work in all languages”¹, thus favoring *la langue over la parole*. Saussure insists that language lends itself to independent study and therefore speech must be studied from the vantage point of language as he states, “*from the very outset we must put both feet on the ground of language and use language as the norm of all other manifestations of speech*”².

On the other side, the Bakhtinian oeuvre is mainly focused on raising objections to the polarization of these dichotomies and instead calls for interaction, not in a mechanical or formulaic way, but as a dynamic system operating amidst contradictory forces. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Volosinov warns about the danger of treating language as a self-contained system:

The idea of the *conventionality, the arbitrariness of language*, is typical one for rationalism as a whole, and no less typical is the *comparison of language to the system of mathematical signs*. What interests the mathematically minded rationalists is not the relationship of the sign to the actual reality it reflects nor to the individual who is its originator, but the *relationship of sign to sign within a closed system* already accepted and authorized. In other words, they are interested only in the *inner logic of the system of signs itself*, taken, as in algebra, completely independently of the ideological meanings that give the signs their content³.

The disregard for “social meanings” achieved through transactions, compromise, and contest is what Bakhtin finds problematic in treating language as a closed system. For Bakhtin, the manifestation of language occurs only in the social realm and therefore the structure of language is of little interest to him. For Bhartrhari, it is the very nature of *Brahman* to diversify in order to take various forms. He equates language as a formal system to the dormant “yolk of peahen’s egg” (VP I #51), and once it is hatched in the “languageing” activity, it displays its variegated colors and obtains finer parts and sequences and even imperfections, depending on its usage by human agents. Like Bakhtin, Bhartrhari also located the origin of meaning making in the social realm. In Bhartrhari’s view one must be attentive to *Sabdana Vyapara* — meaning the ‘business of sounds/meanings’ or ‘buying and selling of sounds/meanings’, because it constitutes the very *Spanda* — vibration of consciousness. The meaning-bearing unit of language emerges through the human interactions, which Bhartrhari refers to as *Sphota*. Similar to the way in which Bakhtin developed his theory of ‘genre’, which in his view is the mind’s eye to see reality, Bhartrhari developed his doctrine of *Sphota* — a tactile metaphor to explain the feel or force of emerging meanings. In fact, for Bhartrhari, *Sphota* is the “real substratum, proper linguistic unit, which is identical with its meaning”. Etymologically, the word *Sphota* has its origins in the word *Sphut* — meaning ‘to burst’; therefore when words touch other words in a sentence, the friction causes manifested meanings in language to spring forth. Since language is an activity in Bhartrhari’s view, his explanations are filled with images of a bustling market place where the business of ‘languageing’ is carried out. Bhartrhari explains that *Sphota* is the meaning that vibrates through language.

Both Bhartrhari and Bakhtin argue against reductionism in the study of language

¹ De Saussure F. *Course in General Linguistics*. — New York: McGraw Hill, 1959. P. 6.

² *Ibid.* P. 9.

³ Volosinov V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. L. Matejka and I.R. Titunik, (Trans.). — Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973. P. 57—58.

and oppose treating language as abstract grammatical categories. They both insist that a ‘word’ like a human being cannot exist in isolation, but need other words from other human beings 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*”¹. Similarly, Bhartrhari cautions about the danger of isolating words, as he explains, “Just as the meaning of the word is not understood from each phoneme, in the same way, the meaning of the sentence is not understood from each word (VP II #60).

Furthermore, both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari insist that meaning making is a joint enterprise between different speakers and listeners, who at any given moment occupy a unique place in culture and history. Since ‘languageing’ is an indispensable part of social life, Bhartrhari observes that the “soul of word meanings” emerge through *Vyavahara* — communication (VP II #437). Bakhtin also insists that the meanings of utterances develop “on the boundary between two consciousnesses². Both of them acknowledge that a given utterance could have different meanings at different times for the same individual, just as different individuals are likely to perceive different meanings of the same utterance at any given moment.

Fixed meanings are problematic for Bhartrhari as they are for Bakhtin because they impoverish the ‘word’ by removing it from its context and history. Bhartrhari states that, “The meanings of words are determined according to the sentence, situation, meaning, propriety, place and time and not according to mere external form” (VP II #314).

According to the *Vedantic* revelations, the Word is the object of worship and the mediator of worship — the offered and the offering. Words or names of Gods assume different meanings depending on the spiritual pathway that the individual takes. In the *Jnana Marg* — the Path of Intellect, words signify awareness and realization, whereas in the *Karma Marg* — the Path of Action, words are a link between performed actions and the inner intentions of the actor and in the *Bhakti Marg* — the Path of Devotion, words are meditative. In Hinduism, there are thousands of Gods, considered to be manifestations of the eternal *Brahman*, and each God has thousands of names. Depending on the topic that the intellect is ruminating on, appropriate name of the God is to be invoked. Whereas in the *Bhakti Marg* — the Path of Devotion, the devotee might engage in *Nama Japa* — meditation by repeating one name of the God. The repetition is meant to build spiritual discipline and intensify the devotion, giving the prayer the necessary thrust to reach the divine. Raimundo Panikkar explains why the Word enjoys incredible variety of meanings according to Vedic traditions,

From the perspective of the Vedic Revelation one would not hesitate to say that the Word is the embodiment of Man as well as of God. In the Word, whose function is both to conceal and to reveal, God and Man meet. It is the cosmotheandric reality par excellence³.

We could say that not only words enjoy variety, but also the absence of words — those pauses, occasional stammer and stutter also enjoy the same privilege of va-

¹ Bakhtin M. M. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays* (V.W. McGee, Trans.) C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Eds.). — Austin: University of Texas Press. 1986. P.127.

² *Ibid.* P. 106.

³ Panikkar R. *Op. cit.* P. 90—91.

riety in interpretation. Think about all the meanings that ‘silence’ might assume — a necessity when deep thoughts are being churned, a screen while searching for the right word or phrase, an intermission for mining the ore of ideas in order to resume their public display, a mask for ignorance, a sign of wisdom, a consent or a snub, or a form of tyranny or a strategy for defiance, a remedy for raging temper, an exercise for developing a steady mind, a symptom of dumbness or an indicator of a contemplative soul in search of its creator and the list can go on. Silence may be the place for the exhausted word to retire, but the meaning of silence remains inexhaustible. It is this plenitude of variety in language that fascinated Bakhtin the most, and that is why he argues that studying the ‘word’ in isolation is akin to studying “*psychological experience outside the context of that real life toward which it was directed and by which it is determined*”¹.

How and why do word meanings undergo transitions and transformations? Bhartrhari maintains distinctions between “language in private thought” and “language in public expression” and between the “intended meaning of the speaker” and the “actually expressed meaning” and the “meaning received by the listener.” He rejects the autonomy of these categories but retains a paradoxical and reciprocal interdependence between them². In order to track the movement of meaning-bearing units from deep inner thought to socially expressed speech, Bhartrhari identifies three distinct stages. The first stage is *Pasyanti Vak* — the preverbal stage — the inner thought, which in Bhartrhari’s view is identical with intellect or consciousness. At this stage the *Sphota* — the meaning-bearing unit according to him is without sequence. Furthermore, the *Sphota* at this stage has no *Nada* — audible sound. As Lev Vygotsky³ would say thought is abbreviated and crystallized, whereas Bhartrhari says that the *Sphota* at this stage has no parts and hence no sequence (VP I # 48). The dislodged thought before reaching the lips of the speaker passes through an intermediary stage that Bhartrhari identifies as *Madhyama Vak*. At this stage *Sphota* must be prepared for expression and by necessity acquires some sequence. The next level is the *Vaikhari Vak* — the social speech, which is elaborate and sequential. At this stage the *Sphota* — meaning-bearing unit or the semantic element is combined with *Nada* — the sound or the sonic element. Using a popular metaphor in classical Indian literature and philosophy, Bhartrhari explains the nature of the relationship between *Sphota* (semantics) and *Nada* (sound) and how and why the shift in meaning occurs. He asks us to think of the reflection of moon (semantics) in the water (sound), and explains that the reflection does not have the inherent quality of movement, but the ripples on the water shifts the image of the moon reflected in it. Therefore, the sound, which has the ripple effect, rearranges the image of the semantic element. Once the semantics mixes with the sound, shift in meanings is inevitable and this is an immediate reality for Bhartrhari.

How and why does the transformation in meaning occur between the speaker and the listener? Bhartrhari explains that for the speaker the movement is from thought, which is without sequence, to speech, which is with sequence, whereas for the listener

¹ Bakhtin M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). M. Holquist (Ed.). — Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. P. 292.

² Patnaik T. *SABDA: A Study of Bhartrhari’s Philosophy of Language*. — New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 2007.

³ Vygotsky L. S. *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky. Vol. 1. Problems of General Psychology*. R.W. Rieber and A.S. Carton (Eds.). — New York: Plenum Press. 1987.

it is the opposite — from the fluid form with sequence to a crystallized form without sequence. For the speaker, sound is the result of meaning, whereas, for the listener, meaning is the result of sound (VP I #53), and hence the variation in meanings.

For Bhartrhari, the growth of words and meanings is a cosmic truth, a linguistic law, a sociological reality and an epistemological necessity. Bakhtin, on the other hand had deep fascination for the cornucopia of differences in the world. He was impressed with the variations in tone, subtleties in voices and changes in time periods, and closely observed varying shades in cultural landscapes and attentively heard distinctive tone in individual voices. Based on the immediate reality that culture is never homogeneous, Bakhtin built his theory of polyphony and heteroglossia. Like Bhartrhari, Bakhtin also insists on situating the ‘word’ in a broader episteme and recognizing the centrifugal and centripetal forces at work. Bakhtin writes that, “no living word relates to its object in a *singular way*”¹, and hence takes on layers of social meaning. He explains the life of a word in culture and history in the following manner,

The word, directed toward its object enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile².

Thus, Bakhtin’s explanatory mode is grounded exclusively in the cultural-historical-literary theory.

On Epistemology and Metaphysics through Language...

It would be inadequate to describe both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari as just philosophers of language, as if their only concern was with how language works. Both of them defy narrow definitions: Bhartrhari is identified as a philosopher, grammarian, philologist and linguist, while Bakhtin is broadly viewed as a literary critic, but considered himself to be a philosophical anthropologist at heart. Both of them cross all disciplinary boundaries and they looked into language to address their concerns on epistemology and metaphysics in a comprehensive manner.

Bhartrhari and Bakhtin maintain that awareness of any kind, including sensory perception is intertwined with language. Bhartrhari explains that tactile awareness falls under pre-linguistic awareness, in which the response is purely to the sound, and when the sound is intertwined with meaning, the awareness is elevated because of the capacity for verbalization. Words of any kind, including animal sounds and infant babbling are the cause of *Pratibha* — ‘flash of understanding’, as Bhartrhari points out that “all words are the cause of a flash of understanding through practice (*Abhyasa*), even in the case of children and animals in their understanding of things as they are” (VP II #117). Bhartrhari explains that in dealing with animals and infants, perceptive human beings use “fixed words or sounds” whereas communication with fellow intelligent beings is full of multiplicities. It is instructive to note that Bhartrhari is making several important distinctions: between sentient and non-sentient beings and between lower and higher forms of mental functions. Furthermore, he is

¹ Bakhtin M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. (C.Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). M. Holquist, (Ed.). — Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. P. 276.

² *Ibid.*

emphasizing the importance of *Abhyasa* — the disciplined practice of study habits by the individual and the centrality of culture in the meaning-making endeavors. The capacity to respond to sounds may be biological, but understanding the meanings of the sound is unmistakably cultural.

Bakhtin also equates the ‘word’ with ‘intelligibility’ because once consciousness emerges through words even the physical world around us changes radically. Once the physical world is grasped by human intellect — an act that is possible only through words — the individual in Bakhtin’s view becomes a witness and a judge. Once the knower and the known enter into a partnership something extraordinary happens in Bakhtin’s view, that is, the emergence of “supra person, the *supra* — *I*”¹ that constitutes the “*whole* human being” because self no longer exists only for himself but for the ‘other.’ According to Bakhtin it is the prerogative to be a judge and witness that sanctions freedom to the individual, which in turn, can be earned and expressed only through words. Bakhtin explains this somewhat esoteric phenomenon,

When consciousness appeared in the world (in existence) and, perhaps, when biological life appeared (perhaps not only animals, but trees and grass also witness and judge), the world (existence) changed radically. A stone is still stony and the sun still sunny, but the event of existence as a whole (unfinalized) becomes completely different because a new and major character in this event appears for the first time on the scene of earthly existence — the witness and the judge².

The epistemological issues that Bakhtin raises (incidentally, because he did not set out to be a theorist of the mind) is grounded in his broader theory of dialogue. Bakhtin constructs human relations on a triadic equation — the I-for-myself, I-for-others and Others-for-me³. These are the parameters within which we can pose questions and gain awareness about self and others. None of these categories are static for Bakhtin because individuals are always operating in an ever-changing world. The interdependence between the self and the other is not necessarily viewed by Bakhtin as a virtue or as a sign of tolerance or as a way to build harmonious society; rather the reliance on the other is inevitable because we cannot transcend our solipsism. At a fundamental level, we are invisible to ourselves — I cannot see my own face — hence I need the other as a mirror. Our view of the world is also partial and hence the need for the other to fill-in. Bakhtin argues that we simply do not have the cognitive categories to get a complete picture of ourselves, or the world around us. The perceptual limitation is compensated by the cognitive awareness that others also have a limited view and hence the need for each other⁴. Thus, the need for the other is an ontological reality and hence an epistemological necessity.

Bakhtin points out the centrality of language in cognitive operations through a complex circuitous route covering the nature of self-other relationships, which necessitates a dialogue, which in turn can be carried out only with words. Bakhtin would certainly agree with Bhartrhari’s general principle that “whatever is knowable

¹ Bakhtin M. M. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays* (V.W. McGee, Trans.) C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Eds.). — Austin: University of Texas Press. 1986. P. 137.

² *Ibid.*

³ Morson G. S., Emerson C. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of Prosaics*. — Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

⁴ Bakhtin M. M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M.M. Bakhtin (V. Liapunov, Trans.) M. Holquist and V. Liapunov (Eds.). — Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

is sayable and whatever is sayable is also knowable”¹, since one cannot exist without the other. However, both would agree that the known need not necessarily be said by choice or due to external conditions. Furthermore, the known, since it belongs to the realm of crystallized thought requires special skill to express it adequately.

How then, does unintended or inadequate meanings emerge? In this realm, it is instructive to note important differences between the two thinkers. Bhartrhari was interested in both language as a unified system and language in action. As Patnaik explains he was concerned with “what can be said **about** language and what can be said **in** language”², even while maintaining a distinction between them. Bakhtin on the other hand had very little to say ‘about’ language and concentrated mainly on what is said or sayable in language.

On reasons behind the emergence of additional and unintended meanings, Bhartrhari looked into the structure of language to offer cogent explanations. He explains that it is an unavoidable epiphenomenon when words come together in a sentence. The following stanzas clearly explain his position:

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, (VP II #298)

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. (VP II # 299)

Though the churning of ignition sticks (*arani*) is done for producing fire, it also produces the unintended smoke in the same process. (VP II # 300)

In the same way, a word also, when a particular meaning is meant to be conveyed, denotes by association, an unintended meaning also. (VP II # 301)

Thus, in Bhartrhari’s view, the collateral benefit and damage are inevitable when words are grouped together because proximity and collision among them invariably produce unintended consequences. Bhartrhari also goes beyond the ‘word’ into the ‘world’ to explain multiplicity in meaning. He points out that there is always the possibility of disjunction between the intended meanings of the speaker and the received meaning of the listener (VP II # 135). Does this mean that all meanings are veracious? Bhartrhari’s answer is a firm no. He points out the differences between the language of the ‘learned’ and the ‘untutored’ and yet has this advice for the learned, “the wise man should not deviate from the definitions of them [words and concepts] adopted by men of the world in their usage” (VP II # 142). In short, words and meanings have conventions and histories, and unlike the untutored mind the learned and the learning mind must travel far and wide in time and space to recognize cultural norms and use language appropriately. Even while acknowledging the playful nature of the relationship between the *word* and the *world*, Bhartrhari insists that what goes on or must go on in society is not a language game (the kind with no rules or limited rules), instead he insists on cultivating *Sabdayoga* — the Yoga of sounds and words or the disciplined practice of words and sounds³.

Like Bhartrhari, Bakhtin⁴ also insists on the disciplined process of verbal tes-

¹ Patnaik T. SABDA: A Study of Bhartrhari’s Philosophy of Language. — New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 2007.

² Ibid. P. 173.

³ Alackapally S. Being & Meaning: Reality and Language in Bhartrhari and Heidegger. — Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002.

⁴ Bakhtin M. M. Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin (V, Liapunov,

timony. Answerability and ethical responsibility are the requirements in the art of speech. The very foundation of dialogism for Bakhtin is in the unity of our answerability — in thought, in speech and in action and deeds. Like Bhartrhari, Bakhtin too was fascinated with how **one** becomes **many**. Bhartrhari saw that in the cosmic power of the **Brahman** to incarnate itself in various forms to facilitate the functioning of the world. Bakhtin addresses this metaphysical issue in his early works — *Art and Answerability* — in the context of the relationship between “spirit” (*dukh*) and “soul” (*dusha*). Morson and Emerson (1990) explain that Bakhtin describes spirit as the I-for-myself, which is open-ended and free, and hence has “no firm points of consummation”¹ (p.193), and the provisional closure is brought by the soul, which is the I-for-others. Thus, the spirit, which always has the ‘loophole’, manages to take off on a free flight while the soul governed by rhythm provides the temporary closure as a safety measure against an open and risky future. In Bhartrhari’s scheme it is the sound that gives sequence to meaning: similarly, Bakhtin explains the function of rhythm in thought and action as he says, “Rhythm is the axiological ordering of what is inwardly given or present-on-hand”². More importantly, rhythm regulates the free movement of meaning or draws the parameters within which meanings find their expression. Bakhtin explains, “Rhythm presupposes a certain *predeterminedness* of striving, experiencing, action (a certain hopelessness with respect to meaning). The actual, fateful, risk-fraught absolute future is surmounted by rhythm...”³. Thus, for Bakhtin, open-endedness does not translate into absence of structure or total chaos or ‘anything goes.’ It is instructive to hear in Bakhtin’s own voice about his fascination for how **one** can become **many** as he reflected on his wide-ranging collection of works towards the end of his life in *From Notes Made in 1970-71*:

The unity of the emerging (developing) idea. Hence a certain internal open-endedness of many of my ideas. But I do not wish to turn shortcomings into virtues: in these works there is much external open-endedness, that is, an open-endedness not of thought itself but of its expression and exposition. Sometimes it is difficult to separate one open-endedness from another. It cannot be assigned to a particular trend (Structuralism). My love for variations and for a diversity of terms for a single phenomenon. The multiplicity of focuses. Bringing distant things closer without indicating intermediate links⁴.

In these personal reflections, Bakhtin is communicating the profound significance to aesthetics and epistemology in the word’s ability to carry multiple concepts (which manifest on specific occasion) and the capacity of multiple words to signify one concept. In artistic pursuits the availability of many words for one idea comes handy for expression and to produce a heightened effect (aesthetics). For pedagogical purposes, multiple words for one concept allow the instructor to reach students with different cognitive style (exposition). Lastly, the ‘many-in-one’ and ‘one-in-many’ allows for the dialogic encounter between disparate and distant ideas, which was the main concern for both Bhartrhari and Bakhtin.

Trans.) M. Holquist and V. Liapunov (Eds.). — Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

¹ Morson G. S., Emerson C. Op. cit. P. 193.

² Bakhtin M. M. *Art and Answerability*. P. 117.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bakhtin M. M. *Speech Genres...* P. 155.

Time, Narrative and Meaning

When a narrative is read, the narrated events are comprehended as ordered in time. Multiple times intersect in the process of understanding — cultural-historical time, as depicted in the narrative, and the time the narrative was written, and the time when it was read, and in this dynamic interaction each form of time also undergoes change. In this process ‘time’ is not just a marker or organizer of events, but becomes an interesting kaleidoscope displaying various experiential configurations.

In Bhartrhari’s philosophy Time as an aspect of Brahman facilitates its multiple manifestations, and it is the power of time (small time) that allows us to recognize that various forms of Brahman. Time as an ‘Absolute Power’ is the cause of birth, existence and death (VP III 9.3) of everything. Time plays many roles and serves many functions: it changes, connects, regulates, permits, prevents, accelerates and slows down various aspects of reality. Bhartrhari offers various images of Time: he saw it as the “wire puller of the world machine” that “regulates the universe” (VP III 9.4), or as a “water-wheel” that turns all the “fragments” — that is smaller units of time and makes them move bringing about seasonal and daily changes. (VP III 9.14) He also saw Time as the “current of a river” that displaces some things and puts other things back in their place (VP III 9.41). The tide leaves some things from the river on the shore and absorbs some things on the shore into its stream. The exchange at the meeting place between land and water is facilitated by Time. At a metaphysical level Time brings about the exchange between the immutable and the mutable. Bhartrhari uses these metaphors to explain that no act of cognition and expression of that act in words are possible without temporal categories and therefore Language and Time are inextricably woven together.

Bakhtin also stressed the necessity of temporal categories in narratives. He rejected the Newtonian notion of time and space as abstract and fixed categories and adopted a more Einsteinian view. In fact, Bakhtin¹ borrowed the term “chronotope” — literally meaning, “time-space” from Einstein’s theory of relativity to suggest the inseparability of spatio-temporal categories in various types of genres. In Bakhtin’s view chronotopes are the basis of drawing “generic distinctions” between various types of genres. Genres conceived in spatial terms with very few temporal categories not only present a rather fuzzy image of the characters, but also establish a very weak link between the characters and their surrounding world. For Bakhtin, chronotopes give meaning to narratives by creating distinct images of the characters and facilitating events to bind while allowing other events to unfold. I would argue that Bakhtin would agree with Bhartrhari that time operating like a “water-wheel” allows for various types of chronotopes to merge and unmerge to present an artistic vision. About the dynamism of temporal categories Bakhtin writes,

Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope².

Thus, temporal categories facilitates the metamorphosis between the characters and the plots, and the text and the reader and in Bhartrhari’s terms, time as the “cur-

¹ Bakhtin M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. (C.Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). M. Holquist. (Ed.). — Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

² *Ibid.* P. 84.

rent of a river” facilitates the exchange and mutual transformation between time represented in the text and the time when the text is read. For Bhartrhari Time gives form to the manifestations of the abstract Brahman. Similarly, for Bakhtin, “All the novel’s abstract elements — philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect — gravitate towards the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work”¹.

For both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari the production of meanings is subjected to the spatio-temporal upheavals. Even abstract thought and meanings of the past, as Bakhtin famously remarked must pass through the “gates of chronotope”². Therefore the encounter between past meanings and present conditions produces transformation of meanings in all the time zones. Bhartrhari points out that distinctions in Time are contingent divisions constructed by the mind in order to express various experiences through words, and thus, out of necessity, Time achieves the sequence called past, present and future. Of these time periods, Bhartrhari equates the past and future with darkness even as he points out different features of the past and future; but only the past in his view has the ability to impede the present. Since the past is identical with darkness, it “hides” objects and the present, which is equivalent to “light,” has the capacity to reveal and illuminate the past (VP III 9. 49-53). In other words, only the present has the power to shed light on the dark past, and therefore the past and present must co-exist for the purpose of interpretation and understanding. Furthermore, the power of the present does not just passively shed light and reveal the past, but has the power to transform it selectively, and the nature of the transformation is contingent on external circumstances and how purposeful the activity is for the present moment. Thus, any interpretation of the past, that is, **of time** can occur only through experiences **in time**, and both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari would attest to this view. That is why Bhartrhari’s metaphor of time as the “current of a river” is germane: the river absorbs visible objects on the shore and hides them and leaves hidden objects from its deep waters on the shore in different places at different times. How and why meanings disappear and reappear at places different from their origin is the function of time. That is why Bakhtin said appropriately about the death and rebirth of meanings, “Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. The problem of *great time*”³.

Bakhtin and Bhartrhari in an Unfinalized Dialogue about Unfinalizability...

The dialogue between Bhartrhari and Bakhtin clearly indicates that the Word is vitally connected with consciousness, community and communication. In Bhartrhari’s cosmological thesis words and concepts contain profound ambiguity, while Bakhtin accounts for the same ambiguity through his sociological thesis. Ultimately, both the thinkers were interested in multiplicity and dialogue and deemed them necessary for higher forms of consciousness. Since words and meanings are aspects of the eternal Brahman for Bhartrhari, he saw the activity of ‘languageing’ as the Spanda — ‘vibra-

² Bakhtin M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination...* P. 250.

³ Bakhtin M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination...* P. 258.

⁴ Bakhtin M. M. *Speech Genres...* P. 170

tion' of consciousness. Grounded in Hindu/Buddhist cosmology, Bhartrhari saw the manifestation of divine power as a vibration. Absolute Power cannot be seen or heard, but must be felt, and to feel the Universal Power within one must enter into a dialogue.

Bakhtin saw the dialogic energy created by multiple voices in the society as the force behind the evolving consciousness. He asserts that, "No human events are developed within the bounds of single consciousness"¹. Although Bakhtin did not discuss religion, at least as a codified abstract belief system, his works seem to indicate a deep interest in faith — a dialogue between the Creator and the created, or constructing the character to hold the self, answerable to a higher power. Bakhtin appreciated and celebrated such a dialogized consciousness in Dostoevsky's works.

Interestingly, Bakhtin uses a Hindu/Buddhist concept to explain the limitation of monologic consciousness as he says, "No Nirvana is possible for a *single* consciousness. A single consciousness is *contradictio in adjecto*. Consciousness is in essence multiple. *Pluralia tantum*"². Dialogue at multiple levels constitute the 'voice of consciousness' as Bakhtin explains,

The definition of voice. This includes height, range, timbre, aesthetic category (lyric, dramatic, etc.). It also includes a person's worldview and fate. A person enters into dialogue as an integral voice. He participates in it not only with his thoughts, but with his fate and with his entire individuality³.

In Vedic tradition 'fate' might be the hand of Higher Power, but entering into a dialogue with fate is an assertion of human power and it is in this play that Bhartrhari felt the vibrations of consciousness and Bakhtin heard the voices of consciousness.

¹ Bakhtin M. M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (C. Emerson, Trans. & Ed.). — Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. P. 288.

² *Ibid.* P. 288.

³ *Ibid.* P. 293.