An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory
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Lecture- 01
The Social History of Sanskrit and the Origin of Kāvya

Hello everyone! As you know, the title of this course is 'An introduction to Indian literary Theory.' Although the cou
rse is titled Indian Literary Theory, the theoretical framework that is going to get maximum attention in this course is Sanskrit poetics. We know that the term Sanskrit is often used synonymously with India. We often use expressions like Indian theatre and Indian literature to refer to Sanskrit theatre and Sanskrit literature alone.

This means that Sanskrit and India have long been treated as synonyms. But this is not the reason why I have decided to focus more on Sanskrit poetics in this course. The reason behind this decision is quite functional. The first reason is that the corpus of Sanskrit literary theory alone is larger than all other streams of literary theory in India put together. So, it demands a large amount of time from a person who is desirous of learning even the fundamentals of these theoretical frameworks.

The second reason is the great influence that Sanskrit literary theory exercised upon Bhasha's literature and criticism. To understand the conceptual trajectories of vernacular poetics one necessarily needs to know what Sanskrit poetics is. That said I do not mean to say that this course is not going to take a look at other literary theories in India. We will definitely deal with them during the course of our journey.

The Sanskrit term corresponding to the expression 'literary theory' is Kavya Sastra. Before understanding the fundamentals of various concepts in literary theory, we need to unpack the expression Sanskrit Kavya Sastra and need to have an overview of these three terms which make the name of this epistemology namely, Sanskrit, Kavya and Sastra. Therefore, in the first module of this course, I will be dealing with a brief history of these three crucial components that form the conceptual terrain of our field of study.

The first component that I will be exploring is Sanskrit. Sanskrit was the language in which treatises on poetics were mostly written. In other words, a large portion of the corpus of literary theory from early and medieval India remained in the Sanskrit language. Although treatises on poetics were produced in Tamil and other vernacular languages later in the medieval period, the size of the non-Sanskrit corpus of literary theory was relatively small.

The second component that we will be dealing with is Kavya or poetry, and literary prose. As we all know, Kavya was the subject of enquiry in this epistemology. So, in the first module, we will also form an overview of the social circumstances which facilitated the origin of Kavya in Sanskrit, the ontology of Kavya and the characteristics which make Kavya different from other forms of languages.

Finally, we will discuss the idea of Shastra in general and its history vis-a-vis the idea of literature. First, let us take a look at Sanskrit. The language in which treatises on poetics were primarily written.

Before the common era, Sanskrit was exclusively an idiom of Vedic rituals and other allied scholastic disciplines. While Sanskrit remained a language of Dharma, Prakrit was the language of mundane affairs.

It was only by the beginning of the common era (CE) that Sanskrit entered rather gradually and hesitantly into the public realm for worldly communicative practices like Kavya. Prior to the beginning of the common era, even the Buddhists, who later produced a lot of work in Sanskrit, consciously stayed away from communicating their ideas in Sanskrit. Buddha's outright rejection of his disciple's suggestion to propagate the Buddhist teachings in Sanskrit bears testimony to it.

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Two monks, Brahmans by birth, were troubled that other monks of various clans, tribes, and families, were corrupting the Buddha's words by repeating them each in his own dialect). They asked the Buddha, "Let us put the Buddha's words into [Vedic-Sanskrit] verse." But the Blessed One, the Buddha, rebuked them, saying, "Deluded men! This will not lead to the conversion of the unconverted . . ." And he commanded (all) the monks: "You are not to put the Buddha's words into [Vedic-Sanskrit] verse. To do this would be to commit an infraction. I authorize you, monks, to learn the Buddha's words each in his own dialect." (Vinayapiṭakam 2: 139)

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The situation remained unchanged even when Ashoka, the third emperor of the Maurya dynasty, introduced the technique of writing in South Asia for the public promulgation of his edicts. Ashoka's inscriptions, other than the ones composed in Greek and Aramaic, were mostly written in the local languages, especially Prakrit.

It was only by the beginning of the first millennium BCE, that Sanskrit started making its appearance in the public domain through some inscriptions. However, the amount of Sanskrit used in these inscriptions was by and large small. Sanskrit in fact had to wait as late as the second century CE to make its presence prominently felt in the public realm. According to the available historical evidence, the first major non-Vedic employment of Sanskrit, especially standard Sanskrit, was found in the Junagarh inscription in the 2nd century CE from what is now called Gujarat.

It was composed by the western Kshatrapa Ruler Rudradaman to mark the reconstruction of a great water reservoir named Sudarshana which was heavily damaged in a storm.

According to scholars like Salomon, this is the first long inscription recorded entirely in more or less standard Sanskrit as well as the first extensive record in the poetic style. Crossing on the heels of Sanskrit emergence outside the closet of the Vedic realm was the beginning of the Kavya tradition in Sanskrit.

The maximum outer limit that we can set for the beginning of the Kavya tradition in Sanskrit is the last centuries before the advent of the common era. Now, what is the term Kavya mean? The word Kavya refers to both poetry and literary prose. In the Indian context, the word Kavya referred to two things. First of all, it referred to the genre category of poetry

itself. In other words, it referred to all those works that conformed to the artistic and literary norms.

Secondly, it also referred to individual poems. At this juncture, I would also like to point out that other than Kavya, the term Sahitya was also used to refer to literary prose and poetry. However the term Sahitya, according to Pollock, is often used to signify Kavya as an object of theoretical reflection. The word Sahitya is used to refer to Kavya based on the understanding that Kavya was a combination of, or Sahithya of, sound and meaning or Sabda and Artha. The history of the term Sahitya in fact begins in Bhamaha's Kavyalankara.

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Where Bhamaha says, "sabdarthau sahitau kavyam". Poetry is the combination of shabda and artha or the sound and meaning. The idea of Kavya as a close association of sound and meaning runs like a red thread through practically all poetry. Creative writers and literary critics from Sanskrit literary culture consider Valmiki's Ramayana as the first Kavya or Adi Kavya in Sanskrit. The earliest testimony regarding this is given by Ashwaghosha in his Buddhacarita composed in the second century CE.

According to scholars like Pollock, the plausible reason for considering the Ramayana as Adi Kavya may be the fact that it was probably the first major text to be preserved, if not composed in written form. The Ramayana tradition can undoubtedly be called one of the most fascinating literary artefacts in South Asia considering the veritable influence it had exercised upon the cultural and moral ethos of the people of this geographical location.

Practitioners of Kavya in various special temporal locations responded differently to Ramakatha to produce numerous versions of the Ramayana to both entertain and instruct the readers. Ramakatha is the basic narrative of Rama's marriage, exile, and battle with Ravana. Valmiki's Ramayana is divided into kandas or chapters. These chapters are titled Balakanda, Ayodhyakanda, Aranyakanda, Kishkindhakanda, Sundarakanda, Yuddhakanda and Uttarakanda.

Scholars and literary historians opine that Balakanda and Uttarakanda are later additions to the Valmiki Ramayana. Ramayana being the first Kavya in Sanskrit, I think this text deserves a special mention.

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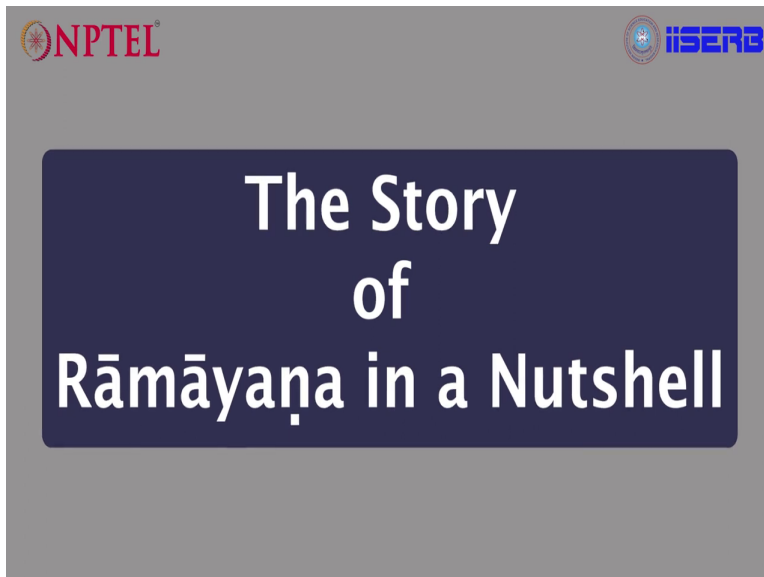
So, let us take a quick glance at the story of the Ramayana. This is the story of the Ramayana in a nutshell. The Dasharatha, who is the king of Ayodhya, has three wives Kausalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra. Since the king does not have a son for a long time to continue his lineage, he decides to perform a fire sacrifice known as Putra-kamesti-yajna to be blessed with a male child. As a result of the yajna, Rama was born to Kausalya. Bharata was born to Kaikeyi and Laksmana, and Satrughna were born to Sumitra.

Everyone thinks that Rama is going to be the heir to the throne of the Dasharatha. Since, obviously, he is the eldest son. But invoking an old boon that the king had previously given to his heir, Kaikeyi demands that Dasharatha has to consecrate her son Bharata as the king of Ayodhya. The righteous king has no other way but to give into the demands of Kaikeyi thus the Dasharatha banishes Rama to the forest for 14 years and appoints Bharata as the king.

Thus, Rama, along with his wife Seeta and brother Laksmana goes to the forest. When this decision is taken, Bharata, the king's second eldest son, is away in the land of Kekeya. When he comes to the palace, he comes to know the whole story. Refusing the kingship that is pressed upon him, Bharata vows to bring Rama back from the forest and leaves for the forest with a vast army. Although Bharata persuades Rama to return, it is of no use.

The righteous Rama is resolute in keeping his father's promise and his own. He consents only to give his slippers to Bharata to display as a token of his kingship. Thus, Bharata returns home and begins the period of his vice royalty from the neighbouring village of Nandigrama. And with his brother Laksmana and wife Sita, Rama endures the wilderness of the Dandaka forest. Years pass by, and one day Rama's wife Sita is abducted by Ravana.

The demon king Ravana rules over the kingdom of Lanka, which is an island surrounded by the sea. Although Ravana's well-wishers, like his noble brother Vibhishna, advise him about the consequences of his action, these words of wisdom, in fact, fall on deaf ears. Rama, who is searching for his wife in the forest in the meantime, comes across the leaders of the monkey army and makes a pact with them.

They eventually get to know that Sita has been abducted by Ravana and is currently staying in Ravana's Ashoka grove. They build a bridge across the sea and reach Lanka. A sanguinary battle follows and at the end of the battle, Rama kills Ravana and rescues Sita. This is also the end of Rama's 14-year-long banishment. Having killed Ravana and rescued Sita, Rama returns to Ayodhya. However, Rama's subjects raise concerns about Sita's chastity.

Since she stayed in Lanka for a long time with Ravana, Sita requests Laksmana to prepare a pile of fire for her to enter to prove her conjugal fidelity. But the fire does not touch her and restores her to Rama, thereby testifying to her purity. But once again, Sita's fidelity was called into question. This time she is sent to sage Valmiki's hermitage. Here Sita gives birth to Rama's children, Lava and Kusha.

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Sita's ordeals do not end here. When Rama and Sita meet each other once again in the forest, people again cast aspersions on Sita's character. Overflown with emotions, Sita decides to go back to mother earth from where she emerged. The earth opens wide and swallows Sita. Rama rules Ayodhya for many years and finally takes samadhi into a river along with his three brothers and leaves the world.

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