

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory
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Lecture- 10
Sanskrit poetics in the Postcolonial Phase

Hello everyone, in the previous lecture, we were dealing with the history of Sanskrit poetics in the colonial period. We saw that the vigour with which new treatises on poetics was produced considerably dwindled during the colonial period. This did not mean that the 'panditya' or the scholarship in Sanskrit poetics vanished altogether. The scholarship in Sanskrit poetics continued to flourish, but the tendency of the previous period to critically examine the views of their predecessors, or to present a radically new concept in poetics was conspicuously absent during this period.

There were primarily two activities which characterized this period the first one was the reconstruction of many treatises on Sanskrit poetics which were thought to be lost forever. We saw how Kuntaka's Vakroktijivita, which was thought to be lost forever and known only through the references from other treatises, were reconstructed from the available fragments.

The second tendency was the dissemination of knowledge about Sanskrit poetics through the translation of these treatises on Sanskrit poetics from Sanskrit to English and other vernacular languages. This facilitated the spread of knowledge about this knowledge system among the scholars who were not versed but interested in Sanskrit. In today's lecture, we are going to deal with an important tendency in the postcolonial phase, which is the deliberation about the utility of Sanskrit poetics in the contemporary literary scenario.

In the olden days, literature was considered a special form of language which could be created only after a careful and dedicated practice in Alankarasastra or literary. In other words, kavya, which was seen as a special use of language distinct from the ordinary form of speech. So, a dedicated practice was necessary to make kavya appear distinct from the ordinary form of speech. But by the mid-20th century, a new conception about literariness under the influence of western critical theory and literature started taking deep root in the Indian subcontinent.

This new approach tried to replicate the style and cadence of everyday speech in literary works and consequently stood in contrast to the formalistic notions about literature to which Sanskrit kavyasastra mostly confirmed. In other words, the erstwhile conception that one needs to know the lessons of Sanskrit poetics before attempting to compose a literary work altogether disappeared.

By this time, the literary world in India was also making a transition from Sanskrit to English and the vernacular languages, which mostly embraced and championed this new conception of literature through new genres like novel, short story, autobiography etc. So, there was also a strong feeling among many vernacular critics that the parameters of Sanskrit criticism were not adequate enough to judge and appreciate the new literary works founded on a new sense of literariness.

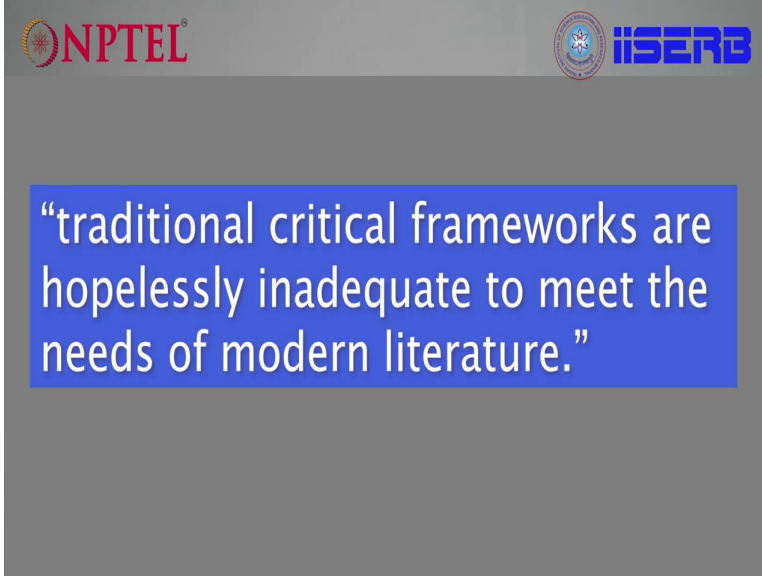
Many literary critics in the vernacular literature often vehemently criticized the Sanskrit influence upon drama and sought for the employment of a new set of parameters for the appreciation and analysis of modern literary works which shared the style and sensibilities of everyday speech and life. What is happening during this period is actually a shift from the ontological idea of literature to a more liberal notion of literature.

The ontological definition of literature believed that a literary work is different from other ordinary forms of language. So, this definition believed that if a piece of writing needs to be called a literature it needs to be different from the ordinary form of speech. Now especially with the emergence of newer forms of fiction such as the novel or short story the idea of literature started looking more like everyday speech. This means two things here. First of all, one does not need any formal training to produce literature. It is often an endeavour solely on the basis of one's Pratibha or creative genius. Secondly, since literature is not an ontological category, we do not need any specific set of parameters to judge a literary work's literary merit or quality. This has also become a highly subjective endeavour. So, many literary critics argue that Sanskrit literary criticism does not have any relevance in the modern world.

It cannot be used as a guidebook to produce literature, nor can it be used as a parameter to judge the literary merit of a modern literary work. Often the situation is that if you try to judge the literary merit of a modern drama or short story on the basis of the parameters of

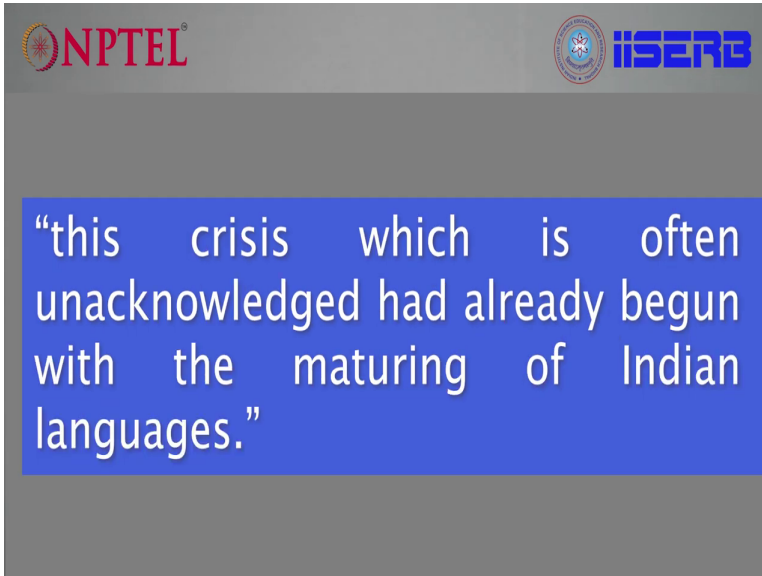
literariness by Sanskrit kavya, we may end up concluding that these modern works have no literary value.

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So, scholars like Sachidanandan opine that traditional critical frameworks are hopelessly inadequate to meet the needs of modern literature.

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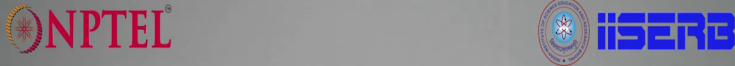
According to him, this crisis which is often unacknowledged had already begun with the maturing of Indian languages. Like Sachidanandan, many critics such as Shiva Rudrapa, Ramlal Jyoshi and Digish Mehta also express their reservations about the effectiveness of Sanskrit poetics in the interpretation of modern literary works. They opine that Sanskrit literary theories pay little attention to the non-formalistic aspects of a work of art which is a huge lacuna as far as a critical framework is concerned.

Despite the general feeling that Sanskrit poetics is outdated to appreciate modern literary works, a group of critics during the 1980s attempted to apply Sanskrit kavysastra to evaluate the merit of modern literary works from India. This shift which can be labelled as a revivalist trend, was spearheaded by Indian literary theoreticians such as K. Krishnamoorthy, Krishna Rayan, Ayyappa Panikar, C.D. Narasamhayya and so on.

The seminal event which inaugurated this movement was a seminar held at the literary criterion centre at Dhanyaloka in Mysore on the theme of the formulation of a common poetics for Indian literature today. The seminar paid considerable attention to the practical use of Sanskrit poetics as a common critical framework to effectively understand and judge the literary merit of modern literary works in modern times.

The conference concluded that the Rasa-Dhvani approach being the most dominant critical system in the Indian literary context could be used as a common critical framework to evaluate literary texts of Indian origin in modern times. The book, The Burning Bush, edited by Krishna Rayyan was an immediate output of this thought. This book analyzes 17 literary works from 17 different Indian languages through the lens of Rasa-Dhvani approach in order to understand the practical applicability of these theoretical positions in modern criticism.

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With literature in the various Indian languages interacting more vigorously today than ever before, it has become all-important that critical practice in them shares a common theoretical framework, so that the assumptions, analytical tools, and evaluative criteria used are roughly uniform. Obviously, there are major advantages in evolving this framework from existing Indian theory rather than sources elsewhere. The most widely dominant Indian critical system is the Rasa-dhvani theory formulated in the 9th century. But before adopting it, it must be revised in the light of other Indian and Western theories, and it must also be tested on texts in Indian Languages. It is this latter that Krishna Rayan's book [The Burning Bush] seeks to do.

The blurb of the book says, “With literature in the various Indian languages interacting more vigorously today than ever before, it has become all-important that critical practices in them shares a common theoretical framework so that the assumptions, analytical tools and

evaluative criteria are roughly uniform. Obviously, there are major advantages in evolving this framework from existing Indian theory rather than sources elsewhere. The most widely dominant Indian critical system is the Rasa-Dhvani theory formulated in the 9th century. But before adopting it, it must be revised in the light of other Indian and Western theories, and it must also be tested on the text in Indian languages. It is this latter that Krishna Rayan's book seeks to do.”

Krishna-Rayan's 'Rasa-Dhvani and present-day literary theory and criticism', Ayyappa Panicker's 'The Renovation of Rasa Theory', Krishnamoorthy's 'The Relevance of Rasa Theory in Modern Literature'. R. B. Patanakar's 'Does The Rasa Theory Have Any Modern Relevance?', Umashankar Joshi's 'The Relevance of Sanskrit Poetics to Contemporary Practical Criticism' etcetera are some of the major works in this direction. All these critics opine that Sanskrit literary theory still has a relevance as a critical tool to appreciate and understand the literary merit of modern literary works, provided we modify these concepts according to the demands of the modern time.

In Rasa-Dhvani and present-day literary theory and criticism, Krishna Rayan observes that Rasa-Dhvani school in Sanskrit poetics has the potential to become a common theoretical framework for literary works in India. There are two reasons why he chooses Rasa-Dhvani approach as the critical framework for Indian literature. First of all, the use of Rasa-Dhvani approach helps us preserve our link with tradition and foster a sense of continuity.

Secondly, the Rasa-Dhvani approach is more widely known than any other critical system, and its concepts are in vogue in our arts and literatures. “There are two reasons”, Rayan says, “make Rasa-Dhvani approach more capable than any other existing theory of serving us the basis of a common poetic tradition for India literature. He notes that while the alankara and riti schools mechanically followed a “manual of rhetoric” and “merely labelled, enumerated and classified stylistic devices using the methodology of a normative grammar,” the Rasa-Dhvani theory critically examined the way the internal constituents of a literary work function to generate an aesthetic response from Sahrdayas. He also points out that the affinity of Rasa-Dhvani theory with the assumptions and conclusions of contemporary Euro-American literary theories give it a considerable degree of contemporary relevance.

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However, he notes that the Rasa-Dhvani theory has a lot of lacunas in the contemporary literary scenario. So, he says that this theoretical position needs to be realigned, revised and added to with reference to the broad movements in literature and literary theory since the 11th century. Rayan holds that the Rasa-Dhvani theory, if enlarged and modified in this line, can well serve as a common theoretical framework for literary criticism in Indian languages.

In the essay, ‘The Renovation of Rasa Theory’, K. Ayyappa Panicker opines that Sanskrit literary theories in their present form are not suitable as a critical framework to read modern literary texts, and we need to incapacitate them by synthesizing them with modern critical theories. He talks about the importance of developing an Indian theoretical framework or concept by modifying Sanskrit literary theories, especially rasa theory, in the light of modern critical positions to interpret both Indian and non-Indian literary works.

According to him since rasa theory which was originally developed and applied to dramaturgy, can be extended to poetry and modern works of art. So, there is no problem in that. So, he is also asking for a revision. In his article, ‘Does Rasa Theory Have Any Modern Relevance?’ R. B. Pathnaker criticizes both the Indian critics who are totally ignorant of the literary thought in the pre-modern period.

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And who find that only the western critical framework is adequate to their purpose, and the Sanskritists who think that Sanskrit literary theories are not supposed to be put to mundane uses like analysis and evolution of modern literary works, even of works produced in Indian languages. He opines that the Sanskrit literary theories as a critical framework still have relevance in modern world, citing the reason that a whole lot of interfaces can be identified between Sanskrit literary theories and the western literary theories of the modern times.

However, he opines that while owing allegiance to ancient scholars, the modern scholars of Sanskrit studies should also realize that it is necessary to modify ancient theories. In short, the conclusion of his inquiry into the ability of Sanskrit literary theories as a critical framework is that they have the potential to become a critical framework in modern times also, but they need to be modified and realigned.

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Many postcolonial critics opined that this tendency in the first instance was the result of a strong desire to decolonize western critical sensibilities and “reconstitute a sense of Indianness of the text considered, and assess their virtue by the standards and assumptions of indigenous aesthetics”. Bill Ashcroft et al. talk about this tendency in literary criticism in their ‘Empire Rights Back’.

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Indian scholars and critics have been locked in debate as to how far these traditions can be adapted to the needs of modern criticism for Indian literature. The debate centres on whether or not the ‘highly sophisticated theories’ propounded by the Sanskrit ‘schoolmen’ can be, or, indeed, ever were ‘applied in the evaluation of works of art’ (Krishnamoorthy 1984) and, more specifically, whether the terms of this tradition: rasa, dhvani, alaṅkāra, etc., are more relevant and suitable than imported terms to the description of contemporary literatures in the Indian vernacular languages and, to a lesser extent, to Indian literatures in English. (116)

They say, “Indian scholars and critics have been logged in debates as to how far these traditions can be adapted to the needs of modern criticism for Indian literature. The debate centres on whether or not the highly sophisticated theories propounded by the Sanskrit schoolmen can be, or, indeed ever were applied in the evaluation of works of art and more specifically, whether the terms of this tradition: rasa, dhvni, alankara etcetera. are more

relevant and suitable than imported terms to the description of contemporary literatures in the Indian vernacular languages and, to a lesser extent, to Indian literatures in English.

Although it is important to record how classical knowledge systems were originally understood and practised, an obsession with this process in the realm of research will only impede new course of development in this field.

What we need is an 'interventionist historiography of ideas' which will critically examine these theoretical positions from different vantage points and will prevent them from becoming static categories. Each new reading of a text dislodges it from our taken-for-granted conceptions about it and leads us to the production of new knowledge about that text. This is the only way in which we can ensure the continuity of the existing framework of ideas.

This attempt to go beyond the borders of the received notions about an epistemology is the very life force of any knowledge system, be it ancient or modern. It not only prevents an intellectual tradition from becoming ossified in nature but also ensures the continuum of knowledge. As far as the Indian kavyasastra tradition is concerned, attempts to step beyond the existing truth claims was its very life force.

In many kavyasastra texts, we can see authors employing what is known as the purvapaksha strategy wherein another explains the view of his predecessor or contemporary and then refutes it systematically in order to register their dissent with the opinion of their predecessors or contemporaries so, as to establish their own positions. We have already seen in the previous lecture of the study that guna and riti critical frameworks were the outputs of dissent with the views of alankarikas.

Dhvani was the result of descent with the view of the exponents of guna and riti and the anumana school had considerable differences of opinion with the exponents of dhvani school. When it comes to the medieval phase navyas or the new intellectuals in kavyasastra subjected the views of their predecessors to careful scrutiny and criticism as we find it in the works of Siddhicandra's kavyaprakasa-khandana or Jagannatha's Citramimamsakhandana.

So, what we need to do here is that instead of repeating the same old paradigms over and over again, we definitely need to go beyond the available scholarship to explore newer possibilities of this field. I hope you have understood this lesson. Thank You.