

The Author of the Three Centuries*

(Studies on Bhartṛhari, 6)

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There seems to be a tendency among recent scholars to consider as possible, or even probable, the identity of Bhartṛhari, supposedly the author of the Three Centuries (*śatakatraya*, *subhāṣitatrīṣaṭī*), with the grammarian-philosopher of the same name. This article is meant to draw attention to the fact that the arguments adduced to support this position are far weaker than is generally realized.

Harold G. Coward (1976:95 f.) has the following to say about the question:

"Tradition seems to have consistently maintained that Bhartṛhari, the poet, was the same Bhartṛhari, who composed the *Vākyapadīya* and a commentary on the *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali. This ancient tradition identifying Bhartṛhari the poet with Bhartṛhari the grammarian was called into question by scholars writing around the turn of the century (e.g., M. R. Kale), and more recently by D. D. Kosambi. Kosambi's argument, however, although meticulously researched, depends for its strength on the Chinese pilgrim I-tsing's suggestion that the Bhartṛhari of the *Vākyapadīya* was a Buddhist. Since Bhartṛhari the poet shows no trace of Buddhism, Kosambi felt that there must be two different Bhartṛharis. However, ... the contents

of [the *Vākyapadīya*] are thoroughly Brāhmanical in nature. This, plus the new dating of Bhartṛhari as prior to the fifth century A.D. (on the basis of Bhartṛhari quotations in the works of Dinnāga), has led recent scholarship to return much nearer the identity thesis of the classical tradition. Not only does the author of this book [=H. G. Coward] adopt the traditional viewpoint on this question, but it is suggested that Bhartṛhari's assumption of Patañjali's classical Yoga in the *Vākyapadīya* ... also occurs in his poetry and is further evidence for the identity thesis."

Coward may be exceptional in his decision to fully accept what he considers to be an ancient tradition. Several other scholars are more circumspect, yet they, too, are inclined to follow this tradition to at least some extent, by considering it more or less probable that the two Bhartṛharis were identical. Christian Lindtner, for example, refers to Coward's remarks, then adds that he has no hesitation at all in accepting the authenticity of the collection of poems ascribed to Bhartṛhari, i.e. the *śatakatraya* (1993:203). Jan E. M. Houben (1992:5-6), similarly, observes: "To consider Bhartṛhari, the author of the [*Vākyapadīya*], identical with Bhartṛhari the poet requires little more than the willingness to imagine him as a versatile genius, since there are no strong arguments to support the view that they were different." Houben refers in this context to D. H. H. Ingalls (1965:41), according to whom there is no reason why Bhartṛhari "should not have written poems as well as grammar and metaphysics". Ashok Aklujkar (1969:555 n. 28), similarly, had observed: "The possibility that Bhartṛhari, the grammarian, and Bhartṛhari, the poet could be the same person is not so slight as is generally assumed." Madhav M. Deshpande (1992: 269), finally, states: "It cannot yet be conclusively decided whether the poet Bhartṛhari was the same as the grammarian-philosopher".

Everyone who has occupied himself with the question of the identity of the author of the Three Centuries, agrees that the work of D. D. Kosambi (1948) is, and remains, the basis of any serious discussion. Yet the positions taken by many of the scholars mentioned above create the impression that they have not read Kosambi's study with the care which it deserves.

Kosambi, like many others before and after him, made a mistake which is to be held responsible for a large amount of confusion: he accepted the testimony of I-ching. Coward is completely right in stating that Bhartṛhari, contrary to I-ching's testimony, was not a Buddhist. Nor was I-ching right in placing Bhartṛhari in the 7th century. Yet this 'fact' is still used by S. Lienhard (1984:89) to show that the two Bhartṛharis cannot be one

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and the same person. For our present discussion it is important to exorcise the ghost of I-ching, and to put his untrustworthy evidence concerning the date and religion of Bhartṛhari aside.

Fortunately much remains to be said about the author of the Three Centuries without invoking I-ching. Consider first Kosambi's following observations (1948:62):

"There is no way of knowing what form the original Bhartṛhari collection took, but it could never have been a *śatakatraya*, nor could the author himself have promulgated any edition comparable to what we possess today. The immense variation in order as well as content proves the latter point, for no one could possibly take such liberties with a generally accepted text. Moreover, the uniform tendency to add extra *ślokas* as Bhartṛhari's shows that the work was, in all probability, started as a collection of Bhartṛhari *ślokas* by much later admirers. For neglect during the poet's own lifetime, the stanzas themselves offer ample testimony."

It is not necessary to recall here the enormous differences that exist between the many manuscripts of the Three Centuries. Let it be enough to mention that these manuscripts contain together some 850 stanzas, only 200 of which occur in all of them. Besides the different stanzas found in different manuscripts, the same stanzas often occur in a different order. The form of the individual stanzas, too, varies greatly in the different manuscripts. Kosambi's remarks seem therefore fully justified.

This, however, would mean that what we have is a collection of stanzas, collected at a time when their composer had been dead for a long time.¹ This in its turn raises the fundamental question whether even the original collection (if there was one) can rightly be ascribed to one single poet. We know that this collection attracted innumerable accretions after its kernel had been established. Can we seriously believe that, before a first collection had been made, several hundred stanzas of one single poet had been preserved together? Is it not far more likely that already the original collection contained stanzas from various poets?

This question gains in significance by the fact that several verses of the kernel of 200 identified by Kosambi occur in other early texts. Stanza

1. One cannot even exclude the possibility that there were various collections of stanzas, which borrowed from each other, so that they all came to share a number of stanzas in common. In this case the attribution to one single poet becomes even less plausible.

63 occurs in Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalā* (5.13; Scharpé, 1954:65), and others are found in the oldest layer of the *Pañcatantra* as restored by Edgerton.² Kosambi was aware of this fact, and concluded (p. 78): "If, therefore, one man wrote these verses, he must belong to the opening centuries of the Christian era", that is to say, before Kālidāsa and before the oldest layer of the *Pañcatantra*. This conclusion, which has been accepted by others, virtually ensures that the author of the Three Centuries was not the grammarian-philosopher Bhartṛhari, for the latter lived, in all probability, after Kālidāsa. This can be seen as follows.

The *Cāndra-Vṛtti* cites Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* (Oberlies, 1989:13). This commentary was composed, it appears (Bronkhorst, forthcoming), more or less at the same time as the *Cāndra-Sūtra*, on which it comments. The author of the *Cāndra-Sūtra*, Candra, is referred to in the concluding verses of the *Vākyapadīya-Vṛtti*. These verses further state that Bhartṛhari is later than Candra. Bhartṛhari, according to this evidence, lived after Candra, who in his turn lived after Kālidāsa.

We are, in view of the above, confronted with the following dilemma: either the original kernel of the Three Centuries had one single author, who cannot then be Bhartṛhari, the grammarian-philosopher; or the Three Centuries was an anthology from the beginning.

Warder (1983:122-23), too, addresses the question whether the original collection was itself simply an anthology. He rejects this possibility on the basis of the following reflections: "In any case one general remark can be made about the collection: it is 'philosophical' in character, at least in the popular sense of reflections about the problems of life. In this it is totally unlike the work of Amaruka..., which is purely descriptive and particular. To the extent that a homogeneous outlook can be discerned in the *Trisatī*, bitter and ironical, we may become convinced that the original collection was entirely the creation of an individual, not merely an anthology of verses by earlier poets which happened to reflect a certain outlook."³ This argument has, of course, only any force if Warder's criterion

2. See Sternbach, 1974:50 n. 255. Serious criticism of Edgerton's reconstruction has been voiced by R. Geib (1969:8 f.). Sternbach (1974:50) believes that the verses from the *Abhijñānaśakuntalā* and the *Pañcatantra* were added to the Three Centuries but maintains, strangely, that yet "a small part of [this anthology] was composed by Bhartṛhari himself".

3. Surprisingly, Warder (1983:122), following the testimony of I-ching, assigns the author of the Three Centuries to the 7th century. The question of the presence of a stanza from the *Śakuntalā* in the Three Centuries is not addressed.

allows us clearly to distinguish between the original kernel and the verses added later. If it doesn't (and no one has as yet claimed the opposite), we'll have to admit that a collection, the multiple authorship of which is beyond doubt, can yet present a more or less homogeneous outlook. And if this is true of the present versions of the *Trisati*, the original collection, too, may have had several authors, yet be homogeneous in its outlook. The homogeneous nature of the present collections has been pointed out by Kosambi, who (p. 81) draws attention to "the remarkable fact that, in spite of the extraordinary variation from version to version, the total impression produced by any of them is about the same". In other words: "A certain type of stanza came to be attracted to the collection."

Sternbach (1974: 50-51) presents the following argument: "Probably many verses of the *Śṛṅgāra-śataka* were written by Bhartṛhari, for they show a definite unity of structure - they first deal with the pleasure of love and the beauty of women, then with the might of love and its joys, particularly in the changing seasons of the year, then there are verses in which the joys of love are compared to the bliss of the peace of mind attained through asceticism and wisdom, and lastly the poet recognizes more and more clearly that a woman is after all nothing but a sweet poison, a serpent by the wayside and that love is but a decoy, luring men to love the world, whereas happiness can only be found in renunciation of the world in God - Śiva or Brahman." This argument is particularly puzzling in that it is well known that the different versions of the Three Centuries present the verses in widely differing orders, and that the versions collectively known as the Southern and Western Recension have imposed a more logical arrangement, where the Northern Recension has undergone no such arrangement. Sternbach is aware of this fact, and indeed speaks of "the immense variations in the order" (p. 51). One is therefore entitled to ask to which version he is referring when he speaks of the unity of structure of the *Śṛṅgāra-śataka*. His book contains no answer to this question. It will therefore be wise to discard the whole argument as ill-founded.

We turn to the next question: Did the collectors of the original kernel of the Three Centuries really ascribe the stanzas to someone called Bhartṛhari? The evidence we have is meagre and late. K. A. S. Iyer observes (1969:11): "A Bhartṛhari had already attained fame as a great poet (*mahākavi*) in the 10th century A. D., because Somadeva calls him so in his *Yaśastilakacampū*. The Jain writer Merutuṅga of the 14th century A. D. says in his *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* that the poet Bhartṛhari wrote the

Vairāgyaśataka and other poems."⁴ The 14th century, be it noted, is more than eight centuries after the date we believe Bhartṛhari lived.

How old is the tradition according to which the poet Bhartṛhari is identical with the grammarian-philosopher of that name? Coward speaks of an 'ancient tradition' which 'consistently maintained' this identity. Iyer's following remark (1969:11) sings a different tune: "There is a tradition that the Bhartṛhari who wrote the three *śatakas* is the same as the author of the *Vākyapadīya*. It is recorded in Rāmabhadra Dīkṣita's *Paṭaṅjalīcaritam* which is, however, not an ancient work. It is not easy to say how old this tradition is." Rāmabhadra Dīkṣita lived around 1700.⁵ It is in this context of interest to note that Puṇyārāja's commentary on VP 2.85 (ed. Iyer p. 46) cites a verse that belongs to the kernel of the Three Centuries (no. 11), without giving the slightest hint that in his opinion the verse was composed by the author of the *Vākyapadīya*.

At this point I must cite another passage from Kosambi's Introduction (p. 57): "...the Kaśmirian Abhinavagupta (1000 A. D.) knows only of the grammarian Bhartṛhari, and seems never to have heard of the poet. Nevertheless, the *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana (Kaśmirian of the 9th century) contains the stanza *smītam kiñcid* [which belongs to the oldest kernel of the Three Centuries; J. B.] without attribution to any author. In the 11th century, Kṣemendra does cite a poet Bhartṛhari by name but he gives as others' śloka which are as genuine Bhartṛhari as any...at least by the canon adopted in this edition." To these remarks by Kosambi we may add that Abhinavagupta, too, cites a verse which belongs to the oldest kernel of the Three Centuries (*Nīti* 11) without attributing it to any author.⁶ Given that Abhinavagupta often refers by name to the author of the *Vākyapadīya*, we must conclude, not just that there is no evidence to believe that the Three Centuries were attributed to the grammarian Bhartṛhari, but also that there is important evidence to the contrary.

To sum up: It is open to serious doubt whether even the original kernel of the Three Centuries had a single author; it is not known whether the original collectors of this kernel believed that the stanzas had a single author; if they did, we do not know whether they thought he was called Bhartṛhari; and the evidence for a tradition according to which the author

4. Cf. Sternbach, 1974: 49-50.

5. *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, V: *The Philosophy of the Grammarians* (ed. Harold G. Coward and K. Kunjunni Raja, Delhi 1990), p. 321.

6. Ingalls et al., 1990: 146.

of the Three Centuries was the grammarian-philosopher Bhartṛhari is very recent indeed. This last assumption, moreover, is in conflict with the presence of some stanzas from before the time of Bhartṛhari in the kernel of the Three Centuries.

It is not necessary to discuss in detail Coward's further "evidence for the identity thesis", viz., the presumed fact that "Bhartṛhari's assumption of Patañjali's classical Yoga in the *Vākyapadīya*... also occurs in his poetry". The similarities between the contents of the *Vākyapadīya* and of the *Yoga Bhāṣya* are remote, and the same is true of those between the *Śatakatraya* and the *Yoga Bhāṣya*. No other conclusions can be drawn from them but that all three texts are Indian and Brahmanical, and therefore necessarily share a number of features.

Let us now consider another argument that has been presented in favour of the identity of the two Bhartṛharis. K. A. S. Iyer (1969:13) formulates it as follows:⁷

"One of the stanzas of the three *śatakas* is the following

*dikkālādyanavacchinnāna[n]tacinmātramūrtiaye/
svānubhūtyekmānāya namaḥ śāntīāya tejase//*⁸

This usually comes at the very beginning of the *Nītiśataka* in the different editions. Kosambi's rigorous critical eye has relegated it to Group II (No.256). In other words, it is a doubtful stanza. Now we have the authority of Somānanda and Utpalācārya that it is a genuine composition of Bhartṛhari, not taken from any of the *śatakas*, but from his *Śabdadhātusamikṣā*. ...Somānanda criticizes Bhartṛhari for straying away from his function of being a grammarian and indulging in the quest for true knowledge not only in his *Vākyapadīya* but also in his (*Śabdadhātu*) *samikṣā* and ultimately propounding, not true knowledge, but a mere semblance of it. While explaining this portion of the *Śivadr̥ṣṭi*, Utpalā says that the learned Bhartṛhari, by speaking about *Paśyanṭī* only, has propounded a mere semblance of true knowledge and quotes two verses from the *Śabdadhātusamikṣā* of which the above verse is one. Somānanda

7. Note that Iyer himself characterizes this argument as "insufficient, not, in any case, enough to upset the conclusion of Kosambi that we really do not know who the author of the *śatakas* was."

8. Kāle (1971:trans.1) translates: "Salutation to that peaceful Majesty whose form is pure knowledge, infinite and unconditioned by space, time, etc., and the principal means of knowing which is self-perception."

criticizes this verse of Bhartṛhari word by word. If this stanza is a genuine one of the three *śatakas* attributed to Bhartṛhari, the fact that it is also a genuine part of another work of Bhartṛhari, the *Śabdadhātusamikṣā*, would point to identity of authorship of the three *śatakas* and the *Śabdadhātusamikṣā* and ultimately of the *Vākyapadīya* also."

In other words, the stanza cited by Iyer might have originally occurred both in the work of Bhartṛhari the poet and in that of Bhartṛhari the grammarian-philosopher. In reality, there are good reasons to believe it occurred in neither.

As far as the Three Centuries are concerned, Kosambi (1948:62-63) had no doubts "that the stanza *dikkālādy-* [256] is...spurious, a later addition as seen from numerous omissions. In the first place, this is the very quintessence of Vedantic doctrine. Secondly, we can see it grow in Vedantic documents. The *Yogavāsisṭha* has *dikkālādyanavacchinnāḥ sarvārambhaprakāśakṛt/ cinmātramūrtir amalā deva ity ucyate munē/* (VI-a, 30.12). This is followed by the 6000 *śloka* *Laghuyogavāsisṭha*, written by Gauḍa Abhinanda, a 9th century Kāśmīrian, which gives [6.1] *dikkālādyanavacchinnam adṛṣṭabhayakoṭikam/cinmātram akṣayam śāntam ekaṁ brahmāsmi netarati/* The exact form of our *śloka* occurs as the opening of the *Laghuyogavāsisṭhasāra*, which gives a still further condensed presentation of the Vedic doctrine in 223 stanzas. In Bhartṛhari proper, the stanza is decidedly out of place, as the more ardent Śaiva stanzas that might have supported it all drop out of Group I." Even more problematic is that the content of the stanza under consideration is in conflict with the philosophy presented in the *Vākyapadīya*, as has been pointed out elsewhere.⁹ In other words, it can hardly be accepted as having been composed by the grammarian-philosopher Bhartṛhari.

Of course, the statements by Somānanda and Utpalā might be considered evidence that they already identified Bhartṛhari the poet and Bhartṛhari the grammarian-philosopher. But not even this conclusion is certain. All we can conclude with confidence is that they believed that Bhartṛhari the grammarian-philosopher composed another work, called *Śabdadhātusamikṣā*.¹⁰ As we have seen, they may have been mistaken in this.

9. *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 46 (1), 1992, p. 58, with note 12.

10. Professor Raffaele Torella informs me that there are good reasons to believe that this work was rather called *Śaddhātusamikṣā*.

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