

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory
Dr. Sreenath VS
Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Science Education and Research - Bhopal
Lecture- 37
Guna or Poetic Merit: Bharata and Bhamaha

Hello everyone,

In the previous lectures, we saw the theory of rasa, aucitya and alankara. In this lecture, we are going to see the theory of guna.

What is guna? The Sanskrit word guna literally means poetic merit. Although it is Bhāmaha's Kāvyaalankāra that marked a systematic inquiry into the body of kāvya and the aspects related to its ontology, some references to the concept of guṇas can be found in the literary works, written even before Bhāmaha's Kāvyaalankāra. A case in point is the Rāmāyaṇa where the poet very clearly states the response of the listeners to the story of Rāma sung by Lava and Kuśa. Here, upon listening to the song of Rāma sung by Lava and Kuśa, the audience says that the rendition sounded sweet or mādhyurya to them. We will soon see that mādhyurya or sweetness is the quality or guna that literary theoreticians are going to list in their treatises on poetry. Similarly, while listening to the story of Rāma, the audience felt that the past events that the song was narrating were taking place right in front of their eyes. This quality of a poem to present a past event in such a manner that it is happening right in front of reader's/listener's eyes is the quality called bhāvika which Bhāmaha is going to talk about in the seventh century. Similarly in the Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa of the Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma greatly appreciates the speech of Hanūman. He says that the speech of Hanūman is endowed with some poetic merits. According to Rama, it was neither ambiguous nor verbose. It was brief and precise without compromising on the quality of clarity. He says that Hanumān's speech was avistara-masanigdham.

Kauṭilya also talks about the guṇas in his *Arthaśāstra*, in connection with his discussions about lekha or political despatches. According to Kauṭilya, a political letter should have the following three guṇas, namely *arthakrama*, *sambandha* and *paripūrṇata*. He collectively calls these gunas arthasam̐pat or the wealth of meaning. Let us take a look at these three

qualities one by one. Arthakrama is the order and method of presentation. The subject that the author wants to convey should clearly be presented. The ideas should follow a logical order with proper emphasis on chief ideas. The second quality is sambandha. This guṇa, called sambandha, represents coherence, relevancy, etc. of the several ideas that make a subject. There should not be any mutual or internal contradiction in the ideas presented. It also emphasizes how the ideas should look like a coherent unit. The last quality is *paripūrṇata*. This is the idea of completeness. Kauṭilya presents three kinds of completeness. The first one is the completeness with respect to meaning, and the letters forming a particular word. The second one is the development of the idea and enriching its exposition by arguments, illustrations and analogies. This definition is available in Dr. Raghavan's 'History of Guṇas.' The third kind of *paripūrṇata* is not very clear. He may be trying to refer to the lack of ineffective expressions.

Towards the end of the same discussion, Kauṭilya also talks about lekha *doṣas* or the faults or blemishes of lekha. These blemishes that Kauṭilya mentions include *akānti*, *vyāghāta*, *punarukti*, *apaśabda*, *samplava*. *Akānti* is the lack of elegance coming out a poor style of the scribe. *Vyāghāta* is the fault coming out of the lack of coherence of ideas. *Punarukta* is the repetition of ideas and words. *Apaśabda* is a grammatical mistake. The last *doṣa* that Kauṭilya mentions, that is *samplava*, is a flaw pertaining to the meter or to the writing of the letter as explained by the commentaries.

Māgha in his *Śisupālavadhā* mentions two qualities, namely *Prasāda* and *Ojas*. By *Ojas*, Māgha means flaring up and by *prasāda*, he means quietening effect. Raghavan's observation is noteworthy in this respect. He says, "Though Māgha was earlier to the time of the theoretical determination of the exact nature of *guṇa*, he, as a poet, grasped the real nature of *guṇas*."

In the realm of dramaturgy, it was Bharata who had first talked about the idea of poetic merits. Bharata defined *guṇas* as the absence of *doṣas*. He said that *guṇas* like *mādhurya* come from the absence of *doṣas*. Bharata was also the first one to say that *guṇas* had to be coordinated with the *rasa*. Bharata in chapter seventeen of *Nāṭyaśāstra* talks about the *guṇas*. He enumerates ten *guṇas*. These ten *guṇas* mentioned by Bharata include *śleṣa*, *prasāda*, *samata*, *samādhi*, *mādhurya*, *ojas*, *saukumārya* *arthavyakti*, *udārata* and *kānti*. *Śleṣa* is the seamless combination of words that signify elegant meanings. If the combination of these

words is so seamless that we feel that it is a single word, we can assume that this quality is called śleṣa is present there. Prasāda is that quality where one understands the śabda and artha without any repetition. Bharata mentions three things as the characteristic marks of the quality called samatā. First, the words are not too short. Second, the meaning is properly conveyed and finally the meaning is easy to be comprehended. Third guṇa is called samādhi. If the meaning of the verse is so elegant that the scholars find it non-ordinary, then we can assume that the verse contains the quality called samādhi. The quality of a verse to remain sweet even after many repetitions is called mādhyurya. A composition that has a lot of compounds and elegant and unique words is said to have the quality called ojas. If the compounds are so seamlessly made that it creates a lot of ease in pronunciation, then it is called saukumārya. Arthavyakti is the clarity of expression achieved by the employment of familiar words and expressions. Udārata is the ability to present rasas like śṛṅgāra. This is achieved by the arrangement of words. The ability of a poem to entertain the readers is called kānti.

Bhāmaha did not give much importance to guṇas. He did not even name the guṇas His discussion of guṇas was limited to mādhyurya and prasāda, the two guṇas that Bharata had already mentioned in Nāṭyaśāstra. But Bhāmaha did not consider them to be essential qualities of kāvya. Bhāmaha mentions only three guṇas, namely mādhyurya, prasāda and ojas. Among the three, Ojas is not mentioned by its name. From Bhāmaha's observations about a quality characterized by the presence of compounds, we need to arrive at the conclusion that he is talking about the guṇa called Ojas. Raghavan's observation is noteworthy in this context. According to him, "This fact of Bhāmaha mentioning only three guṇas has no relation to the later theory of guṇas being only three as a corollary of the theory of guṇas as rasa dharma established by Ānandavardhana, but it seems to embody a tradition of guṇas being three and not ten."

Let us take a look at Bhāmaha's definition of these three guṇas. According to Bhāmaha, a kāvya that has mādhyurya is sweet to hear and it is not overloaded with samāsa or compounds. Bhāmaha says that sravyatva or the quality of being soothing to the ears and the absence of compounds are the two characteristic marks of mādhyurya. Ānandavardhana in Dhvanyāloka later criticizes this view of Bhāmaha. Ānanda says that śravyatva or the quality of being sweet to the ear is not a virtue that is found only in mādhyurya. It can be found in the quality called ojas also. If the meaning of a poem is understood easily by boys and women as easily as it is

understood by a learned man, then we can say that the poem has the quality called prasāda. Bhāmaha is of the view that both these guṇas, that is mād'hurya and parasāda will go hand in hand since they do not have profuse compounds. Ojas is liked only by some people and it has profuse samāsas in it.

Bhāmaha also speaks of a guṇa called bhāvika. What is bhāvika? Bhāvika is a quality that pervades the whole prabandha or the whole work. This is a quality which the poet achieves by presenting the ideas of the past and the present so vividly that these actions look like happening in the present. Bhāmaha says, "Bhavika is a quality that belongs to a composition as a whole. In it, the transactions of the past and of the future are described vividly, i. e., as if taking place before one's eyes". From this we can say for certain that Bhāmaha's discussion of guṇa is very meagre. But soon we will see a paradigm shift in the treatment of guṇas, when we see Daṇḍin's discussion of guṇas in his famous Kāvyaḍarśa. We will discuss Daṇḍin's idea of guṇas in Kāvyaḍarśa in the next class. I hope the lessons that we discussed so far are clear to you. I will wrap up this class by summarizing all the major points we discussed. We saw that Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra is the first text to talk about the idea of guṇa in Sanskrit poetics. In Nāṭyaśāstra, Bharata mentions ten guṇas namely śleṣa, prasāda, samata, samādhi, mād'hurya, ojas, saukumārya arthavyakti, udārata and kānti. Śleṣa is the seamless combination of words that signify elegant meanings. Prasāda is that quality where one understands the śabda and artha without any repetition. Bharata mentions three things as the characteristic marks of the quality called samatā. First, the words are not too short. Second, the meaning is properly conveyed and finally the meaning is easy to be comprehended. Third guṇa, samādhi is attained, if the meaning of the verse is so elegant that the scholars find it non-ordinary. The quality of a verse to remain sweet even after many repetitions is called mād'hurya. A composition that has a lot of compounds and elegant and unique words is said to have the quality called *ojas*. If the compounds are so seamlessly made that it creates a lot of ease in pronunciation, then it is called saukumārya. Arthavyakti is the clarity of expression achieved by the employment of familiar words and expressions. Udārata is the ability to present rasas like śṛṅgāra. This is achieved by the arrangement of words. The ability of a poem to entertain the readers is called *kānti*. Though Bharata mentioned ten guṇas, Bharata's successor Bhāmaha reduced the number of rasas to three. The three rasas mentioned by Bhāmaha include mād'hurya, ojas and prasāda. In addition to these three guṇas, Bhāmaha also mentions a quality called bhāvikatva. Mād'hurya is sweet to hear and it is not overloaded with samāsa or compounds. If the meaning of a poem is understood easily by boys and women as

easily as it is understood by a learned man, then we can say that the poem has the quality called prasāda. Ojas which is liked only by some people has profuse samāsas in it. Bhavika is a quality that belongs to a composition as a whole. In it, the transactions of the past and of the future are described vividly, i. e., as if taking place before one's eyes. These are the major points that we need to keep in our mind with respect to the first lesson. Thank you!