

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory
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Lecture- 29
The Concept of Aucitya: An Introduction

Hello everyone, in this video lecture, we are going to learn the concept of *aucitya* in Sanskrit poetics. In this module on the concept of *aucitya*, we will be primarily doing two things.

First of all, we will see the history of the concept of *aucitya* and trace the opinion of various Sanskrit theorists in this respect down the line. Then, we will see the two major ways in which *aucitya* functions in Sanskrit *kavyasastra*. And finally, we will also explore the impact of *aucitya* on *kāvya*.

In early India, the reading of literature was also considered a spiritual activity, aiming to liberate readers from their materialistic attachments. Aesthetic emotion or *rasa* was often considered a secular counterpart of the spiritual bliss. Abhinavagupta, in his commentary on *Dhvanyāloka*, records Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's observations about the unique nature of aesthetic experience:

"Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka calls aesthetic experience a special feeling that is similar to the great bliss that one derives by identifying oneself with the highest Brahman."

He calls this special feeling *brahma- svāda sahodara*. Abhinava also shares the same opinion. According to Abhinava, the relishing of *rasa* is *alaukika* or supernormal. For him, the process of aesthetic relish is *lokottararūpa* or "something which transcends the

experience of the workday world.” Does this mean that *kāvya* was absolutely removed from the constraints of the practical concerns of social life? In reality, *kāvya* was heavily controlled and tailored by the notions of *aucitya* prevalent in the society.

The Sanskrit word *aucitya* can literally be translated into English as ‘propriety.’ *Aucitya* or propriety is the acceptable practice in any field. In the domain of literature, it can mean two things. First, it can mean the use of right word or right aesthetic component that suits the context. It can also mean the standards of behaviour that are conventionally considered acceptable in any society. I will explain this with the help of a banal example from real life. Suppose, you are writing an email to your professor? How will you address your professor in the email? Or what salutation will you be using? You will write Dear professor so and so. You will not write ‘Hey there.’ Why do you use ‘Dear Professor,’ instead of ‘Hey there.’ The answer is very simple. You know that is not the right usage according to the cultural conventions. So, there are a whole lot of conventions concerning the right usage of expressions in a particular context. The same is the case is with the behaviour of characters. In a society, there are so many ‘discourses’ or rules of propriety governing one’s behaviour. For instance, we have notions of propriety which tell us how we are supposed to behave in a public space, how we are supposed to address our elders, how one should prepare a research paper and so on.

It is very much possible to draw a parallel between the India concept of *aucitya* and the Greek and Roman classical notion of decorum. Aristotle in his poetics emphasizes the need for the poet to aim for the “necessary or the probable in characterization and diction.” For example, Aristotle opines that it would be improper for the part of a dramatist to show death on the stage, as it causes uneasiness in the minds of the spectators. We can see the same concept of

decorum or propriety occupying a predominant position in works of Cicero's *De Oratore* and Horace's *Ars Poetica*. This means that classical literature in general seems to be under the sway of this insistence on the "right things to do." It is possible to argue that decorum or *aucitya* operated in two ways in classical theories of literary production. First of all, it functioned as a guiding principle for the inclusions and exclusions elements. Second, as a set of unwritten rules that outline the limits of the representable in literature.

The concept of *aucitya* had always been central to the treatment of literature in Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra*, although it developed as an independent theoretical position in literary science only in the eleventh century with Kṣemendra's *Aucityavicāracarica*. Pollock's observation in his book, *The Language of Gods in the World of Men* is particularly noteworthy here. Pollock says, "Propriety came to function as a critical standard in literary judgement at a relatively early date, and by the time of its most complete exposition in the eleventh century, it had become an all-embracing category of fitness."

Pollock says that the idea of *aucitya* was "the life force pervading the limbs of a literary text, in regulating the use of everything from particular preverbs, particles, and individual words . . . to figures of speech, aesthetic moods (*rasa*), and the argument of the work as a whole." (*Language of the Gods* 198).

We need to particularly keep in our mind that the first one to use the concept of *aucitya* in poetry was Yasovarman of Kanauj in his drama *Ramabhyudaya* in the 8th century. In the prologue to the drama, Yasovarman points out the importance of *aucitya* in literature"

"Words suitable to each character

Characters befitting the whole story

The culmination of *rasa* at the right time and no deviation from the story line;

a neat organization of component parts and the incorporation of suitable words.

These are the virtues which will win attention of the erudite audience."

Yaśovarman here refers to the essential qualities which make a good drama. The first among them is the composition of appropriate speech which suit the nature and rank of the characters. The second one is the use of appropriate characters and the third one is the delineation of characters in their proper moods in order to develop the rasa in the proper place. Bhoja later on incorporates this idea in his *Śṅgāraprakāśa*.

A review of some major texts that became landmarks in the intellectual history of Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra* will clearly show the importance of *aucitya* in Sanskrit poetics. As in the case of many other topics, "the idea of *aucitya* can be traced back to Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Bharata opines that being an imitation of the world, *nāṭya* should closely follow the ways and manners accepted in the society. When he says that the characters in drama should wear costumes according to their age, should walk according to their costume, and should speak according to their gait, he is implicitly stating that one should be attentive to the idea of *aucitya*. Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin, Vāmana, Viśvanātha, Mahimabhaṭṭa, and Hemacandra are also equally concerned with the concept of *aucitya* through their discussion of *kāvya doṣas*, the improper elements in literature that can ruin the beauty of *kāvya*.

The first one to mention it in poetics was Rudrata in the 9th century. Up to Rudraṭa, the idea of *aucitya* was being discussed in literary criticism without using the term *aucitya*. Rudraṭa's *kāvyaḷaṅkāra* is the first text to use the term *aucitya* in literary theory. Rudraṭa uses the term *aucitya* first in the second chapter of *Kāvyaḷaṅkāra* during his discussion of *śabdāḷaṅkāra*. Rudraṭa observes that they are to be used only after due thoughts on *aucitya*. The word

aucitya again occurs in the third chapter when he warns the poets against the dangers of using yamaka in poems. He opines that the poets should be very careful in the use of yamakas.

Probably the first author to reflect systematically upon the concept of *aucitya* is Ānandavardhana. In *Dhvanyāloka*, Ānandavardhana clearly speaks about the importance of *aucitya* in literature. According to Ānanda, “A poet who follows the system of Bharata and others, who studies the work of great poets of the past, and who gives rein to his own genius, must be attentive, and exert the greatest care not to relax or depart from the proprieties of the *vibhāvas* and other factors of *rasa*”.

Mahimabhaṭṭa, in his seminal work *Vyaktiviveka*, sees impropriety as the only cause for the spoiling of aesthetic emotion. For him, “Composing a work in conformity with propriety is the very *Upaniṣad* of *rasa*.”

In *Vakroktijīvita*, Kuntaka sees *aucitya* as a poetic merit and insists that a poet should pay due attention to it during the course of writing. Kuntaka’s discussion of the idea of *aucitya* is primarily in connection with his criticism of Udbhaṭa’s argument that *ūrjasvin* is a figure of speech. *Urjasvin* is the indecorous representation of *rasas* and *bhāvas* in a work or art or literature. According to Udbhaṭa, *ūrjasvin* is “the composition of sentiments [*rasas*] and feelings [*bhāvas*] wherein an action transgresses propriety (*anaucityappravarttānām*) because of anger, desire and so on”. The example given by Udbhaṭa for *ūrjasvin* is Śiva’s indecorous advance towards Pārvaī before their marriage.

Kuntaka does not subscribe to Udbhaṭa’s view that *ūrjasvin* is an *alaṅkāra*, since it tampers with the propriety of the period. Kuntaka observes that *rasa*, *bhāvas*, etc. that are bound together in an improper or *anaucitya* fashion not only impede the improvement of *rasa*, but

also spoil it altogether . He asks how a *rasa* marred by impropriety can shine forth as an ornament? In the third chapter of *Vakroktijīvitā*, Kuntaka repeats Ānandavardhana and Mahimabhaṭṭa’s stance that the spoiling of *rasa* is caused solely by the breach of propriety. In *Kāvya prakāśa*, Mammaṭa also warns the poets against impropriety by saying that impropriety or *anaucitya* results in the aberration of emotion (*rasābhāsa*).

If these critics were concerned with the observation of the concept of *aucitya* in literary works, the tenth-century literary critic Bhoja went a step further by stating that he was concerned with the moral ethos of his time even in the composition of his own voluminous treatise on literary science *Śrīngāraprakāśa*. In the seventh chapter of *Śrīngāraprakāśa*, Bhoja declares, “I hereby pray to the omnipotent God to ensure that while I am composing this book, there would be no transgression of the established order, practice of the social orders and the four life stages”.

In his *Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharaṇa*, Bhoja talks about eight kinds of *aucityas* such as *viśayaaucitya* or the propriety of subject, *vācyaucitya* or the propriety of speech, *deśaucitya* or the propriety of place, *samayaucitya* or propriety of time, *vaktrviśayaucitya* or the propriety of using language according to the status of the speaker, and *arthaucitya* (propriety in the use of language according to the subject matter).