

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory

Dr. Sreenath VS

Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Science Education and Research - Bhopal

Lecture- 17

Kavyasvarupa or the Ontology of kavya

Hello everyone, What is *kāvyaśvarūpa* or the ontology of *kāvya*, according to Sanskrit literary theoreticians? This is a concept that we have briefly discussed before. But I think it is important to elaborate on this since it forms the core of the enquiry initiated by Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra*. Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra* always held an ontological view about literature. That is to say, it is 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. Therefore, throughout its history of almost a millennium, Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra* was exclusively preoccupied with the task of identifying and analysing the formal devices generating literariness in a work of art. Considering *kāvya* as a ‘specialized’ mode of language marked by the ‘ingenious’ use of certain distinctive linguistic devices, *kāvyaśāstra* always made it a point to delimit *kāvya* from other uses of language such as *śāstra*, 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 Ānandavardhana’s *Dhvanyāloka*, distinguishes the remit of *kāvya* from that of the Veda and workaday language: “Both everyday sentences and Vedic sentences have meaning without being poems”. Hemacandra in *Kāvyañūśāsana* says that it is the presence of four components such as *śabda* (signifier), *artha* or signification, *guṇa* or poetic qualities and *alaṅkāra* or figures of speech that constitutes a *kāvya*. Vāgbhaṭa II delimits the ambit of *kāvya* by defining it as a composition of *śabda* and *artha* marked by the absence of *doṣas* and the presence of *guṇas* and *alaṅkāras*. Mammaṭa observes that “It, that is *kāvya*, consists in word and sense—without faults and with merits and excellences of style—which may at times be without figures of speech.”

In *Candrāloka*, Jayadeva sets the limit of poetic expression by defining *kāvya* as a verbal icon characterized by the absence of *doṣas* and the presence of *lakṣaṇā* (deviant utterance), *rīti* (diction or style), *guṇa*, *alaṅkāra*, *rasa* (aesthetic emotion) and *vṛtti* (linguistic modality).

Vidyānātha in *Pratāparudrīya* sees *kāvya* as a special composition of both *gadya* (prose) and *padya* (poetry) bereft of *doṣas* and adorned by *guṇa*, *alaṅkāra*, *śabda*, and *artha*. Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka talks about three crucial components that are conspicuously absent in other uses of language and present only in *kāvya*. According to him, these three elements include *abhidhāyakatva* or denotative function, *bhāvakatva* or ability to realize aesthetic experience, and *bhogakṛttva* or the experience of aesthetic emotion. In his commentary on *Dhvanyāloka*, Abhinava reproduces the view of Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka: “Rather, poetic words are of an altogether different nature from ordinary words, thanks to their threefold operation. Their denotative power or *abhidhāyakatva* operates within the limits of the literal meaning; their aesthetic efficacy or *bhāvakatva* operates in the area of the *rasas*, etc. [i.e., it transforms the *vibhāvas*, etc., into *rasa*]; and their efficacy of aesthetic enjoyment *bhogakṛttva* operates within the sensitive audience. The working of a poem consists of these three operations”.

Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka further distinguishes *kāvya* from *śāstra* and historical narratives: “One may distinguish the *śāstras* by the prominence they give to the word. One knows that stories are wedded to meaning. One forms a just notion of a poem by subordinating these two, viz., word and meaning, and making the operation or *vyāpāra* paramount.” Kuntaka opines that it is the figurative deviation of speech or *vakrokti* that makes a *kāvya* “different from the ordinary expression and *śāstras*.”

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 *kāvya*. In *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa*, Bhoja distinguishes between *kāvya* and other linguistic genres on the basis of the nature of the language employed in them. According to Bhoja, “While workaday language is the explicit language of science and daily life, *kāvya* is the deviant language found in texts teeming with aesthetic pleasure”. In *Sarasvatīkaṅṭhābharāṇa*, Bhoja illustrates the process in which a nondescript expression is made poetic and laden with *rasa* through the figurative deviation of speech. Bhoja says, “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 *kāvya*] are these—a novel idea; non-ordinary, mellifluous expression; beautiful composition; clarity in articulation and meaning that conforms to propriety.

In *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa*, Bhoja lists twelve rules governing the combination of signifier or *śabda* and signification or *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, figures of speech, aesthetic emotion, and the absence of poetic faults. We can see this exclusionist view of *kāvya* 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 Jagannātha in the seventeenth century observing that “*kāvya* is signifiers generating noble significations.”

According to Gerow, “the problem of *kāvyaśāstra* was then seen in differentiating that particular expression we call poetic from other verbal means, *śāstra*, and narrative” (224), and throughout its history of almost a millennium, *kāvyaśāstra* “never ever strayed away from this central problem.” In other words, *kāvyaśāstra* was incessantly preoccupied with the task of pinpointing factors that were responsible for the specificity of poetic language. Pollock observes, “What substantively constitutes *kāvya* and how literariness comes into being were naturally matters of on-going debate, and various elements were proposed as the essence of *kāvya*. But the fact that *kāvya* has an essence—a “self” or “soul”, as it was phrased—something marking it as different from every other language use was never doubted by anyone.”

This identification and scrutiny of formal factors that made *kāvya* a ‘special’ use of language was primarily motivated by the hope that an enquiry into the textual elements responsible for the unique nature of *kāvya* will contribute greatly to the creation of good art. In their endeavour to identify the ‘soul’ or the most important constituent of *kāvya*, different literary theoreticians privileged different formal elements as the inalienable mark of literature. Samudrabandha, a tenth-century commentator on Ruyyaka’s *Alaṅkārasarvasva*, gives us a glimpse into this. In his commentary on *Alaṅkārasarvasva*, Samudrabandha observes, “Literature is marked by certain special words and meaning. The speciality of these two that is *śabda* and *artha*, can be analysed in three ways—through some language feature or *dharma* or through some function *vyāpāra* 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 Vāmana, the third one by the author of *Vakroktijīvita*, the fourth by Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka and the fifth by Ānandavardhana.

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 *kāvya*, they all had a consensus of opinion on the idea that *kāvya* 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 *alaṅkāraśāstra*, which was often used synonymously with Sanskrit poetics, readily functions as a pointer to the teleology of Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra*. Because of *kāvyaśāstra*'s unwavering interest in the ornaments (*alaṅkāra*) of *kāvya* that made literature a higher-order linguistic composition, the term *alaṅkāraśāstra* was often used synonymously with *kāvyaśāstra*. A survey of the major theoretical positions in Sanskrit literary theories such as *alaṅkāra*, *rīti*, *guṇa*, *vakrokti*, *dhvani*, and *aucitya* will further corroborate this observation.

For Bhāmaha, the earliest known exponent of *kāvyaśāstra*, it is primarily *alaṅkāras* or figures of speech that transform a piece of writing into *kāvya*. Therefore, in his *Kāvyaḷaṅkāra*, Bhāmaha is chiefly concerned with the identification and analysis of *alaṅkāras* that beautify a work of literature. Bhāmaha lists and analyses thirty-eight *alaṅkāras* in his attempt to identify the unique nature of *kāvyaśarīra*. According to Bhāmaha, what makes an *alaṅkāra* different from other uses of language is its figurative deviation (*vakrata*) from ordinary language. Therefore he employs the term *alaṅkāra* to refer to all the deviant linguistic expressions. Bhāmaha opines that a poet should always be diligent in developing this art of figurative deviation, which functions as the vital force of all *alaṅkāras*. He notes, “This peculiar method of statement or *vakrokti* is found everywhere (i.e. in other *alaṅkāras*). By this, meanings are rendered beautiful. Poets should be assiduous in cultivating it. Where is an *alaṅkāra* without this?” In the fifth chapter of *Kāvyaḷaṅkāra*, Bhāmaha points out that a composition devoid of figurative deviation of sense—such as ‘the sun has set,’ ‘the moon shines’ or ‘the birds fly back to their nest’—is a mere ‘report’ or *vārta*, not *kāvya*. What Bhāmaha’s theory of *alaṅkāra* shows is that *kāvya* is distinct from other uses of language by the presence of *alaṅkāras*. So his analysis of *kāvyaśarīra* is mainly oriented towards the identification and scrutiny of *alaṅkāras* which present everything in a defamiliarized form.

Daṇḍin, in his *Kāvyaḍarśa*, declares that the aim of his work is to identify the elements that make up the body of *kāvya*: “Here, that is in *Kāvyaḍarśa*, I state the characteristic marks of *kāvya* [*kāvyaalakṣaṇa*], after my careful study and scrutiny of the previous treatises.” In *Kāvyaḍarśa*, Daṇḍin broadens the scope of his scrutiny of *kāvyaśarīra* by increasing the number of figures of speech to thirty-five and that of poetic merits to ten. Considering the amount of attention he pays to the analysis of *alaṅkāra* and *guṇa*, we can safely assume that in Daṇḍin’s conception, *kāvyaśarīra* is primarily constituted by *guṇas* and *alaṅkāras*.

Vāmana’s *Kāvyaḍalaṅkāra-sūtra-vṛtti* opens with a chapter titled *kāvya-śarīra-nirṇaya*, or the ‘understanding of the anatomy of *kāvya*.’ Such a self-explanatory title immediately informs us that the purpose of his work is to identify and analyse the formal factors that go into the making of the body of *kāvya*. Vāmana sees a *guṇa* or poetic merit as the vital force of literature. According to him, a verbal expression without *guṇa* cannot become a *kāvya*, just as a group of words without syntax cannot make a coherent meaning. He is of the view that a literary style or *rīti* where all the *guṇas* are properly knit together serves as the soul of *kāvya*. Though Vāmana opines that the body of *kāvya* is characterized by sound and sense adorned by *guṇas* and *alaṅkāras*,” he privileges *guṇas* over *alaṅkāras*. According to him, it is *guṇas* such as *ojas* and *prasāda* that are responsible for the unique nature of *kāvya*. The function of *alaṅkāra*, on the other hand, is only to enhance the beauty of *kāvya*, which is already beautified by the presence of *guṇas*. Though there is a shift of focus in Vāmana’s theory from *alaṅkāra* to *guṇa*, the idea that *kāvya* is a supra-normal entity remains unchanged.

Ānandavardhana, the successor of Vāmana, criticises Vāmana’s view that *rīti* is the soul of *kāvya*. According to Ānanda, “It was persons unable to analyse the true nature of poetry . . . who propounded the doctrine of “styles.” For Ānanda, *dhvani* or poetic suggestion is the soul of *kāvya*. Therefore, in his *Dhvanyāloka*, Ānandavardhana examines the nature of *dhvani* in detail. He states the purpose of his critical inquiry in the following manner: “Here some might contend that poetry is nothing more than what is embodied in word and meaning. The means of beautifying this pair that lies in sound, such as alliteration, and those that lie in meaning, such as simile, are well known. Also well-known are those qualities such as sweetness, which possess certain properties of phoneme and arrangement. The *vṛttis*, which have been described by some writers under such names as *upanāgarikā*, and which are not different in function from these [figures and qualities], also have reached our ears. So also the styles or *rītis* such as *vaidarbhī*. What is this thing called *dhvani* that should differ from these?”

According to Ānandavardhana, *dhvani* is the linguistic device by which a sign or a set of signs expresses something other than what it apparently signifies. Ānanda says, “The type of poetry which the wise call *dhvani* is that in which sense or word, subordinating their own meaning, suggests that [suggested] meaning.” According to this theory, what primarily distinguishes *kāvya* from other uses of language is the presence of *dhvani*. This does not mean that he turns a blind eye to the linguistic devices such as *alaṅkāra* and *guṇa* that his predecessors had previously identified as the distinguishing mark of *kāvya*. According to Ānandavardhana, *alaṅkāras* function like ornaments on a person’s body, while *guṇas* are like qualities like courage. However, the soul of *kāvya*, for him, is undoubtedly *dhvani*.

Kuntaka, a tenth century Sanskrit literary critic, considers *vakrokti* or the figurative deviation of speech, as the chief source of literariness. According to Kuntaka, “*Kāvya* is that combination of *śabda* or signifier and *artha* or signified which shines forth with *vakrata* (figurative deviation of speech) to impart pleasure to readers.” According to him, “*Vakrokti* signifies that kind of beautiful signification (*abhidhā*) which is different from common usage. Kuntaka says that “These two [*śabda* and *artha*] are things to be ornamented. The only ornament that beautifies them is *vakrokti*, and *vakrokti* issues from a poet’s expertise in using language beautifully”. He divides *vakrata* into five important categories such as *varṇa-vinyāsa-vakrata*, or figurative deviation of phonemes, consonants, and syllables; *pada-pūrvārtha-vakrata* or figurative deviation of speech to transcend the literal meaning of a word, *pada-parārtha-vakrata* or figurative deviations of the terminal part of a word; *vākya-vakrata* or the figurative deviation of sentence; *prakaraṇa-vakrata* or figurative deviation of episodes and *prabandha-vakrata* or figurative deviation of the plot. Considering *vakrokti* as the supreme governing principle of *kāvya*, Kuntaka makes a thorough analysis of the various forms of *vakrokti* in the four chapters of his *Vakroktijīvitā*.

Kṣemendra, an eleventh-century literary critic from Kashmir, holds that *aucitya* or propriety is the hallmark of *kāvyaśarīra*. Unlike the literary theoreticians we have seen before, Kṣemendra does not introduce any new formal feature as the source of literariness. On the other hand, he lays emphasis on the proper organization of the linguistic devices, which are already considered the hallmark of literature. He is of the view that in *kāvya*, the proper organization of these distinct linguistic devices is as important as their presence. According to him, neither figures

of speech nor poetic merits will look charming without propriety. Kṣemendra's concept of *aucitya* is an all-encompassing precept that is applied to all aspects of *kāvya*.

Emphasising the importance of propriety in *kāvya*, Kṣemendra says, "Figures of speech are but ornaments, while merits of speech are mere excellences; but propriety is the abiding life of poetry, full of flavour." Kṣemendra compares a poem that does not conform to the rules of propriety to an unruly person wearing his girdle string around his neck, necklace around the waist, anklets on the hands and bracelets on the feet. By prescribing rules regarding the ontology of *kāvya*, such as 'how figures of speech should be organized,' 'how characters should be represented', or 'how different sentiments should be expressed,' *aucitya* delimits the ambit of *kāvya* from the nondescript use of language. In short, by laying out rules regarding the composition of literature, Kṣemendra adhered to the view that literature is a 'special' way of using language, and literariness is clearly a textual entity emanating from the writers' sense of decorum concerning the organization of various formal elements.

From this analysis, we can arrive at two major points that are central to this study— (1) the entire epistemology of *kāvyaśāstra* had a consensus of opinion on the idea that *kāvya* is a 'special' way of using language, and (2) the chief concern of *kāvyaśāstra* was the identification and scrutiny of different linguistic elements responsible for the unique nature of *kāvya*. It is significant to note that Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra* in its canonical form is very much similar to Russian Formalism in the Western critical praxis. Formalism, like Sanskrit literary science, sees literature as a special mode of language, distinctly different from ordinary language. According to Eagleton, "The Formalists, saw literary language as . . . a 'special' kind of language, in contrast to the 'ordinary' language we commonly use." For Formalists, say, Abrams and Harpham, "[t]he central function of ordinary language is to communicate to auditors a message, or information, by reference to the world existing outside of language . . . The linguistics of literature differs from the linguistics of practical discourse because its laws are oriented toward producing the distinctive features that formalists call literariness." Jan Mukarovsky, in his "Standard Language and Poetic Language", says that poetic language, unlike the ordinary language of everyday life, foregrounds its unique nature by pushing communication into the background and inviting the readers' attention to its own unique form. This conception of literature as a special mode of language endorsed by Mukarovsky typifies the view of all Formalist critics about literature.

The primary function of these special formal devices, according to Victor Shklovsky, is to 'defamiliarize' or 'estrangle' literary language from the ordinary use of language. Assuming that a literary work has a non-ordinary ontology characterized by the presence of literariness, the Formalist critics were preoccupied with the task of identifying and analyzing the special formal devices generating literariness in a work of literature. In the lines cited by Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson observes: "The object of study in literature is not literature but 'literariness' that is what makes a given work a literary work." What we should note here is that both the Formalist theoretical position in the west and Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra* tradition in the east hold an exclusionist view of literature which proposes that only certain uses of language characterized by a special treatment can qualify to become literature.