

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory

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Lecture- 25

Rasa Theory and Abhinavagupta

Hello everyone,

In the previous class, we saw the theory of Bhatta Nayaka. In this class, we are going to see the theory of rasa propounded by Abhinavagupta. In this lecture, we primarily depend upon two sources to understand the theory of rasa conceptualized by Abhinava, namely Abhinavabharati and Abhinava's Locana or commentary on Anandavardhana's Dhvanyaloka. It is significant to note that Abhinava is the first scholar to produce an intellectual history of aesthetics from Dandin to his time. He is also the first to argue, as Pollock says, in a philosophical mode that aesthetic rapture is an apprehension in which only pleasure appears. Since, we have already seen the biography of Abhinava in the earlier classes, I do not intend to repeat it. Let us directly get into Abhinava's theory of rasa.

Abhinavagupta introduces his theory by proclaiming that rasa is the ultimate aim of a literary work and what brings the rasa into being is the bhava. The bhavas are called so because they are capable of bringing into being or 'bhavayanti' the aesthetic emotions.

According to Abhinavagupta, when a qualified person listens to a statement like this, "They held a sacrificial session throughout the night" or "He offered up the oblation into the fire," the person will have a desire to perform the similar sacrifice and then he will eventually do it. Here, the expression 'qualified person' means a person who is allowed by the scripture to perform that particular sacrifice. There are three stages to this process of accomplishing the sacrifice upon listening to the statement above mentioned. In the first stage, the person who listens to this particular statement will understand the basic meaning of the sentence. In the next stage, he will expunge the particularities associated with the statement, such as the time when the particular sacrifice was conducted, the place where it was held, the person who conducted it, etc. In the third stage, he will have the desire to do the same sacrifice. And finally, in the fourth stage, he will perform this sacrifice.

According to Abhinava, the same process is at work in the case of aesthetic enjoyment as well. To substantiate his point, Abhinava cites a passage from Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntala* where a fawn is running away from an arrow shot by King Dushyanta. The verse goes like this: "A fawn, seeing the arrow of the king chasing her, ran away in fear, with its neck bent back beautifully." When a qualified person, that is a *sahrdaya* who has the capacity to appreciate a literary work, listens to this poetic passage, he will go through four stages. In the very first stage, he will comprehend the literary meaning of the passage. Then in the next stage, the reader will visualize the event without the specificities associated with the event, such as 'this is an event which happened in the past,' 'the person who is shooting the arrow is Dushyanta,' etc. Abhinava opines that the whole assemblage of theatrical components such as the actor, the actor's costume, the stage props, etc. make possible this process of visualization. This will result in the generation of a 'pure' emotion, that is an emotion without any particularities. Finally, in the fourth stage, the *sahrdaya* will enjoy this pure emotion. In the case of the passage we saw earlier, the *sahrdaya* will be experiencing the pure emotion of 'fear.'

While the spectator is enjoying this pure emotion of fear in this context, his mind will be devoid of thoughts pertaining to any particularities, such as 'I am afraid' or 'my friend is afraid,' 'my enemy is afraid or' 'someone I am not acquainted with is afraid', etc. This process whereby the particularities of the emotion are expunged is called *sadharanikarana*. It should be noted that this pure emotion is beyond the limits of all these particularities. In this state of pure fear, the viewer's self is neither completely displaced from nor prominently involved in the emotion. The same holds true for all the emotions. Abhinava calls this process of relishing the aesthetic emotion, *camatkara* or the aesthetic rapture.

If this theory of Abhinava sounds familiar to us, it is primarily because we have already seen this theory when we discussed Bhatta Nayaka's theory of *rasa*. In other words, Abhinava has borrowed considerably from the theoretical corpus of Bhatta Nayaka in his own formulation of *rasa* theory. Pollock's observation in this regard merits attention here. Pollock says, "If this sounds familiar, it is because many of the same ideas, and much of the same terminology, are found in the earlier theory of Bhatta Nayaka and his disciples, Dhanamjaya and Dhanika, respectively the author of and commentator on *The Ten Dramatic Forms* [*Dasarupaka*]. Bhatta Nayaka based his entire reformulation of aesthetics on a hermeneutical model. . . All the key terms that Bhatta Nayaka either made his own or perhaps even coined. . . were taken over by Abhinava as building blocks of his own theory. He [Abhinava] even appropriates his

opponent's [Bhatta Nayaka's] three-part hermeneutic model. However much Abhinava may criticize Bhatta Nayaka in *The Eye [Locana]* as well as in *The New Dramatic Art [Abhinavabharati]*; however much he may protest . . . that Bhatta Nayaka is relating "simply what the sage [Bharata] himself has said, and nothing new at all," Abhinava's own "purified" theory of aesthetics is largely that of Bhatta Nayaka".

Now, let us come back to the ideas we were discussing. We were talking about Abhinava's theory of pure emotions, devoid of particularities. Abhinava also reminds us that this process of the commonization or *sadharanikarana* of the particularities associated with an emotion is not limited to a single spectator. According to him, it is indeed a communal feeling. The several individuals who are watching a performance lose their respective egos or "I"s to form a collective, unique "I," which is distinct from their individual selves. This is somewhat akin to the spiritual experience that arises when a group of devotees take part in a ritual, guided by a common goal and belief. However, the aesthetic experience is different, in the sense, that here, the individual self is not completely lost; all the emotions and facts of everyday life are present in a transformed manner in the enjoyment of art.

Abhinavagupta also mentions seven impediments or *vighnas* to the process of *camatkara* or the aesthetic rapture, in which the readers or spectators enjoy the pure emotions devoid of any particularities. These seven impediments or hindrances or *vighnas* mentioned by Abhinavagupta include 'the lack of plausibility,' 'preoccupation with time-space particularities,' 'fixation on one's own states of mind,' 'deficiency in the means of apprehension,' 'absence of perspicuity,' 'nonessentiality,' and 'doughtfulness.' Now, let us take a look at all these seven implements in detail.

The first impediment we saw was the lack of plausibility. If the spectators feel that the event that is being depicted on the stage is not plausible in real life, then spectators will not pay attention to what is being depicted on the stage. This will adversely affect the process of relishing the aesthetic emotion or *rasa*. Abhinava notes, "A person who finds what is being narrated to be implausible cannot fix his consciousness on it, let alone become absorbed in it".

When the drama deals with events that happen in daily life, this impediment will not arise. But sometimes, the playwright will have to present characters and events that the spectators are less likely to chance upon or be familiar with. At that time, what should the playwright do, to

overcome the feeling that the event is less likely to happen? Abhinava has an answer to this question. He says that to overcome this feeling of implausibility, that arises in the minds of the spectators upon seeing the extraordinary events, less likely to happen in real life, the playwright should give the characters names that are well-known to the spectators, such as Rama, etc. To remove this impediment, Abhinava suggests one more strategy. Abhinava says that when the playwrights decide to present stories, which contain extraordinary events, unfamiliar to the readers, they should borrow stories from such well-known sources like *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Since the stories from these sources are well ingrained in the minds of the spectators, they will not doubt the plausibility of these events.

After this, Abhinava proceeds to explain the second impediment which is 'preoccupation with time-space particularities.' According to Abhinava, the emotions portrayed on the stage can be broadly divided into two, namely pleasurable experience and painful experience. If the emotion portrayed is pleasurable, there may arise in the minds of the spectators the fear that this pleasurable experience may end. He may also have the desire to retain that pleasurable feeling. It is also possible, Abhinava says, for the spectator to have the desire to attain that experience and declare his desire for the same. Similarly, if the experience is painful, there may arise in his mind the desire to get out of that feeling or to conceal it. These feelings, according to Abhinava, will impede the process of the aesthetic relish.

By the same token, if one witnesses the emotions, be it painful or pleasurable, experienced by someone else, the same situations may arise. The spectators will have similar feelings—such as pleasure, pain, confusion, mere indifference, etc. This will also adversely affect the aesthetic experience. Abhinava notes that these feelings that impede the relishing of the *rasa* can be overcome with the help of the theatrical assemblages like the costumes of the characters, their dialogue, etc. This will provide the spectators with a pure emotion which does not involve any particularities involving the self of the spectator or the identity of the actor or the character.

Abhinava says that as per the dramatic conventions of Sanskrit drama, in the prologue to the drama, the actors doing the role of various characters, should appear in front of the director in their own person, and chat with him. The actors don the role of various characters only after this. Since the actors have concealed their actual persona with the help of the costumes, etc. the spectator does not feel that this emotion is experienced by the actor. Since, the spectators know very well that the character they are seeing in front of their eyes is an assumed figure,

their awareness does not come to rest on the character's assumed form. Abhinava notes, "All such preparations, accordingly, have been required by the sage for their usefulness in promoting the relishing of rasa, by way of achieving the commonization of the aesthetic elements". Thus, with the help of this device, the feelings that pleasure or pain pertains specifically to this particular person, in this particular place, for this particular reason will get eliminated.

The third vighna or the impediment is 'fixation on one's own states of mind.' Abhinava notes that a person who is immersed in his own happiness or pain will not be in a position to enjoy the aesthetic emotion. To take the spectators out of their feelings such as pleasure, pain, indifference, etc., the playwrights should employ colorations. Here the word 'coloration' refers to the theatrical elements such as poetry, singing, instrumental music, etc. Abhinava says, "To quote: "Drama is something to be both seen and heard." Thereby, the sensibilities of even an insensitive man, by virtue of his acquiring mental clarity, can be rendered completely receptive, so that he becomes a sensitive viewer".

Abhinavagupta combines the fourth and the fifth impediments together. The fourth impediment is 'the deficiency in the means of apprehension' and the fifth one is "the absence of perspicuity". The first one is the result and the second one is the cause. Abhinava says that in the absence of the means of apprehension, one will not be in a position to understand the emotion and enjoy it. Abhinava opines that although the knowledge about an event, gained through inference and verbal testimony, are valid, direct perception of the event is absolutely necessary to understand the event properly. There is no doubt about the fact that the knowledge about a person or an event gained through direct perception is more valid and correct than the knowledge gained through inference and verbal testimony. Here, quoting Vatsyayana, Abhinava says 'all valid knowledge depends upon direct experience.' To substantiate his point about the importance of direct perception, Abhinava cites an example. He says, when a burning stick is swiftly circled, we may think that it is a wheel of fire or *ālātacakra*. But on a closer look, we will understand that it is not a wheel of fire. It only appears to be a wheel of fire. This proper understanding of the event was possible because one could see it in front of his eyes. Therefore, to remove such obstacles as "the deficiency in the means of apprehension" and "the absence of perspicuity," the emotions should be enacted in front of the spectators through proper acting, supplemented by social conventions, the theatrical modes, and the costumes.

Representation is a different operation from that of inference and verbal testimony. So, in drama, we should have *pratyakṣakalpa sākṣātkāra*, the experience similar to perception.

The sixth *dosa* is non-essentiality or *apradhanata*. According to Abhinava, the most important aspect in a drama is *sthayibhava*, not *vibhava* or *anubhava* or *vyabhicāribhava*. If the playwright makes *sthayibhavas* unimportant and *vibhavas*, etc. important, then the spectators mind will run away from what is wrongly portrayed as important, to what should have been portrayed as important. In other words, the mind of the spectators will move from the *vibhavas* etc, which the playwright now wrongly presents as important, to the *sthayibhavas*, which the playwright should have ideally portrayed as important. Abhinavagupta opines that that the consciousness and attention of a spectator fail to rest on a thing of a secondary order. At that point, the consciousness of the spectator will inevitably move towards the predominant thing which is the *sthayibhava*. This will adversely affect the enjoyment of aesthetic emotion.

According to Abhinava, *vibhavas* and *anubhavas* are of insentient nature. Therefore, they can never be the predominant things. Although the *vyabhicāribhāvas* or transitory feelings are not of insentient nature, they cannot claim to have any independent status. They depend for their existence and perception upon the *sthayibhavas* or permanent mental state. Hence, they are also subordinate like the *vibhavas* and *anubhavas*. This is the reason why only *sthayibhavas* can be the object of aesthetic tasting, as they have the predominating nature. Abhinava observes that the predominant mental state should be clearly recognised in a drama. He further says that if it is closely observed, all the four mental states can be seen to be present in the various passages of the same drama in a pre-eminent position.

The seventh obstacle mentioned by Abhinavagupta is the arousal of doubt about the recognition of mental state and its actual cause. Abhinavagupta mentions that “there is no necessary correlation between a given *anubhava* or physical reaction, a *vibhava* or a foundational factor, *vyabhicāribhāvas* or the transitory emotion and a given *sthayibhava* or a stable emotion. For example, tears, etc., may arise out of bliss. But it can also arise out of some disease in the eye. If the cause of the tears is not clear, one will not be able to understand what does the shedding of the tears represent. Similarly, a tiger can cause anger fear, and so on. If the *sthayibhavas* are not presented in combination with *vibhavas*, we will have difficulty in understanding what the *sthayis* stand for. The combination of these elements, that is *vibhava*, *anubhava* and *vyabhicāribhāvas*, has an unmistakable signification. They represent what *sthayi* is being

evoked. In other words, when the Vibhavas, etc. are well put together in the context of a story, the spectators will be able to understand why that particular sthayibhava is aroused and where does its source lie. If the connection between these various elements mentioned above are proper, the doubts regarding the sthayibhava and its cause will not arise in the minds of the spectators. For example, if the vibhava is death, then the anubhava will be wailing, shedding the tears, etc. The vyabhicāribhāvas will be anxiety, depression, etc. In this case, there is no doubt regarding the connection between these aesthetic elements. And the spectators will be quite clear about the origin of the emotion and what it actually means. If this connection or the samyoga is not properly made, there will be doubts in the minds of the readers or spectators. This will impede the process of aesthetic enjoyment. So, Abhinava says that wherever there may be uncertainty, the means to resolve the doubt and hence, to remove the hindrance is the use of the proper conjunction of aesthetic elements.

These are the basic things you need to know about the theory of rasa propounded by Abhinavagupta. I hope these ideas are clear to you. Thank you!