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Time in Hinduism¹

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WHEREAS CHRISTIAN CONCEPTIONS of time feature a strong linear thrust, Hinduism sees time as cyclical. While Christianity and Western thought generally view time and the universe as having a point of beginning with its creation by God, Hindu thought sees the universe and time as having been going on beginninglessly (*anadi*). There is no notion of an absolute first creation or beginning to time.² However, within this beginninglessness, there are cycles of creation usually thought of in terms of the seed-plant metaphor. Each cycle of creation begins from a seed which sprouts, grows, flowers, withers, and dies, but leaves behind (from the flower) a seed from which the next cycle of creation will arise. As in Christian accounts (e.g. Genesis), the passage of time is identified in the Hindu Puranas with the corruption of humans. As time passes, the *dharma* or righteousness of the first half of the cycle is used up so that, by the last half, injury, greed, hatred, delusion, disease, and old age arise due to the deterioration of *dharma*.³

The Vedas also offer their own speculations regarding time. Time (*kala*) is described in one hymn as the first god, existing in many forms.⁴ Time generates the sky and the earth and sets in motion the past, the present, and the future. Time is the lord of all and the father of Prajapati. The universe is set in motion and sustained by time. Indeed in the *Atharva Veda* 19:53 and 54, time (*kala*) is celebrated as the primordial power and unifying principle of the universe. In *kala* lie the worlds and the sun. By *kala* was the universe urged forth. *Kala* is Brahman. "Time contains and conquers all, and still continues onward."⁵ However, the high place accorded *kala* in

the *Atharva Veda* is seldom repeated in the Upanishads, and in the *Svetasvatara* the view that everything came out of time is regarded as a heretical doctrine.⁵ In the *Maitri Upanishad*, though, time is given the same high status as in the *Atharva Veda*. In *Maitri* 6:15, we read,

There are, assuredly, two forms of Brahma: Time and the Timeless. That which is prior to the sun is the Timeless (*a-Kala*), without parts (*a-Kala*). But that which begins with the sun is Time, which has parts. Verily, the form of that which has parts is the year. From the year, in truth, are these creatures produced. Through the year, verily, after having been produced, do they grow. In the year they disappear. Therefore the year, verily, is Prajapati, is Time, is food, is the Brahmaabode, and is Atman. For thus has it been said:

'Tis Time that cooks created things, All things, indeed, in the Great Soul (*mahatman*). In what, however, Time is cooked - Who knows that, he the Veda know.'⁷

As in the *Atharva Veda*, time is here given the highest status of being identified with Prajapati, but now also with Brahman and Atman. Verse sixteen goes on to describe embodied time as the great ocean of creatures, planets, and all things. The sun is fittingly identified as the symbol of time.

A Philosophical Analysis of Time

Bhartrhari (ca. CE 450-500)⁷ is the great philosopher of the Grammarians School. He follows in the line of Panini and Patanjali and other earlier grammarians. He draws out many of the insights inherent but not philosophically developed in their writings. These insights he systematizes into a fully

developed philosophy and spiritual discipline. In his thought, *kala* or time occupies a most important place, one fairly much in continuity with the position given *kala* in the *Atharva Veda* and the *Maitri Upanishad*.

In Kanda One of the *Vakyapadiya*, Bhartrhari begins by stating that Brahman is the one and only reality and that it is through the power of *kala* or time that the One appears as many. The creation of the objects of the universe occurs in the first instance through the creative power of Brahman's *kala* or time-power. *Kala* is not different from Brahman but is that aspect of Brahman which follows manifested sequence to come into being. When such time sequences appear as differentiated objects, then time as a power seems to be different from Brahman, but really it is not.⁹ *Vakyapadiya* I:3 states that all other powers within the created universe are in the first instance governed by the creative power of time. Through time things come to be and through time things pass away. Time is the efficient cause by which Brahman controls the cycles of the universe.

Two illustrations are offered by Bhartrhari to make clear his meaning. The power of time in the creative process is like that of the wire-puller in a puppet-play.¹⁰ Just as the wire-puller is in complete control of the puppet-play, so *kala* has full control over the running of the world. Ordinary cause and effect processes cannot operate unless *kala* or time-power infuses them with life-force. This control of ordinary cause and effect by time is further illustrated in relation to the strings a hunter ties to the feet of small birds which he uses as bait for larger ones. The small birds can fly over a limited distance but they cannot go beyond the length of their strings. Like the strings controlling the movement of birds, so the objects of the created world are controlled by the "string of time".¹¹

It is in Kanda Three, Section Nine of the *Vakyapadiya* that Bhartrhari presents his detailed analysis of *kala*. Just as number measures material objects, it is time which measures activity (3:9:2). In answer to the

question as to how activities are measured by time, Bhartrhari states in *karika* 3,

In the creation (arising), existence and destruction (of beings) which possess these (activities), Time, remaining in a divided state, is said to be the (instrumental) cause.¹¹

Helaraja, in his commentary, explains the meaning of the verse as follows. Time is the cause of the birth, existence, and decay of everything. Thus we say some things are born in Spring, others in the Fall. The same can be said about their existence and their death. Time, although One, differentiates or sequences things through states of birth, existence, and decay. It is in this sense that time is called the "wire-puller" of the universe. Yet, these everyday changes of state or sequences of action are not the true nature of *kala* but superimpositions. *Kala* in its own nature, as one with Brahman, is transcendent of all change, yet also its cause.

To one familiar with Advaita Vedanta, the above description of *kala* sounds very similar to Sankara's notion of *maya* in relation to Brahman. This is certainly the view held by two eminent contemporary interpreters of the *Vakyapadiya*, Gaurinath Sastri¹³ and K. A. Submanian Iyer.¹⁴ As we examine Bhartrhari's description of *kala* in *Vakyapadiya* 3:9, let us test this contention.

Verse 14 of *Vakyapadiya* 3:9 is worth careful attention in this regard. It reads,

By means of activities similar to the turning of the water-wheel, the eternal and all pervasive Time turns out (*kalayati*) all the fragments (*kalah*= objects) and thus acquires the name of *kala* (time).

Like the ever renewed pushing or lifting up of water by the water-wheel, so the all-pervading and all-penetrating time drives or pushes (*kalayati*) beings or objects releasing them from their material causes and making them move. That is why time is given the appropriate name of *kala*. Helaraja goes on to observe that what Bhartrhari means to say is:

The soul of the universe is but one, called "parabrahman" i.e. the real Being. This same one, due to its being

the agent of manifold actions, is defined as possessing unlimited power. And thus, manifesting successive beings which revolve like the turnings of a wheel, it "drives" (*kalayati*) the beings. Therefore it is called time (*kala*). This all-pervading one is independent. For this very reason, it has been established as being an independent power in the *Vakyapadiya*.¹⁵

If Helaraja is right, then Bhartrhari views time as a power of Brahman, independent of all beings and objects, yet also inherent in them, pushing them through the successive changes of life. Rather than the passive external superimposition of the successive changes upon Brahman, the Advaita model, the image here is more characteristic of urgent change through pregnant forces located within Brahman.

The distinction between Bhartrhari's conception of *kala* and the Advaita Vedanta view of *maya* is not with regard to locus of *kala* or *maya* being in Brahman (for both schools seem to agree on this), but rather with regard to the ontological power ascribed to *kala* or *maya*. Bhartrhari's *kala* doctrine emphasizes the driving (*kalayati*) power inherent in Brahman which is the first cause of the bursting forth of the worldly phenomena. The Advaita conception of *maya*, although it does indeed (in the Vivarana tradition, at least) locate *maya* in Brahman,¹⁶ does not seem to attribute to *maya* the same degree of ontological "pregnancy" or "driving force" as Bhartrhari ascribes to *kala*. While it is acknowledged that *maya* has two aspects, obscuring (*avarana*) and projective (*viksepa*), the stress in Advaita interpretation seems to be on the former more than the latter. For the Advaitin, the focus is upon *maya*'s obscuring of Brahman; for Bhartrhari, it is the projective power or driving force of *kala* that occupies centre stage. While this difference may at first appear to be merely a question of difference of emphasis, a definite difference seems to appear when the ontological status of the phenomenal projection itself is analysed. While for Advaita the projected world of *maya* is

neither real nor unreal but inexplicable (*anirvacaniya*), the *kala*-driven world of Bhartrhari, although increasingly impure as it becomes manifested as worldly phenomena, never loses its direct ontological identity with Brahman. The relation between the phenomenal world and Brahman for Bhartrhari is continuous and does not have the mysterious break of an "all or nothing" sort which Sankara's *maya* doctrine and its rope-snake analogy requires. Whereas super-imposition (*adhyasa*) is a fitting term for Sankara,¹⁷ it does not seem appropriate to Bhartrhari. The illustrations offered in the *Vakyapadiya* are more often associated with images of Brahman bursting forth in illumination (*sphota*), of pregnancy (the peacock egg producing all the colours of creation), and of driving force like the pushing-up or lifting-up action of the water-wheel (*kalayati*).

According to Bhartrhari, time (*kala*) is a creative power. Whereas for Advaita (the Vivarana Advaitin, at least) the obscuring function of *avidya* is equated with *maya*,¹⁸ Bhartrhari in the *vitti* on Kanda 1, Karika 1 describes *avidya* as the diversity of phenomena which Brahman's time power creates. Helaraja in his *Tika* on Kanda 3 further describes time as an independent power of Brahman and discusses its ontological status in relation to *avidya*.

According to Bhartrhari, Time is the *Svatantryasakti* of Brahman ... Due to *avidya*, there is, first of all, appearance of diversity. Diversity is temporal and spatial. The former comes first. Consciousness, at the stage called *pasyanti*, is without any sequence. When it becomes associated with *pranavrtti*, it appears to have sequence due to Time.¹⁹

As this comment makes clear, there are three ontological levels in Bhartrhari's thought: Brahman, his powers of time and space, and the diversity of the phenomenal world. Once again this contrasts with Sankara's Advaita where there is only one ontological level, Brahman, with *maya* as an epistemological second level (which is neither real nor unreal but inexplicable). For Bhartrhari, the

highest ontological level is pure Brahman without sequence or diversity. It is called *pasyanti* which also indicates the direct and full perception of meaning – thus the culmination of our experience of *vak* or word.²⁰ Although time is inherent in Brahman at this stage, no sequence has yet occurred – it is still pure potentiality. The next ontological level, in descending order, is *madhyama*. It is at this level that *kala* begins to push or drive delimited portions of Brahman into sequence. This it accomplishes with the help of *prana* or breath. In our experience of language, this corresponds to the separation of the unitary *sphota* into the mental sequence of thoughts. The full-blown appearance of diversity appears when time has released all the secondary cause-effect relations which have been waiting as stored-up memory traces (*samskaras*) or “seed-states” in all the cycles of the universe. It is in this third or *vaikhari* level that the power of time as the sequence evidenced in ordinary cause-effect relations is fully experienced. To return to Bhartrhari’s own analogy, at this stage we see the birds on time’s strings flying about to the full extent of the limits that their “strings” allow. Time is thus the governing power of all activity in the universe of manifested objects. It is time that drives or pushes objects into action to the point where their own secondary cause-effect relations take hold. But it is also the behind-the-scene activity of time that controls the extent of the secondary actions of objects, and their moment of decay or withdrawal.

The notion of time functioning by permitting and preventing worldly activity is stated in *Vak*. 3:9:4 and reappears frequently throughout section 9.

Time has been called the wire-puller of the world Machine. It regulates the universe through prevention and permission.²¹

The Sanskrit terms involved are *abhyanujna* (permission) and *pratibandha* (prevention or decay). As the “wire-puller” of the universe, time allows some things to appear at a particular time and prevents others from appearing. This scheduling activity of time

is most important, for without it everything would appear at the same time and there would be mass confusion.²² The function of time called permission (*abhyanujna*) allows things to be born and to continue in existence.²³ By its other function, prevention (*pratibandha*), time obstructs the inherent capacities of objects and “old age” is then experienced. It is in this way that the stages of life and the seasons are ordered. When time is functioning under its impulse of prevention, decay or *jara* occurs. *Jara* (decay) and growth (*krama*) operate like pairs of opposites. When *jara* is active, *krama* or growth is blocked, and vice versa.²⁴ But the underlying substratum of all of this activity is the driving impulse of time.²⁵ Time remains eternal although the actions of growth and decay come and go.

As a result of the activity of growth and decay, time, which is one, attains the states of past, present, and future. Thus when an action ceases, time, conditioned by that action, is called past. When something is about to happen, time, conditioned by that event, is called future. When action has been initiated but is not yet completed, time is then called present.²⁶ In this way the one transcendent reality time is experienced, through the actions of the secondary causes it releases or restrains, to be sequenced into past, present, and future. Time, says Bhartrhari, is like the ever-flowing current of a river which deposits some things on the river bank and at the same time takes away others.²⁷ So it is that the seasons change, as symbolized by the motions of the sun and stars. As Helaraja puts it, “The seasons may be looked upon as the abode to Time, because it appears as the seasons. The power called ‘Freedom’ of Brahman is really Time and it appears diversified as the different seasons like Spring, etc.”²⁸ Thus the appearance of the Universe, which is really without sequence, as something with sequence, is the work of time.²⁹

The essence of Bhartrhari’s viewpoint is that time (*kala*) is an independent power (*sakti*) of Brahman. *Kala* is characterized by its two energies of *pratibandha* (prevention or decay) and *abhyanujna* (permission or

growth). A direct precursor of Bhartrhari's view seems to be available in the *Maitri Upanishad* discussion of time. As mentioned earlier, in *Maitri* 6:15, time is described as the form of Brahman which has parts. These parts (i.e. the year, etc.) grow and decay. Time is said to cook all things in the Great Soul (*mahatman*). All this seems very close to the view that Bhartrhari elucidates in the *Vakyapadiya*.

Summary and Conclusion

Behind the discussion of the levels of language in the *Vakyapadiya* is Bhartrhari's notion of the dynamic limiting function of time (*kalasakti*). After setting forth the absolute nature of Brahman as being the one eternal essence of word and consciousness, Bhartrhari then introduces the notion of time as the power or means by which this one unchanging absolute (*Sabdatattva-Brahman*) manifests itself as the dynamic diversity mankind experiences as creation. Time is the creative power of Brahman, and thus is responsible for the birth, death, and continuity of everything in the cosmos. Time is one, but when broken or limited into sequences appears as moments or actions. These segments of time are mentally categorized as seconds or minutes. Such limited segments of time are then mentally unified into day, week, month, and year. In the same fashion, notions of past, present, and future are developed. When time is thought of as action not yet completed, the notion of the present is established. An action that has been completed is time as past; and an action yet to be completed is time as future. All of ordinary life is sequenced by these three powers of time. Yet all the while, declares Bhartrhari, there is really no sequence at all. From the ultimate viewpoint all three powers of time are constantly present. Time is One. Although the effects of the three powers of time (i.e. past, present, and future) are mutually contradictory, they function without causing any disorder in the cosmos. They are like three paths on which objects move about without any confusion.

Bhartrhari enters into this deep

discussion of time in relation to the absolute, not as a fascinating metaphysical aside, but to explain how the unitary Word (*Sabdabrahman*) manifests itself in experience as the diversity of words called language. As a grammarian, he is also providing a metaphysical basis for the experience of the tenses past, present, and future in language. And, it is past and future that have the veiling function of keeping one apart from the absolute eternal present. In religious terms, union with the eternal present is union with the Divine and for Bhartrhari this is the inherent goal toward which all language, all grammar, is reaching. In this way, Bhartrhari offers one philosophical analysis of time from the Hindu viewpoint.

Notes

1. An earlier version appeared in the *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 10 (1982) pp. 277-287.
2. S. C. Chatterjee and D. M. Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1968), pp. 22-24.
3. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass), pp. 24-25.
4. Atharvaveda 19:54, as quoted in S. N. Dasgupta, *Indian Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 10.
5. W. Norman Brown, "Veda and Religion", in *Indian and Indology* edited by R. Rocher (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), p. 45.
6. Dasgupta, *Indian Idealism*, p. 66.
7. As translated by R. E. Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanisads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 434.
8. Although tradition places Bhartrhari from the first century BCE to the first century CE, the current consensus among scholars is that he should be dated ca. CE 450-500. See Hajime Nakamura, "Tibetan Citations of Bhartrhari's Verses and the Problem of His Date", in *Studies in Indology and Buddhology*, Kyoto: Hozokan, 1955, and K. A. Subramania Iyer, *Bhartrhari* (Poona: Deccan College, 1969). This discussion is summarized in H. G. Coward, *Bhartrhari* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), pp. 11-12.
9. *Vakapadiya of Bhartrhari* (hereafter, *Vak.*), trans. by K. A. Subramania Iyer (Poona:

- Deccan College, 1965), 1:2, p. 4, Kanda III, Pt. I is published by Deccan College, 1971. Kanda III, Pt. ii is published by Motilal Banarsidass, 1974.
10. *Vak. III:9:4.*
 11. *Vak. III:9:15.*
 12. *utpattan ca sthitan caivavinase capitadvatam nimittam kalam evahur vibhaktentmana sthitam.* The English translation quoted is by Peri Sarveswara Sharma, *Kalagamuddesa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972), p. 42.
 13. Gaurinath Sastri, *The Philosophy of Word and Meaning* (Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1959).
 14. K. A. Subramanian Iyer, *Bhartrhari* (Poona: Deccan College, 1969).
 15. *Kalagamuddesa*, 9:14, p. 50.
 16. See for example the lucid presentation of Vivarana Advaita by T. M. P. Mahadevan, *The Philosophy of Advaita* (Madras: Ganesh and Co. 1969), pp. 236-251.
 17. See Sankara's "Introduction" to his *Commentary on the Brahma Sutras*, trans. by George Thibaut, Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 34 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), p. 3ff.
 18. Mahadevan, *The Philosophy of Advaita*, p. 229.
 19. *The Vakyapadiya of Bhartrhari* Chapter III, pt. ii, trans. by K. A. S. Iyer (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), p. 54.
 20. *Vakyapadiya* I:142.
 21. *Vakyapadiya* III:9:4.
 22. *Vakyapadiya* III:9:5.
 23. *Vakyapadiya* III:9:23.
 24. *Vakyapadiya* III:9:24. This, says Helaraja, is Bhartrhari's meaning of the term *vivarta*, which appears in *Vak. 1:1 & 3.3.81*.
 25. *Vakyapadiya* III:9:74.
 26. *Vakyapadiya* III:9:37.
 27. *Vakyapadiya* III:9:41.
 28. *Vakyapadiya* III:9:45, *Tika*.
 29. *Vakyapadiya* III:9:46.