Lakshmi Bandlamudi
E.V. Ramakrishnan   *Editors*

Bakhtinian Explorations of Indian Culture

Pluralism, Dogma and Dialogue Through History

Springer

Bakhtinian Explorations of Indian Culture

Lakshmi Bandlamudi · E.V. Ramakrishnan
Editors

Bakhtinian Explorations of Indian Culture

Pluralism, Dogma and Dialogue Through History

Editors
Lakshmi Bandlamudi
Department of Psychology
LaGuardia Community College
New York, NY
USA

E.V. Ramakrishnan
School of Language, Literature and Culture
   Studies
Central University of Gujarat
Gandhinagar, Gujarat
India

Printed on acid-free paper

Acknowledgements

In 2010 when one of the editors, Lakshmi Bandlamudi, was in India as a recipient of a Fulbright Award, had given few lectures at the Forum on Contemporary Theory in Vadodara and at that time suggested to the Director, Prof. Prafulla Kar, to convene a Bakhtin conference in India to explore and reactivate inherent dialogicality in the intellectual traditions and cultural histories of India. Prof. Kar responded with a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment. In order to bring this proposal to fruition, Prof. Kar left no stone unturned and without his relentless efforts, insight, and leadership the proposal could not have culminated into a conference. My deep gratitude to Prof. Kar for his willingness to be my interlocutor; he patiently heard my suggestions and proposals and added his perspectives and practical suggestions and made the event possible. In the process, I gained a friend, philosopher, and guide that I deeply value.

An international conference titled "Bakhtin in India: Exploring the Dialogic Potential in Self, Culture and History" was convened at Gandhinagar, Gujarat from August 19–21, 2013 and we were the conveners. It was organized by the Central University of Gujarat (CUG), Gandhinagar in collaboration with the Balvant Parekh Center for General Semantics and Other Human Sciences, Vadodara and the Forum on Contemporary Theory, Vadodara and the event was sponsored by the Indian Council for Social Science Research, New Delhi. Selected papers from this conference constitute the current volume.

We acknowledge the support extended by Prof. R.K. Kale, the then Vice-Chancellor of the Central University of Gujarat (CUG), for the conference. Members of the faculty and students from the Centers of Comparative Literature and English Studies at CUG contributed substantially toward the logistics of the Conference. Thanks are also due to INFLIBNET Gandhinagar for providing the venue and technical assistance.

We owe a deep debt of gratitude to Bini B.S. Her sharp editorial eye and critical reading of all the essays in this volume contributed immensely to the preparation of

this manuscript. She undertook the project with a great deal of commitment and seriousness and without her able assistance we could not have achieved our goals. Bini offered her time and skill so generously to read and re-read each and every essay that our words fall short in expressing our gratitude.

<div align="right">

Lakshmi Bandlamudi
E.V. Ramakrishnan

</div>

Contents

Editors and Contributors

About the Editors

Lakshmi Bandlamudi is Professor of Psychology at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York. She is the author of *Dialogics of Self, The Mahabharata and Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History* (Anthem Press, 2010) and *Difference, Dialogue and Development: A Bakhtinian World* (Routledge, 2015) and *Movements with the Cosmic Dancer: On Pilgrimage to Kailash Manasarovar* (2006), in addition to several papers in peer reviewed journals in the areas of dialogic consciousness and socio-historical epistemology. She is a recipient of Fulbright Nehru Award in 2010 and was a CUNY Distinguished Fellow in 2013–14.

E.V. Ramakrishnan is a bilingual writer and translator who has published poetry and literary criticism in Malayalam, his first language, and English. Among his critical books in English are *Indigenous Imaginaries: Literature, Region, Modernity* (2017); *Interdisciplinary Alternatives in Comparative Literature* (coedited, 2013); *Locating Indian Literature: Texts, Traditions and Translations* (2011); *Making It New: Modernism in Malayalam, Marathi and Hindi Poetry* (1995); *Narrating India: the Novel in Search of the Nation* (edited, 1999); and *Indian Short Story 1900–2000* (2001). He wrote six critical books in Malayalam. He has published over two hundred research papers in the areas of his specialization such as comparative literature, translation studies, culture studies, literary theory, and post-colonial studies. He is presently Professor Emeritus at the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar, Gujarat.

Contributors

Foara Adhikari University College London, London, UK

Jasmine Anand MCM DAV College for Women, Chandigarh, India

Bini B.S. Balvant Parekh Centre for General Semantics and Other Human Sciences, Vadodara, India

Atanu Bhattacharya Centre for English Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar, India

Craig Brandist University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Paromita Chakrabarti Department of English, H.R. College of Commerce and Economics, Mumbai, India

Elizabeth Chalier-Visuvalingam School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Jasbir Jain University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, India

Pooja J. Mehta Department of Communication Skills, Marwadi Education Foundation's Group of Institutions, Rajkot, Gujarat, India

Jyoti S. Rane Pratap College, Amalner, India

Sunthar Visuvalingam Independent Researcher, Chicago, USA

Chapter 1
Introduction: Intellectual Traditions of India in Dialogue with Mikhail Bakhtin

Lakshmi Bandlamudi and E.V. Ramakrishnan

So many bodies

So many opinions

But my Beloved is in every body

Though invisible

(Sant Kabir)

No Nirvana is possible for a *single* consciousness. A single consciousness is a *contradictio in adjecto*. Consciousness is in essence multiple. *Pluralia tantum*.

(Mikhail Bakhtin, Appendix II. Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. 1984b: 288)

Diversity of language is worth keeping because diversity of cultures and differentiation of soul-groups are worth keeping and because without that diversity life cannot have full play; for in its absence there is a danger; almost an inevitability of decline and stagnation.

(Sri Aurobindo, Diversity in Oneness. 1997: 496)

The soul is the self-coincident, self-equivalent, and self-contained whole of inner life that postulates another's loving activity from outside its own bounds. The soul is a gift that my spirit bestows upon the *other*.

(Mikhail Bakhtin, Art and Answerability. 1990: 132)

A mystic poet (Sant Kabir) and a multidimensional thinker (Sri Aurobindo)—both from India—celebrate the incredible diversity in Oneness that is necessary to enrich the soul and keep the culture on the move and away from decline and stagnation. From another part of the world a Russian thinker—Mikhail Bakhtin—argues that

L. Bandlamudi (✉)
Department of Social Science, LaGuardia Community College,
City University of New York, New York, NY, USA
e-mail: lakbandlamudi@gmail.com

E.V. Ramakrishnan
School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies,
Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India
e-mail: evrama51@gmail.com

nirvana might be a sought-after ideal by an individual, but the processes of reaching it is not based on the sole efforts of the individual, and the soul—be it that of an individual or a culture—is inevitably dependent on the *spirit* of the *other* for its enrichment. Given the shared concerns and values between a culture and a thinker, a conference was convened in Gandhinagar, India in August 2013 to mark the formal arrival of Bakhtin in India and this volume is an outcome of that conference.

Few cultures can boast as much as India about the incredible diversity in every realm of life and Mikhail Bakhtin is one of the few thinkers of the 20th century to have had a deep fascination for the plenitude of differences in the world and hence the affinity between the thinker and the culture of India only seems natural. The soul of India has always been at the confluence of cultures and hence offers a veritable feast of divergent ideas, colorful customs, and disparate convictions through multiple languages and diverse faiths and Bakhtin is bound to take special delight in engaging with these features of a culture that he so cherished and celebrated. The philosophical and literary traditions and histories with open-ended and unfinalized texts that stand under the banner of plurality is also capable of bringing Bakhtin's works readily under the very same banner. India has always been a parliament of languages, where meanings must be negotiated and the other must be accommodated and this sheer reality of culture necessitates a dialogue. One could very well argue that long before the principles of dialogue took shape in the western world, these ideas, though not labeled as such, were an integral part of intellectual traditions in India.

However, at the very outset, we need to recognize the inherent paradox in the culture with its built-in contradictions. As much as we find principles of dialogicality in full force in the culture, we also see and feel the forces of dogma with its stubborn social hierarchies and unyielding views on social structures. Therefore, we cannot celebrate the dialogicality in certain pockets of culture at certain historical moments, without being mindful of the ugly and violent dogmas that have also been so pervasive in the culture. Therefore, it would seem pernicious to discuss dialogue by ignoring dogmas. This is very much akin to what Bakhtin would argue about dialogism; we cannot talk about it without recognizing the strong monologic impulses in individuals and culture. Hence, the real question is about the cultural forces that contribute to the building up of dogmas and about how the creative forces of dialogism mediate the breakdown of dogmas.

Furthermore, even as we acknowledge that Indian heterodoxy is remarkably capacious and ever-present, we must also recognize that a simple assemblage of divergent ideas does not constitute dialogue. It only creates a potential for a dialogue. The reality of differences undoubtedly necessitates a dialogue, but whether individuals respond to that call, or whether or not cultural conditions enable the necessary dialogue is an open question. It would be a dubious claim that just because the culture is composed of diverse elements, dialogicality is automatic. In our current globalized world, terms such as dialogue and diversity have become fashionable and these words are certainly convenient political tools to cover serious problems of rigidity. Hence, a mechanical leap from variations in culture to

dialogicality would be erroneous and would disregard the philosophical depth and complexity.

A Bakhtinian reading of classical Indian texts could be quite prismatic—refracting and evoking multiple dimensions of the immediate cultural landscape—and moving gradually into the horizon of mythic consciousness, only to blur the boundaries between here and now and what lies beyond in time and space, while pointing out the sensible, the sensuous, and the spiritual. It would be more than an analysis of images of culture; it is an exercise in imagination to creatively rethink and reorganize the cultural montage and capture the vivid moments of human experiences. Only a dialogic understanding of our past would enable us to figure out what needs to be preserved and revived and what needs to be corrected. It is in this spirit that Bakhtin's arrival in India becomes mutually beneficial and meaningful. However, it does not imply a mechanical import of ideas; rather it is an occasion to reclaim, reactivate, and recognize inherent dialogicality in the culture, history, and philosophies. At the same time, Bakhtin is not necessarily a key to open up dormant dialogicality in the texts; instead, he is an active participant in a great dialogue—a necessary outsider's perspective capable of seeing things that an insider cannot. Bringing the deep-rooted dialogicality of literary and philosophical schools of India to the forefront, need not and indeed must not make Bakhtin an incidental figure, for he offers some very sharp analytical tools that are well suited to make sense of a variety of home-grown genres in India. The spell of story in India is ubiquitous; it is a simple vehicle of truth and a preferred mode of communicating psychological, metaphysical, and social thought and this activity of *storying* not only lends itself well to Bakhtinian analysis, but also adds new dimensions to the very philosophy of dialogue.

Mikhail Bakhtin: The Man and His Ideas—A Paradox

A paradoxical tension exists between the man, his ideas, and the reception of his ideas and we need to be mindful of this tension to give a fair reading and thoughtful application of his works. In their authoritative biography, Clark and Holquist (1984) claim that Bakhtin considered himself to be a philosophical anthropologist at heart, probing into the interconnections between individuals, texts, cultures, and histories. His works that span several decades passing through the most tumultuous period in Russian history display incredible insights into the diversity of the world, and yet he was not an academic empire builder and nor was he driven by a single question or overriding concern. His works are capacious enough to accommodate every angle in an idea, and every voice, however feeble, gets a fair hearing. Hence, Bakhtin's open-ended ideas invite various schools of thought to appropriate him as their own and this appeal to everyone leaves him in a deeply ironic situation; either not understood by anyone in a comprehensive manner or appropriated and misappropriated by everyone. For that matter,

everything about Bakhtin is contentious; his intellectual roots, his personal life, his academic life (his doctoral dissertation on Rabelais caused furor then and continues to generate controversy to this day), and even his identity (authorship of several books) are in dispute.

Paradox seems to be the very essence and power of Bakhtin and it is not restricted to the matters of mind, but also extends in its most concentrated form in matters of the body. Bakhtin's physical body was his curse and his savior. At a very early age, he was afflicted with osteomyelitis and thus suffered from constant pain, inflammation, and ulcers, and hence was forced to be answerable to the painful demands of the flesh. In common with many intellectuals in the then Soviet Union, Bakhtin was sent to jail in 1929 and in few months his diseased body came to his rescue. The bone disease flared up and he was moved from a prison cell to a hospital ward. By 1938, when he was barely in his early 40s the severity of disease forced the amputation of his right leg almost up to his groin. Struggling with his deformity, Bakhtin wrote the most provocative account on the power of corpore-ality. The physical confronted the metaphysical and body found its rightful place in philosophy.

From various accounts of his life, the image that emerges is that of an interesting and complex human being; a thinker who advanced the dialogic in all sincerity often displayed "single-voiced" behavior in his close social circle because he was confident that competing ideas were sufficiently debated in his intra-psychic realm. He took great delight in the bawdy language of the marketplace, but in his com-munications the language was polished. He insisted on philosophical rigor, but his writing methods were sloppy due to lack of discipline in verification procedures for citations, and so on. Attention is drawn to these aspects of Bakhtin only to emphasize that an unorthodox thinker demands and unconventional approach. Emerson (1997) observes,

> In the place of God, Bakhtin deified the everyday interlocutor. A creature made neither for prayer nor parenting, he reigned in a world of philosophical conversations carried over endless tea and cigarettes in small room in the dead of night. (p. 5)

Given this characterization of Bakhtin's world, one must enter that cold and congested room somewhere in Russia with a preparation and willingness to listen: listen to the voices in the texts that Bakhtin is engaging with; listen to the con-versations Bakhtin has with these voices; and listen to Bakhtin's voice ruminating on the deeper meanings of texts.

Finally, one needs to be sensitive to the plight of intellects operating under tyrannical conditions. There is always more to be said and what was said is hinting at something else or something beyond. Writers, philosophers, and religious leaders under Soviet rule had to learn to write in riddles or frequently swallow their thoughts, as there was always the risk of being banned or jailed or, even worse, killed. Bakhtin has had first-hand experience of living in single-voiced, rigid, and un-free world and thus gave a most persuasive philosophy on the potential for growth in a multi-voiced, flexible, and free world.

Epic/Novel Contrast in Bakhtin's World and Epic-Novel Fluidity in the Indian World

In much of the Western world, the novel is a much-preferred and celebrated genre and Bakhtin also advanced this idea and saw the novelistic genre as a significant break from the epic genre. In contrast to the novel, which is continually evolving in real present time, Bakhtin (1981) says that the "epic past" is the "absolute past" and "it is both monochronic and valorized" (p. 15) because it represents "a world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times' in the national history" (p. 13) and hence the epic distance cannot be covered by the contemporary world. According to him, the epic hero is not in the zone of familiar contact and hence the character is sealed off and complete. Such a characterization has no validity in the Indian soil, as that country's epic texts are alive, open, immediate, and incredibly influential. In interpreting the epic texts, the phenomenon we observe is a movement between novelization and the canonization of ancient texts (Bandlamudi 2010). As living texts, they absorb cultural trends and forces of history.

The epic Ramayana is a *kavya*—and hence has a beginning and an end—and yet is open to heteroglossic layering and furthermore the text has been rewritten in practically every regional language, thereby bringing in local customs and sensibilities. Dialogue and dialogic relations characterize *The Mahabharata* in every dimension and although a later text it is far more open-ended and inconclusive. The very structure of what we may loosely refer to, as "Vyasa's text" is an extraordinary form of nested dialogues. The *Adi Parva* begins with Ugrasrava narrating to the curious sages assembled in the forest of *Naimisha* on what was narrated by Vaisampayana during the snake sacrifice performed by Janamejaya. About the life of the text, Sukthankar (1933), who was instrumental in compiling the critical edition of *The Mahabharata*, observes: "we are compelled to assume that even in its early phases *the Mahabharata* textual tradition must have been not uniform and simple, but multiple and polygenous" (p. lxxxix).

Much of the diversification of the text could be attributed to back and forth movement between textual and oral traditions and also from translations into various Indian languages. Cultural history indicates that translations of epic texts into regional languages were accompanied by shifts in culture. In these translations, the local literary traditions enter into the narrative creating a dialogic relation between the *marga* (the pan Indian) and the *desi* (the local). For instance, Sarala Das, while translating *the Mahabharata* into Oriya, excluded the philosophical discussion between Arjuna and Krishna, which provided the substance for the great philosophical text called the *Bhagavat Gita*. The native reader's lived reality is brought closer to the translated text by incorporating folk tales and motifs from the everyday life of the community. Here it is obvious that translations in modern Indian languages were not oriented towards 'theoretical thinking' but 'the actual once-occurent world', a distinction that is basic to early Bakhtin. The poets of the regional languages inhabited multiple worlds that were not homogenized into single wholes. They understood that their primary responsibility was to the speech

community of which they were a part. Translation for them becomes a mode of negotiating the other in the society and culture. For Bakhtin, 'aesthetic seeing' can become 'participative thinking' only when one accepts the orientation toward the other as a condition of one's existence and cultivates 'empathy' as an essential feature of one's life and art. It is this ethical position that characterizes the poetry of Indian languages at its foundational moment.

This may be illustrated with reference to the language of Malayalam. Translation was the means by which the literary culture of Kerala was defined and refined over a period of five centuries from 1500 CE. The standardization of Malayalam into a modern literary language that can confront the marginal and the latent in the culture happened through Thunchath Ezhuthachan's (c. 16th century CE) translation of the *Ramayana* that was done in the *manipravalam* mode. *Manipravalam* embodies a dialogic spirit because it combines the Dravidian and Sanskrit strains in Malayalam into a new creative medium. According to *Leelathilakam,* a work on grammar and rhetoric from 14th-century Kerala, *mani* signifies 'jewels' and *pravalam* means 'corals', the former standing for Tamil and the latter for Sanskrit (Mukherjee 1999: 225). Ezhuthachan made it possible for Malayalam to assimilate the high serious-ness of Sanskrit and the earthly wisdom of Tamil that represent two experiential worlds with conflicting orientations. The impulse to bring them into a dialogic relationship is made possible through the idiom of *manipravalam* that hybridizes Malayalam and enables it to confront the other within its experiential domain. Malayalam becomes a site of engaging the elite and subaltern through the poly-phonic structure of this hybridized language. What made this dialogic relationship possible was the Aryan–Dravidian synthesis that happened in the social system of Kerala during its formative phase. Ezhuthachan's challenge was to devise an idiom that can address a speech community divided into several castes in the feudal hierarchy. Ezhuthachan is compelled to devise a dialogic mode to negotiate the complex plurality of his society.

Here we shall illustrate the manner in which *manipravalam* functions in the text. In one of the most famous passages, Rama, while instructing his brother, Lakshman on the transient nature of earthly existence, compares the world to a frog "trapped in the throat of a snake, (the frog) still pleading for food (unaware of its impending death)" (Paniker 1999: 202). This is an everyday image drawn from the life of ordinary people and conveys the contingency of the everyday world. In the same passage, Rama also says that worldly joys go past like lightning and human life is "a fleeting thing" (ibid.). In the original Ezhuthachan uses a high-sounding Sanskrit phrase, *kshanaprabhanjalam*, to convey the transient nature of human life and the world. In the space of a few lines we are given two contrasting metaphors derived from two discourses pointing to a common theme. This is what makes *ma-nipravalam* a dialogic mode of address. Thus, during its very formative phase, Malayalam interiorizes the social contradictions manifest in its linguistic structure into a creative force that can forge a participatory space of experience.

The novel did not originate in India as an imitation of the Western model. The social dynamics of the 19th century could no more be articulated in the prevailing genres which partook of ideological forms and genres which carried the stamp of

classical and neo-classical periods. While commenting on "the extra-artistic reasons and factors that made possible the construction of the polyphonic novel" in Russia, Bakhtin argues that "the multi-leveledness and contradictions of social reality" was a major contributing factor for the emergence of the form (Bakhtin 1984b: 27). As he says: "the epoch itself made the polyphonic novel possible" (ibid.). This is also true of Indian society. In the West, the trajectory of modernity gained ground over a period of three centuries. But in India the epoch-making changes took less than one hundred years as a society steeped in traditions of various kinds, confronted and accommodated various strands of modernity in every walk of life from the domestic to the public, from administration to law and justice, and from education to culture. However, modernity did not exhaust the multiple worlds in which an Indian lived. The large-scale changes initiated by colonialism contributed towards a redefinition of human subjectivity in India. The modern Indian subject could be narrativized only in new genres. Genres such as autobiography, essay, lyric poetry, travelogue, short story, and the novel emerged in response to the crisis of experience and expression. In this sense, all these are dialogic genres that embodied in themselves multiple points of view that were available in Indian society as it confronted modernity. Namwar Singh has argued that in India we tend to consider the novel as a derivative form without realizing that there are socio-political factors shaping the new genre of prose and the novel. He considers the rebellion of 1857 as the First War of Indian Independence, following Marx, and believes that "the country and the novel were born together" (Singh 2002: 4–5). The ideological axis of colonial oppression and nationalist awakening created a multi-leveled society with several internal contradictions that resulted in the search for new forms of expression.

As Anderson's formulation of nationalism suggests, nations need to be simultaneously both ancient and modern as well as secular and sacred. The Indian novel as a dialogic genre gave expression to the contradictory impulses of colonial modernity that pulled in different directions. Even as the new Indian novel spoke on behalf of the common people, it embodied a largely elitist view of the nation. In a novel like *Anandamath* (1882/2005) by the Bengali writer Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the author gives expression to this ambivalence when he portrays the cult of the *santaan* (child), which was devoted to the ideal of liberating the motherland. He glorified celibacy and renunciation as ideals and portrayed a hermitage in the heart of the forest where the members of the cult congregated. While the nationalist project had a secular ideal rooted in modernity, this novel uses a revivalist discourse monumentalizing the past. The Hindu past is appropriated in favour of a modern nationalistic discourse, rendering members of religious community invisible. In fact, the Muslim figures in the novel as an antagonist. Julius Lipner, in his introduction to the translation of *Anandamath,* comments on the "Sanskritic theme" present in the novel: "…in the context of the nationalist (and protonationalist) agitation in 19th-century Bengal, this theme of the transformative use of *tapas* acquired by a celibate life-style was adapted to bring about nationalist/ patriotic goals" (Lipner 2005: 57). The moment of colonial modernity was marked by a pronounced ambivalence to the very ideals of the secular-modern that demanded allegiance from the modern subject. The modern Indian novel becomes a

dialogic enactment of such subliminal conflicts that could not be resolved in the prevailing discourses of tradition or modernity. Despite Bankim's obvious ideological proclivities, the novel as a dialogic form allows us to view the marginalized perspectives and this contributes to the emergence of a self-critical consciousness.

Dialogicality and Philosophy of Language

Dialogue is a multi-leveled concept and it must be acknowledged that at a macro level, Truth is dialogic. Our view of the world and life is dialogic. Bakhtin (1984b: 293) asserts that, "Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in a dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree and so forth." For the realization of dialogue in life, one must have a dialogic conception of truth and deploy a dialogic method to explore, understand and represent life. The reason that verses of great Indian mystics from every faith—to name a few, Ghalib, Annamacharya, Kabir, Tyagaraja, and Tukaram to Guru Nanak—remain alive is because their conception of Truth was dialogic. Relationship was everything, and in mind, body, spirit, soul, and deeds they participated in a dialogue with their creator and their fellow human beings and so their words continue to speak to us. For them, it was the feel for faith that reigned supreme, while the dogmatic codification of religion became shadowy and insignificant.

The next sense is that language in action can only be dialogic. No human activity is possible without language and hence every utterance by its very definition is dialogic (Bakhtin 1986). Bakhtin's interest was not in the 'word' but in the *life of the word*. Who is the speaking subject, to whom are the words directed, who is the listening subject, and what is his or her response to the utterances? These questions are fundamental in determining meanings.

Almost 1500 years before Bakhtin, Sanskrit grammarian/philologists saw language as the kinetic energy of human consciousness that sets everything in motion. We do not know if there was a circuitous route through which philological traditions from India reached Bakhtin in any form, but it is worth noting that Bakhtin carefully studied many German philosophers like Schelling, the Schlegel brothers, and others who were greatly influenced by philosophies of language in India. That aside, Bakhtin had similar metaphysical and epistemological concerns that Bhartrhari had.

Sanskrit linguist and grammarian Bhartrhari (c. 5th century CE) discusses his doctrine of language and reality in his three-volume classic work, *Vakyapadiya*—literally meaning 'sentence-word'—and in these texts he argues against reductionism in the study of language and advocates a holistic approach. Therefore, as a "collection of words" only the sentence is capable of expressing "inalienable meaning" (*Vakyapadiya* II 1977: 56). For Bhartrhari, the meaning-bearing unit is *sphota* (lit. spurt); similar to Bakhtin's utterances because when words are strung together they become an indivisible whole, assuming different intonations and connotations. For both Bhartrhari and Bakhtin, language is not a closed formal system, but a live event that humans engage in, and hence Bhartrhari insists on

being attentive to *sabdana vyapara*—the business of negotiating sounds and meanings and Bakhtin proclaims that 'we own meanings.' Bhartrhari felt the vibrations of consciousness—*spanda*—in linguistic transactions and Bakhtin heard the voices of consciousness in the social discourse.

Despite similarities in their approach to language, it is important to note significant differences. In the Western world, philosophies of language, broadly speaking, all into binary categories: some like de Saussure privileging the *la langue*—structure of language while others like Bakhtin and Wittgenstein focusing on *la parole*—language in action that produces myriad meanings. Bhartrhari, on the other hand, proposes a holistic doctrine on language that upholds the inseparability of *langue* and *parole*. He offers a comprehensive account of language in a multilayered fashion —at phonological, syntactical, semantic and sociological and, ultimately, at the cosmological level—even while pointing out the inevitable disjunctions and achieved alignment between these levels. Such philosophical traditions with a long history put India at the forefront of advancing dialogical studies.

Philosophy of the Act and Self/Other Relations in a World of Differences

In order to get a full grasp of the Bakhtinian oeuvre, it is important to study his early works as they lay the philosophical foundation for his later works. For Bakhtin, abstract concepts do not have a stand-alone status; instead, they gain validity and veridicality only through lived-life and ground realities and answerable acts. Unlike Immanuel Kant, Bakhtin had very little interest in fixed categories and operational definitions. In the Kantian world of transcendental aesthetics, concepts gain validity once they pass through a priori categories and synthetic judgments. In such a highly abstract world, there are no traces of life experiences because local space and time are considered contaminants. Whereas, Bakhtin shunned *phantom* philosophies, be in aesthetics, ethics or epistemology. In his early work—*Toward a Philosophy of Act*—Bakhtin (1993) writes:

> Life can be consciously comprehended only as an ongoing event, and not as Being *qua* a given. A life that has fallen away from answerability cannot have a philosophy: it is, in its very principle, fortuitous and incapable of being rooted. (p. 56)

For Bakhtin, being rooted in ground realities and lived life is of paramount importance and he insists that even the philosophy of religion must be informed by living and participatory faith; otherwise, it can easily become a dogma (Bakhtin 2001). Tagore (1985) was acutely mindful of this danger and that is why in his critique of *Nationalism*, he forcefully argues that ideologies and revolutions when divorced from lived realities become vacuous and dangerous, as he says, "… personal man is eliminated to a phantom, everything becomes a revolution of policy carried out by the human parts of the machines, with no twinge of pity or moral responsibility" (p. 7). Tagore captures this dilemma in his famous literary work

Ghare Bhaire (*The Home and the World*, 1916)—showing sharp contrast between Sandip, the charismatic, seductive and nihilistic *swadeshi*[1] leader and Nikhil, who is ever sensitive to ground realities even while managing to push some silent revolutions. Tagore is persuasive in communicating that an abstract ideal can become an easy tool for hegemony.

Sri Aurobindo (1997) also cautions about ideals removed from ground realities evaluating life, because abstract "reason seeks to understand and interpret life by one kind of symbol only, the idea" (p.182) and when this idea that has emanated from a specific context is generalized, it results in forced subordination of many actually lived lives to an abstract idea. Thus, the main concern for Tagore, Bakhtin, or Aurobindo was the danger of subjective ideal turned into a universal objective truth.

Bakhtin's early philosophical works are primarily a challenge to Kantian transcendental philosophy. For Bakhtin, the knowing subject can never overcome his or her unique position in time and space and since we cannot transcend our solipsism, this epistemological reality calls for the necessity of the other. The interdependence between self and others emerge from this necessity. Bakhtin (1990) constructs human relations based on a triadic equation—*I-for-myself, I-for-others* and *Others-for-me*—and the disjunction between these ever-evolving equations creates the space to bargain, plead, reject, and retaliate. Bakhtin (1993) insists that the guiding principle in self/other relationship is "*non-alibi in Being*" (p. 40) because each and every voice must retain its uniqueness and individuality. Bakhtin problematizes many common traits that we observe in individuals: the desire to achieve significance in the lives of others, or striving to win fame and glory or being driven by the will to be a hero or even the strong need to quench the thirst to be loved, because such needs cannot be fulfilled by the efforts of the self and hence must be left to the prerogative of the other. Love is a gift of life and it cannot be demanded and similarly, the one cannot be a self-appointed savior of the other, because such needs and actions constitute invading the consciousness of the other. These ideas are far too familiar in the Indian ethos because the supreme secret of an ancient civilization has emphasized the value of *nishkama karma*—dispassionate action and *sthitha pragna*—steady equanimity and in Bakhtin's works we recognize the reverberations of ancient wisdom.

Politics of Caste: Negotiation, Resistance and Retaliation in the Novel

The conflicting points of view that inform the discursive regime of the Indian novel may be illustrated with reference to *Indulekha* (1889/1964), a Malayalam novel that gained fame for its 'literary' merits. At the heart of the novel is the conflict between the patriarch of an old joint family and his English-educated nephew. The novelist

---

[1]Swadeshi literally means 'self rule' and it refers to independence movement of India.

O. Chandu Menon, who portrayed the love between Indulekha and Madhavan as a radical reformist step that could revolutionize society, had opposed the colonial government's attempt to reform the marriage system in Kerala. Such ambivalences were characteristic of many reformers of the late nineteenth century. In *Indulekha,* the narrative embodies the voice of the upper-caste communities, the Nairs and the Brahmins. In fact, the novel stages a transfer of culture capital from the Brahmins to the Nairs who were the first to become educated in English join colonial administrative service. Its plot centers around a series of shifts in power formations: from matrilineal joint family to nuclear family; from feudalism to capitalism; from Brahmin-centered hierarchy to a Nair-centered hierarchy of upper castes; from Sanskrit to English; and from village to city. Sanskrit was considered the language of tradition and ancient wisdom, while English embodies the voice of the modern. In the novel, the literary discourse of Brahmins is represented in the Sanskritized Malayalam of the neo-classical period. However, the Anglicized syntax of the novel heavily leans towards everyday Malayalam as spoken by Nairs and the Brahmin becomes the other in the discursive structure of the novel. What *Indulekha* does is to create a new field of cultural capital for the elites, negating and neutralizing the dominance of the neo-classical tradition in literature. Once the legitimizing authority of his cultural dominance is questioned, Suri the Brahmin becomes a clownish figure. What O. Chandu Menon demonstrates is that his ritualistic status is no longer included in the scheme of modernity. He fumbles and misquotes a Sanskrit verse in the presence of English-knowing Indulekha. 'English' now becomes a value system signifying a series of elements such as rationality, scientific temper, individuality, discrimination and resistance to feudalist attitudes. *Indulekha* is characterized by the "deliberate multi-styled and hetero-voiced nature" of the novelistic genre. The author inserts Sanskrit *Slokas,* parodies, retold dialogues, letters and similar attributes of the novelistic genre that Bakhtin discusses (Bakhtin 1984b: 108). It also abounds in the use of double-voiced discourse, which makes it possible for the author to depict the speech of the character and also reveal the author's attitude towards him. As Bakhtin says in *The Dialogic Imagination*: "In such discourse, there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while, these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they—as it were—know about each other… Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized" (Bakhtin 1981: 324).

While writers like Bankimchandra and Chandu Menon were imagining the nation from an elitist perspective, there were authors from the lower caste who subverted such symbolic representations of hegemonic structures of power. *Saraswativijayam* (lit. meaning the 'triumph of Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge') was written in 1892 in Malayalam by Kunjambu Potheri, soon after the publication of *Indulekha* by Chandu O. Menon (1889/1964) to challenge the oppression of the lower castes. At the very beginning of the novel we see a young boy from the lower caste being brutally punished for singing songs when a Brahmin was passing by. His family is evicted from their small piece of land. The boy was abandoned for dead and the colonial government registers a case of murder against the Brahmin who now flees from the village. His Nair servant is arrested. Years later, the Brahmin is arrested from Banaras where he was living under an assumed

name and brought to trial. Here the story takes an unexpected turn. The lower-caste boy who was punished by him had gone to a missionary school and got educated and it is in his court that the trial now takes place. The Brahmin's family that was excommunicated also had joined Christianity like the lower-caste boy and his granddaughter who is called 'Saraswati' is now the wife of Yesudasan, the judge. The novel is highly critical of the caste system, which is evident in its repeated critique of the Hindu dharma. Each chapter in the novel has an epigraph from a sacred text of the Hindus. These passages bring out some seminal questions from these texts at the beginning of the chapter and then continue to narrate events illustrating the condition of the lower-caste Hindus in modern Indian society. This creates a dialogic relation in the very body of the text between the code of dharma and its practice by the upper-caste Hindus. The injustice and brutality of the caste system is not only revealed through the novel but the justification of the caste system put forward by the Hindu texts is also shown as untenable in a civilized society. In creating such an 'intertextual' narrative, the author points to the deep asymmetry where ethical questions cannot be answered within the purview of the prevailing moral codes. What makes this novel deeply dialogic is the double-voiced tone of the narrative, which in telling the lower caste oppression constantly invokes the larger emancipatory ideal of the lower castes, anchored in social justice, freedom and equality.

The World of Carnival: Liberating Laughter and Folk Sensibilities

The world of carnival with its boisterous laughter, coarse language, grotesque body images and excessive indulgence in food and liquor, according to Bakhtin (1984a), brings wholesomeness to our cultural life. In the carnival space and time we see the world not through the rational dictates of the mind, but through the body principle. Only in this inverted world does one manages to breakdown the oppressive hierarchies and pull the veil of false claims and peel layers of hypocrisies.

Carnival as a practice and as a philosophical and theoretical construct has had a very long history and an immediate presence in Indian culture. Fed with tales of Akbar and Birbal and Krishnadevaraya and Tenali Ramanna, the wise fool is all too familiar to generations of Indians. The phenomenal world, according to Hindu cosmology is one grand trick and laughing at the metaphysical flimflammery is a significant moment of awareness and liberation—liberation *in* the world and *not from* the world. People from all walks of life gather at the carnival space to shed their inhibitions, their sense of uniqueness and false sense of superiority, to find relief from the serious drone of cerebral activity. While seriousness grants power to revered entities, laughter as a corrective measure redistributes it. Carnival is a platform to mock at all revered entities. Laughing at lustful mendicants and bishops is not a wholesale rebuke of holy men, but a caution against wholesale valorization