

Word, World, and the Absolute: Raja Rao's Poetics in the Light of Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadīya*

Richa Pande

Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty), Department of English,
DSB Campus, Kumaun University, Nainital
pandericha292@gmail.com

Abstract

Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadīya* shapes much of Indian classical thought on speech and language through its concept of *sabdadvaita*, which posits that the word, the empirical universe, and ultimate existence are one. Here, language is more than just a tool for naming things, it builds what we call 'real'. From this stance emerges an inquiry into Raja Rao's views on creative expression drawn directly from his writings about literature. Rather than assuming a detached analysis, the discussion unfolds alongside his meditations and poses pertinent questions such as- How does poetry come to be? By what presence does a poet speak? What drives poetry at its core? Through aligning Raja Rao's ideas with Bhartrihari's metaphysics of Word as propounded in the *Vākyapadīya*, this study presents poetry not merely as art but as a spiritual practice or *sadhana*, anchored in *Sabdabrahman*. Instead of treating words as tools, it reveals how Rao draws from the concept of *sphoṭa* to shape his vision of poetic utterance. Beneath surface speech or *Vaikhari* lie deeper layers: *madhyama*, *paśyanti*, and *para*, each unfolding toward Silence. The study also incorporates an interpretation of Om through Upanishadic insight as sound merging with boundless reality. It argues that rather than standing apart, ancient Indian thought flows into modern form via Rao's work. His voice bridges old frameworks with present-day literature without force or fracture. This fusion has not been successfully achieved by many and warrants critical analysis.

Keywords: Bhartrihari's, *Vākyapadīya*, Poetics, Word, World, Sphota and Absolute

Introduction

The Relationship between Language and Reality: Indian and Western Views

Reality's shape shifts under words and how speech creates reality has been the central intellectual concern worldwide. Whether it is just a mirror or a maker, this debate has split schools of thought for centuries. Some hold that speech names the world; others claim it forms the world. Across continents and teachings, disputes arise on whether language reflects or creates. Metaphysics wrestles with meaning. Epistemology questions knowing through terms. Linguists probe structure while writers test limits. East meets West where ideas entangle around voice and existence.

Among early explorations into language in Western thought, Plato's *Cratylus* stands out - a conversation led by Socrates alongside Cratylus and Hermogenes. One idea takes shape through Hermogenes: names link to things not by essence but by choice, shaped over time within communities. Then comes Cratylus, offering a different view, his stance suggests speech mirrors reality by its very makeup, as if sounds match what they name at a deeper level. Where

one sees invention, the other detects alignment. This link makes sense because it follows from how things actually are (Livingston 8). Moving through the conversation, Socrates carefully examines each view - then introduces another idea: perhaps language does not just copy reality, yet forms part of it, tightly woven or maybe identical (Lehmann 578).

Though some began seeing language as shaping existence, much of Western thinking took another path entirely. Starting with Aristotle, then flowing through medieval logic and later intellectual trends, speech came to be seen less as creation, more as reflection - mirroring what already exists. Such ideas found a strong voice in modern times, especially via Ferdinand de Saussure's model, where words are signs made up of sound-image and concept. For him, naming things rests not on natural ties but agreed habits; meaning arises because signs differ from one another inside the system, not because they match reality directly. So it follows - language gets treated like a device used mainly for passing messages, not as the fabric through which being unfolds.

Reality forms around speech, according to Indian philosophy, rather than words merely describing what already exists. Though Western thought often treats language as symbolic, here it functions as a shaping force. From the start, Vedic texts present *Vak*, not just as human utterance, but as cosmic rhythm. What emerges through sound was not there before; form comes after speech. *Brahman*'s energy acts through verbal potency, making creation an expressive act. Far from being passive, speech becomes the living instrument of divine manifestation. This idea finds sharp clarity in the phrase '*Vak vai Brahma*', where word and ultimate essence are one. Instead of standing apart from truth, speaking discloses it from within. Built into the structure of thought, Bhartrihari's idea of *sabdadvaita* unfolds across the *Vakyapadiya*, standing out among views on language's place in reality. More than just words or symbols, *sabda* forms the base layer of what exists and in his view, it is equal to *Brahman* (Pillai 10). Seen one way, the diversity of things that exist around us arises only when the primal Word seems to split apart. Yet beneath the appearance of multiplicity, unity stays intact. Meaning does not float free from consciousness, both tie directly to existence itself - all parts of one unbroken whole.

Within this layered intellectual lineage lies the ground where Raja Rao's thoughts on language take shape. Not confined by East or West, his perspective draws from Indian metaphysics while engaging deeply with European ideas. Instead of treating words as mere signs, he sees them as carrying Being itself. Through writing, meaning emerges not just cognitively but existentially. Rooted in the ancient concept of Bhartrihari's *sabdadvaita*, his approach recasts linguistic expression as an act of inner transformation. Literature, for him, does not mirror reality - rather, it unfolds it. The spoken or written word becomes a vessel for spiritual awakening.

Bhartrihari and the Nature of Language

Bhartrihari, a thinker from India in the fifth century, emerges clearly among others who studied language, not just as a grammar expert but as someone deeply engaged with philosophy. What sets him apart? A rare blend of precision and depth in exploring how speech connects to existence. The *Vakyapadiya*, his central work, goes far beyond rules of structure or meaning -

it builds an entire worldview around language as the core fabric of what is real. Though details about his daily life remain scarce, influence does not depend on biography here. Instead, authority comes from three major sections of that text - the *kandas* - alongside explanatory notes like the *Vrtti*, widely linked to him by tradition (Pillai xiii). Together, they reveal one mind moving fluidly between syntax and being, shaping grammar into something more: a lens for understanding all things.

What stands out in Bhartrihari's thought is his view: the Word - *sabda* - is not separate from ultimate existence itself. This stance sets him apart from prior linguistic traditions quite clearly. Instead of treating speech as mere instrument, he sees it as foundational. Earlier works like Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* approach *sabda* differently - it triggers understanding when spoken, so functions as a means to grasp things. While such views recognize language matters for knowing and sharing meaning, they stop short of saying it is reality. Bhartrihari's position goes further than theirs ever did. Reality, in his view, unfolds through *sabda* rather than merely being described by it. Not separate from existence, language becomes its living movement - where meaning emerges only within speech's flow. What appears as world takes shape not behind words, but inside their rhythm. Speech here isn't a tool; it forms the texture of what is real. From silence to utterance, each expression draws being into presence.

Bhartrihari draws a line between two linked sides of *sabda*: *dhvani* and *sphota*. One aspect, *dhvani*, refers to the spoken sound - tangible, shaped by speech organs, caught by hearing. This form takes place step by step, shifts across moments, built from physical stuff. Yet *sphota* bursts into awareness whole - not stretched out like sounds in sequence, but seen entire in a flash when words are grasped. While *dhvani* moves through time, broken into parts, *sphota* jumps past those gaps, arriving complete. Meaning does not build slowly from joining small sounds; instead, it shows itself fully through *sphota*, standing apart from how it is voiced.

Word becomes the core of existence in Bhartrihari's thought, shaping his view of the absolute. From the start, the *Vakyapadiya's Brahmakanda* presents *Brahman* - without origin or end - as timeless, standing on its own, embodying *sabda* in essence. This reality unfolds not by actual change or modification, as *parinamavada* suggests, yet through mere appearance, following *vivartavada*, where a single utterance seems to multiply while staying whole (Iyer 135). What we see as variety, distinction, or motion belongs only to surface sight, never touching the deepest truth.

Inside this structure, time - called *kala* - acts first, shaping the whole unbroken *Sabdabrahman* into what we see: separate entities. Sequence, how one thing leads to another, all these flow from its rhythm, yet always under the rule of the timeless utterance. So, the universe does not stand apart from *sabda*; rather, it speaks itself out loud in structured ways. For Bhartrihari, consciousness and speech and reality do not split - they meet in one view without division, where Word begins everything and also fills every part. This wholeness moves through each spoken moment, never broken by appearance.

Raja Rao and the nature of language

What stands out in Raja Rao's work is how consistently he draws on Bhartrihari's idea of *sabdadvaita*, making speech more than just expression, it becomes foundational. Far from treating words as tools for mere messaging or decorative flourishes in prose, Rao sees them as shaping existence. Reality, in his view, emerges through linguistic structure rather than existing prior to it. Such thinking finds a strong voice in *The Sacred Wordsmith*, where writing slips beyond art into questions of Being. At play here is not technique, but the belief that meaning arises only within language.

From the start, sound shapes everything. Building on insights drawn from Vedic cosmology and early models of acoustics, Rao suggests *śabda* serves as the foundation beneath physical reality. Instead of emerging from objects, sound supports them. Under this perspective, matter depends on sonic patterns. Every natural component connects to an original frequency - what some call a seed tone. Forms appear when such tones mix, collide, or shift. In turn, what we touch reflects frozen resonance. The visible world then becomes sound settled into shape. Because of this, giving names gains deep power. What appears as naming turns out to shape what is named. Far from just tagging something that already exists, speaking it helps form its presence. These acts - uttering and being - are woven together at their root. Neither comes before the other when traced back to *śabda* (Rao 126).

Unlike mainstream Western thought, Rao sees language not as a mirror but as a maker of the world. Where others claim words simply label things already out there, he insists they shape what exists. Most contemporary linguists and philosophers hold that speech acts like a tool - detached, pointing at truths beyond itself. Yet Rao turns this logic on its head: meaning grows from within expression, not before it. Instead of standing apart, terms fuse with the real. For him, utterance is not secondary - it breathes life into being. Reality emerges through saying, not prior to it. What gets spoken does not follow existence; it ushers it in.

This idea fits well with how Bhartrihari saw language - where what speaks and what gets spoken cannot be pulled apart. Not separate things stuck together by convention, he argued, but twin faces of one whole built on *śabda* (Iyer 101). Rao takes up this view, holding word and meaning as fused, yet reshapes it using today's literary thought. Through that shift, older ideas about speech gain fresh life; now they speak to making literature, crafting poems, how writers meet the world.

The Four Levels of Vak and the Structure of Consciousness

What stands out in both Bhartrihari and Raja Rao is their shared engagement with the idea of *vak* unfolding through four stages - a structure where language moves from hidden depths into spoken clarity. Though the *Vakyapadiya* outlines just three: *vaikhari*, *madhyama*, and *pasyanti*, later thinkers in Kashmir Shaivism added a deeper layer, known as *para vak*. This highest tier, emerging before thought itself, found its way into Raja Rao's thinking. Instead of rejecting it, he wove the full quartet into his view of how words shape awareness. For him, expression in literature does not begin with sound, but with silence that stirs beneath. Language, then, becomes a trail leading inward, not merely outward.

Outside of everything else, *vaikhari* means speech that people actually say and hear - real-world talking shaped by time, grammar, and what the senses pick up. Though tied to how things are normally used in conversation, it still follows fixed patterns. One step inward, *madhyama* stands for inner dialogue - the kind of silent language made of ideas, aims, or mental shapes before they become sounds. Without needing noise at all, this layer lives as quiet shifts inside awareness.

Third comes *pasyanti* - a mode where knowing lacks division, words untouched by separate meanings. Here, language appears whole, seen at once like an inner sight, sound and sense bound inside one flash of understanding. Not quite thought, not fully awake mind, this stage holds the edge where speaking blurs into being. Above it rests *para vak*: speech so deep it seems total quiet, utter calm without motion. Far from talk as people know it, this form stands beyond pairs - source before voice, ground beneath thinking begins (Rao 168).

Waking life links to one level of speech, Raja Rao observes, much like how dreams tie into another. Flowing beneath both lies deep sleep, mirrored in a quieter form of utterance. Beyond these three rests *turiya*, silent yet complete - matched by a fourth mode of language that words cannot capture directly. The sacred symbol Om unfolds similarly, its sounds peeling apart consciousness layer by layer. Such parallels are not accidental; they bind sound, mind, and existence together. Meaning does not float free from reality, instead it grows out of structured inner states. Expression carries weight, shaped as much by unseen layers within as by the world outside. Language becomes a map, though never fixed, always echoing wider rhythms. Not culture alone shapes talk, but older patterns buried in awareness itself.

Surprisingly, silence takes precedence over spoken words in this framework, becoming the core basis of language according to Rao. Although utterance develops across layered stages, its root lies in an unspoken fullness prior to expression. Meaning does not stop at vocabulary; instead, it peaks in quietude, where discourse dissolves into raw awareness. With silence positioned as speech's starting point, Raja Rao suggests fiction and verse do more than convey ideas or please the ear - they open routes to deeper knowing and inner awakening.

Poetry as Practice: The Poet as Witness

Deep inside this view of language as something beyond mere words, Raja Rao reshapes what poetry means. Not decoration, nor clever phrasing meant only to delight - poetry becomes, for him, a path shaped by discipline, aimed at knowing the self. Because sound - the very word - is seen as divine, each true poem touches the holy ground of existence. Writing verse turns into something like prayer, where forming sentences feels less like invention and more like reverence. He puts it sharply: "Aham is kavya." To say "I am" then isn't just speech - it is poetry, standing bare before reality. This line holds firm in *The Meaning of India* (162).

Under this view, the poet shifts from being seen as someone crafting words skillfully to becoming a *ṛṣi* - someone perceiving what lies beneath ordinary sight. Instead of creating something new, their role centers on revealing insights hidden within deeper layers of knowing. Through poetry, movement happens - not sudden, yet steady - from spoken expression

(*vaikhari*) toward the unspoken fullness of (*para*). This form acts quietly, bridging stages of *vak* without force or speed. As reading unfolds, both listener and writer begin shifting inward, pulled by rhythm rather than thought. Awareness changes slowly, shaped by contact with language that points beyond itself.

Beauty leads beyond feeling, according to Rao, who ties artistic experience to India's traditional *rasa* theory. Though poems stir emotions like joy or grief, such feelings extend beyond personal reaction. They evolve into *rasa* - an effect deeper than mere enjoyment. This transformation turns sentiment into something spiritual, not just sensory delight. Whether evoking courage, longing, sadness, or kindness, each mood shifts toward the infinite. Such an unfolding points steadily at *Brahman*, as Rao notes (127). Art then does more than please - it guides perception upward. Aesthetic moments thus trace a quiet journey through being, where form meets meaning.

This idea about poetry lines up with what Bhartrihari proposed: working carefully on language can open a way to freedom. The *Vakyapadiya* does not see grammar study as mere mechanics; instead, it frames it as a method for cleansing speech - and so, the mind too. Rao supports this stance directly, pointing to Bhartrihari's phrase calling grammar "the road to salvation," along with its role in refining every kind of knowing (Rao 135). When rooted in strict attention to words, poetic expression shifts into an act that changes who you are - leading slowly toward inner transparency and deeper being.

So begins Raja Rao's view: poetry lives not as art alone, but as devotion woven into speech, mind, and ultimate reality. Not through effort, yet by presence - the poet becomes witness, poised, where voice fades into stillness, drawing words toward their origin in *sabdabrahman*. Out of this blend - language shaped by spirit - literature regains depth, seen now as inner exploration instead of custom or beauty measured by form. Only when meaning flows beyond expression does such writing endure.

Conclusion

Looking closely at Raja Rao's view of language through Bhartrihari's *Vakyapadiya* shows deep links between ancient Indian ideas about speech and today's Indian literature. Not simply borrowing old concepts, Rao reshapes *sabdadvaita* for current philosophical storytelling. Though rooted in tradition, his work breathes new life into these notions by placing them in contemporary settings. Because of this, silence becomes as meaningful as words across his writings. Where others might separate speaking from being, Rao treats them as intertwined realities. Language, for him, isn't just expression - it forms identity, shapes awareness. Poetry then emerges not as ornament but as a mode of knowing. Even when unspoken, meaning lingers beneath sentences like echoes. His characters often dwell where talk ends and thought begins. From such stillness, selfhood takes shape slowly. This ongoing attention suggests something larger: that sound, word, voice - are tied to existence itself. Rather than treating speech as a tool or symbol, it appears as an origin point. In effect, the world unfolds out of utterance according to his vision. So too does inner experience arise from verbal essence. While some see language as secondary, Rao insists on its primacy. Each phrase carries weight beyond

surface sense. Meaning lives before grammar fixes it. Silence matters most when words fail yet remain implied. Thus, cosmos and mind mirror one another through *sabda*. Far from abstract theory, this belief guides how stories unfold in his novels. Thought flows where speech cannot reach directly. Yet every pause holds potential articulation. Ultimately, form arises from formless vibration.

What if poetry were not art but a discipline? Raja Rao frames it as *sadhana*, casting the poet not as an artist but as a seeker - closer to *ṛṣi* than writer. This shift unsettles Western models where words only point, name, or serve. Instead of treating language as tool, he revives its ritual depth. Meaning does not sit apart from utterance; it emerges through devotion. The act of writing then pulls speaker and listener beyond expression, inching toward unspoken knowing. Not description, but passage: sound fading into stillness.

Even so, Raja Rao approaches *sabda brahman* through a wide-ranging philosophy open to many voices. Though rooted in Sanskritic thought, he refuses narrow claims about language or culture belonging only to one group. To him, the Absolute cannot be locked inside one tongue, sacred text, or regional practice. By choosing English on purpose, he shows no break from India's deeper thinking - rather, it reveals how the spoken essence goes beyond speech codes. In his work, English gains weight equal to what once seemed unique to Sanskrit.

From this angle, Raja Rao takes shape as a key thinker linking old Indian ideas with today's world. Not only does his writing preserve deep philosophical roots, it reshapes them through current storytelling methods. Language, in his view, becomes more than just expression - it acts as reality taking form. Because of this shift, standard Western models face quiet but firm challenge. Rather than treat texts as mere objects, he sees reading and writing as paths inward - toward being, awareness, truth. Thus, traditions once seen as distant now speak clearly across time and space. What results is not revival, but living continuity. Even so, the depth remains, untouched by simplification. His voice stays distinct amid broader conversations on words and worlds. In subtle ways, past wisdom gains presence through narrative craft.

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