

## An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory

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Lecture- 34

Aucitya and the Reader

In the previous video lecture, we saw two things. First of all, Sanskrit *kavya* did not generally veer away from the generally accepted notion of *aucitya* in society. In other words, the notion of *aucitya* was not remaining isolated from the realm of *kavya* as a theoretical concept. It was followed closely by literary theoreticians. Then we enquired how did creative writers were conditioned to follow the notion of *aucitya*. Here, we saw that it was made possible through *kavisika*. That is, any aspiring poet was supposed to learn *kavyasastra* before composing poems. And an important part of the syllabus of *kavisiksa* was *aucitya*. We also saw that Sanskrit literary theoreticians also considered *kavya* as a way to instruct the readers, although entertainment was their primary concern. How did *kavya* was supposed to perform this didactic function?

What we specifically need to note here is that the didactic function that *kāvya* performed was entirely different from that of the *Vedas* and *śāstras*. Abhinavagupta's observation is a case in point. Abhinava in his *Locana* opines that while poetry instructs after the fashion of a wife, *Vedas* instruct like a master. Mammaṭa reproduces the same quotation in *Kāvya prakāśa*, while talking about the way in which *kāvya* instructs its readers. The crux of Abhinavagupta's dictum is that while *śāstra* and the *Vedas* explicitly give moral instruction to readers, *kāvya* performed its deontic function rather implicitly, by producing in readers an aspiration to act like the law-abiding noble characters. While the victory of the propriety-bound noble characters inspired readers to conform to *aucitya*, the fall of the indecorous *adhama* characters made them repulsive. Bhoja makes this point clear in his *Śrīṅgāraprakāśa*. He explains at length about the way in which readers need to read *kāvya*, and self-fashion themselves after the characters who abide by the rules of decorum prevalent in the society.

Bhoja says, "Literary texts are supposed to provide moral instruction. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* and other literary works, authors instruct us to act like Rāma and not like Rāvaṇa by showing us the eventual victory of a righteous man and the fall of a morally degenerate one. Since Rāma paid heed to his father's counsel, he emerged victorious, although he was exiled to the forest;

but Rāvaṇa, who was capable of conquering the three worlds, perished because he desired for another person's wife. This is a message regarding prohibition and precept. All the literary works such as *mahākāvya* and *prabandha* are composed in a similar fashion.

Bhoja's conviction of the 'uses' of stories is in line with Plato's concept of poetry as a sugar-coated pill, that the readers should necessarily fashion themselves after the image of the noble characters portrayed in *kāvya*. While *śāstra*, *itihāsa* and the *Vedas* explicitly inform their readers how to behave, *kāvya* coaxes its readers into modelling their subjectivity after the noble characters who conform to the mores and values of the society.

Bhoja is not the sole author to talk about this process of self-fashioning. He is, in fact, merely reproducing and explicating the ideas of his predecessors. One of the first literary theoreticians to comment upon this reader-oriented didactic function of *kāvya* was Kuntaka. In *Vakroktijīvita*, Kuntaka talks about the importance of readers self-fashioning themselves after the noble heroes in *kāvya* who follow *dharma-vidhi* or the moral action prescribed by the society: In the *Rāmāyaṇa*-based dramas of great poets which shine forth with all the five figurative deviations, what we have on the surface is the description of the noble heroes. But in reality, it ends up in a moral injunction—'act like Rāma, not like Rāvaṇa.' Similarly, in *Tāpasavatsarāja*, the surface meaning denotes the history of the 'flower-hearted' hero who is immersed in lovely games. But in reality, it advises [indirectly] that it is incumbent upon a minister to save his king who is drowning in the sea of sorrow.

In his *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, Viśvanātha makes a similar observation. According to Viśvanātha, a reader who is desirous of achieving the four-ends of human life should always model himself or herself upon the ideal characters of *kāvya*. "To attain the four ends of human life from *kāvya*, one should act like Rāma and not like Rāvaṇa".

In *Kāvya prakāśa*, Mammaṭa also subscribes to the view that art is for life's sake. Mammaṭa observes, "Such poetry is the work of poets, clever in depicting things in a manner passing the comprehension of ordinary men. It offers to other poets and cultured men counsel most persuasively, like a beloved wife, by means of a moving tenderness in the manner of it (that is, in the words)—counsel such as that one should behave like Rāma and not like Rāvaṇa. As such, poetry is by all means to be studied and cultivated." This shows that art was to teach people how they should live their lives righteously in society.

From these passages dealing with the deontic function of *kāvya*, it could be drawn that *kāvyaśāstra*, especially the concept of *aucitya*, conceptualized *kāvya* as a ‘suggestive force upon the readers.’ This function of ‘suggestive force’ that Sanskrit literary science ascribes to *kāvya* is something that it has directly borrowed from the *pūrvamīmāṃsa* tradition.

The *pūrvamīmāṃsa* hermeneutics holds that all *Vedic* passages are supposed to impart a moral injunction to its listener. Normally, only prohibitive and injunctive utterances have the power to propose a command, and all other forms of sentences are usually statements of facts. But the view of the *mīmāṃsakas* is that even those passages which are neither injunctive nor prohibitive have the capacity to terminate a command or injunction. They call these sentences which perform the prohibitive or injunctive function at a subliminal level, as *arthavāda* passages. In his commentary on Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Abhinavagupta exemplifies the *arthavāda* theory of the *pūrvamīmāṃsa* scholars.

Abhinava opines, “While a person listens to sentences from the scripture such as these—‘They conducted a rite of [twenty-one] night,’ or ‘He proffered [the oblation] into the fire’—a qualified person who has the desire for the sacrificial fruit and other requirements will at first have the literal comprehension of the sentence which will be followed by a strong inclination towards the action described. After this, an excessive cognition dawns upon him with the result that the original time mentioned in the scripture is set aside, and then he thinks, ‘May I also hold a sacrificial session,’ or ‘May I also offer the oblation.’ Cognition of this ilk is termed differently by different philosophical schools such as *pratibhā* (intellection), *bhāvanā* (effectuation), *vidhi* (injunction), *udyoga* (exertion) and so on.” By describing the merit of an action, the above *arthavāda* sentence persuades the listener to perform a similar action.

Bhoja’s comment in *Śrīṅgāraprakāśa* on the deontic function of *kāvya* clearly shows that *kāvyaśāstra* borrowed the idea of ‘symbolic power’ from *arthavāda* of the *mīmāṃsa* philosophers. Bhoja says,

“Every sentence has a communicative function. Even if it is not explicitly optative . . . every sentence aims toward a command or prohibition. For instance, in the sentence ‘alms are given here,’ what we should comprehend is a command: ‘stay here.’ If it is said that ‘there are thieves on the way,’ it should be comprehended that ‘one should not tread that path.’ In the sentence, ‘There are sharks in the water, we must understand ‘do not swim here.’ A

larger meaning like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, also functions in a similar manner. Rāma, despite his exile in the forest obeyed his father's command and achieved success, whereas Rāvaṇa, despite being capable of conquering the whole world, desired for another person's consort and perished. Hence pay heed to your father's order, do not desire for another man's wife. Act like Rāma not Rāvaṇa"

As it is shown in Bhoja's comment, an *arthavāda* sentence need not always result in the injunction of a positive action. It can also intend to prevent the reader from performing a particular action. Śabara opines that an *arthavāda* sentence can produce "an attraction to or repulsion from certain things". In short, an *arthavāda* sentence can either be positive recommending a ritual for a certain purpose, or negative prescribing abstinence from a bad result.

The *mīmāṃsā* scholars opine that there are two sorts of *bhāvanas* or the process of bringing something into existence at work in an *arthavāda* sentence namely *śabdi-bhāvana* and *arthi-bhāvana*. *Śabdi-bhāvana* is language-oriented, in the sense that it creates in the listener a desire to perform or stay away from an action. On the other hand, *arthi-bhāvana* refers to the actual performance of that action by the listener. For example, a person's wish to perform a sacrifice which she or he gets after reading a passage about the merits of a sacrifice refers to *śabdi-bhāvana*, whereas his actual performance of the sacrifice is *arthi-bhāvana*. Sanskrit literary theoreticians believe that *kāvya* has the potential to make use of these two sorts of *bhāvanas* that *arthavāda* contains.

Since, *kāvyaśāstra* saw *kāvya* as a 'suggestive force,' it always made sure that literature never failed to create aspiration for a morally upright lifestyle. For this, literary theoreticians insisted that *kāvya* should always show the ultimate victory of the characters who conform to social decorum and the decay of those who defy it. Bhoja says that *kāvya* should never ever show that a law-abiding noble character, despite conforming to the rules of decorum, fails to emerge victorious over a law-breaking *adhama* character. If there is an instance which is contrary to this in a story, the poet should make it a point to rewrite the story in such a way that the law-abiding moral character prevails and the wrong-doing *adhama* character perishes. Bhoja says, "If a person desires to compose a literary work based on a plot from the epics, it is possible that a character who conforms to propriety might not only fail to attain the desired result, but also might receive what he does not desire. On the other hand, another character who has no regard

for propriety might attain the result he desires. In such cases, the plot must be revised in such a way that the character who conforms to propriety is not denied the result he desires, and the other person should not only fail to attain his desire, but also should attain what he does not want."

The victory of the characters who live according to the laws of *aucitya* and the decay of those who defy them is definitely a way to create aspiration among the readers of *kāvya* to emulate the propriety bound ways and manners of the noble characters. Bhoja, like all his predecessors and successors in *kāvyaśāstra*, staunchly believes that the failure of a character who is loyal to the social propriety, and the victory of a degenerate character who throws social decorum to the winds will certainly result in the break-down of *kāvya* as a 'symbolic power.'

The conception in the Sanskrit cosmopolis of a poet as a prophet or seer further strengthened the 'symbolic power' of *kāvya* by way of earning the reader's trust in whatever the *kavi* spoke. The term *kavi* was originally employed to refer to the Vedic hymnists to whom the Vedas were revealed in endless time, without beginning or end. The idea of poet as a seer with a prophetic vision, in fact, begins with the *Rāmāyaṇa* where the omniscient narrator says that the whole story of Rāma appeared to Vālmīki in a prophetic vision during his composition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*:

“*Tat paśyati dharmatma  
tat sarvam yogamastith /  
pura yattat nivr̥ttam  
panaavamalakam yatha*”

With the power of yoga, the righteous (Vālmīki) saw clearly, like an *amalaka* fruit in the palm of the hand the entire course of events that happened in the past relating to Rama. In *Kāvyaṇuśāsana*, Hemacandra equates poet with a prophet and says that one who is not a seer is not a poet.

The image of a poet as a seer or prophet in fact cuts across cultures in early Indian societies, and it invariably became indispensable in the validation of political power. The king-as-patron always employed the poet to reel off eulogies (*stutis*) or compose elaborate genealogies (*vamsavali*) to position him in a reputed and fabulous dynasty. Thapar points out how the bard

or *suta*, despite his lower caste, “was often seen as outside the normal hierarchy of caste and, at the same time, evolved a ritual which gave him a special sanction”. Upinder Singh observes a similar pattern in early South India: “The most important basis of legitimation of political power in early historical South India was the eulogy of the poets”. Besides, this was the high social status of the *kavi* or poet: “The social position of the poet in ancient India was a very honoured one. The poet enjoyed a highly privileged and enviable status in the assemblies and concourses of the cultured classes in those days”.

This shows that the dominant social forces in the society, which coaxed the poet to produce *kāvya* in conformity with the rules of decorum, managed to vindicate everything that the *kavi* presented by projecting him as a great visionary who could see the past, present and future with his divine vision. To the reader, the *kavi* (poet) became a demi-god who professed truths and values that had to be emulated.