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Bakhtinian Explorations of Indian Culture

Pluralism, Dogma and Dialogue Through History

Springer

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

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> 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

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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 corporeality. 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 communications 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 conversations 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 seriousness 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 polyphonic 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 *manipravalam* 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

of holy men. Falsehood is a close companion of power and that is why the attendants of the Lord—the *ganas*, as the cosmic clowns and jesters of the pantheon are always in a fact-finding mission to deliver hard truths. The *Pramatha Gana*—the Principal Attendant—Ganesh (the Hindu elephant god) with his incongruous body and gluttonous appetite, according to the *Natya Sastra*[2] presides over the comic sentiment. Commenting on Bharata's *Natya Sastra,* the philosopher Abhinavagupta (c. 950–1016 CE) explains the comic sentiment as *kuhaka,* meaning the tickling of *kaksa*—armpits, or literally "hidden place" (Siegel 1987). Abhinavagupta saw laughter as a tactile equivalent of intellectual and aesthetic processes in which the hidden and untouched zones of meaning making spheres are brought to life. Open societies and open minds must never fear parody and laughter because it pulls the individual away from dogmatism. Bakhtin (1984a) explains that Rabelais built his theory of laughter based on the "Hippocratic novel" in which Democritus's laughter was based on a "certain spiritual premise of the awakened man who has attained virility" (p. 67). Laughter is mind's equivalent of bodily virility enabling it to act and produce new forms of knowledge.

In the cultural history of India, the folk expressions have periodically nourished the mainstream traditions of theater and poetry. The popular domain of the folk resisted the hegemonic structures of power embodied in the great traditions of the *bhadralok*, or the elites. Folk laughter was essentially subversive and was not bound by the protocols of stylized movements in theater. While commenting on *bhavai,* a type of folk-theatre in Gujarat, Erin B. Mee comments:

> Bhavai, an open-air Gujarati community theatre honouring Goddess Amba, begins with a Ganesh-puja (literally sacred offerings to God Ganesha) followed by a dance by Goddess Kali, and the appearance of a comic character who functions as society's conscience by pointing out social problems, and then proceeds with a series of plays depicting social, political or religious themes. (Mee 2008: 3)

Tamasha, a folk form of performance in Maharashtra, known for its music, pageantry, mime, and dance, incorporates a section known as *batavani* that contains "jokes that satirized a current event or person in power" (ibid.). It is significant that laughter is an essential component of many such folk forms throughout India. Those who enacted major roles in these forms came from lower castes. Hence it can be seen that the subversive laughter in folk expressions provided a critique of the caste system and its feudal authority.

In 18th-century Kerala, a new genre called *thullal* was devised by an eminent poet, Kunchan Nambiar (1705–1770) to enact mythical stories through song, music, and dance. He devised this new genre by adapting devotional dances like *patayani*, which was popular among the 'avarna' castes. He also used ritual dances of possession common among the lower castes. Nambiar took his themes from the great tradition, but carnivalized their articulation through *thullal.* His larger objective in using the carnivalized forms was to critique a social system plagued by divisions of caste, feudal arrogance, and Brahmin dominance. Rich Freeman has argued that

[2]Natya Sastra is a treatise on dance and drama given by Bharata Muni.

Nambiar's works are "the culmination of hybridizing movements between performance and text that are indicative of the caste and class tensions historically built into Kerala's literary practices" (Freeman 2003: 489). In retelling the myths of the great tradition, Nambiar uses conversational rhythms and colloquial diction to lampoon the high culture and its interpretation of the world. Bakhtin, while describing what he means by the"carnival sense of the world", says that works belonging to the carnivalized genres are characterized by "mighty life-creating and transforming power, and indescribable vitality" (1984a: 107). This is precisely what we experience in Nambiar's poetry, as the division between the serious and the comic breaks down as the carnivalized word simultaneously addresses both the upper and the lower castes. It has to be remembered that *thullal* was performed outside the temple premises while *Kathakali*[3] and *Koothu* were confined to the sacred precincts until the beginning of this century. While narrating the well-known stories from the Hindu mythology, Nambiar digresses from the main story to comment on contemporary Kerala society and its exploitative caste hierarchy. Since Nambiar's verses were accompanied by music and dance, they could directly address the common people drawn from the non-Brahmin castes. Brahmins and Nairs are singled out for satire in most of his *thullal* narratives. Elaborate feasts, processions, preparations for battles, verbal arguments, community rituals, humiliations suffered by the mighty and powerful etc., recur in his descriptions, providing him ample opportunity to comment on the greed, gluttony, and timidity of the upper castes. The hierarchical order of the divine world of the eternal and the human world of history collapse into each other, in the carnival laughter of his poetic narratives. He exploits the inherent contradictions between Malayalam and Sanskrit to critique the contradictions within a society, which is hierarchically organized. In a well-known passage, he compares Sanskrit and Malayalam with reference to their reception among the learned elites and the common masses:

> Men of culture would like to listen to Sanskrit verse;
> but the vulgar cannot find any delight in it.
> Before an audience of the common people
> who are out to see some folk-show
> only the lovely, shapely language of Kerala is proper.
> If we present the sound and fury
> of pedantic Sanskrit verse,
> the common man won't make head or tail
> of such odd and obscure concoctions
> and he will just get up and leave the place. (Paniker 1999: 336)

Kunchan Nambiar's poetry communicates a self-critical perspective which later deepened the search for democratic and reformist movements in the 19th century.

[3]Kathakali is a four hundred year old classical theatre form from Kerala in which male actors with facial masks and elaborate costumes, perform mythological narratives drawn from Hindu epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

In sum, carnival is faithful to interior truth and internal freedom. The inverted world of carnival disrupts the hierarchically organized world that sees itself as the norm, to suggest other possibilities and hence it catalyzes individual and collective consciousness.

Essays in the Volume: A Brief Introduction

Long before the arrival of Bakhtin's ideas in India, philosophies from India, particularly the discourses in philology, reached the Bakhtin Circle. One of the most prominent members of the Bakhtin Circle, Michael Tubianskii, was an Indo-Tibetan scholar who brought Hindu/Buddhist perspectives into the Circle. Craig Brandist, an intellectual historian who heads the Bakhtin Center at the University of Sheffield, traces the circuitous pathways (in Chap. 2) through which Indian philosophies reached the European soil and the complicated relationship that European intelligentsia and, in particular, the Soviet scholars, developed with the esoteric texts from India.

Carnival in all its dimensions—colorful festivities, boisterous laughter and mockery of authority—has been an integral part of cultural life in India. There is a deep regard for the wisdom of folly embodied in the *vidusak*—the ritual clown or the wise fool in performance traditions, whose acts are blatantly anti-philosophical and anti-establishment, but whose intent is to restore the philosophical injunctions of the parent-religion. Sunthar Visuvalingam's chapter (Chap. 3) is an exposition of 'transgressive sacrality' as depicted in the Bhairava tradition[4]. The chapter introduces the reader to Abhinavagupta's works on the aesthetics of laughter and the Tantric tradition and draws crucial distinctions from Bakhtin's discussion of the carnival. Sunthar points out that while Bakhtin saw carnival as having the liberating potential in response to the rigid Stalin era, the carnival in India is seen as part of an ever-present dialectic between order and chaos and interdiction and violation. Since the carnivalesque has been so intricately woven into the Hindu mainstream through the semiotics of transgression, Sunthar argues that the resources of tradition could be brought into the global arsenal to disrupt various forms of existing and emerging tyrannies.

As a French Indologist and philosophical anthropologist, Elizabeth Chalier-Visuvalingam (Chap. 4) engages in a deep comparative analysis between the original works of Rabelais (which she reads in French, meaning that little is lost in translation) and Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais and Abhinavagupta on transgressive laughter, which has at its core the principle of 'freedom' (*svatantra*). The chapter takes the reader into the Rabelaisian world in medieval France with its bold defiance against all forms of authority. According to the author, Bakhtin's reading

[4]The word in Sanskrit for "horrifying" is "Bhairava". Because the revealed Truth is horrifying Lord Shiva got the name "Bhairava" and this is part of Tantric tradition.

of Rabelais is limited because it is meant to resist the Stalinist oppression; whereas, the liberating world of Kashmir Saivism sanctions freedom from compulsions that come from within and the social taboos that are imposed from outside. The author argues that the school of Kashmir Saivism is built on two seemingly contradictory movements of *sankoca*—the philosophy of ascent, contraction and abstraction—and *vikasa*—the philosophy of descent, expansion, and the concrete, and that the interplay between these two exercises lead to freedom and self-realization. Elizabeth argues that the comprehensive philosophy of Abhinavagupta, unlike Rabelais and Bakhtin (whose views in comparison are somewhat limited), offers a holistic and cogent philosophy of laughter that has the liberating potential at the psychological, sociological, political, and spiritual levels.

Based on interviews conducted by the author with the renowned Bharatanatyam dancer Malavika Sarukkai and on other published materials about the performer (the recent film *The Unseen Sequence* made about her dance), Lakshmi Bandlamudi (Chap. 5) reviews and applies key concepts of aesthetics in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism like architectonics (how disparate elements are grouped together and consummated to achieve an aesthetic whole) and answerability (the perennial dialogue between the creator and the created) and shows how these concepts are manifested in the dance of Malavika Sarukkai. The chapter weaves in ideas taken from Abhinavagupta's commentary on *Natya Sastra*, to show the dialogic sophistication that existed in the ancient treatise on dramaturgy. The author argues that in the choreography of Malavika Sarukkai, *kaala* (time) stretches simultaneously into the ancient past—passing through the living present—to move towards an open future and these multiple temporalities serve as the very basis of Malavika's aesthetic vision.

Travel narrative is one of the oldest genres of writing. The wandering in the physical space for a curious soul is an occasion to discover various modes of thinking and understand different cultural practices to appreciate the incredible plenitude of differences in the world. Furthermore, the physical journey allows one to question and disrupt stubbornly held ideas in order to reorganize the inner being and discover the hidden nooks and crannies of the inner landscape. Jasbir Jain (Chap. 6) traces the spiritual wandering of Guru Nanak, who sought to learn, debate, question, and eventually evolve through his dialogic encounters with different others. The author discusses and demonstrates how features of dialogicality find expression in Guru Nanak's travels.

The novel was the much-preferred genre for Bakhtin and he strongly felt that only the novelistic genre, unlike poetry and drama, was fully capable of embodying dialogicality. In his essay, E.V. Ramakrishnan (Chap. 7) proves otherwise: he engages in a Bakhtinian reading of the rich poetic tradition in India, ranging from Bhakti to Sufi poetry to demonstrate the dialogic sophistication inherent in them. Unlike Vedic texts which were primarily monologic, the Bhakti poetry emerged from lived experience and sought a lively relationship with the divine. Ramakrishnan also shows how Bhakti and Sufi traditions informed and enriched each other and both were less concerned with codified religion and rituals and concentrated more on feeling the power of divinity in the lyrical beauty of poetry.

When dialogicality appears in full force, be it in Bhakti, Sufi, or Buddhist *therigatha* traditions, we find that exchanges between faiths become so effortless and respectful and Ramakrishnan's essay demonstrates their coexistence in the cultural literary traditions of India.

Elephants are an integral and important part of ritual traditions in Kerala and, therefore, the narrative assumes various characterological profiles in the legends and myths of Kerala. Bini B.S. (Chap. 8) examines elephant stories in *Aithihyamala* —a compilation of stories and accounts of events from regional oral traditions and Malayalam adaptations of stories from Sanskrit and Tamil traditions—to explore the dialogic potentialities in the narrative and performance traditions where the divine, the human, and the animal intermingle, communicate and fulfill ethical obligations towards each other. Through careful textual analysis, Bini shows how the linguistic tropes move in multiple directions that enable various characters to negotiate with alterity and, in the process, the author argues that we detect answerability between art and life and between Gods, humans and animals.

In a multilingual and multicultural country like India, translation is not just a necessity, but also an integral part of Indian consciousness. Pooja Mehta (Chap. 9) observes that the very activity of translation is as old as the civilization itself and the dialogicality inherent in the activity is articulated through the back and forth movements between *vad, anuvad*, and *samvad*. Pooja builds the argument on the observation made by G.N. Devy that Indian consciousness is a 'translating consciousness'—thereby affirming the dialogic transition and transformation between languages and between private thought and public speech.

In her provocative essay, Jyoti Rane (Chap. 10) observes that the socio-political conditions and historical time that gave birth to novel in Western Europe were very different from the conditions in which the novel emerged in India. Bakhtin argues that the novelistic genre, unlike the epic genre is unmistakably heteroglot and evolves amidst the contradictory forces of culture, thereby absorbing the multiple voices of the society. Rane argues that the novel as Bakhtin saw it could not have emerged in the unyielding hierarchy that characterized Indian society. If the novel is emblematic of human consciousness, as Bakhtin claims, Rane asserts that such a view cannot be extended to Indian consciousness, as it is steeped in mythology, which, according to her, makes no room for answerability. Furthermore, she argues that the novel as a genre in Indian languages emerged only after the English language established itself as the preferred language among the elite class in India and thus the colonial hegemony further strengthened the existing hierarchy. Rane's views on Indian mythology and the history of novel in India are highly contestable and hence this essay invites counter-arguments.

What is the relationship between Man and Machine and how do they mutually transform each other? The relationship between human intellect and tool use and production was at the heart of Karl Marx's dialectical materialism and a central concern for Russian theorist of the mind—Lev Vygotsky. In his chapter, Atanu Bhattacharya (Chap. 11) explores the potential dialogic interrelationships between digital technologies and pedagogy. The author asks if digital technologies in pedagogy bring about a paradigm shift within the humanities curriculum and, more

importantly, mediate a conceptual shift in the socio-cultural politics of pedagogy. The digital platform is open to all and thus has immense potential to create dialogic exchange on many levels and Atanu's contribution explores the way in which this potentiality could be actualized in teaching humanities and social sciences.

The relationship between lived life and narrativized tale is never a mechanical representation: if anything, the experiences and narrative enter into a dialogic relationship, transforming static memory into dynamic remembering. Paromita Chakrabarti (Chap. 12) gives a Bakhtinian reading of Meena Alexander's memoir —*Fault Lines* to show how the profile of the autobiographer emerges and re-emerges in a changing world. Through her careful reading, the author discusses the complex and contradictory relationship between memory and discursive representation and how the ambiguous contours of language leave the text open-ended for other possible interpretations.

A comparative analysis between Naipaul's early work *An Area of Darkness & India* and his later work *India: A Million Mutinies Now* is a classic study in the transformation and evolution of consciousness. It is a movement from stubborn monologism, which marks Naipaul's early impressions of India, to the fluid dialogism that characterizes his later work. Jasmine Anand (Chap. 13) gives a refreshing Bakhtinian reading of Naipaul's later work to show how the author freely decenters himself to hear the voices of variety of people and how they give meaning to mutinies. In his early work, Naipaul the author and India the nation and the subject remain static, frozen, and single-voiced, whereas in his later work, the author invites various others to co-author the idea of India and, hence, becomes multi-voiced and dynamic. Jasmine's analysis captures that evolution.

The final chapter in this volume affirms the open-ended and unfinalized nature of Indian civilization that has always been active in exporting and importing ideas through active engagement with various civilizations. Therefore, when Foara Adhikari (Chap. 14), a polyglot (proficient in various Indian and non-Indian languages) reads the works of a Francophone West African writer—Ahmadou Kourouma—the sensitivity and sensibility of an emerging scholar who grew up in a hybrid culture becomes visible. She rightly poses the question—dead text or living consciousness—and answers that texts, individuals, and civilizations are not static entities to be analyzed, but living beings to be dialogued with, so that we may learn, understand and eventually transform.

The essays assembled in this volume demonstrate the versatility of Bakhtin's analytical categories in understanding the incredible diversity present in Indian culture. Furthermore, from the iconoclastic wisdom of carnival to aesthetic vision of performance traditions to varieties in social speech types that characterize India, not only enter into a dialogue with Bakhtin's ideas, but add more depth and dimension to the very idea of dialogue and it is this promise, we hope that would be valuable and insightful to scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

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