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Time in Hinduism

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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. 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.

The Vedas also offer their own speculations regarding time. Time (kala) is described in one hymn as the first god, existing in many forms. 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." 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. In the Maitri Upanishad, though, time is given the same high status as in the Atharva Veda. In Maitri 6:15, we read,

'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.'

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) is the great philosopher of the Grammarian 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


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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. 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. Just as the wire-puller is in complete 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".

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.

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 Sastri and K. A. Submanian Iyer. 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*) 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 turns out (*kalayati*) all the fragments (*kalah*) objects and thus acquires the name of *kala* (time).

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
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 Vakyapadīya. ¹⁵

If Helaraja is right, then Bhārtṛhari 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 Bhārtṛhari’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. Bhārtṛhari’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 Bhārtṛhari 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 Bhārtṛhari, 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 Bhārtṛhari, 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 Bhārtṛhari 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 Bhārtṛhari. The illustrations offered in the Vakyapadīya are more often associated with images of Brahman bursting forth in illumination (spūta), 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 Bhārtṛhari, time (kala) is a creative power. Whereas for Advaita (the Vivarana Advaitin, at least) the obscuring function of avidya is equated with maya,¹⁸ Bhārtṛhari in the vīti on Kanda 1, Karika 1 describes avidya as the diversity of phenomena which Brahman’s time power creates. Helaraja in his Tīka on Kanda 3 further describes time as an independent power of Brahman and discusses its ontological status in relation to avidya.

According to Bhārtṛhari, Time is the Svatantrasakti 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 pranavr̄ti, it appears to have sequence due to Time.¹⁹

As this comment makes clear, there are three ontological levels in Bhārtṛhari’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 Bhārtṛhari, 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.*

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.

The Sanskrit terms involved are *abhyamujna* (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.

The function of time called permission (*abhyanujna*) allows things to be born and to continue in existence. 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. But the underlying substratum of all of this activity is the driving impulse of time. 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. 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. 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.” Thus the appearance of the Universe, which is really without sequence, as something with sequence, is the work of time.

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 *abhyamujna* (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 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.


**Notes**


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.


