

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory

Dr. Sreenath VS

Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Science Education and Research – Bhopal

Lecture- 11

Reader in Sanskrit kavya tradition

Hello everyone! In the previous weeks, we have been talking about the history of Sanskrit kavya and kavyasastra. We saw the origin and development of Sanskrit poetry and literary theory in detail. In this lecture, we are going to see the idea of the reader in Sanskrit kavya tradition. You need to remember that it is impossible to come up with a monolithic figure of a reader from Sanskrit literary culture. So, in this lecture we will be primarily trying to identify the figure of the reader that we can see in literary productions as well as literary theory.

In Sanskrit, the term sahr̥daya is popularly used to refer to the idea of a reader, although words such as anuvācaka, rasika and so on are also used to refer to the readers. The word sahr̥daya literally means somebody with a responsive heart. According to Abhinavagupta, the term sahr̥daya is used to denote “persons who are capable of identifying with the subject matter, as the mirror of their hearts has been polished by the constant study and practice of poetry, and who respond to it sympathetically in their own hearts”. He says this in Locana. What this definition of sahr̥daya, given by Abhinava, shows is that sahr̥daya needs to possess reasonably good knowledge about the technicalities of a poetic composition, even if he or she is not going to compose a poem, so as to identify and effectively appreciate the poetic techniques employed or used by the creative writer. Lienhard’s observation in his ‘A History of Classical Poetry Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit’ is a case in point here. He says, “The ability to enjoy kāvya presupposed mainly adequate learning and familiarity with the special nature of literary texts”. He continues,

(Refer to Slide time 2:30)

“The reader or listener had a command not only of the literary language, its means of expression and style, but was also familiar with the sources and technique of poetry. . . He also had a knowledge of metrics, decorative figures (alaṅkāras), the theory of the sentiments or rasa and the implied or dhvani; indeed, he might even be a specialist in some other branches of science as well” (A History of Classical Poetry Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit 31)

“The reader or listener had a command not only of the literary language, its means of expression and style, but was also familiar with the sources and techniques of poetry. . . He also had a knowledge of metrics, decorative figures or alaṅkāras, the theory of the sentiments or rasa and the implied or dhvani; indeed, he might even be a specialist in some other branches of science as well”. The readers who the literary theoreticians call by names such as sahr̥daya or the congenial reader, rasajna or rasika or the connoisseur of sentiment, or sat, vidat, sudhi or vidagdha or the knowledgeable are the experienced critics who are capable of discovering the special qualities that a poem or the listener wishes to emphasise by paying close attention to the handling of details. These scholar-readers had a command not only of literary language or its means of expression and style, but they were also familiar with the sources and techniques of poetry. Naturally he knew the epics, the puranas which were a rich mine of all sorts of themes of the major form of kāvya. He also had knowledge of metrics or cchandas, alankaras or figures of speech, rasas or the aesthetic emotion. Needless to say, he must have been a very good connoisseur in other forms of art and branches of knowledge as well. Leinhard observes that

(Refer to Slide time 4:15)

“He possessed the measure of general knowledge that was the prerequisite for an appreciation of classical poetry. This appreciation was to some extent recognition of the norms that were applied by the poet at any time which, being part of poetic canon, were the most important tools in the hands of the poet and the reader alike” (A History of Classical Poetry Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit 31).

“He possessed the measure of general knowledge that was the prerequisite for an appreciation of classical poetry. This appreciation was to some extent recognition of the norms that were applied by the poet at any time which, being part of poetic canon, were the most important tools in the hands of the poet and the reader alike”.

So, Visvanatha’s observation in Sahityadarpaṇa about a rasika or ‘a reader capable of enjoying rasa’ is also important in this context. For Visvanatha, a rasika’s ability to enjoy rasa is simultaneously the result of his predilection for art or vasana that comes not only from this birth, but from the previous births as well. In the present birth, one develops this special mind-set to enjoy rasa through one’s constant study of literary works.

(Refer to Slide time 5:16)

“If the study of literature were not necessary to relish aesthetic emotion, even the theologians versed in the Vedas and the students of logic would have been able to savour rasa”.

“If the study of literature were not necessary to relish aesthetic emotion”, Visvanatha notes, “even the theologians versed in the Vedas and the students of logic would have been able to savour rasa.” According to him, if we do not consider one’s predisposition toward art from the previous birth as an important causal force for being a sahrdaya, we will not be able to explain why some students of kavya are incapable of relishing rasa, despite their constant endeavors to do so. Quoting Dharmadatta, Visvanatha opines that a person without these prerequisites for being a rasika remains as insensitive as “the wood-work, the walls and the stones” in the theatre. It is a very important observation.

Sanskrit poets and literary theoreticians often hold the view that an author’s worth is always and can only be judged by an able reader. For example, Kalidasa, in both Raghuvamsa and Abhijnanasakuntala, talks about the importance of a learned reader in judging the creativity of a poet. In Raghuvamsa, Kalidasa says that

(Refer to Slide time 6:36)

तं सन्तः श्रोतुमर्हन्ति सदसद्व्यक्तिहेतवः।
हेमः संलक्ष्यते हाग्नौ विशुद्धिः श्यामिकाऽपि वा॥

Raghuvamśa 1:10
[Just as gold is tested with the help of a touchstone,
so also the heart of a sensible reader functions as a
means to judge the quality of a poem]

“Just as gold is tested with the help of a touchstone, so also the heart of a sensitive reader functions as a means to judge the quality of a poem.” In *Abhijnanasakuntala*, he opines that a drama cannot be deemed successful until and unless it is well appreciated by the connoisseurs of art. Further emphasising the importance of the reader in the appreciation of creative artefacts, the eight-century poet and playwright Bhavabhūti, in his play *Mālatīmādhava*, says that a reader who can properly appreciate his poetic merit and identify with his creative heart or *samānahṛdaya* is yet to be born. According to Rājasekhara, “Only a good reader can understand the effort and intention of a poet. In the absence of a good reader, all efforts of a poet go in vain.”

Rājasekhara further points out that a good reader is the master, friend, preceptor, minister and disciple to the poet.”

Anandvardhana, in his lost work *Viṣamabāṇalīlā*, opines that the actualization of *kāvya* happens only in the presence of *sahṛdayas* or men of taste, just as a lotus blooms when graced by the rays of the sun. He says, “Virtues blossom, when admired by men of taste. When graced by the sun’s rays, a lotus becomes a lotus. In another poem often attributed to Kālidāsa, the speaker makes a strong plea to the Lord Brahma to spare him from the punishment of presenting his poem to an insensitive listener or *arasika*. It goes:

(Refer to Slide time 8:28)

इतरकर्मफलानि यद्दृच्छ्या विलिखितानि सहे चतुरानन |
 अरिसिकेषु कवित्वनिवेदनं शिरसि मालिखमालिखमालिख ||
 O God Almighty! Whatever destiny you may desire and consider reasonable
 about my life's other events is acceptable to me, but please do not write in my
 destiny that I may be compelled to listen to the sub-standard poetry by a
 novice and insensitive so-called poet.

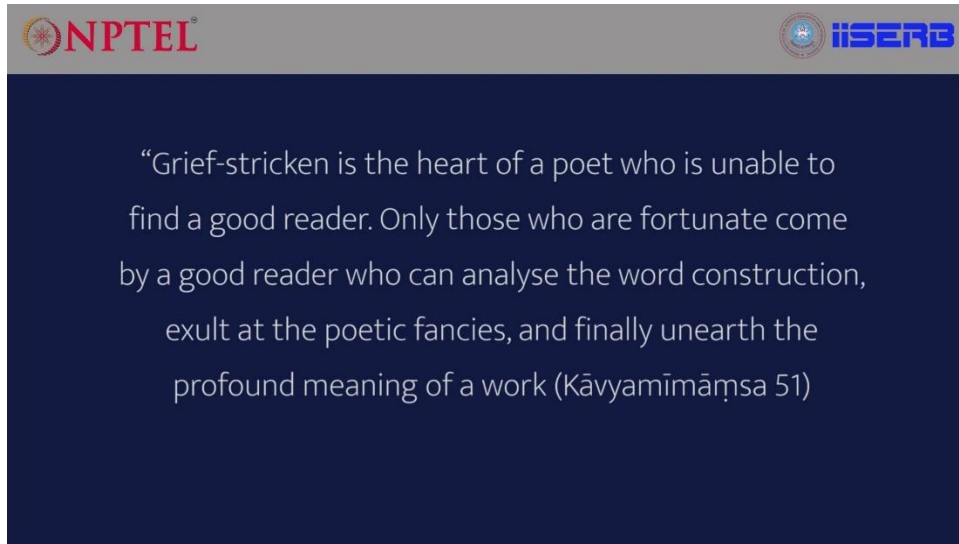
“arasikeṣu kavitva nivedanaṃ śirasi mā likha mā likha”.

Acknowledging the importance of a sahrdaya in the appreciation of a work of art, another anonymous poet declares that the act of a poet appreciating his work of art is as inappropriate as a father appreciating the beauty of his daughter. The poem says that although a poet is the creator of a text, its merit has to be ultimately judged by the readers erudite in kāvyasāstra. The actual shloka goes like this: “kavi karoti kāvyāni svādam jānāti paṇḍitaḥ | saundaryan api lāvaṇyaṃ patir jānāti no pita.”

So, for Abhinavagupta, the essential quality of a responsive reader or sahrdaya is his ability to identify with the heart of the poet or the creator. Abhinavagupta in his commentary on Bharata’s Natyasastra opines that when a signification charged with rasa flashes through the heart of a sahrdaya or a responsive reader, it pervades his body just as dry wood catches fire. He mentions this in Abhinavabharati. Abhinava also talks about the impediments or vighnas that can play havoc with a sahrdaya’s relishing of aesthetic emotion. These impediments include the feeling that what is presented in kavya is not likely to happen, the generation of actual emotions instead of aesthetic emotions during the aesthetic experience, the reader’s immersion in his own personal problems, absence of aesthetic elements which lead to the production of rasa, obscurity in the representation of aesthetic elements, lack of a predominant aesthetic emotion or subject- matter, and the doubt in the reader’s mind regarding the rasa that a particular vibhava etc. are trying to generate in a work of art.

According to Rajasekhara, a reader's capacity to appreciate a poem is called, bhāvayatri pratibha. In Kāvya-mīmāṃsā, Rajasekhara divides the readers of kāvya into four broad categories on the basis of their ability to appreciate a poem. And it goes, insensitive readers (arocika); sensitive but indiscriminate readers (satṛṇābhya-vayavahari); competitive readers (matsari); and the true readers (tatvābhiniveśi). The insensitive readers are those who are innately uninterested in enjoying a work of art. The sensitive but indiscriminate readers like to read everything that comes to them, but they lack the ability to judge the true poetic merit of a work. The competitive readers are always jealous of good poets. Although they understand the real worth of a poem, they are very much reluctant to accept it. The last category, that is, the true readers who can appreciate a poem properly is an extremely rare category.

(Refer to Slide time 11:52)



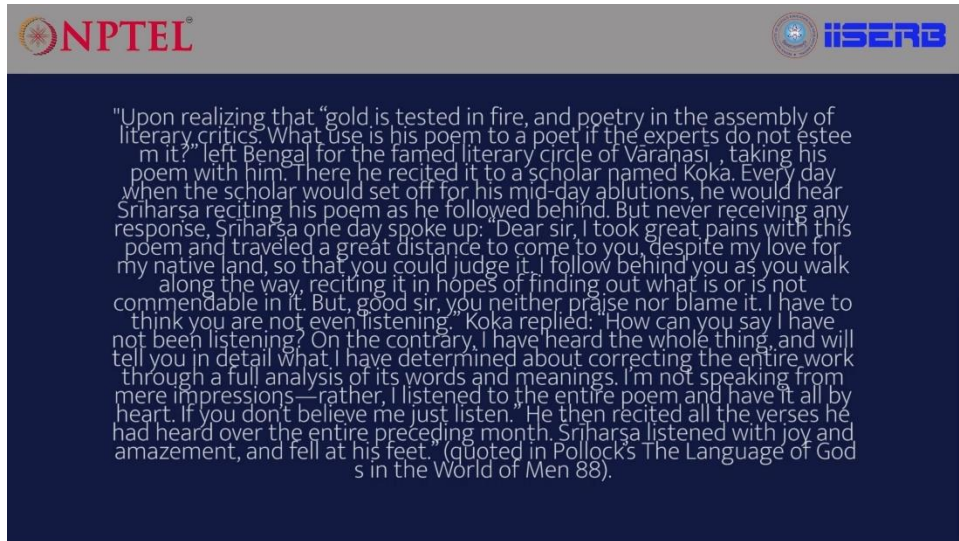
According to Rajasekhara, "Grief-stricken is the heart of a poet who is unable to find a good reader. Only those who are fortunate come by a good reader who can analyse the word construction, exult at the poetic fancies, and finally unearth the profound meaning of a work. As far as Rajasekhara is concerned, a good reader who can meaningfully critique the work of a poet is simultaneously a master, a friend, a counsellor, a pupil and a teacher to the poet.

Rajasekhara opines that both the poet and connoisseur of art possess the poetic imagination or pratibhā. Pratibhā in the poet is creative or kārayatri, whereas pratibhā in the reader is imaginatively recreative or bhāvayatri. So, one might say that a kāvya is twice born, first at the

level of the poet when his creative imagination conceives it and then at the level of the reader who brings to life the same poem by his power of imagination known as bhāvayatri pratibhā. So, the ultimate wish of a poet is to come across a reader who is able to appreciate the worth of his poetic genius. A poet who is not fortunate to get a reader who understands the former's effort and genius continues to remain grief-stricken. It is important to note that this fascination for an ideal reader is not something that we come across in the treatises on literary theory alone.

We have stories of great poets leaving their hometown in search of critics of great talent who can appreciate their poems. A case in point is the twelfth-century poet and philosopher Śrīharṣa the author of what is often considered the last of the great courtly epics in Sanskrit, the 'Niṣādīyacarita' or The Life of Nala, King of Niṣādiya. Vidyāpati in his Puruṣaparīkṣa presents Śrīharṣa as someone who left Bengal for the city of Vāraṇasī in search of a sahr̥daya. Vidyāpati says,

(Refer to Slide time 14:16)



“Sriharsha, upon realizing that Gold is tested in fire, and poetry in the assembly of literary critics. What use is his poem to a poet if the experts do not esteem it? left Bengal for the famed literary circle of Vāraṇasī, taking his poem with him. There he recited it to a scholar named Koka. Every day when the scholar would set off for his mid-day ablutions, he would hear Sriharsha reciting his poem as he followed behind. But never receiving any response, Sriharṣa one day spoke up: “Dear sir, I took great pains with this poem and traveled a great distance to come to you, despite my love for my native land, so that you could judge it. I follow behind you as you walk along the way,

reciting it in hopes of finding out what is or is not commendable in it. But, good sir, you neither praise nor blame it. I have to think you are not even listening.” Koka replied: “How can you say I have not been listening? On the contrary, I have heard the whole thing, and will tell you in detail what I have determined about correcting the entire work through a full analysis of its words and meanings. I’m not speaking from mere impressions—rather, I listened to the entire poem and have it all by heart. If you don’t believe me just listen.” He then recited all the verses he had heard over the entire preceding month. Sriharṣa listened with joy and amazement, and fell at his feet.

This shows that validation from a learned reader was always necessary for a poet to establish himself as a good poet.

So far, we have been primarily talking about the receptive readers who can evaluate the merit of a poem and, by extension Pratibha or the genius of the poet. Does it mean that kavya was being written only for these connoisseurs of art? No. Kavya was also written for the ordinary readers who have no knowledge about the technicalities underpinning a poetic composition. These ordinary readers are not doṣjnas. They are reading kāvyas to primarily enjoy or relish aesthetic emotions. Literary critics opine that along with enjoying the aesthetic pleasure, the readers of kāvyas will also get instructed in puruṣārthas or the object of human pursuit. Bhāmaha, who is considered the founding father of kāvyāśāstra in Sanskrit, shares the opinion of Bharata. According to Bhamaha, “Composition of good poetry, produces in readers ability in dharma, artha, kama and mokṣa.” In his commentary upon Udbhaṭa’s Kavyalankara-sara-saṃgraha, Pratiharenduraja opines that rasa is indeed a source of instruction for readers. Rudraṭa in Kavyalankara, in fact, privileges the deontic function of kāvyas over its aesthetic function. He often says that,

(Refer to Slide time 17:42)

Does not the knowledge of dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kāma (joy), and mokṣa (salvation) reach sensitive minds easily and pleasingly through poetry? People are always weary of śāstras. Therefore poetry contains rasa to serve the purpose of śāstras in a joyous manner. (149)

“Does not the knowledge of dharma or righteousness, artha or wealth, kāma or joy, and mokṣa or salvation reach sensitive minds easily and pleasingly through poetry? People are always weary of sastras. Therefore, poetry contains rasa to serve the purpose of sastras in a joyous manner.

This is not an isolated opinion, in fact. Abhinavagupta, in his *Locana* on Anandvardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* says that the study of good poetry gives readers skill in dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa. In *Vakroktijīvitā*, Kuntaka also sees rasa as a means to instruct readers about the four ends of life in a way that is conspicuously distinct from sāstra, purāṇas and the Veda. Kuntaka's position is that while the sāstra and the other allied disciplines talk about the moral duties incumbent upon men in an insipid way, kāvyā performs the same function in a very pleasurable manner. Kuntaka says,

(Refer to Slide time 18:54)

Literary artefacts such as mahākāvya create pleasure in the nobles. The noble persons like princes are supposed to learn the ends of life such as dharma. But being fickle and joyous by nature, they are reluctant to take an effort to learn them. Kāvya will be like a toy to them. Therefore they can learn dharma of life in a pleasurable way
(Vakroktijivita 55).

“Literary artefacts such as mahakavya create pleasure in the nobles. The noble persons like princes are supposed to learn the ends of life such as dharma. But being fickle and joyous by nature, they are reluctant to take an effort to learn them. Kāvya will be like a toy to them. Therefore, they can learn dharma of life in a pleasurable way.

In Kāvya prakāśa Mammaṭa also holds the same opinion: “Poetry brings fame and riches, knowledge of the ways of the world and relief from evils, and counsel sweet as from the lips of a beloved consort.”

According to Abhinavagupta, what lies, in fact, beneath the pleasing veneer of aesthetic emotion is undoubtedly a very strong desire to instruct the readers. For him,

(Refer to Slide time 19:54)

Princes who are not educated in Scripture—those words of sruti and smṛti which consists in commands like those of a master to do this or that—and who have not received instruction from history, which like a friend reveals to us the connection of cause and effect with such persuasive instances like ‘this result came from such an act,’ and who are therefore in pressing need of instruction for they, given the power to accomplish the wants of their subjects, can be given instruction in the four goals of man only by our entering into their hearts. And what enters into the heart is the relish of rasa (rasasvada, the imaginative experience of emotion). Now since this rasa is brought about by the union of the vibhāvas and their related factors, a union which is invariably connected with instruction in the four goals of man, it follows that the subjection of a man to the relishing of the rasas by a literary construction of the vibhāvas, etc., appropriate to rasa, serves at the same time for the instruction (vyutpatti) that naturally results. In this way [literary] delight (pratiti) is an aid to instruction. (Locana 3.10-14 f L)

“rasa is a sugar coated pill for the young princes who are neither educated in Scripture nor have received any instruction from history.” Abhinava observes: “Princes who are educated in Scripture- those words of sruti and smṛiti which consists in commands like those of a master to do this or that – and who have not received instruction from history, which like a friend reveals the connection of cause and effect with such persuasive instances like ‘this result came from such an act’. And who are therefore in pressing need of instruction for they, power to accomplish the wants of their subjects, can be given instruction in the four goals of man only by our entering into their hearts. And what enters into the heart is the relish of rasa (rasasvada, the imaginative experience of emotion). Now since this rasa is brought about by the union of the vibhāvas and their related factors, a union which is invariably connected with instruction in the four goals of man, it follows that the subjection of a man to the relishing of the rasas by a literary construction of the vibhāvas, etc., appropriate to rasa, serves at the same time for the instruction (vyutpatti) that naturally results. In this way [literary] delight is an aid to instruction.

In Sāhityadarpaṇa, Visvanātha opines that even a dumb-head will be morally enlightened through their consumption of kāvya. He says,

(Refer to Slide time 21:42)

Since the attainment of the fruits consisting of the class of four i.e. the four great objects of human desire—viz., Merit, Wealth, Enjoyment and Liberation—is pleasantly possible even in the case of those of slender capacity, by means of poetry only, therefore its nature shall be now set forth”
(Śṛṅgāraprakāśa,120)

“Since the attainment of the fruits consisting of the class of four, that are, the four great objects of human desire—such as., Merit, Wealth, Enjoyment and Liberation—is pleasantly possible even in the case of those of slender capacity, by means of poetry only, therefore its nature shall be now set forth” In Sringarprakasa, Bhoja also declares, “A literary artefact should be understood as a combination of sentences that informs us as to what we should do and we should not do”

So far, we have been talking about the history of the reader in Sanskrit poetics. In the next video, we will be talking about Bharata’s observation about the idea of reader in his Natyasastra. Then we will wind up this section on reader. I hope you have understood the lesson. Thank you.

(Refer to Slide time 22:52)

Bibliography

Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavabharati*. Vol. I, in *Natyasastra of Bharathamuni*, edited by K Krishnamoorthy. Oriental Institute Vadodara, 1992.

Abhinavagupta. “Locana.” In *The Dhvanyaloka of Anandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, by Anandavardhana. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Bhoja. —. *Sringaraprakasa*. Edited by Josyer G.S. Vol. I. Mysore: G.S Josyer, 1955.

— . *Sringaraprakasa*. Edited by Josyer G.S. Vol. II. Mysore: G.S Josyer, 1963.

Lienhard, Siegfried. *A History of Classical Poetry Sanskrit–Pali–Prakrit*. Vol. III. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984.

Mammaṭa. *Kāvya prakāśa of Mammaṭa*. Edited by Ganganath Jha. Varanasi: Bharathiya Vidya Prakashan, 1966.

Pollock, Sheldon . *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India*. Los Angeles: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Rajasekhara. *Kavyamimamsa*. Edited by Sadhana Parashar. Delhi: D.K Print World, 2000.

Udbhata. *Kavyalankara-sara-sangraha with the commentary, the Laghuvrtti of Induraja*. Edited by Narayana Daso Banhatti. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1982.

Rudrata. *Kavyalankara*. Bombay: Nirnaya Sagar Press, 1886.