

## **An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory**

**Dr. Sreenath VS**

**Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Science Education and Research - Bhopal**

**Lecture- 44**

**Riti or the Theory of Poetic Styles**

Hello everyone,

In the previous class, we saw the theory of *guna*. In this class, we will familiarize ourselves with the concept of *riti*. These two concepts are related to each other. How are these two concepts related to each other? Well, we will see that soon. The Sanskrit word *riti* literally means style. So, the concept of *riti* is the style in which a poet is going to compose poetic composition. Sanskrit literary theoreticians believed that not all styles suit the subject matters at hand and it is necessary that poets choose or invent a style that helps their engagement with the topic they are dealing with. In Sanskrit poetics, the idea of *riti* is very much related to the concept of *guna*. Often, the ontology of *riti* is determined by the presence of certain *gunas*. Since, *rīti* cannot be evaluated separately from the idea of *guṇa*, these two concepts are discussed in conjunction here. In the history of Sanskrit literary theory, the first person to systematically talk about the question of *riti* was the ninth century critic Vamana.

Vamana was of the view that *riti* or style is the very soul of *kavya*. In his *Kāvyaṅkārasūtravṛtti*, Vāmana says: "*kāvyaśyātmā rīti*", which means that, *rīti* is the very soul of *kāvya*.

According to him, a *rīti* where all the *guṇas* are properly knit together serves as the soul of *kāvya* (I.2.5). He thought of *rīti* as '*viśiṣṭa pada racanā*, or, a special arrangement of words. Vamana's observation in this respect is worth quoting here. Vamana observes "The speciality of style is to be defined by its quality." According to Vāmana, there are three kinds of *ritis*, namely *vaidarbhī*, *gaudīyā*, and *pāñcālī*. Vāmana says that these styles are named after these places primarily because these varieties are mainly employed by writers from these places. According to Vamana, out of these three styles, the most appropriate diction to compose poetry is *vaidarbhī* because *vaidarbhī* contains all the twenty *guṇas*. He praises *vaidarbhī* by saying that it is as sonorous as the sound of the musical instrument *vīṇā*. He calls *vaidarbhī* *vipañcī svarasaubhāgya* (I.2.11). While *vaidarbhī* is blessed with the presence of all the ten

gunas, the guna called gaudīya is characterized by the presence of only two qualities, namely ojas and prasāda. Pāñcālī rīti also has only two gunas, viz mādhyura and saukumārya. In Kāvyaśāstrakāra sūtravṛtti, Vāmana warns aspiring poets against practising the art of composing poems in any style other than vaidarbhī. Vāmana says that he explained the ontology of gaudīya and pāñcālī not to suggest that these styles are also suitable to compose kāvya, but only to distinguish vaidarbhī from the rest. Vāmana believed that just as a painting evolves from initial lines on the canvas, a poem develops from one of the three rītis. Vaidarbhī was the most preferred style for Vāmana because it had all the merits, and he believed that only this style was capable enough to express the inexpressible truth of poetry.

S. K. De's observation about Vamana's conception of rīti and guna merits attention here. De explains that, "Vaidarbhī is the complete or the ideal one which unifies all the poetic excellences, whereas the other two encourage extremes. The one lays stress on the grand, the glorious or the imposing, the other on softness and sweetness, whereby the former loses itself often in bombast, the latter in prolixity." De is of the view that these styles which derive their names from regions could have been developed from "an empirical analysis of the prevailing peculiarities of poetic expression in different places and furnishes another proof of the general a posteriori character of the discipline itself".

Vamana's idea that rīti is the soul of poetry was later refuted by Anandavardhana. According to Ānanda, "It was persons unable to analyze the true nature of poetry . . . who propounded the doctrine of styles. Ānanda continues to observe: "The Vaidarbhī, Gauḍī, and Pāñcālī styles were set up by persons unable to give a clear idea of the true nature of poetry, for this true nature, which we have analyzed by using the concept of dhvani, appeared to them unclearly". His argument was that rīti dealt only with the syntactics of poesy and did not really analyze the true nature of literary creation. Moreover, the choice of style was dependent on the rasa to be conveyed. According to Ananda, it is wrong to claim that one particular style is the most appropriate style for the poetic composition. According to him, the poets should change their styles, according to the subject matter at hand. Ānandavardhana was also against the view that a good poetic composition should contain all the guṇas because according to him, guṇa has to be modified according to the rasa that is portrayed. For example, śṛṅgāra-rasa has the quality of sweetness (mādhyura) predominant in it whereas raudra has the quality of ojas. Here I would also like to point out that Ānandavardhana used the term saṃghaṭanā to refer to what Vāmana called rīti.

So far we have been dealing with the concept of *riti* in connection with its major proponent Vamana and Vamana's detractor Ananda. Now let us take a look at the history of *riti* briefly. If you are interested in knowing this concept in detail, you can refer to my own book, 'An Introduction to Indian Aesthetics: History, Theory and Theoreticians'. Okay, let us come back to the point. The origins of the idea of *rīti* can be traced back to Bharata. Bharata does not use the term *riti*, instead he uses the term *vṛtti*. In his *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata lists four *vṛttis*, namely *kaiśikī*, *sātvatī*, *ārabhaṭī*, and *bhāratī*. Of these, only *bhāratī* had anything to do with language while the others were connected to various aspects of performance. Bharata had also mentioned a category called *pravṛtti*. According to Bharata, *pravṛttis* are based on the regional variations of language, behavior, and cultural practices. The *pravṛttis* mentioned by Bharata include *avanti*, *dākṣiṇātya*, *pāñcālī*, and *ugramāgadhī*. They respectively represent the styles of the west, south, east, and north of India. Bharata insisted that the characters should speak a language that suited the region and culture they came from. So we can undoubtedly say that the idea of *rīti* was an evolution from Bharata's concepts of *vṛtti* and *pravṛtti* (see chapter XXII of *Nāṭyaśāstra* for a detailed reading of the idea of *vṛtti*).

Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin, and Kuntaka had also incorporated the idea of *riti* in their theoretical corpus. But instead of *riti*, they used the term "mārga." Bhāmaha, the founding father of Sanskrit poetics, did not think much of *mārga/rīti*. For him, the most important fact was the way language was used, irrespective of the style. Although he referred to *vaidarbhī* and *gauḍī* in *Kavyalankara*, he rejected outright the very classification of *rīti* propounded by his predecessors. He also did not subscribe to the idea that *vaidarbhī* was superior and *gauḍī* was inferior. According to Bhāmaha, there was hardly any difference between *vaidarbhī* and *gauḍī*. He opined that "this nomenclature is due to unintelligent people following blindly the lead of others".

He observed that "Even *gauḍīya* is superior if it has *alaṅkāras* or figures of speech in it and if it is devoid of vulgarity, has full and proper meaning, and is simple. There is no separate thing as *vaidarbhī*".

In *Kāvyaadarśa*, although Daṇḍin mentions *mārgas* such as *pāñcālī*, *avantikā*, *lāṭīya*, and *magadhī*, he paid attention only to two *mārgas* namely, *vaidarbhī* and *gauḍī*, citing the reason that only these two are discernible. Daṇḍin considered these *guṇas* as qualities that are to be necessarily present in a *kāvya* and connected them to *mārgas*. According to Daṇḍin, all the ten *guṇas* can be perceived only in *vaidarbhī mārga*, while *gauḍī* contains only a few of them.

He also believed that even gauḍī and vaidarbhī, despite being clearly distinguishable, vary from one writer to another. In other words, innumerable variants of gauḍī and vaidarbhī can be found. Daṇḍin also points out that even Sarasvatī, the goddess of speech, is incapable of counting the mārgas existing in this world. It is worth noticing that Daṇḍin's approach takes cognizance of the fact that a lot of subjectivity goes into the choice of style and diction, which was a departure from the norm. Udbhata the successor of Dandin, borrowed the idea of vṛtti from Bharata and developed the idea of a style that depended on diction. A style that had harsh-sounding words that were difficult to pronounce was called paruṣa; words that were soft and pleasing constituted komalā, and a middle path was termed upanāgarikā (Kāvyaḷaṅkāra-sāra-samgraha I.4–6).

So, we need to keep in our mind a few things before we wrap up our class on riti. The first aspect is that the style or riti is often defined on the basis of the presence of certain gunas. So, there is a very strong connection between the idea of guna and riti. Vamana was the first literary theoretician to systematically talk about the idea of riti. According to Vamana, riti is the very soul of kavya. Among the there ritis that he mentions, namely Vaidarbhi, gaudi, and pancali, the most important riti is Vaidarbhi because it contains all the ten gunas in it. Although Vamana mentions three gunas, he reminds us that these ritis are mentioned not because they are suitable for the poetic composition, but only to distinguish vaidarbhi from other ritis. Finally, the view of Vamana was refuted by Anandavardhana.