

# Bhartrhari on language and reality

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## BHARTRHARI ON LANGUAGE AND REALITY

Saroja Bhate, Pune

The present paper is an attempt to sum up Bhartrhari's views on the relation of language with reality. It is, in fact, a further extension of the problem posed by Dr. J. Kelley in his paper, namely, whether the *Vākyapadīya* (VP) can be looked upon as an argument about the limitations of a formal system of analysis to describe linguistic phenomena<sup>1</sup>. I would like to go a step further and pose the problem whether the VP represents an argument about the limitations of language to describe reality.

Bhartrhari accepts perception, inference and word as valid means of knowledge. However, he acknowledges highest authority to word. He declares in the *Brahmakānda* that there is no knowledge which does not assume the form of a word<sup>2</sup>. All knowledge must culminate in verbal knowledge. No object which is not expressed in words exists. Language is the only window to the world. Our knowledge of reality is shaped by the language we use. Thus Bhartrhari has initially accepted an intimate relationship of language with reality.

However, Bhartrhari shows the superficial character of this intimacy by pointing out how language falls short of reality. At several places in the VP he describes language not only as an inadequate tool to represent reality but also as a wrong means, which, in fact, never takes us to reality. It is very intriguing that the VP begins with a declaration that there is no world beyond language, whereas it ends up with a note of disharmony between the two and declares that reality transcends language. What follows is a résumé of the views presented in the VP about the nature of language in relation to reality.

(All references to the *Vākyapadīya* (VP) are from the edition of VP by K.V. Abhyankar and V.P. Limaye, Poona, 1965.)

1 John D. Kelly's paper entitled 'Meaning and the limits of analysis: Bhartrhari and the Buddhists, and post-structuralism' elsewhere in this volume.

2 VP. I.123:

*na so 'sti pratyayo loke yah śabdānugamād rte /  
anuviddham iva jñānam sarvam śabdena bhāsate //*

In the beginning of the *Sādhanasamuddēśa* Bhartr̥hari describes the world as an aggregate of multiple powers<sup>3</sup>. He also describes the meaning as all-powerful in contrast with the word which has limited powers<sup>4</sup>. Thus as far as their respective powers are concerned, both language and reality are not on the same footing. However, the word with its restricted powers exercises its control over reality<sup>5</sup> and checks its powers through *vivaksā* 'speaker's intention'<sup>6</sup>. Bhartr̥hari's exposition of gender illustrates this point. According to him every object possesses all the three powers, namely, *āvirbhāva* 'manifestation', *tirobhāva* 'disappearance' and *sthiti* 'maintaining status' which are respectively manifested in the masculine, feminine and neuter genders. A word expressing an object is, however, used not in all genders but in a specific gender whose selection is based on *vivaksā* as well as the association of the object with the external world<sup>7</sup>. The infinite reality being thus checked by the finite powers of the word, we naturally get a suppressed view of reality through words.

At another place Bhartr̥hari refers to the skindeep relationship between language and reality. A word is, according to him, a mere indicator of an object<sup>8</sup>. Like a lamp it merely reveals an object. It does not provide any information about the object. When the word *ghata* is, for instance, uttered, nobody understands its shape, size or colour<sup>9</sup>. These are understood from our repeated observation and usage rather than from words<sup>10</sup>.

3 VP. III.7.2:

*śaktimātrāsamūhasya viśvasyānekadharmanah /  
sarvadā sarvathā bhāvāt kvacit kiñcid vivakṣyate //*

4 VP. II.431: ... *arthasya sarvaśaktivāt ...* / VP. III.12.14 ...  
... *niyatāḥ śabdaśaktayah /*

5 VP. II.434:

*sarvātmakatvād arthasya nairātmyād vā vyavasthitam /  
atyantayataśaktivāc chabdā eva nibandhanam //*

6 See note 3 above.

7 VP. III.13.19-20:

*sthiteṣu trisu liṅgeṣu vivakṣāniyamāśrayah /  
kasyācic chabdasamskāre vyāpārah kaścid isyate //  
sannidhāne nimittānām kiñcid eva pravartakam /  
yathā takṣādiśabdānām liṅgeṣu niyamas tathā //*

8 VP. II.435:

*vastūpalakṣanam śabdo nopakārasya vācakah /  
na svaśaktiḥ padārthānām samspraṣṭum tena śakyate //*

9 VP. II.123:

*ghatādīnām na cākārān pratyāyayati vācakah /*

10 VP. II.120:

*prayogadarśanābhyāsād ākārāvagrahas tu yah /  
na sa śabdasya viśayah sa hi yatnāntarāśrayah //*

Similarly, although the word *go* is used by a speaker to refer to a certain cow with specific colour, shape and certain ornaments etc. the listener never understands these features when the word is uttered<sup>11</sup>. The remark in the VP, namely, *na hi sarveṣām satām śabdo 'bhidhāyakaḥ* (VP II.38) 'a word is not expressive of all existing (features of an object)' implies that an object in its totality is never understood from the word which is used to denote it. As far as this inherent incompetence of verbal knowledge is concerned it is compared to *pratyakṣa* 'perception' which always fails to present a complete view of reality<sup>12</sup>. There are many examples in the VP which illustrate this inadequate nature of language. The word *salila* conveys, for instance, water. However, it fails to convey whether that water is in the form of a drop or a river<sup>13</sup>. All such illustrations and arguments given above lead to the conclusion that language is a mismatch for reality.

It is further argued in the VP that language is not only a mismatch for reality; it also misrepresents reality. Here again verbal knowledge is compared to perception. Bhartrhari offers a number of illustrations to show how our perception is often deceptive. For example, one sees water in both, a river and a mirage; but the water in the mirage is not a reality<sup>14</sup>. A miniature of a giant mountain seen through a mirror is similarly not a reality<sup>15</sup>. According to our perception of a fire-circle produced by the circular movement of a fire-brand, we use the word *alātacakra* 'fire-circle'. However, there is no such object as a fire-circle although there is the

11 VP. II.153-154:

*yathā samyogibhir dravyair lakṣite 'rthe prayujyate /  
gośabdo na tv asau teṣām viśeṣānām prakāśakah //  
ākāravamāvayavaiḥ samsrṣtesu gavādiṣu /  
śabdah pravartamāno 'pi na tān aṅgīkaroty asau //*

12 VP. II.156:

*durlabham kasyacil loke sarvāvayavadarśanam /  
kaiścit tv avayavair drṣṭair arthah kṛtsno 'numīyate //*

13 VP. II.158:

*samkhyāpramānasamsthānanirapekṣah pravartate /  
bindau ca samudāye ca vācakah salilādiṣu //*

14 VP. II.287:

*darśanam salile tulyam mrgatṛsnādidarśanaiḥ /  
tulyatve darśanādīnām na jalām mrgatṛsnikā //*

15 VP. II.294:

*mahān āvriyate deśah prasiddhaiḥ parvatādibhiḥ /  
alpadeśāntarāvastham pratibimbam tu drīyate //*

word<sup>16</sup>. Words like *śaśaśṛṅga* 'hare's horn', *khapuspa* 'skyflower' refer to non-reality. Thus the word not only presents an incomplete picture of reality; it also conveys non-reality.

Further, even when the word expresses reality, it is not expressed in its own form. Often an object is expressed by a word in terms of its properties rather than its own form<sup>17</sup>. In the *Vrtisamuddēśa* Bhartrhari describes how our analytical mind sees diverse properties in a single object and accordingly manifests them in the language<sup>18</sup>. Here again, *vivakṣā* plays an important role in making selection of properties<sup>19</sup>.

Thus an object is partially understood from a word, and that too, in terms of its properties rather than its real form. While referring to this invariable appearance of a property in an expression Bhartrhari observes, just as pure knowledge without an object is impossible so also knowledge of an object without a property connected with it is impossible<sup>20</sup>. He further remarks, just as knowledge becomes impure due to being coloured by an object, an object understood from a word is similarly coloured with some property and thus deviates from its own form<sup>21</sup>. Both knowledge and the object of that knowledge thus render each other impure.

The properties expressed by a word do not always accord with reality. Often there are properties which are not existent. For instance, in expressions like *patasya śuklah* "white colour of the cloth" and *dārāh* 'wife' non-existing features like singularity or plurality and masculinity (in case of *śukla* and *dārā*) are expressed. Bhartrhari concludes, when a feature of

16 VP. I.130:

*atyantam atathābhūte nimitte śrutyupāśrayāt /  
drśyate 'lātacakrādau vastvākāranirūpanā //*

17 This is indicated by the following verse:

VP. III.11.6:

*svabuddhyā tam apoddhṛtya loko 'py āgamam āśritah /  
svadharmād anyadharmena vyācaṣṭe pratipattaye //*

18 VP. III.14.571:

*aṅgadī kundalī ceti darśayan bhedahetubhiḥ /  
caitram tīrṣam ity āha buddhyavasthāparigrahāt //*

19 VP. III.14.573:

*buddhyavasthāvibhāgena bhedakāryam praṭīyate /  
janyanta iva śabdānām arthāḥ sarve vivakṣayā //*

20 VP. III.11.8:

*yathaiivāvisayam jñānam na kiñcid avabhāsate /  
tathā bhāvo 'py asamsrsto na kaścid upalabhyate //*

21 VP. III.3.58:

*yathā ca jñānam ālekhād aśuddhau vyvatisthate /  
tathopāśrayavān arthāḥ svarūpād viprakṛsyate //*

an object is being expressed by a word it hardly matters whether the feature actually exists or not<sup>22</sup>.

Bhartrhari's observations recorded above may be summed up as follows:

Although language is the only window to the world, it is too small to give us a complete picture of reality. Further, whatever view it offers is not necessarily faithful to reality. Words often misrepresent and distort the facts of the external world. The linguistic world and the external world thus do not match with each other.

Bhartrhari finally declares that although language claims to have a control over reality by virtue of its being the only tool to represent it, it never does, in fact, represent reality. Reality transcends language.

Do we then ever know reality? If yes, how?

Bhartrhari's answers to these questions are: No! Reality is never understood by an ordinary person, only *ṛṣis* 'sages' are capable of knowing it. Further, whatever reality is understood by the *ṛṣis* can never be expressed in words<sup>23</sup>. Language has thus no power enough to hold reality.

What is it then that we understand from language? What about the close intimacy between language and reality proclaimed in the *Brahma-kānda*? How to reconcile these opposite statements?

Bhartrhari offers a very simple solution. He distinguishes between *sampratisattā* 'present reality' and *aupacārikā sattā* 'secondary reality'<sup>24</sup>. It is the latter which is intimately connected with language. We may name the former, 'Reality', and the latter, 'reality'. While language is in perfect harmony with reality (in fact, the whole VP aims at establishing this harmony), it is far away from Reality. It is even detrimental to Reality as pointed out above.

The *aupacārikā sattā* with which language is directly connected exists in the mind. Bhartrhari shows how the conception of this reality is a solution to logical fallacies involving our usage. The expression, *aṅkuro jāyate* 'a sprout is born' is, for example, fallacious, because it involves contradiction. Since the very utterance of the word *aṅkura* implies its

22 VP. III.11.10:

*paradharmasya na hy atra sadasattvaṃ prayojakam //*

23 VP. II.139:

*ṛṣinām darśanam yac ca tattve kiñ cid avasthitam /  
na tena vyavahāro 'sti na tac chabdanibandhanam //*

24 VP. III.3.39:

*vyapadeśe padārthānām anyā sattaupacārikā /  
sarvāvasthāsu sarveṣām ātmarūpasya darśikā //*



existence it would be redundant to say *jāyate* 'is born'. If it is argued that *aṅkura* is non-existent and that *jāyate* implies that it comes into existence, how can a non-existent object become existent<sup>25</sup>? The VP points out fallacies also in other expressions like *nāsti* 'does not exist' where both existence and its negation are simultaneously conveyed<sup>26</sup>. The only solution to problems of this kind is to accept that objects like *aṅkura* and even the existence conveyed by *asti* in the expression *nāsti* exist in the mental world. Thus whatever is expressible in words 'exists' in the *aupacārikā sattā*, may it be a flower or a skyflower. Even *abhāva* 'non-existence' exists in this world. The mental world is thus extended far beyond the boundaries of Reality. It does not maintain temporal and spatial distinctions<sup>27</sup>. It is because of this world that an object possesses some properties which may contradict each other<sup>28</sup>. All objects are infused with life in this *sattā*<sup>29</sup>. Bhartrhari further says that it is this reality rather than the Reality which is the basis of worldly transactions.

According to Bhartrhari *buddhi* 'intellect' plays a vital role in creating and shaping this reality. It is the *buddhi* which has power to do and undo. On a number of occasions Bhartrhari acknowledges this extraordinary power of *buddhi*<sup>30</sup>.

However, in spite of the wonderful *buddhi*, it is the cognition which narrows down the view of reality. Bhartrhari remarks, since cognition of a complete reality is not possible, words based on such cognition present

25 VP. III.3.43:

*yadi saj jāyate kasmād athāsaj jāyate katham /*

26 VP. III.3.48:

*prāk ca sattābhisambandhāt mukhyā sattā katham bhavet /  
asamś ca nāsteḥ kartā syād upacāras tu pūrvavat //*

27 VP. III.3.50-51:

*abhinnakālām arthesu bhinnakāleṣv avasthitām /  
pravṛtīhetum sarvesām śabdānām aupacārikām //  
etām sattām padārtho hi na kaś cid ativartate /  
sā ca sampratisattāyāḥ pṛthag bhāṣye nidarśitā //*

28 VP. III.3.41:

*tadvac chabdo 'pi sattāyām asyām pūrvam vyavasthitāḥ /  
dharmair upaiti sambandham avirodhivirodhibhiḥ //*

29 VP. III.14.327:

*acetanesu samkrāntam caitanyam iva drśyate /  
pratibimbakādharmaṇa yat tac chabdanibandhanam //*

30 VP. III.14.15:

*budhhyaikam bhidyate bhinnam ekatvam copagacchati /  
buddhyāvasihā vibhajyante sā hy arthasya vidhāyikā //*

objects different from their own form<sup>31</sup>. And as far as cognition and expression are concerned there is no difference, according to Bhartrhari, between a learned scholar and an ignorant child<sup>32</sup>.

To sum up the foregoing observations: According to Bhartrhari language is not at all connected with the external world. It is connected with the mental reality of which it presents a restricted view due to the restricted nature of cognition. The mental reality is a creation of *buddhi* which has a boundless capacity to create objects. Due to the inherent incompetence of language as well as due to the limited nature of cognition language fails to reflect reality in its own form. Often it misrepresents and obscures reality. Further, language and reality are so opposed to each other that reality starts where language ends. Language can never reach reality (Reality). Bhartrhari has, finally, extended the notion of *apoddhāra* 'abstraction' which is peculiar to grammar, also to language which implies that for him language is as fictitious as grammar<sup>33</sup>.

31 VP. III.3.54:

*akṛtsnavisayābhāsam śabdah pratyayam āśritah /  
artham āhānyarūpeṇa svarūpenānirūpitam //*

32 VP. III.3.55:

*rūpanavyapadeśābhyām laukike vartmani sthitau /  
jñānam praty abhilāpam ca sadṛṣau bālapāṇḍitau //*

33 VP. III.11.6:

*svabuddhyā tam apoddhṛtya loko 'py āgamam āśritah /  
svadharmād anyadharmena vyācāste pratipattaye //*

VP. III.11.9:

*bhedena tu samākhyānam yal loko 'py anuvartate /  
āgamāc chāstrasadrṣo vyavahārah sa varnyate //*



