

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory
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Lecture- 03
The Genesis and Evolution of Sanskrit Literary Theory

In the previous lecture, we have been talking briefly about the social history of Sanskrit and the origin of kāvya. In this lecture, we are going to answer some of the crucial questions concerning the idea of Sastra and the genesis and evolution of Sanskrit literary theory.

Before we delve into this topic, it is necessary to talk about the idea of theory or sastra.

Sastra or the prescription of acceptable practices in a field of knowledge, was an integral part of almost all knowledge systems in early and medieval India. In early India, it covered a wide range of areas such as ethics and morality, sex, drama, sculpture, astrology, salvation, etc. So, we have dharmasastra, kamasastra, natyasastra, silpasastra, jyotisastra, moksastratra, etc. The term Sastra refers to two things.

First, it denotes the discipline which codifies the practices within a field of knowledge. It also signifies a treatise which prescribes the rules of an area of study. So, it is simultaneously “a system of knowledge that a person would seek to master and a treatise codifying such knowledge”. Codifying “the positive and negative regulation of some given human practice,” Sastra in any discipline played a vital role in preventing any aberration in the praxis of knowledge.

As is and should be the case, the theorization of kavya evolved and gained definite shape only after its writing had been prevalent for some time. Although kavya originated as early as the beginning of the Common Era and flourished through the works of writers like Asvaghosha, Bhasa, Kalidasa and so on, there was no attempt to systematize the knowledge about the art of composing kavya until 7th century C.E. According to the available historical evidence, the earliest available text in the kavya sastra tradition is Bhamaha’s Kavyalankara in the 7 th century C.E. The tile Kavyalankara literally means the Ornament of Poetry.

Now you may ask, what about Bharata’s Natyasastra? Wasn’t it composed earlier than Bhamaha’s Kavyalankara? Yes, you are right. It was composed earlier than Bhamaha’s Kavyalankara.

But Bharata's Natyasastra is primarily a treatise on dramaturgy. In Sanskrit cultural history, the term poetics, in its broadest sense, was concerned with two subject matters, namely natya and kavya. The factors that distinguished natya from kavya in terms of style, composition, and aesthetic effect were so strong that Sanskrit poetics virtually got bifurcated into two streams such as natyasastra and kavyasastra. While the natyasastra tradition of poetics focused primarily on the performance of drama on stage, kavyasastra was exclusively concerned with the ontology of kavya or literature. Although texts in the natyasastra tradition such as Bharata's Natyasastra exercised a veritable influence upon kavyasastra, especially through the understanding of how literature embodies rasa or aesthetic emotion, its focus of attention was primarily the structure of drama in performance, not the theory of literature.

Although many works in the natyasastra tradition contain some fruitful deliberations on poetic language, natyasastra's did not pay considerable attention to literary language. A case in point is Bharata's Natyasastra. In Natyasastra, Bharata's reflections on the literary language are very minimal compared to the amount of attention he pays to the structure of dramatic performance on stage. In Natyasastra, only chapters 15 and 18 deal with poetic language.

Although I called Bhamaha's Kavyalankara the first treatise on literary theory, I do not mean to say that prior to Bhamaha there were no discussions about kavya at all. Bhamaha himself refers to a few literary theoreticians who antedated him by using such words as anye, apare, kecit, etc. He also names a literary theoretician named Medhavin. This means that there used to happen discussions about poetry and poetic language even before Bhamaha. But these deliberations about the art of composing poems might have been conducted orally by poets and lay connoisseurs of verbal art without collating their ideas into a systematic body of knowledge. Bhamaha's Kavyalankara is the first text to take this crucial step toward the systematization and codification of thoughts in the art of composing poems. Bhamaha's influence upon later literary theoreticians, especially upon those from Kashmiri writers, was so strong that they often treated him as the founding father of Sanskrit poetics and made him stand for everything that is old school.

According to scholars like Yigal Bronner, this trend that began with the great ninth-century scholar Udbhata and his extensive commentary on Bhamaha's Kavyalankara. Considering

these facts, Bhamaha's Kavyalankara can rightly be called the starting point of the early phase of Sanskrit kavyasastra tradition.

Even though Bhamaha's Kavyalankara inaugurated Sanskrit poetics and very much served as a guiding light for the subsequent literary theoreticians, it was Dandin's Kavyadarsa or the Mirror of Poetry in the 7 th century C.E that became heavily influential for various non-Sanskritic literary traditions in South Asia. Throughout the Sanskrit cosmopolis, this work was thoroughly studied and readapted. Siyabaslankara or Ornament of Our Own Language in the 9 th century C.E. in Sinhala, Tantiyalankara or The Literary Art of Dandin in the 10 th century C.E. in Tamil, Sangharaksita's Subodhalaakara or Literary Art without Toil in the 13 th century C.E. in Pali, etc. are a few vernacular treatises on poetics based on Dandin's Kavyadarsa. According to Pollock, "All these make Dandin's Kavyadarsa the most influential work on literary science in world history after Aristotle's Poetics."

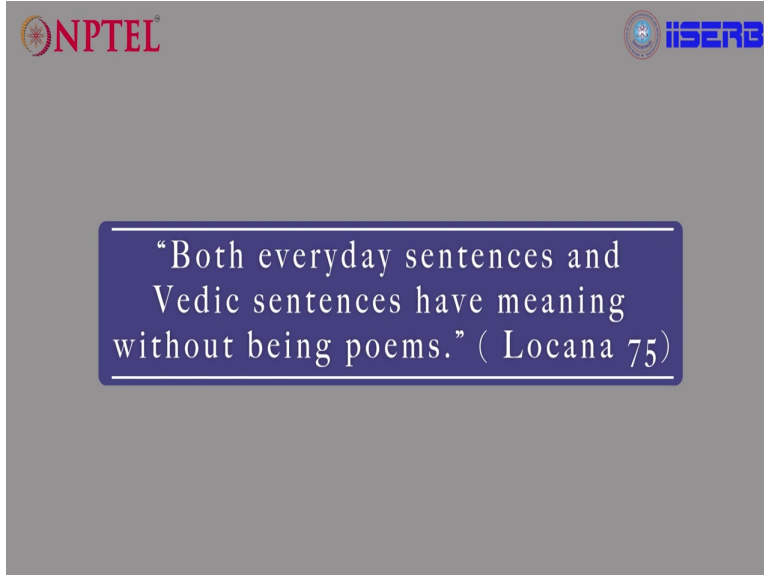
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Now let us take a look at the way in which Sanskrit kavyasastra conceptualized the form of kavya or literature. Sanskrit always held an ontological view about literature. That is to say, it believed that it is the presence of certain special linguistic features such as poetic suggestion, figures of speech, figurative deviation, etc., that attribute literariness to a work of art. So kavyasastra considered kavya as a 'specialized' mode of language marked by the 'ingenious' use of certain special linguistic devices. It also delimited kavya from other uses of language such as sastra, the Vedas, and workaday language. We have a host of literary theoreticians in Sanskrit poetics who typify this exclusionist view of literature. Abhinavagupta, in his

commentary on Anandavardhana's Dhvanyaloka, distinguishes the remit of kavya from that of the Veda and workday language.

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He opines, "Both everyday sentences and Vedic sentences have meaning without being poems." Hemacandra in Kavyanusasana says that it is the presence of four components such as sabda or sound, artha or meaning, guna or poetic qualities and alankara or figures of speech that make a piece of writing kavya. Vagbhata II delimited the ambit of kavya by defining it as a combination of sabda and artha marked by the presence of gunas and alankaras.

According to Bhoja, although poetry is generally called the combination of word and meaning, not all combinations of word and meaning can claim the status of a kavya. In Sringaraprakasha, Bhoja distinguishes between kavya and other linguistic genres on the basis of the nature of the language employed in them.

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In *Sringaraprakasa*, Bhoja lists twelve rules governing the combination of signifier (sabda) and signification (artha) in the production of poetic language.

Of these twelve principles, while the first eight ones are common to many other forms of language, the last four ones are unique to the linguistic body of kāvya. These four characteristics that Bhoja exclusively reserves for kāvya include ‘the presence of poetic qualities’ or ‘guna’, figures of speech or alankara, aesthetic emotion or rasa, and the absence of poetic faults or dosas. In *Sarasvatikanthabharana*, Bhoja illustrates the process in which a nondescript expression is made poetic and laden with rasa through the figurative deviation of speech.

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In the expression 'Hey maiden, why don't you love me who loves you a lot?' we have an ordinary expression that produces only boredom [because it lacks rasa or aesthetic emotion]; in 'The God of love, that cruel person, is pitiless to me, but he holds no grudge to you, my pretty-eyed lass,' the sense is sophisticated and generates rasa. The factors that are instrumental for the creation of rasa [the most important distinguishing mark of kāvyā] are these—a novel idea; non-ordinary, mellifluous expression; beautiful composition; clarity in articulation and meaning that conforms to propriety. (Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharāṇa, 555)

Bhoja says, “In the expression ‘Hey maiden, why don't you love me who love you a lot?’ we have an ordinary expression that produces only boredom [because it lacks rasa or aesthetic emotion]; Whereas in the expression ‘The God of love, that cruel person, shows no mercy to me, but he holds no grudge to you, my pretty-eyed lass,’ the sense is sophisticated and generates rasa. The factors that are instrumental for the creation of rasa are these—a novel idea; non-ordinary, mellifluous expression; beautiful composition; clarity in articulation and meaning that conforms to propriety.”

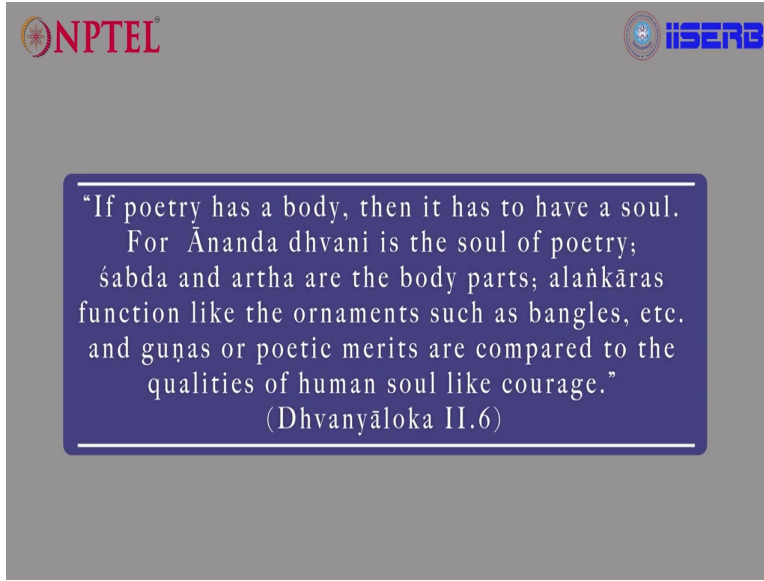
Critics like Jayadeva, Vidyanatha, Bhatta Nayaka, Kuntaka also take a similar attitude towards literature. I will include their definitions of Kavya at the end of this lecture as an appendix for your reference. We can see this exclusionist view of kavya as a special linguistic category, with complex literary conventions and elaborate metrical schemes, unchangingly going down the line till the end of the active phase of Sanskrit literary culture with Jagannatha in the seventeenth century observing that “ramaniyartha pradipadaka sabdam kavyam”: “kavya is signifiers generating noble significations”

One can confidently say that literary theoreticians in Sanskrit, irrespective of their spatio-temporal locations unanimously agreed upon the fact that kavya was a special mode of expression distinctly different from the ordinary form of speech. If kavya is a special form of expression, what are these special components which make kavya a unique entity? In response to this enquiry into the factors responsible of literariness, Sanskrit literary theoreticians came up with different formal elements such as alankara, riti, guṇa, dhvani, vakrokti, aucitya, etc as the formal factors responsible for the creation of the unique status of

kāvya. The only point of contention among the practitioners of Sanskrit literary theory who agreed upon the unique nature of kavya was the prioritization of these formal elements as the ‘soul’ or atma of literature.

Comparing kāvya to a human body was a common practice in Sanskrit literary science. Literary theoreticians often called the body of kavya Kavyasarira. Kavyasarira means the body of kavya. Kavya is compared to a human body. The image of kavyasarira keeps on appearing in kavyasastra.

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For instance, Anandavardhana opines that if poetry has a body, then it has to have a soul. For Ananda dhvani is the soul of poetry; sabda and artha are the body parts; alankaras function like the ornaments such as bangles, etc. and guṇas or poetic merits are compared to the qualities of the human soul like courage.

Ksemendra compares a kavyasarira that does not conform to the notion of propriety or aucitya to a man who has worn his ornaments in the wrong places. Different literary theoreticians privileged different formal elements as the inalienable mark or the soul of literature. For Vamana riti was the soul of kavya. For Anandavardhana, it was dhvani. Kuntaka considered vakrokti as the soul of kavya. Scholars like Ksemendra held aucitya in high esteem. Samudrabandha, a tenth-century commentator on Ruyyaka’s Alankarasarvasva gives us a glimpse into this. In his commentary on Alankarasarvasva, Samudrabandha observes,

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“Literature is marked by certain special words and meaning. The speciality of these two [i.e. śabda and artha] can be analysed in three ways—through some language feature [dharma] or through some function [vyāpāra] or through aesthetic suggestion [dhvani]. The first group contains two sects—the one that gives importance to figures of speech and the one that lays emphasis on poetic qualities. In the second sect, some pay attention to beautiful expression and the others to the capacity to produce aesthetic pleasure [in readers]. Of these five groups, the first one is accepted by Udbhata and others; the second one is accepted by Vāmana, the third one by the author of Vakroktijivita, the fourth by Bhatta Nāyaka and the fifth by Ānandavardhana.” (4)

“Literature is marked by certain special words and meaning. The speciality of these two [i.e. śabda and artha] can be analysed in three ways—through some language feature or dharma, or through some function or vyapara, or through aesthetic suggestion or dhvani. The first group contains two sects—the one that gives importance to figures of speech and the one that lays emphasis on poetic qualities. In the second sect, some pay attention to beautiful expression and others to the capacity to produce aesthetic pleasure in readers. Of these five groups, the first one is accepted by Udbhata and others; the second one is accepted by Vamana, the third one by the author of Vakroktijivita, the fourth by Bhatta Nayaka and the fifth by Anandavardhana.

This shows that although there were differences of opinion among literary theoreticians as to which of these elements has to be treated as the most important element of kavya, they all had a consensus of opinion on the idea that kavya is a unique use of language. Therefore, their efforts were unidirectionally oriented toward unravelling the various formal factors that attribute an aura of uniqueness to literature. The term alankarasastra, which was often used synonymously with Sanskrit poetics, readily functions as a pointer to the teleology of Sanskrit kavya sastra.

Because of kavyasastra’s unwavering interest in the ornaments or alankara of kavya that made literature a higher-order linguistic composition, the term alankarasastra was often used synonymously with kavyasastra. The word alankara should not be used in the narrow sense of figure of speech. In the expression alankarasastra, the word alankara refers to all aspects, including the figures of speech which ornate a piece of writing to make it literary.

