

SABDA AS REALITY: RAJA RAO'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE IN THE LIGHT OF BHARTRIHARI'S VAKYAPADIYA

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Abstract

Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadiya* occupies a seminal position in the Indian philosophy of language by advancing the doctrine of *sabda dvaita*, which posits an ontological identity between *sabda* (the Word), *Brahman* (Ultimate Reality), and the phenomenal world. Language, in this tradition, is not merely representational but constitutive of reality itself. Against this philosophical background, the present paper undertakes a critical and systematic examination of Raja Rao's philosophy of language and poetry, as articulated in his essays and reflections on literary creation. The study specifically explores how Raja Rao addresses foundational questions such as: What is poetry? Who is a poet? And what is the ultimate purpose of poetry? By situating Raja Rao's literary thought within the metaphysical framework of Bhartrihari's *Vakyapadaya*, the paper argues that Rao redefines poetry as a spiritual discipline (*sadhana*) rooted in the non-dual realization of *Sabda brahman*. The paper demonstrates that the theory of *sphoṭa* deeply informs Raja Rao's conception of poetic language, the four levels of *vak* (*vaikhari*, *madhyama*, *paśyanti*, and *para*), and the Upanishadic understanding of *Om* as the sonic embodiment of the Absolute. In doing so, the paper positions Raja Rao as a modern Indian writer who successfully integrates classical Indian linguistic philosophy with contemporary literary expression.

Keywords: Bhartrihari, *Sabda*, *Sphoṭa*, *Vak*, *Sabda brahman*, Raja Rao, Poetry, Liberation, Indian Philosophy of Language

Introduction: Language and Reality – Western and Indian Perspectives

One of the most persistent and complicated philosophical problems that has captivated the interest of thinkers across cultures and intellectual traditions is the relationship between language and reality. The fundamental question that lies at the core of this problem is: Is reality merely described by using language, or does language participate in the very constitution of reality? Numerous debates across disciplines, including metaphysics, epistemology, linguistics, and literary theory, have been shaped by this question, resulting in divergent philosophical approaches in both Western and Indian traditions.

In the Western philosophical tradition, Plato's *Cratylus*, which is structured as a dialogue between Cratylus, Hermogenes, and Socrates, is one of the earliest and most detailed analysis of the nature of language. The text highlights two contrasting views about linguistic meaning. Hermogenes argues that the relationship

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between words and their referents is arbitrary and is based on social agreement. This is a conventionalist position. Cratylus, on the other hand, adopts a naturalist view, which maintains that words bear an inherent connection to the objects they signify. This connection is rational and is grounded in the nature of things themselves (Livingston 8). As the dialogue progresses, Socrates rigorously scrutinises both the positions and suggests a third possibility, that language may not simply imitate or describe reality, but they may be fundamentally interconnected or even inseparable (Lehmann 578).

In spite of this move toward an ontological understanding of language, Western thought gradually followed a distinct trajectory which moved in the opposite direction. From Aristotle through medieval scholasticism and into modern schools of thought, language has been increasingly viewed as a representational system that describes reality rather than a constructive force. This tendency reaches its most defining formulation in modern linguistics, particularly in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who defines language as a system of arbitrary signs composed of the signifier and the signified. According to him, the relationship between word and world is based on convention rather than being intrinsic, and meaning is generated through difference within the linguistic system rather than through any ontological correspondence with reality. As a result, language is primarily understood as an instrumental medium, a tool for communication, rather than the structure of being itself.

In contrast to this representational approach, the Indian philosophical tradition gives language a fundamentally ontological and metaphysical status. The Vedic and Upanishadic canon repeatedly emphasises that *Vak* (speech) is not only a medium of expression but the underlying principle that brings the cosmos into existence. Speech is understood as creative, and it is considered as the active power (*sakti*) of *Brahman*, the Ultimate Reality. The Vedic declaration 'Vak vai Brahma' captures this worldview by expressing an essential identity between word and the Absolute. In this tradition, language is not an external sign pointing toward reality, but it is the means through which reality reveals itself.

Bhartrihari's doctrine of *sabda dvaita*, as explained at length in the *Vakyapadiya*, is the most systematic and philosophical articulation of this ontological conception of language. For Bhartrihari, *sabda* is much more than a linguistic sign, it is the very ground of existence and is identical with Brahman itself (Pillai 10). According to this view, the phenomenal world appears multiple due to the apparent division of the Word, but its underlying unity remains undisturbed. Thus, meaning, consciousness and being are inseparable aspects of a single, undifferentiated, non-dual reality.

This rich and nuanced intellectual tradition provides the context within which Raja Rao's reflections on language and literature must be situated and understood. Shaped by Indian metaphysical thought, yet keenly aware of Western philosophical debates, Raja Rao presents a view of language that challenges modern representational theories and attempts to restore the sacred, ontological power of the Word. His philosophy of language and literature reinterprets *sabda dvaita* for a modern literary context, in which writing functions as a spiritual discipline and poetic language becomes a pathway to self-realisation and ultimate truth.

Bhartrihari and the Metaphysics of the Word

Among Indian thinkers on language, Bhartrihari, the fifth-century philosopher-linguist, stands out as the most systematic and philosophically rigorous voice. His ideas mark a key moment in Indian intellectual history where linguistic inquiry moves beyond grammatical analysis to engage with metaphysical questions. His magnum opus, the *Vakyapadiya*, is not merely a treatise on grammar or semantics; rather, it offers a

comprehensive philosophical account in which language is treated as the foundation principle of reality itself. While historical records provide little information about Bhartrihari's personal life, his intellectual contribution is firmly established through the three *kandas* of the *Vakyapadiya*, along with the *Vrtti* and other associated glosses that are traditionally attributed to him (Pillai xiii). Collectively, these texts show Bhartrihari as both a grammarian and a metaphysician, whose ideas about language are bound to his ontological concerns.

Central to Bhartrihari's philosophy is the claim that *sabda* (Word) is identical with *Brahman*, the Ultimate Reality. In making this claim, he sharply differs from earlier approaches to grammar and linguistics. In classical grammatical texts, such as Patanjali's *Mahabhasya*, *sabda* is primarily defined as a functional tool of cognition that, when uttered, produces a definite cognition of an object in the hearer. Although these accounts acknowledge the role of language in cognition and communication, they do not grant it an ontological status. Meanwhile, in Bhartrihari's thought, *sabda* is not just a way of communicating reality, but it is the very ground of being. For him, language does not stand apart from reality, it is the very process through which reality reveals itself.

In developing this view, Bhartrihari introduces a distinction between the two inseparable aspects of *sabda* : *dhvani* and *sphota*. *Dhvani* denotes the audible, physically articulated sound produced by the organs of speech and perceived by the senses. It is material in nature, it unfolds in a sequential manner, and it changes over time. *Sphota*, on the other hand, is the single, indivisible, meaning-bearing unit that suddenly arises in consciousness when an utterance is heard. Unlike *dhvani*, which unfolds successively, *sphota* is understood instantaneously and all at once as a complete whole, transcending the breaks of time (Iyer 156). Meaning, therefore, does not simply arise from the combination of phonemes, but it is revealed through *sphota*, which exists independently of its phonetic expression.

The concept of *sabda brahman* represent the culmination of Bhartrihari's linguistic philosophy, here, the Absolute is identified with the Word. In the *Brahmakanda* of the *Vakyapadiya*, the opening verses describe Brahman as beginningless and endless, eternally self-existent, and of the nature of *sabda* . Here, the phenomenal world does not come into being through real transformation (*parinamavada*) but through apparent manifestation (*vivartavada*), where the one Word appears to become many without altering its essential unity (Iyer 135). Multiplicity, difference, and change exist at the level of appearance and not at the level of ultimate reality.

Within this framework, time (*kala*) functions as the primary power through which the undivided *sabda brahman* comes to appear as a world of distinct objects and events. Time regulates sequence, cause and effect, and change, enabling the world of experience to emerge while remaining subordinate to the eternal Word. As a result, the cosmos is not separate from *sabda* ; it is *sabda* manifest in an articulated form. In Bhartrihari's philosophy, language, consciousness, and being are inseparable and united in a non-dual vision where Word is both the origin and the very substance of existence.

Raja Rao and the Ontology of Language

Raja Rao's literary and philosophical writings show a deep and ongoing engagement with Bhartrihari's doctrine of *sabda dvaita*, placing language at the very center of his metaphysical and aesthetic vision. For Rao, language cannot be reduced to either a neutral means of representation and communication or to a stylistic device used for artistic effect. Instead, language is an ontological principle that underlies and orders reality itself. This position is most clearly articulated in *The Sacred Wordsmith*, where Rao presents a view of

language that transcends the boundaries of literary aesthetics and enters the realm of metaphysics.

Using ideas from Vedic cosmology and ancient theories of sound, Rao posits that *sabda* is the basic substance that underlies the material universe. According to this worldview, sound does not arise from matter, rather, matter rests on sound. Each element in nature is linked to a primordial vibration or root sound, and material forms emerge through the combination and interaction of these elemental sounds. So, matter is understood as crystallised sound, which means that the physical world is the manifestation of sound that has taken a stable, visible form. Within this framework, naming takes on a radically creative role. It is not merely an act of assigning a passive label to an already existing object; it actively participates in bringing the object into existence. The word and the object are therefore ontologically inseparable, sharing a common origin in *sabda* itself (Rao 126).

Rao's position differs sharply from the dominant Western theories, which see language as merely representational and treat words as arbitrary signs that refer to an external and independent reality. This view is prevalent in modern linguistics and philosophy; it treats language as a purely instrumental system that points to meaning without being inherently connected to it. Raja Rao challenges this assumption and rejects the idea of external reference. He asserts that words do not point toward reality from the outside; they are reality in articulated form. Language, in this sense, does not mirror the world but generates and sustains it.

This insight closely resonates with Bhartrihari's view of the inseparable relationship between *vacaka* (that which expresses) and *vacya* (that which is expressed). In Bhartrihari's philosophy, these are not two independent entities connected by convention but complementary aspects of a single, unified linguistic reality grounded in *śabda* (Iyer 101). Rao inherits this non-dual linguistic ontology and reinterprets it within a modern literary and philosophical context. By doing so, he revitalizes the Indian philosophy of language and applies it meaningfully to questions of literary creation, poetic expression, and the writer's engagement with reality. Thus, Raja Rao emerges as a modern inheritor and creative interpreter of the Indian metaphysics of the Word. His ontology of language bridges classical linguistic philosophy and contemporary literary thought, transforming *sabdadvaita* into a living principle of artistic practice. Through his reflections on language and sound, Rao reasserts the sacred, world-constituting power of the Word and redefines literature as a mode of metaphysical inquiry rather than mere aesthetic representation.

The Four Levels of *Vak* and the Structure of Consciousness

One of the most significant conceptual links between Bhartrihari and Raja Rao lies in the theory of the four levels of *vak*, a linguistic, metaphysical framework that explains the progressive manifestation of language from its subtlest to its most articulated form. While Bhartrihari's *Vakyapadiya* primarily elaborates three levels of speech, *vaikhari*, *madhyama*, and *pasyanti*, later developments within the Kashmir Shaivite tradition introduce a fourth and ultimate level, *para vak*. Raja Rao explicitly adopts and integrates this expanded fourfold model, treating it as a foundational principle for understanding not only language but also consciousness and literary creativity.

At the most external level, *vaikhari* denotes articulated speech as it is spoken and heard in the empirical world. This level is bound by temporal sequence, grammatical structure, and sensory perception, and it corresponds to language in its conventional communicative function. *Madhyama*, the second level, refers to mental or internal speech, where words exist as intentions, meanings, or thought-forms prior to vocalization. Here, language is no longer dependent on sound but retains a subtle form as cognitive movement within the mind.

The third level, *pasyanti*, signifies a state of undifferentiated awareness in which word and meaning are not yet distinct. At this level, language exists as a holistic vision (*darsana*), where signifier and signified remain fused in a unified cognitive intuition. *Pasyanti* thus marks a transitional zone between thought and pure consciousness, where linguistic differentiation begins to dissolve. Beyond this lies *para vak*, the highest and most subtle level of speech, which Raja Rao describes as pure silence or absolute stillness. *Para vak* is not speech in any ordinary sense; it is the non-dual Absolute itself, the unmanifest source from which all linguistic and cognitive activity emerges (Rao 168).

Raja Rao further correlates these four levels of *vak* with the four states of consciousness outlined in the *Maṇḍukya Upaniṣad*, waking (*jagrat*), dreaming (*svapna*), deep sleep (*susupti*), and the transcendent *turiya*. He also aligns them with the syllabic structure of *Om*, thereby integrating linguistic theory, metaphysical cosmology, and psychological experience into a single interpretive framework. Through this synthesis, Rao suggests that linguistic expression is not merely a cultural or social phenomenon but a reflection of deeper cosmic and mental processes.

Significantly, this model leads Rao to privilege silence over articulated sound as the ultimate ground of language. While speech unfolds through progressively differentiated levels, its source remains a state of plenitude beyond verbalization. True meaning, in this view, is not exhausted by words but culminates in silence, where language returns to its origin in pure consciousness. By foregrounding silence as the foundation of speech, Raja Rao reinforces the idea that literature and poetry serve not only communicative or aesthetic purposes but also function as pathways toward metaphysical insight and spiritual realization.

Poetry as *Sadhana*: The Poet as Seer

Situated within this metaphysical understanding of language, Raja Rao radically reconceptualizes the nature and function of poetry. For him, poetry is not a form of aesthetic embellishment or verbal artistry designed merely to evoke pleasure; rather, it is a disciplined spiritual practice (*sadhana*) directed toward self-realization. Since *śabda* itself is identified with Brahman, every genuine poetic utterance participates in the sacred. The act of composing poetry thus assumes a ritualistic and devotional character, transforming linguistic creation into an act of worship. Rao encapsulates this vision in his striking formulation, “Aham is *kavya*. ‘I am’ is poetry,” thereby equating poetic expression with the primal assertion of being itself (*The Meaning of India* 162).

Within this framework, the poet is no longer understood as a skilled technician manipulating language for expressive effect, but as a *ṛṣi*, a seer who intuits reality beyond the surface of empirical appearances. The poet’s task is not invention but revelation, an uncovering of truths that already exist at deeper levels of consciousness. Poetry, in this sense, functions as a mediating force that enables a gradual ascent through the levels of *vak*, moving from articulated speech (*vaikhari*) toward the silent plenitude of *para*. Both poet and reader are drawn into this inward journey, as the poetic experience becomes a means of attuning the mind to higher modes of awareness.

Rao further situates this process within the classical Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa*. While poetry gives expression to various emotions (*bhavas*), these emotional states do not terminate in psychological pleasure alone. Instead, they culminate in *rasa*, which Rao interprets not merely as aesthetic relish but as a vehicle for transcendence. Regardless of the specific emotion invoked, whether love, compassion, heroism, or sorrow, the ultimate movement of *rasa* is toward Brahman itself (Rao 127). In this way, aesthetic experience is subsumed

within a larger metaphysical trajectory, where beauty becomes a path to truth.

This understanding of poetry closely resonates with Bhartrihari's assertion that the disciplined refinement of language constitutes a legitimate path to liberation. In the *Vakyapadiya*, grammatical inquiry is not treated as a purely technical enterprise but as a means of purifying speech and, by extension, consciousness itself. Rao explicitly endorses this view by citing Bhartrihari's claim that grammar is "the road to salvation" and the purifier of all forms of knowledge (Rao 135). Poetry, when grounded in such linguistic discipline, becomes a transformative practice through which the individual moves toward spiritual clarity and ontological realization. Thus, in Raja Rao's vision, poetry emerges as a sacred vocation, one that bridges language, consciousness, and the Absolute. The poet, as seer, stands at the threshold between sound and silence, guiding language back to its source in *sabda brahman*. Through this synthesis of poetics and metaphysics, Rao reclaims literature as a profound mode of spiritual inquiry rather than a merely cultural or aesthetic pursuit.

Conclusion

An examination of Raja Rao's philosophy of language through the conceptual framework of Bhartrihari's *Vakyapadaya* reveals a profound continuity between classical Indian linguistic metaphysics and modern Indian literary thought. Raja Rao does not merely appropriate Bhartrihari's insights as inherited doctrine; rather, he reinterprets and reactivates the principle of *sabda dvaita* within a modern literary and philosophical context. His sustained reflections on language, silence, poetry, and selfhood demonstrate that his literary practice is grounded in an ontological understanding of *sabda* as the foundational reality underlying both consciousness and the cosmos.

By redefining poetry as a form of *sadhana* and the poet as a seeker or *r̥ṣi*, Raja Rao decisively challenges dominant Western paradigms that treat language as a representational or instrumental system. In contrast to theories that separate word from world, his vision restores the sacred dimension of language, affirming its capacity to disclose truth rather than merely describe it. Poetry, in this framework, becomes a transformative practice through which both the poet and the reader are guided from articulated speech toward the silence of ultimate realization.

At the same time, Raja Rao's engagement with *sabda brahman* is marked by an expansive and inclusive philosophical outlook. While his thought is deeply informed by Sanskritic traditions, he explicitly resists linguistic or cultural exclusivism. For Rao, the Absolute is not confined to any single language, scriptural corpus, or cultural form. His deliberate choice of English as a medium of expression thus does not signal alienation from Indian philosophical traditions; instead, it affirms the non-dual nature of the Word, which transcends all linguistic boundaries. English, in his hands, becomes capable of participating in the same metaphysical depth traditionally associated with Sanskrit.

Raja Rao consequently emerges as a vital intellectual bridge between ancient Indian philosophy and global modernity. His work demonstrates how classical metaphysical insights can be meaningfully rearticulated within modern literary forms without loss of philosophical rigor. By reconceiving language as both the medium and the manifestation of ultimate reality, Rao offers a compelling alternative to prevailing modern theories of language and literature. His philosophy invites a rethinking of literary practice itself, as an avenue toward self-knowledge, ontological insight, and spiritual realization, thereby reaffirming the enduring relevance of Indian linguistic thought in contemporary global discourse.

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