

BHARTṚHARI ON LANGUAGE AND REALITY: SOME PHILOSOPHICAL OBSERVATIONS*

ABIR DAS

It is a well known fact that the concept of language is one of the important issues with which philosophy deals. Language reveals reality to us. There is a serious philosophical debate among the linguistic philosophers regarding the nature of language and reality, and also about the relationship between them. Different views have been proposed by different philosophers on these issues. Most of the linguistic philosophers maintain that language and reality are purely different. One is expresser and another is expressed. But interestingly enough, Bhartṛhari, one of the greatest linguistic philosophers and also a monist, claims that language and reality are same. They are like the two sides of one and the same coin. Consequently, one cannot be separated from another. Even though language reveals reality but Reality for him, is *Brahman* and language is *Śabda*. Language is reality and reality is language. Reality is not independent of language and vice-versa. As reality and language are intertwined both of the terms *Śabda* and *Brahman* have been coined and called as *Śabdabrahman* to designate both of them. For him, *Śabdabrahman*, on the one hand, is the ultimate reality and on the other hand, this *Śabdabrahman* itself is the inner meaning revealing language. Bhartṛhari claims that *Śabdabrahman* is the ultimate reality out of which knowing souls, known objects and knowledge come into being.

Bhartṛhari is known as monist as he believes in one ultimate reality i.e the *Śabdabrahman*. The *Śabdabrahman*, according to him, is without beginning and end and it is also beyond all sorts of change and modifications though the whole world is manifested from it through the process called evolution.¹ *Śabdabrahman* creates the root sound *Aum*, which is modified into the manifold world. It is modified into the world of objects with the aid of time. *Śabdabrahman* is one but it appears as many. This manyness or plurality is false. Plurality is simply imaginary. In fact, everything in this world is actually the manifestation of one and the same *Śabdabrahman* and the manifold differences of the manifested worldly objects are due to our ignorance. *Sabdabrahman* is one but plurality is imposed upon it due to our *avidyā* (ignorance).

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One has to transcend it through the process of self realisation. An analysis and reflection on the nature of the self is a means of knowing *Śabdabrahman* which is known as the ultimate reality in Bhartṛhari's philosophy.

Bhartṛhari holds that reality is one and he interprets the creation of this world in terms of time (*kāla*). But it is important to note that the *Kālaśakti* is the inseparable power of *Śabdabrahman*. Bhartṛhari says that *Śabdabrahman*(Reality) is revealed through language and it is manifested into speech without affecting the true essence of reality. Reality and *Śabda* both are intertwined each other and that is why the object is not different from the word, as it is the word which has turned into the object.² But it is important to point out here that Bhartṛhari technically uses the term *Śabda* or language. He has given emphasise on the internal aspect of language, i.e. the essence of language and following Bhartṛhari it can be said that the essence of language is all about of reality. This is the reason why he says that the reality i.e. the *Śabdabrahman* and language are inseparably related. In fact, language itself is reality. It is language through which reality is revealed and it is revealed not as a separate entity but as an integral part of language. In this sense Bhartṛhari claims that language is reality.

According to Bhartṛhari there are five kinds of *Pramāna* i.e. *Pratyakṣa*, *Anumāna*, *Śabda*, *Adṛṣṭa*, and *Abhyāsa*.³ Among them *Śabda pramāna* is most important. Bhartṛhari observes that if knowledge does not assume the form of word then it cannot be claimed as a knowledge.⁴ In this world no comprehension is possible in isolation of speech. No knowledge will shine in the form of a recollection without speech. It is a speech i.e. the word which makes recollection possible.⁵ According to Bhartṛhari language is not just a conveyor rather it constitutes a vital part of thought, because the cognitive faculty operates necessarily with the verbal faculty. For him, all knowledge must culminate in verbal knowledge. So, language is the only window to the world. The usage of language shapes our knowledge of reality. It is worthy to note that the *Vākyapadiya* begins with a declaration that there is no world beyond language and it ends up with a note that reality transcends language. In the second *kānda* of *Vākyapadiya* Bhartṛhari refers to the keen relationship between language and reality.⁶ He claims that a word is mere indicator like a lamp which reveals an object. In the third *kānda* of *Vākyapadiya* Bhartṛhari shows how our analytical minds

sees diverse properties in a single object and accordingly manifest them in language.⁷ So, although language is just the one window to manifest the world, yet it is too small to give us a complete picture of reality. The reality transcends or goes beyond the range of language. Reality is never understood by an ordinary person; only *Rsis* are capable of knowing it. Whatever the sages understand or perceive, they do it with their senses and mind and use words according to figures existent in their mind.⁸ Language has thus no power enough to hold reality.

In the third *kānda* of *Vākyapadiya*, Bhartṛhari describes the vital role of intellect in creating and shaping this reality. Thought at this *buddhi* or differentiated stage of word sequences, perhaps is best understood as internal speaking. *Madhyamā vāk* is chiefly associated with that intellect. Bhartṛhari claims that cognition of a complete reality is not possible. So, it can be said that words based on such cognition present objects different from their own form.⁹ There is no difference between a wise person and an ignorant person as far as the cognition and the expression are concerned.

Bhartṛhari says that due to the inherent incompetence of language and limited nature of cognition language fails to reflect in its own form. Reality is so higher in level that cannot be described by language. Thus language can never reach reality, because when it ends, reality starts. So, it can be said that when Bhartṛhari claims that language itself is a reality i.e. *Śabdabrahman* then by the term 'language' he means the inner meaning revealing language and when our ignorance goes away after exercising grammar then that inner meaning revealing language reveals as a reality i.e. *Śabdabrahman*.

As far as our observation of Bhartṛhari's philosophy is concerned we think that Bhartṛhari's philosophy suffers from some serious problems. There is no scope to deal with all the problems in this paper. We are citing only the three problems out of them. Bhartṛhari claims that the reality transcends the range of language. But he also holds that language and reality are one and the same. Both of the statements cannot be true at the same time. If reality and language are identical i.e. one and the same then how one can transcend another and again if one transcend another then how one can be identical with another? Secondly, if reality transcends language and both of

them are true then monism, the metaphysical position of Bhartṛhari cannot be maintained.

Both of these problems appear to be serious. But we think these problems can be resolved through the careful analysis of the Philosophy of Bhartṛhari. The language as it is understood by Bhartṛhari, has altogether three layers- *paśyanti*, *madhyamā* and *vaikhari*. Sometimes, Bhartṛhari distinguishes his language into two halves- internal and external. Internal language which is called by him as inner meaning revealing language consists of two layers- *paśyanti* and *madhyamā*. The external language which is described by him as verbal language is nothing but the *vaikhari* level of language. Problems crop up only because he uses the term 'language' in different contexts in different senses. Sometimes he means inner-meaning revealing language, sometimes verbal language and again sometimes both of them taken together by using the same term 'language'. When he says that language and reality are identical then he uses the term language in the third sense mentioned. But when he says that reality transcends language then he uses the term 'language' in the second sense i.e. verbal noise. The moment we understand the different senses of language in which it is used in the Philosophy of Bhartṛhari the problems resolve.

In the first *śloka* of *Vākyapadiya* one of the terms called *akṣaram* has been used. A controversy is seen among the scholars exactly in which sense that term has been used. According to some, the term *akṣaram* has been used to mean that *Śabdabrahman* is something which is beyond destruction. But some of the thinkers do not agree with them. They argue that the term *anādinidhanam* already used in this *śloka* states that *Śabdabrahman* is beyond both the creation and destruction. Therefore, the term *akṣaram* cannot be used in the same sense. They hold that here the term *akṣaram* has been used in the sense of alphabet. But it is important to point out that here the alphabet (*varna*) stands for both the word and sentence. I think the first alternative answer is more consistent and acceptable than the second one. The term *śabdatattva* used in the first *śloka* clearly implies that the *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, stands for *śabda* designating word, sentence, language etc. So, if the term *akṣaram* is used in the same sense then it would be a mere repetition. But if the term *akṣaram* is used to designate something beyond change and modification then it would be more consistent and rational. I think the term *anādinidhanam* and *akṣaram*

are not synonymous. *Anādinidhanam* means something without having creation as well as destruction. But the term *akṣaram* means something which is beyond the change and modification. Though it is true that a thing which is without having the creation and destruction must be beyond change and modification yet the two terms are not synonymous. It is true that a father must be married yet the term father cannot be synonymous with the term married. The same is true in the case of the two terms *anādinidhanam* and *akṣaram* used in that *śloka*. Actually, the two terms refer to one and the same thing but their meanings are different. Thus it is proved that the first alternative is more rational and consistent than the second one.

References

1. *anādinidhanam brahma śabdattvaṁ yad akṣaram/ vivartate'rithabhāvena prakriyā jagato yataḥ//*
2. Bhartṛhari, *Vākyapadiya*, I.123.
3. VP.I. 35-40
4. VP.I.123: *na so'sti pratyayolake ya śabdānugamāt ṛte/ anubiddham iva jñānam sarvam śabdena bhāṣate//*
5. Ibid.124: *vāgrūpatā cet niṣkrāmet avabodhasya śāsvatī/ na prakāśaḥ prakāśeta sā hi pratyavamarśinī//*
6. VP.II. 434
7. VP.III.14.571
8. VP.III. 3.53, *rṣinām darśanam yat ca tattve kimcid avasthitam/ na tena vyavahāro'sti na tat śabdanibandhanam//*
9. VP.III.3.54: *akṛtṣnaviṣayābhāsam śabdaḥ pratyayamāśṛtaḥ/ artham āhanyarūpeṇa svarūpeṇānirūpaṇam//*

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