

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory

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Lecture- 52

Vakrokti: An Introduction

Hello everyone,

In this lecture, we are going to learn the theory of vakrokti propounded by the tenth-century Kashmiri critic Rajanaka Kuntaka. Kuntaka who lived in Kashmir in the 10th century is primarily known for his magnum opus *Vakroktijīvita*. Pollock, in his *Rasa Reader*, says that “The only work in the Sanskrit tradition that can be likened to ‘what today we would regard as literary criticism’ is Kuntaka’s *Vakroktijīvita*.” In his introduction to Kuntaka’s *Vakroktijīvita*, Krishnamoorthy also makes a similar observation. According to him, “In the whole range of Sanskrit poetical theory, we do not have anyone who can be termed a practical literary critic in the modern sense of the term except Kuntaka”. Kuntaka’s *Vakroktijīvita* was thought to have been lost forever for a long time. A glance at the various stages through which Kuntaka’s *Vakroktijīvita* was reconstructed bears witness to the amount of energy and meticulous research that went into this process. Kuntaka’s *Vakroktijīvita*, which was long thought to be lost, and known only through the citations in the later texts of *kāvyaśāstra*, is now available to us primarily through the efforts of S. K. De and Krishnamoorthy.

S.K. De brought out a copy of Kuntaka’s *Vakroktijīvita* in 1923, based on two Devanagari transcripts of a Malayalam manuscript (which was also lost at some point) from the Oriental Manuscripts Library, Madras. The manuscript seemed to have contained four chapters, but the last chapter in the manuscript broke off without any conclusion. The third chapter also contained a lot of gaps in it. So De was unable to publish a readable text. However, he brought out an edition of Kuntaka’s *Vakroktijīvita* with the first two chapters and a résumé of the contents of the last two chapters. This arrangement was still necessary, even in the second edition in 1928, when a new edition of *Vakroktijīvita* was brought out after a new manuscript was found in Jaisalmer. Despite these limitations, his edition was quite crucial in introducing Kuntaka’s idea of *vakrokti* to the readers of modern India. A coherent and readable text of

Vakroktijīvita along with a translation came out in 1977 through the efforts of Krishnamoorthy. For this edition, Krishnamoorthy collected a transcript of the last two chapters of the Madras manuscript, and combined it with the same portions of the new Jaisalmer manuscript and the *Vakroktijīvita* extracts in the *Kalpalataviveka*. For the first two chapters, he made use of the Jaisalmer manuscript along with De's 1928 edition. These efforts finally came to fruition in the form of a readable text for *Vakroktijīvita*.

The Sanskrit word, *vakrokti*, is a portmanteau word composed of two words namely *vakratā* and *ukti* meaning respectively “deviant” and “utterance.” So, the word *vakrokti* literally means deviant utterance or a “striking usage”. In the realm of Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra*, Bhāmaha is the first literary theoretician to use the term *vakrokti*. Before Bhāmaha, Bharata had employed the idea of deviant utterance in his *Nāṭyaśāstra* without using the term *vakrokti* per se. Bharata used the term *lakṣaṇā* to refer to what his successors would call *vakrokti*. Bhāmaha employed the term *vakrokti* in connection with his discussion of the figure of speech *atiśayokti*. According to Bhāmaha, *atiśayokti* is the treatment of an object or idea in such a way that it appears strikingly new to the readers. In other words, in the figure of speech called *atiśayokti*, an object or entity transcends our familiar equations of perceiving it. The following is an example of *atiśayokti* which Bhāmaha cites in *Kāvyaśāstra*: “If the loose skin of water drops down like the slough of serpents, then it will become like the white garments on the limbs of ladies sporting on in the water”. In this example, Bhāmaha gives us a deviant and the hitherto unfamiliar equation of perceiving water. The dominant conception about water is that it is a colourless, odourless, liquid which forms water bodies such as river, ocean, pond and so on. By considering water as a white garb on the limbs of ladies playing in the water, Bhāmaha is altering the dominant conception about water.

According to Bhāmaha, *atiśayokti* is identical with *vakrokti* or deviant utterance and all poets should take special care to master this art of deviant utterance. In *Kāvyaśāstra*, Bhāmaha says, “This [*atiśayokti*] is nothing but *vakrokti*. All meanings appear new by this. Poets should be assiduous in cultivating it. Where is an *alaṅkāra* without this?” (49). Bhāmaha says that ordinary expressions which reproduce the dominant way we perceive entities without any figurative deviation should not be considered an *alaṅkāra*, and the matter-of-fact expressions bereft of *vakrata* are mere *vārta* (report), not *kāvya* (poetry). Bhāmaha observes, “‘The sun has set; the moon shines, the birds are winging back to their nests.’ What kind of poetry is this? This is called *vārta*.” Holding *vakrokti* in high esteem, Bhāmaha is reluctant to consider *svabhāvokti* (the act of presenting something in the way it is

commonly perceived) as an *alankāra*. While describing five kinds of *kāvya*, Bhāmaha reiterates that *kāvya*, in any form, becomes commendable only if it is characterized by deviant utterance. For him, a composition which is clear, smooth, and elegant, but devoid of deviant utterance will be mere music (not *kāvya*).

According to Daṇḍin, the successor of Bhāmaha, the whole universe of speech can be divided into two, namely *vakrokti* and *svabhāvokti* (325). Vāmana holds that *vakrokti* is subsumed in ‘the secondary usage based on similarity’ (*sadrśya-lakṣaṇā-vakrokti*), and is just a *śabdālaṅkāra* (165). The first literary theoretician to use the term *vakrokti* as a separate poetic figure is the ninth century Kashmiri critic Rudraṭa (Bronner and McCrea, “The Poetics of Distortive Talk” 439). As far as Rudraṭa is concerned, *vakrokti* is an *arthālaṅkāra* which can be divided into two broad categories namely *śleṣa-vakrokti* and *kāku-vakrokti*. *Śleṣa-vakrokti* is *vakrokti* based on a pun, whereas *kāku-vakrokti* is *vakrokti* based on the tone of voice. According to Rudraṭa, “A sentence uttered in one sense by a speaker and taken in another sense by a listener because of the double meaning of the words is called *śleṣa vakrata* (*vakrata* of pun)” (15). Sometimes because of a change in the speaker’s intonation, there is a change in the meaning of a sentence. It is called *kāku vakrata* or *vakrata* of tone (16).

Ānandavardhana, a contemporary of Rudraṭa in the court of King Avantivarman, also refers to the concept of *vakrokti* in his *Dhvanyāloka*. In the third *udyota* of *Dhvanyāloka*, Ānanda subscribes to Bhāmaha’s opinion that *vakrata* which is identical with *atiśayokti* is the very life force of all *ālaṅkārikas*. Ānanda observes,

"All [hyperboles] are deviant utterances [*vakrokti*].

By it meaning is exalted.

A poet must take pains with it,

[for] what is figure of speech without it. " (602).

In *Dhvanyāloka*, Ānandavardhana further reaffirms the importance of *vakrata*, when he sarcastically talks about a fool’s conception of a good *kāvya*.

Abhinava’s commentary on this passage is also important in connection with our discussion of *vakrokti*. In his commentary, Abhinava opines that *vakrata* is identical with sublime *saṃghaṭanā* (*vakrokti ulkṛṣṭa saṃghaṭanā*) and the lack of *vakrata* means the absence of beauty. Abhinava says, “Striking turn of speech” [*vakrata*]: elevated style or arrangement (*saṃghaṭanā*). That it lacks this implies that it lacks the qualities of sound and meaning” (*Locana* 62). Bhoja in his *Śṛiṅgāraprakāśa* opines that there is no *kāvya* without

vakrokti. He divides the whole universe of speech into *vacas* and *kāvya*. While *vacas* is the representation of objects and ideas in the way they are dominantly perceived or presented in daily life, *kāvya* is marked by *vakrata* or deviant utterance (I:221).

Mammaṭa in his *Kāvyaṭprakāśa* sees *vakrokti* in both its narrow and broad senses. In its narrow sense, the term *vakrata* is a category of *śabdālaṅkāra*. He says, “When what is said by one person in one sense is construed by another person in a different sense—either through punning or through intonation—it is called equivoque (*vakrokti*)” (317). Like Rudraṭa, Mammaṭa divides *vakrata* into two categories of *śabdālaṅkāra*, viz. *śleṣa-vakrokti*, and *kāku-vakrokti*. In its broadest sense, Mammaṭa sees *vakrokti* as the essence of all *alaṅkāras* by quoting Bhāmaha’s dictum that *atiśayokti* is identical with *vakrokti* and there is no *alaṅkāra* without it (458). Sharing the opinion of Mammaṭa, Ruyyaka sees *vakrokti* first as a category of *śabdālaṅkāra* and later as the life force of all *alaṅkāras* (228). He also divides *vakrokti* into *kāku-vakrokti* and *śleṣa-vakrokti* (227).

For Viśvanātha and Viśveśvara, *vakrokti* is a mere ornament of sound. Vidyānātha, Jayadeva, Appayya Dīkṣita, Bhaṭṭa Devaśaṅkara Purohita and Amrtānandayogin treat *vakrokti* as an *arthālaṅkāra*. Considering *vakrokti* as the ultimate locus of literariness in *kāvya*, many practicing poets called themselves unparalleled experts in the employment of *vakrokti*. For instance, the poet Kavirāja in his *Rāghavapāṇḍavīya* names himself, Subandhu and Bāṇabhaṭṭa as the only three experts in the employment of *vakrokti*. He asks: “Subandhu, Bāṇa, and Kavirāja are the only three masters of deviant utterance. Can there be a fourth one?” (1.41). Later in the early thirteenth century, Vidyāmādhava adds his own name to this list and confidently declares that there could not be a fifth one. In his *Pārvatīrukmiṇīya*, a work modelled on Kavirāja’s *Rāghavapāṇḍavīya*, Vidyāmādhava remarks: “Bāṇa, Subandhu, Kavirāja and I, the erudite scholar Vidyāmādhava, are the only four masters of deviant utterance in this world. There will never ever be a fifth one” (I.15).

In *kāvya* tradition, the first major literary work that avowedly claims to make use of the possibilities of *vakrokti* is the ninth century Kashmiri poet Ratnākara’s *Vakroktipaṅcaśikā*. *Vakroktipaṅcaśikā* can be rightly called the most influential specimen of the nascent genre of *vakrokti* poetry (Bronner and McCrea, “The Poetics of Distortive Talk” 440). This short poem portrays Goddess Pārvatī’s attempts to break up with her husband Śiva, and Śiva’s attempts to assuage her anger through the skilful employment of deviant utterance. Śiva playfully evades Pārvatī’s complaints by intentionally taking them in a sense which Pārvatī does not intend, thereby dragging their conversation to the point of Pārvatī finally reconciling with him. Other poems modelled on Ratnākara’s skilful use of deviant utterance in *Vakroktipaṅcaśikā* include

Śivarāma's *Lakṣmī-sarasvatī-saṃvāda* and the anonymous *Rambhā-śuka-saṃvāda* and *Girijā-kamala-vivāda* (Krishnamachariar, *History of Classical Poetry* 376-77). *Lakṣmī-sarasvatī-saṃvāda* portrays the verbal fencing between Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī—the rival wives of Viṣṇu and Śiva; *Rambhā-śuka-saṃvāda* deals with the dialogue between the ascetic Śuka and the celestial woman Rambhā who has come to the earth to seduce Śuka, and *Girijā-kamala-vivāda* is in the form of a dialogue between Pārvatī and Lakṣmī. It is also important to note that the entire Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra* tradition has seen *kāvya* as a systematic deviation or *vakrata* from the ordinary form of speech. In the first chapter of this study, we have seen critics like Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin, Udbhāṭa, Ānandavardhana, Abhinavagupta, Mammaṭa and so on treating literature as a conscious departure from the quotidian use of language. This shows that the idea of *vakrokti* or deviant utterance was a central concern throughout Sanskrit literary tradition.

Although Bhāmaha laid out the basic framework of the idea of *vakrokti* and his successors like Daṇḍin, Rudraṭa and Ānandavardhana took it up in their poetic theory, none of them in fact treated the idea of *vakrokti* as a major concern of their critical inquiry. We find a detailed exposition of the idea of *vakrokti* only in *Vakroktijīvita* of the tenth-century Kashmiri critic Kuntaka. *Vakroktijīvita*, as I have pointed out in the introduction of this study, came down to us in a somewhat fragmentary form without any commentary. And the text still remains incomplete without the last chapter. However, since all the major topics that Kuntaka promises to take up in the text are covered in the first three chapters of *Vakroktijīvita*, we have all the reasons to think that nothing much of the text has been lost. His florid compositional style which is a clear departure from the usual way of employing Sanskrit in literary treatises seems to be an open endorsement of the critical position he talks about in his text.

According to Kuntaka, the very essence of *kāvya* is *vakrata* or the art of presenting something in a fashion which is antithetical to the way we have experienced it so far. According to Kuntaka, the sound and sense in *kāvya* necessarily need to be adorned with the ornament called *vakrata*. Kuntaka defines *vakrokti* as "that signification which is different from the popular usage." He calls it *prasidhābhidhāna-vyatirekiṇī*. He primarily saw *vakrokti* as the portrayal of sound and sense in a deviant form so that the familiar, ordinary, objects around us appear different. According to Kuntaka, what made a narrative a verbal art was the presence of *alaṅkāra*, and the only *alaṅkāra* or ornament that could adorn a poem was *vakrokti*. Kuntaka says,

“Both these refer to words and meanings which deserve to be looked upon as the subjects of ornamentation for the enhancement of their appeal. ‘What then is this ornament?’ one might ask. The answer is that though they are two in number, they have only one common ornament. What exactly is this ornament? ‘Artistic turn of speech’ is the reply. It stands for a charming and novel utterance peculiar to poetry and distinct from familiar usage. It is the very index of the artistic turn that a master-poet’s speech takes. In other words, artistic utterance itself is the ornament in question” (307).

Kuntaka clearly differentiated *vakrokti* and *svabhāvokti*, maintaining that *svabhāvokti* is nothing more than the description of objects in nature and would not qualify to be a part of poetry. Instead of re-creating or re-presenting the dominant conception about the identity of an entity (*svabhāva*), Kuntaka, like Viktor Shklovsky much later, was concerned with the creative transformation of the existing structures and he never aimed to reproduce the known and the familiar. Kuntaka says:

"The gist is:—The poets do not give existence to things nonexistent in the world; only they endow such superior and original excellences to things which merely existed before, that a unique appeal of beauty to connoisseurs is invariably brought about. . . . Things in the world have mere existence. But they are given such heightened extraordinary beauty or shade of charm that they began to appear as if they are entirely new. Their natural state is completely concealed and a new splendor comes to be attached to them making one think that they were invented right then for the first time. It is this fact which confers the title of ‘Creators’ on the poets." (415)

This is somewhat similar to the concept of defamiliarization that was propounded by Viktor Shklovsky, the Russian Formalist, in the 20th century. Shklovsky’s observation merits attention in this context. He says: “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”

Kuntaka’s theory of *vakrokti* poses a strong resistance to the habitual frameworks of performance and perception, and sees literature as a transformative act which presents the familiar objects in a defamiliarized fashion. This act of defamiliarization, in the first instance, is a liberating experience for the author in the sense that it provides the author with an opportunity to transcend the familiar equations of perception and performance. In this

process, it also releases the entity which is being portrayed in *kāvya* from our rigid conventional conception about it. Equally liberating is the experience of the reader who encounters an instance of deviant utterance. Through their encounter with the hitherto unseen facet of a familiar object, readers broaden the horizon of their perception, and experience what is called *atiśaya* or surprise. It is also significant to note that despite Kuntaka's insistence on the employment of *vakrata* in *kāvya*, he never aims to shock his readers by presenting something so differently that it breaks the norms of propriety in the society. *Vakrokti*, for Kuntaka, is always subordinated to the idea of social propriety and the feeling of surprise and pleasure.

Kuntaka divides *vakrokti* into six broad categories such as *varṇa-vinyāsa-vakrata*, *pada-pūrvārtha-vakrata*, *pada-parārtha-vakrata*, *vākya-vakrata*, *prakaraṇa-vakrata*, and *prabandha-vakrata*. We will soon see all these varieties of *vakrokti* in detail.