

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory

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Lecture- 12

Who is the ideal spectator for natya?

Hello everyone,

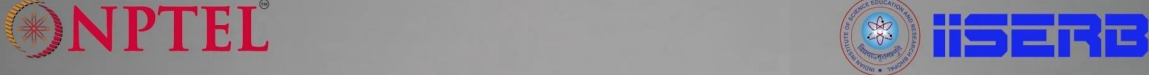
In the previous video lecture, we saw the idea of reader as envisioned by various literary theoreticians. In today's lecture, we are going to see the figure of an ideal spectator anticipated for natya or drama.

In the texts on dramatic theory various words are used to designate the spectators, such as Preksaka, sāmajika, sabhya, and sabhāsada and so on. Depending upon the class of the audience who appreciates the drama, Bharata classifies the success of drama into two, namely divine or daiviki and human or manusi. The divine success relates to the appreciation showered upon a drama by the cultured audience, who generally take interest in deeper and more subtle aspects of a dramatic performance, and they are above ordinary human beings; and the latter relates to the average spectators who "are generally moved by outward aspects of dramatic performance."

In the twenty-seventh adhyaya or chapter of Nāṭyaśāstra, Bharata mentions the qualities of an ideal spectator or prekṣaka. For him, an ideal spectator should have good vision and hearing. He should have the ability to distinguish between good and bad. He should be able to strike a balance between love and hatred. Bharata also lays a lot of emphasis on the spectator's ability to respond positively to aesthetic emotions expressed through drama. He says that ability to positively and emotionally respond to the events on the stage is an essential quality of a good spectator. He says that he who becomes happy upon seeing a person glad, and sorrowful upon seeing a character suffering, and he who feels miserable on seeing him miserable, is also considered fit to be a spectator in a drama. Here what he means is that an ideal spectator is someone who has the ability to conceive within himself the right aesthetic emotion that the playwright intends to have in the spectator at different junctures of the story or drama.

That said Bharata does not mean to say that all these qualities can be seen in one single spectator. If the spectator is not a great connoisseur of art, he can also choose to judge what he is familiar with or good at. Bharata's observation in this respect is noteworthy here. He says,

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Nāṭyaśāstra

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Bharata also does not see all the spectators as equally skilled in the art of appreciating a drama. He sees nāṭya as the fifth Veda who anyone can watch, learn and enjoy. So, when he talks about the audience, he has all kinds of people in his mind, not necessarily the learned ones. Bharata claims that,

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Nāṭya teach duty to those who are interested in the lessons of duty, love to those who are eager for its fulfilment, and it chastises those who are ill-bred or unruly, it promotes self-restraint in those who are not disciplined; it gives courage to cowards, energy to heroic persons, enlightens men of poor intellect and gives wisdom to the learned. It gives diversion to kings, and firmness to persons afflicted with sorrow, and the rules of acquiring money, to those who are for earning it, and it brings composure to persons agitated in mind (Nāṭyaśāstra).

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So, Bharata is also of the opinion that different spectators may find different items attractive in a drama. So the dramatist should take into account the nature of his audience, before deciding on the topic of the drama. He says that young spectators will be usually interested in seeing the representation of love, the learned one will be searching for a religious or philosophical doctrine, those who seek money will be interested in topics related to the earning of wealth; the ones without any passion will look for the principles of liberation; the heroic ones will love to find the odious and terrible sentiments, the personal combats and battles; the old people will be interested in purānic stories and stories of virtue. Women, children, and uncultured men will look for comedy and make-up. So, the bottom line of

Bharata's observation is that know your audience before you start it; or before you stage the drama.

It is also highly possible that there can be a dispute with respect to the judgement of the play. This situation particularly arises when the actors are competing with each other for a prize or a banner. In such a situation, it is mandatory that there should be a panel of judges. This panel of judges include an expert in the process of sacrifice, an actor, a prosodist, a grammarian, a king, an archer, a painter, a courtesan, a musician and a king's officer. Bharata also talks about the qualities of a judge. The judge who is going to declare the winner of a nāṭya performance should be of noble birth. He should be calm and well versed in s̄āstras. He should be young and impartial and interested in fame and dharma. He should be familiar with the four kinds of acting and be good at the six nāṭyāṅgās. He should be of stable mind and should be adept at playing the three kinds of music instruments. He should know about costumes, various forms of arts, places, and the languages spoken in various places or geographical locations. It is imperative that they should know grammar and poetic meters.

In Nāṭyasāstra, Bharata clearly mentions the duty of each of these judges. An expert in sacrifice will be an assessor in the representation of sacrifice, an actor will judge in general the histrionic representation, a prosodist judges the complicated metres, a grammarian analyses the details of speech, a king is a judge of royal character, and in matters related to the management of the harem, the archer judges the sausthava or the quality of the pose, and a painter judges the movements and dresses and make-up, which are at the bottom of a dramatic production; a courtesan will be a judge in matters relating to the enjoyment of love, and a musician is a judge of the application of notes or svaras and tāla or rhythm, and an officer or the king will evaluate the matter of showing courtesies. If there is a dispute among people who know s̄āstras, then the debate should be based on the dictums mentioned in the s̄āstras or scientific treatises. In course of deciding a controversy one should observe the performance of the parties involved without any partiality, and they should not take into account blemishes caused by the gods, enemies and portents. Blemishes from gods are the strong wind, fire, rains, fear from an elephant or a serpent, stroke of lightning, appearance of ants, insects, a beast of prey killing animals, etc. Blemishes created by an enemy include screaming, buzzing, noisy clapping, and the throwing of cow-dungs, clods of earth, grass and stones to the place of performance. Blemishes created by an enemy are considered by the wise to be due to jealousy, hostility to the party injured, etc. Blemishes due to portents result

from portents such as the earthquake, storm, the falling of meteors and the ilk. Bharata opines that these judges or examiners should neither be too near the stage nor too far from it. Their seats should be at a distance of six yards from the stage on which the performance happens. While deciding the merits of the drama, the judges or observers should not be partial at all.

Although critiques and creative writers of Sanskrit kāvya tradition often held the reader in high esteem, considering them as the true judge of a poet's creative excellence, nobody in fact took up the question of the reader's involvement in the production of a text's aesthetic emotion or rasa or its meaning. They all subscribed to the notion that an author supplies meaning and aesthetic emotion while the reader, the sahrdaya, receives and relishes them. In other words, neither Sanskrit literary theoreticians nor creative writers till around the tenth century ascribed any agency to the figure of the reader in the production of a text's signification or meaning or aesthetic emotion or rasa. For the earliest thinkers like Bhatta Lollata, rasa was actually located in the character. Although the ninth century literary critic, Samkuka, incorporated reader or spectator within his discursive framework, his theory also remained essentially text-oriented.

Samkuka's theory stated that rasa cannot be directly perceived, but can only be inferred by the reader from the imitation of characters and situations enacted by actors. So, in his theory of anumana, Samkuka was preoccupied primarily, especially solely with the nature of this imitation. The process of inference that the reader or spectator performs was completely ignored or sidelined. Similarly, Ānandavardhana, who wrote Dhvanyāloka to reveal to sahrdayas the ontology of dhvani or poetic suggestion, also turned a blind eye to the figure of the reader. Pollock observes,

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The first literary critic in Sanskrit kāvyasāstra to talk about the reader’s involvement in the process of aesthetic enjoyment was the tenth-century critic Bhatta Nāyaka, followed by his disciple Abhinavagupta in the eleventh century. So, according to both Bhatta Nāyaka and Abhinavagupta, rasa is neither perceived in the actor, nor is perceived by the spectators in themselves; rasa, he says, on the other hand, is ‘enjoyed’ by the spectators with the power of a special capacity called bhāvana. We will discuss it in detail when we discuss the rasa theory. So you do not need to be worried about these concepts.

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