

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory

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Lecture- 24

Rasa Theory and Bhatta's Nayaka

Hello everyone, I hope you are thorough with the theory of rasa put forward by Ānandavardhana. After Ānandavardhana, the next major literary theoretician to deal with the concept of rasa was Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka. Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka conceptualized his theory of rasa in his *Hṛdayadarpaṇa* which was lost beyond recall. So, we know of his theory only through excerpts quoted by critics like Abhinavagupta, Hemacandra, Mammaṭa and so on. We have to be satisfied with a partial understanding of his critical corpus and all the failings that such a partial understanding entails. However, it is safe to say that he was the first to bring the viewer into the rasa experience.

Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka argued that rasa is not a perceptible product brought forth by the composite working of artistic elements. If rasa were produced or manifested in the actor, then it would not have become a “taste” for the spectator. This is because there is no way we can access somebody else’s experience through inference. It is also wrong to argue, he said, that rasa is produced within the spectator. If rasa were produced within the spectator, it would again bring about another set of problems. The spectator would be so immersed in one or another state of mind such as passion, disgust, shame, etc. to the point of not being able to enjoy the dramatic performance on stage. That is to say, if rasa were internal to the spectator, one would feel actual pain and never again go to the theatre to see sad plays. Second, if rasa has to be produced within the spectator, there should be a vibhāva or causal factor. Where will the spectator find a vibhāva to have the rasa generated within him?

During a dramatic performance, what can possibly become a vibhāva for the generation of rasa in the spectator is another character. But in reality, a character can become the vibhāva for only another character. In other words, Sītā can become a vibhāva only for Rāma the character, not for the spectator. Now it could be argued that when the spectator watches Sītā on the stage, he will be reminded of his wife and this will possibly generate rasa within the spectator. In other words, since Sītā and the spectator’s wife could probably share the common attribute of being a wife, one can argue that the image of Sītā drives home to the spectator’s mind thoughts about his own wife, thereby stimulating his sthāyibhāva. But Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka ruled out this possibility. According to Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, this is not actually possible in reality. It is true that there was no point of comparison between an ordinary woman and somebody like Sītā who was the consort of Lord Rāma. For instance, the śṛṅgāra rasa in *Uttararāmacarita* is evoked by the romance between Rāma and Sītā. How could the spectator experience this śṛṅgāra rasa towards Sītā, knowing fully well that Sītā is a divine presence who is beyond his mundane sphere of life? Besides, one cannot find incidents similar to everything that is presented in a drama to get his or her stable emotions stimulated. For example, in the case of the representation of vīra rasa in an incident like leaping over the ocean and the like, how can the spectator ever claim to have anything in common?

An opponent will further argue that while watching the performance of the actor who is doing the role of the character of Rāma, the spectator will be reminded of actual Rāma and his actions. Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka says that this position is also faulty. How can the spectator gets reminded of the actions actual Rāma, while watching the character Rāma on the stage? Since the spectator has not seen real Rāma ever in life, it is also wrong to argue that the spectator will be reminded of actual Rāma as result of watching the performance of the character on the stage to be in possession of an emotion. It is also wrong to argue that the spectator is said to have ‘perceived’ Rāma through some other means of valid knowledge, such as testimony or inference to supply a basis for his memory. According to Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, these various forms of perception lead only to information or jñāna, not to rasa, which must be experienced through some other means.

Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka talks about three crucial components that are conspicuously absent in other uses of language and present only in *kāvya*. He is of the view that it is the operation of these three elements which gives rise to rasa in a work of literature or art. 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. Here the term denotative function or *abhidhāyakatva* should not be understood as a word’s ability to denote a meaning. On the other hand, the term *abhidhāyakatva* should be understood as a literary language. Pollock observes, “For Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, *abhidhā* is extended far beyond its narrow meaning to embrace literary expression as such, including phonic language qualities or *guṇas*) and figures of speech or *alankaras*. . . . In fact, *abhidhā* in Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka’s usage is best understood as “literary language”; something completely different from the language of scripture and everyday discourse, as Abhinavagupta describes it” (Pollock, “What was Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka Saying? 153). 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 (*abhidhāyakatva*) operates within the limits of the literal meaning; their aesthetic efficacy (*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” (*Locana* 221-22).

According to Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, *abhidhā* is endowed with a special power called *bhāvanā* or revelation. This is how he distinguishes between the two: “Rasa is revealed by a special power assumed by words in poetry and drama, the power of revelation or *bhāvana* (Gnoli 45). This power has the special function of universalizing or generalizing the things presented or described” in drama. During the process of universalization or *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*, the aesthetic elements such as *vibhāva*, *anubhāva*, and *vyabhicāribhāva* are stripped of their particularities such as “this is the divine figure Sītā,” or “she is a queen,” or “she is another person’s (Rāma’s) wife.” After the process of universalization, what we get is Sītā emptied of all her particularities, which enables us to experience the stable emotion that Rāma feels for Sītā. Upon the realization of *rasa*, a third stage known as *bhoga* (aesthetic relish) begins. “The *Rasa*, revealed by this power of *bhāvanā* is then enjoyed through a sort of enjoyment different from direct experience, from memory, etc.” (Gnoli 46).

It is clear that Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka believed that the enjoyment of *rasa* is different from our normal experience of emotions. During the enjoyment of *rasas*, we do not experience the negative effect that the counterparts of these aesthetic emotions—the *sthāyibhāvas*—have on us in our real life. For example, we enjoy *bhayānaka rasa* or *bībhatsā* without being frightened or repulsed. This explains why we enjoy watching horror films or read extremely depressing novels. An aesthetic emotion universalized by the power of *bhāvanā* gives us a sense of

pleasure. This experience of universalized emotion is so special that the spectator never thinks that it is somebody else's feeling. There is a complete identification with the emotion that the character feels. However, the experience of these universalized emotions differs radically from real-life emotions. We are traumatized by tragic events in our life; however, reading or watching *Hamlet* gives us supreme pleasure despite its oppressively tragic atmosphere, because it pertains to the artistic realm.

Sādhāraṇīkaraṇa or the process of universalization is at the core of Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's concept of the rasa experience. He also considered the process by which the spectator is able to forget, at least temporarily, their personal and practical interests, and be immersed in another character's experience, as analogical to spiritual experience. As Gnoli explains:

"Rasa, the aesthetic experience revealed by the power of revelation (bhāvanā), is not noetic in character, is not a perception, but an experience, a fruition (bhoga). This fruition is characterized by a state of lysis (laya), of rest into our own consciousness, the pervasion of consciousness by bliss and light: it belongs to the same order as the enjoyment of the supreme brahman. (xxiii) "

This shows how his philosophical perceptions colored his aesthetic concepts. More importantly, it also reveals the seriousness with which our ancient critics approached the idea of art and art experience. Furthermore, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka differed from many of his contemporaries in his view of the purpose of art. He did not agree that the primary function of art was to instruct; he believed that instruction was secondary to the artistic value of the work.

(for a detailed reading of Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's theory, read *Abhinavabhāratī* 270–271; *Kāvya prakāśa* 56 and 2.4 L of *Dhvanyāloka*).