

## BOOK REVIEW

Sebastian Alackapally, *Being and Meaning (Reality and Language in Bhartrhari and Heidegger)*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002, pp. xviii+297, Rs. 490, ISBN: 81-208-1803-2.

The phenomenon of the encounter of religions and philosophies of the West and the East has become a very conspicuous one with the increasing number of comparative studies in the recent times. Dr. Sebastian Alackapally's *Being and Meaning* is another welcome addition to this literature to make the West and the East meet. One of the ever-alive dreams of this endeavour is that their philosophical and religious formulations, since they converge so closely, are bound to meet at one point. It has become an open question as we consider the roots and aspirations behind these formulations of the philosophical and religious quests. The truth, however, is that ultimately, when these formulations are viewed as pure germinal intuitions, all philosophical and religious reflections, both in the West and the East, are inspired by the same vision of man's true and original nature. This seems to be the working hypothesis in the book under review.

The subtitle of the book uses more concrete terms to reach out the more abstract aspect of reality. Real (*sat*) has to have being and its experience articulated naturally in language leads the seeker to meanings and the total sum of meanings. For Bhartrhari (c.450-510), a philosopher of language from India and Martin Heidegger (1889- 1976), a German existentialist philosopher, reflection on being and language is a common theme, though evolved from different cultural contexts, distant from each other in space and time. Dr. Sebastian develops various aspects of these reflections in four chapters with a general introduction and a general conclusion with two chapters each set apart for the study of the contributions of Bhartrhari and Heidegger.

The general introduction makes it clear that thinking on being is thinking on reality in language. The *Vakyapadiya*, the masterpiece of Bhartrhari, "through the doctrines of *Sabdabrahman*, *sphota* etc...largely presents the outlines of the metaphysics of linguistic philosophy"(p.9), a philosophy based on the non-dual (*advaitic*) vision of reality. Heidegger in his masterpiece *Being and Time* suggests that thinking on Being is the only way to come closer to Being or Reality (p.17). Bhartrhari also agrees with

this view that the only way to supreme reality has to be through the spoken or written word (*sabda*) and its meaning in language and so an analysis of language is not an optional activity in philosophy, but the core of it both in the East and the West.

Heidegger took up the classical theme of mind representing material object or being inherited from the Greek philosophy, especially from Aristotle. To bypass this traditional "picture, Heidegger sets out to describe *Dasein's* "average everydayness" (p.17). For him the analytic of *Dasein* is an ontological hermeneutics to the extent that it provides an account of how understanding in general is possible. Since there is no pre-given human essence, humans in their authenticity are understood as self-interpreting beings, who take a stand on their life by acting in the world. All the dominant characteristics of *Dasein* gain their fuller significance in the interpretation of its temporality. Heidegger tried to escape the subjectivism of this interpretation by taking a stance characterized by meditative thinking, thankfulness for the 'gift' of being, and openness to the silent 'call' of language. Here the problem of the nature of language is intimately connected with the problem of the meaning of Being. Heidegger moves away from his earlier position that "language is found to be constitutive of the existence of the individual human beings" and enters into the meditation of Being as such and retrieves the key word 'logos' which not only merely signifies 'language' or reason, but also indicates the primal gathering of beings in Being. In other words 'word' and 'speech' as distinguished from everyday language, is directly involved in the disclosure of the Being of beings.

Bhartrhari, on the other hand, is right on his target and presented a theory of language, which is just the opposite of the thought-development we find in Heidegger. For him the very essence of speech or meaning (*sabdattatva*) itself is the ultimate reality (Being or Brahman) and it is also in a lower level, the *sphota* (meaning or content) of language. Unlike that of Heidegger, the following opening verse of *Vakyapadiya* itself shows that Bhartrhari started with a perfected vision of reality and language. "That beginningless and endless one, the imperishable Brahman of which the essential nature is the Word, which manifests itself into objects and from which is the creation of universe."

In Bhartrhari, as in Heidegger, time is an essential factor affecting being. He does not begin from the being of the everydayness of the humans. The very eternal, timeless itself appears in Bhartrhari's thought as changing owing to the working of time factor. The *sabdatattva*, in fact, is immutable and it transcends space, time and causality. Bhartrhari therefore, proposes *vagyoga* to raise the level of consciousness of words to the highest stage of the word-principle to reach the complete absence of all sorts of differentiation and sequence.

The essence of Bhartrhari's view of language is that how several phonemes forming a word, or many words making up a sentence could have a single meaning for the listener. Grounding on his basic theory that reality is an integral whole, which can be cognized as such, he postulated a meaning-bearing symbol called *sphota*, from which the meaning bursts forth. Here the real is the essence of words, that is *sphota*, which is one. In the identification of Brahman with *sphota* the language or grammar dissolves into philosophy. This concept is certainly unique and without parallel in the western thought. As a concluding critical remark the author writes: "Although he visualized Grammar as a means of attaining *moksha* he does not describe the stages of this spiritual ascent. Yet his main purpose in *Vakyapadiya* seems to be rolling up the curtain on the stage of human communication so that the communicants may have a *darsan* of the hidden mystery of all meanings behind all words of human dialogue and performance on the stage of social communication" (p.102).

The book, though limited in its scope, is a veritable contribution to the field of comparative study of eastern and western philosophies. The central concerns of the authors under discussion are lucidly presented. With an extensive bibliography, detailed index and an appendix on *sabda*, the book has become a dependable tool for further studies in the field of epistemology and metaphysics.

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