

**Dialectics of Desire and Detachment: Women in the Philosophy
of Bharthari**

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Abstract: *This paper delves into the philosophical tenets of Bharthari, an eminent figure in the Indian ascetic tradition, with a specific focus on his nuanced exploration of desire and detachment as encapsulated in his Shataka Trayam—comprising the Niti, Shringara, and Vairagya Shatakas. This study meticulously examines Bharthari's historical contextualization, navigating the challenges posed by his mythical portrayal, and delves into his recurrent contemplations on the role of women within his philosophical framework. The analysis unfolds Bharthari's intricate critique of the transient and constricting nature of sensual pleasures, emphasizing his discerning evaluation of the romanticized portrayal of the human form. The study meticulously unravels Bharthari's proposed remedies for negotiating desires, particularly through the prism of meditation and the dispelling of delusions. An integral facet of this exploration is Bharthari's pragmatic counsel, advocating for an unequivocal choice between worldly indulgence and ascetic contemplation while discouraging ambivalence. This endeavour offers a rigorous examination of Bharthari's dialectical worldview, casting a scholarly spotlight on his profound philosophical considerations regarding desire, detachment, and the intricate role of women in shaping the human experiential tapestry.*

Keywords: *Bharthari, Indian Asceticism, Desire and Detachment, Shataka Trayam, Women etc.*

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Introduction

In the annals of Indian philosophical thought, Bharthari, an ancient sage, emerges as a distinctive voice, articulating profound insights into the dichotomy between worldly indulgence and ascetic renunciation. Amidst a philosophical landscape often characterized by a unilateral focus on either sensual pleasures or renunciation, Bharthari's unique perspective encompasses both realms with a rare candidness. Centuries back, surmising two available options before an individual, i.e., either enjoying sensual pleasures or joining renunciation, Bharthari stated, "What is the use of empty talk? There are always two recourses for men around this world: women...or the wilderness."¹ While this idea in itself was not his innovation as asceticism and engagement in pleasures were in existence long before him. But his perspective towards these two domains, and the frankness enshrined in his expression is a combination that occurs rarely in early Indian philosophy. It is so because the early Indian philosophers and authors seldom focussed on these two aspects at the same time. For example, texts like the *Kamasutra* were focused on sensual pleasures while the Upanishads had renunciation in mind. In context of women, one of the most visible features in the Indian ascetic traditions is that they were to be avoided at all costs. For instance, in Buddhist philosophy, women are represented as the enticers who lead innocent men from the path of virtue². However, Bharthari, instead of perceiving the world in absolute terms, finds contradictions everywhere. He observes, "At one place, the play of lutes, at another, howls and weeping; somewhere, a learned gathering, elsewhere, a drunken brawl; here a woman beautiful, there a body fully leprous; I do not know if this our world is nectar-like or poisonous"³. Notably, Bharthari's approach diverges from the prevailing narratives that often marginalized women in ascetic traditions. This departure from conventional approaches is particularly evident in his seminal work, the *Shataka Trayam*, comprising the *Niti Shataka*, *Shringara Shataka*, and *Vairagya Shataka*. In the sage's keen observations, contradictions abound, revealing a dynamic interplay between appreciation and critique of women's roles in the worldly and ascetic spheres. For example, at times they are blamed for causing desires and deviating people from the path of meditation. Elsewhere, he appreciates them greatly. While doing so, despite his inclinations towards renunciation, he appears to have been mesmerised by the charms of worldly life, fascination offered by beauty, and enjoyments arising out of sensual pleasures. As in the realm of Bharthari's philosophical musings, the position and influence of

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women hold a significant place, this research endeavours to unravel their intricate portrayal within the *Shataka Trayam*, dissecting the conflicting perspectives he presents. By delving into the complexities of Bharthari's thoughts, this study seeks to illuminate the multifaceted nature of women's representation in his philosophy and its implications for both his contemporaneous society and the broader philosophical landscape. However, before proceeding with these objectives, we will familiarise ourselves with Bharthari.

Bharthari is a prominent name in the Indian ascetic tradition and is fairly well recognised. His exalted stature made him a subject of various legends leading to difficulties in ascertaining his historical persona. According to one such legend, he was a king who turned ascetic because of his wife's infidelity. As recorded in a couplet, "I have always longed for her, but she does reject me, indeed she wants another man who chases someone else, a maid who is to me attracted: a curse on her and on that man, on the other girl, on Love, on me."⁴. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact historical events, we are sure of one thing: he was a man of wide experience with a keen sense of observation. These experiences and observations ranged from polity, justice, happiness, wealth, and penury to love and renunciation. Even while the themes covered by him are immensely diverse, his views about women appear frequently. Whether he is discussing their role in sensual pleasures or in causing desire and obstructing the path of meditation, he is mindful of them. Hence, he does not perceive them as feeble by declaring, "Those poets have contrary minds who always call a woman 'weak'; for women, with their flashing glances, vanquish even Indra and the rest: how can they be feeble thought?"⁵. Elsewhere, "He deceives himself and others, that pandit, who does revile young women so falsely. For paradise, the fruit of penance is also full of nymphs"⁶. Such comparisons may appear to objectify women, but in his philosophy they are neither passive objects nor they can be avoided as they are very much an active part of this world⁷ and their influence a reality. Hence, Bharthari attempts to ascertain women's influence and records his views in the *Shataka Trayam*. An analysis of his observations is presented in the subsequent sections.

As Bharthari closely observed the world of pleasures, he recognises the fact that union with women leads to pleasure⁸. He considers it is a blissful state⁹ and he believes men in company of the women of noble birth as lucky¹⁰. For him, lovemaking is homage to the Kamadeva¹¹ and declares that men engaged in such activities are fortunate¹². The following couplet aptly surmises his views, "At winter's onset, lucky people dine on yogurt, milk and ghee, dress in robes with madder dyed, their bodies smeared with sandal paste, and tired with

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lovmaking varied, lie in comfort in their homes... They indeed are blessed”¹³. While Bharthari recognises that enjoyment arises out of sensual engagements, yet he is quick to point out that these are not without inherent limitations. Elaborating on it, he says that pleasure in itself is not a goal; rather, it is just a method for treating an ailment. In his words, “One drinks water, sweet and cold, when the mouth is parched with thirst; eats rice garnished with meat and spices when suffering from hunger; and one’s bride firmly embraces when Kama’s fire flames within all these, which people think are pleasures, are only the means and methods for treating an ailment”¹⁴. Underscoring his viewpoint, he underscores numerous flaws associated with one’s engagement in sexual pleasures. First, he delves into the nature of human bodies. For him, when looked closely, the bodies are nothing but an amalgamation of skin, bones, and flesh. In his words, “Truly, never was the moon their face, or blue lilies their two eyes, nor of gold their limbs created. But, even knowing this reality, their thoughts being by poets duped, foolish folk relish the bodies of women, though they consist merely of skin, bones and flesh”¹⁵. Elsewhere he uses a more direct tone, one, perhaps unsuited to contemporary sensibilities and says, “Her twin breasts, just mounds of flesh, are compared to cups of gold; the face likened to the moon, even though containing phlegm; the loins, damp with trickles of urine, are said to rival elephant trunks: O how these despicable forms are built up by clever poets”¹⁶. For him, despite being of a base nature, romantic representations and visualisation of human bodies generate temptation. This romanticisation hides the underlying reality and sets men on wrong pursuits. Such pursuits carry expectations for the reciprocity of affection from one’s beloved. But, these expectations generally do not materialise. Stressing this point, he says, “With one they will be bantering, at one looking coquettishly, in their hearts dwelling on yet another, who indeed can a woman’s love be?”¹⁷. Beyond the reality of the human body and the reciprocity of emotions, Bharthari underscores the transient nature of the world. As highlighted by him, “Birth carries the smell of death, sparkling youth of old age, contentment of a wish for wealth, a happy calm of amorous advances by flirtatious women, merits breed public jealousy, forest floors breed snakes, rulers are with villains joined, and opulence with transience: what indeed is not possessed or stricken by something else?”¹⁸. When the nature of things changes in this manner, objects lose their appeal. Thus, if we lose sight of this fact, then after some time, we are left with tasteless objects¹⁹. Because of it, he terms passion as “a fit apoplectic that attacks the human limbs”²⁰. The pleasure emerging out of this passion is momentarily and it is not capable of yielding any credible result as bodily infutations “do not give refuge from hell...”²¹.

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Because of these limitations related to sensual pleasures, enjoyments, and passions, he recommends avoiding these and instead seeking “union with the bride of wisdom, and with the maid, compassion, amity”²². According to him, if seen beyond the pleasures, one can find the Brahman in the world itself. In his words, “When the darkness that is passion did cloud me with ignorance, the world entire then appeared as pervaded by that woman; my eyes have now been favoured by the salve of keener discrimination, and a more perceptive vision sees this whole universe as Brahman”²³. But this realisation needed shunning passions and avoiding the factors that induce it. As this is a difficult task to achieve, Bharthari carefully guides the pursuer of this path.

According to Bharthari, progress on the spiritual path is hampered by the presence of two inherently interrelated elements: firstly, fascination towards sensual pleasures and their impact on the human mind and, secondly, the presence of women²⁴ who cause inclination towards pleasures. Explaining the first element, Bharthari says, “Sensual pleasure may be worthless or lead to troubles at the end, and thus deserves to be condemned as the seat of every fault; but it has a certain power, most strong and indescribable, which does throb within the hearts of even those with realized minds”²⁵. Explaining further, he stresses that the most important difficulty before an individual is passions aroused by *kama* (desire)²⁶ because of women. Explaining the influence of women, he says that “the other end would not be far away if in between were no obstructions by maids with intoxicating eyes”²⁷. Terming them a detriment in achieving the spiritual goals, he observes, “Of uncertainties, this labyrinth, the home of impropriety, a city of audacious acts, of sins and faults a repository; this casket filled with all illusions, the field of hundredfold deceits, a barrier to the gates of heaven, and an opening to hell’s domain: by whom indeed was it created, this device, ‘woman’ called, a nectar which is venomous, a noose for all the world”²⁸. Thus, Bharthari sees women as a major threat to those pursuing the path of renunciation as they are associated with sensual desires. Once the desires are aroused, it is very easy to wander off from the path. In the words of Bharthari, “Man stays on the righteous path, with modesty and courtesy, and in control of all his senses, only until his heart is struck by the glances of amorous women...”²⁹. According to him, the ‘twinkling glances’ of maids extinguish the ‘lucid lamp of discrimination’ of the learned³⁰. Such is the impact that “Maddened with passion intense, whatever women commence, in hindering that even the deity Brahma displays great timidity”³¹. Under these circumstances, if an individual was successful in seeing “damsels with sparkling eyes and the arrogance of

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youth,” yet staying unperturbed, he was blessed³². As apparent, it was a very difficult stage to achieve. To stress his point, he takes up the mythical examples of prominent ascetics like Visvamitra and Parasara. Highlighting the impact of desire for women on a world renouncer, he states, “Sages like Visvamitra, Parasara, and others who did subsist on air and water, eating leaves— they too underwent delusion at the sight of lovely women with faces sweet as lotus blossoms. Then what of men who do partake of fine rice, yogurt, milk and ghee? If they could control their senses the hills would swim upon the sea!”³³. Thus, even the masters of the art of meditation face the risk being tempted by sensual pleasures. That is why, he finds that control over the desires and maintaining this control as a remarkable achievement. An individual who achieves this is nothing but a rare achiever³⁴. It is so because numerous people are well versed in scripture, in conduct, honesty and straightforwardness, yet “rare are those who, in this world, for a blessed state are qualified”³⁵. It is so because attraction towards women finally deviates people from the path of meditation and this attraction turns ‘the keys which do unlock the gateway to the city of hell’³⁶. Having highlighted these major challenges, Bharthari offers the solutions.

If an individual was to attain a state of no desires, he was to recognise two main elements: seeing through the delusions and performing meditation. For him, when misunderstanding about the pleasures is removed from the senses, youth and beauty do not appeal³⁷. With this, when meditation is added, an individual achieves a blissful stage. As highlighted by him, “O Kama, why take the trouble of twanging your bow? O koel, why this cooing soft that you do in vain? O pretty girl, enough of these sidelong glances, sweet and smart. My mind has kissed the feet of the god crested by the moon, and remains immersed within the nectar of that meditation”³⁸. The meditation needs constant practice of yoga with which an individual reaches a stage where there remains no need for the “prattle of some pleasing girls with moonlike faces”³⁹. But despite outlaying this theoretical layout, he is not blind to the difficulties on the path of renunciation which are highlighted as follows, “Renouncing attachments are only words in lectures in the mouths of learned pandits. For who is able of forsake the ruby girdles tinkling on the hips of pretty-eyed girls?”⁴⁰. Overall, path of asceticism is hard to join and even more difficult to sustain. But such is the nature of Bharthari’s philosophy that he does not hold anything back while suggesting anything. He highlights the pros as well as the cons and leaves the matter of choice to the individual. But the

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matter of choosing between the two worlds underlines another impressive feature of his worldview.

Bharthari is someone who finds joy in renunciation and medication. He sees no benefit in reliance on worldly enjoyments as he is motivated towards a higher spiritual purpose. As reflected in his argument, “Can one rely on waves or bubbles, on river torrents, snakes or flames, or lightning flashes, or on women? O mind, purge out every delusion, and dwell on the heavenly river’s banks, seek love for the god with the lunar crest”⁴¹. Despite it, he is a realist who knows that neither renunciation appeals to everyone nor sensual pleasures can be shunned easily. Hence he does not recommend any of these paths and leaves the decision completely on his reader. However, he is strictly against indecision and strongly endorses that an individual selects any of the two paths. He recommends arriving at a decision and then enjoying the chosen path to the fullest. For him, one must spend his time either “with the mind immersed in the elixir of knowledge” or in company of women⁴². In more direct terms, “There can be, the poet says, one god: Keshava or Shiva; one friend: a king or an ascetic; one abode: a town or a forest; and one bride: a beauty or a cave”⁴³. Further, “Make your dwelling by the Ganga, whose waters wash away all sins, or between garlanded breasts of a damsel who ensnares the mind”⁴⁴. For him, it is either the wildness of pleasure or the wilderness⁴⁵; nothing in between. An inability to arrive at a decision is nothing but a waste which he hates. Highlighting the dilemmas and the extent to which people waste their precious life, Bharthari says, “In lovers, Hara is singular: of the loved one, half his body formed; that is more than yogis, only freed from contact with womenfolk. As for the rest, who have been maddened by the serpents poisonous of Kama’s unavoidable darts— they stay caught in dilemmas, in which they neither enjoy pleasures nor are able to give them up”⁴⁶. Living in a manner by which an individual neither acquires knowledge nor the company of girls is nothing but a parasitical way of living life and wasting time⁴⁷. This idea gets a more vocal expression in the following words, “On the great god Ishvara’s feet we did not meditate properly to cut through worldly bonds; did not even acquire virtues able to open heaven’s doors; nor did we embrace the breasts and thighs of women, even in dreams; we were only just the axe slashing through our mother’s youth”⁴⁸. Thus, a choice is necessary and his final verdict appears as follows, “Before you singers, by your side eloquent poets from the south, and behind you the tinkling anklets of women who wave the whisks; if this is your wish, be a sybarite, relish delights mundane; if not, then O mind, swiftly enter into deep meditation”⁴⁹.

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Conclusion

The examination of Bharthari's philosophical tenets, as encapsulated in the *Shataka Trayam*, illuminates a nuanced and contemplative stance on the dialectics of romanticism and realisation. Bharthari eschews the conventional binary opposition between hedonistic pursuits and renunciatory asceticism. Rather than adopting a reductionist perspective, Bharthari's philosophical discourse embraces the inherent contradictions embedded in the human experience, thereby presenting a departure from prevalent dichotomies characterising early Indian philosophical discourses. While he concedes to the rapture inherent in the union with women, he concurrently underscores the transient and illusory facets of such worldly pleasures. His critical analysis extends to the romanticised idealisation of the human corporeal form, thereby revealing a perspicacious deconstruction of the deceptive allurements that possess the potential to divert individuals from higher spiritual pursuits. Furthermore, Bharthari identifies women as formidable impediments on the path of renunciation due to their association with sensual proclivities. However, Bharthari refrains from proffering prescriptive panaceas. Instead, he advocates for a resolute selection between the realms of worldly indulgences and the trajectory of ascetic renunciation. Eschewing ambivalence, Bharthari exhorts individuals to ardently embrace their chosen trajectory, be it the pursuit of sagacity or the indulgence in terrestrial pleasures. Thus Bharthari's philosophical oeuvre encapsulated in the *Shataka Trayam* epitomizes the intricate tapestry of human existence, acknowledging the coalescence of seemingly incongruent elements. His contemplative engagement with the dialectics of romanticism and realization, particularly in the context of the feminine agency, distinguishes his philosophical corpus within the milieu of early Indian ruminations.

Notes & References

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3 Haksar: *Vairagya Shataka*, 83.

4 Haksar: Prologue, 6.

5 Haksar: *Shringara Shataka*, 13.

6 *Ibid.*, 92.

7 *Ibid.*, 73.

8 *Ibid.*, 33.

9 *Ibid.*, 55.

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- 10 Ibid., 24.
- 11 Ibid., 26.
- 12 Ibid., 25.
- 13 Ibid., 57.
- 14 *Vairagya Shataka*, 19.
- 15 *Shringara Shataka*, 67.
- 16 *Vairagya Shataka*, 16.
- 17 *Shringara Shataka*, 66.
- 18 *Vairagya Shataka*, 32.
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- 24 Ibid, 31.
- 25 Ibid, 38.
- 26 Ibid, 96.
- 27 Ibid, 32.
- 28 Ibid, 65.
- 29 Ibid, 94.
- 30 Ibid., 87.
- 31 Ibid., 95.
- 32 Ibid., 81.
- 33 Ibid., 99.
- 34 Ibid., 93.
- 35 Ibid., 97.
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- 37 Ibid., 82-83.
- 38 Ibid., 84.
- 39 Ibid., 89.
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- 41 *Vairagya Shataka*, 64.
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- 43 Ibid, 100.
- 44 Ibid, 35.
- 45 Ibid, 36.
- 46 *Vairagya Shataka*, 18.
- 47 Ibid., 45.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid, 65.