

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 05

Sanskrit Dramaturgy and Rasa Theory I

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religion in South Asia. So, we have been discussing about the Sanskrit tradition and the literary pieces that were written and produced in ancient India. So, Sanskrit verses, as far as the Indian tradition is concerned, we see that the origin of the Sanskrit kavya is not very clear; it is vague and these manuscripts remain in permanent oblivion. We also understand that Sanskrit verses are esoteric in nature, they could have multiple interpretations, there is no definitive reading of these verses, there have been multifarious understandings of the Sanskrit verses. Now, during the period when Bhama and Kalidasa, great poets from the Sanskrit tradition were writing, this period was understood as a renaissance in Sanskrit tradition, Sanskrit literature. During this period, literary materials were transmitted from the orature.

So, largely Sanskrit tradition used to exist in oral form, in the form of orality and they got documented during the period of Kalidasa and Bhama. Now, however having said that, we understand that due to the lack of specific methods of preserving and you know, channelizing these texts to the posterity and also because of restricted scope of exchanges, many of the manuscripts were lost in the process of documentation only. What we find today is selective. So, Sanskrit court poems are usually characterized by formality and sophistication and its thrust is on the aristocracy.

They are chiefly characterized by grand expressions. So, although we see that the emphasis is on royalty, on royal personages, it is also true that Sanskrit verses or Sanskrit literature can be secular in nature. The focus has mainly been on spiritual transcendence, but they can also talk about things other than God or otherworldly, right. They can also

focus on the this-worldly affairs. So, as compared to the Sanskrit tradition, the Prakrit tradition deals with love life and it is mainly inspired by the non-religious common man's life, right.

Its provenance or origin is nature; it is deeply and greatly inspired by nature and yet, it is not restricted by any dictum, but Prakrit tradition is more flexible when compared with the Sanskrit tradition. Now, Sanskrit has traditionally had this tendency of hierarchically positing itself as superior and it is known as the mother of all languages and language of gods, such that the Sanskrit scholars have a tendency to show Prakrit as a derivative language, a language that has derived from and is you know subordinate to the Sanskrit language, culture and tradition. Now, Indologists such as Maxmuller argued that during the invasion by the Sakas and the Greeks, the Sanskrit renaissance period had greatly made use of the Prakrit resources and turned them into Sanskritized versions which led in many ways for Prakrit to disappear into an oblivion, right. So, on the other hand, other critics would counter this argument, the fact that Sanskritization has caused disappearance or evanescence of Prakrit tradition. They would say that Sanskrit and Prakrit existed simultaneously and the fact that not only Prakrit, but also Sanskrit poems can have and do have strong references to erotica and this worldly affair.

So, Sanskrit tradition is not only dealing with transcendentalism. Now, we are going to talk about Bharat Muni's very important work called Natya Shastra. Natya Shastra belongs to circa 200 BCE and it is a classical treatise on dramatics, music and aesthetics which has been commonly attributed to a sage named Bharat Muni for its authorship. So, Natya Shastra is founded on human psychology prevailing under the conditions of ancient India's civilization and cultural system, and its main focus is on stage performance. Natya Shastra is an analytical text of dramatic performance that categorically describes the fundamentals of dramaturgy such as Natya, Vithi, Bhav, Vyavichari Bhav, Satvik Bhav, Bibhav, Anubhav, Rasa, Rasasutra, Nishpatti, model spectator and the highly spiritual concept of Shanti.

So, the tradition of Sanskrit scholarship regards Natya Shastra as an additional ved, owing to its prescriptive nature. It is a compendium, a compilation of performative arts, drama, music, dance as well as fine arts. Bharat Muni leaves a deep influence on the subsequent Sanskrit critics and scholars such as Abhinav Gupta, Manmohan and Vishwanath in Indian aesthetics. So, Rasa theory is at the heart of the Natya Shastra and Bharat Muni is remembered as the exponent of this Rasa theory. So, now we are going to

talk about what Rasa is, what Bhav is, all these things that shape the basic premises of Natya Shastra.

So, Natya Shastra provides an insight into the psychology of aesthetic reception and it has been acknowledged as offering a scientific exposition of Rasa theory, which makes it a distinctive contribution, a significant contribution in the form of Natya Rasas. So, it is a compilation based on the scientific application of reason to human nature and human experiences. So, it could be possible that the basis of the practical experience of Rasas form the foundation or bedrock for the aesthetics of art and fine arts. Natya Shastra is a depiction and a communication pertaining to the emotions of all the three worlds. So, it is a kind of dictat, like I said, it comprises dictats regarding the emotions, the commentary regarding the emotions pertaining to all the three worlds as envisioned by the Sanatana Dharma, and it includes a wide variety of settings.

These settings could be sport, wealth, peace of mind, laughter, combat or war, sexual passion as well as sacrifice. So, all the different activities that make up the common man's life. So, according to Bharat, Natya Shastra imitates the manifold conducts of the world. Besides serving the purpose of entertainment and pleasure, Natya Shastra plays an instrumental role in instructing about the worldly affairs. So, like we already said, the Sanskrit verses and the mother of all Sanskrit verses or the origin of all these verses being Natya Shastra is not only dealing with spirituality and transcendentalism, the other-worldly, but is also deeply rooted, deeply entrenched in the this-worldly, the secular aspects of our lives.

Natya Shastra encompasses all kinds of knowledge, craft, love, art and fine art, design, emotion and acts pertaining to or centered on the human life. This work offers an imagination about the happenings in the lives of not only humans, but gods, demons, among humans deals with kings, families, men, women as well as the sages who have acquired spiritual knowledge. In fact, the nature and behavior of the world are explained as intimately connected with a happiness and misery. These are the two tropes or the two themes that are consistently present in Sanskrit artworks. One is the happiness, the other is misery.

Natya Shastra renders the different human emotions through physical and other forms of acting. So, according to Bharat, the entire nature of human beings as connected with the

experience of happiness and misery, joy and sorrow is presented through the process of histrionics, what he calls as Abhinay and this is explained well in the Natya Shastra through the concept of Natya. Now, let us move on to our understanding of Rasa theory. What is Rasa? Rasa is one of the basic components explained elaborately in Bharat's Natya Shastra. Rasa can be roughly translated as an aesthetic pleasure, relish, an emotion or rapture on the part of the reader or the audience, and it is derived from and in response to a work of art.

So, this is a shloka by Bharat Muni and this is how it goes- “Anubhavyate anen vagang krotobhinaya iti”. It means, you know, it defines the bhava as the constant state of mind or a sentiment. I will repeat again, “Anubhavyate anen vagang krotobhinaya iti”. So, bhava as the constant state of mind or a sentiment, whereas Rasa is the dominant emotion or feeling.

So, according to Bharat, it is in combination with affect or mental states that are known as bhavas present in a work that Rasa or emotion arises. So, affect and mental states combine and from there emerges the Rasa or emotion. Bhavas can be roughly translated as psychophysiological states in the human and they are largely classified into three kinds. The sthayibhavas, the vyabhicharibhavas also known as sanchari bhava, and the sattvic bhavas. So, sthaivavas can be translated broadly as the stable or permanent states and they are the ones which dominant or persist throughout a piece of work.

Sthayibhavas dominate or persist throughout a piece of work. In other words, the sthayibhavas can be said to set the prevalent mood of a given work. They could be angry, they could be sad, terrifying and that is the prevailing mood, like I said, in a given piece of work. On the other hand, the various fleeting or transitory states that come and go and that accompany these sthayibhavas are generated alongside the sthayibhavas are called the sanchari bhavas. They are the ancillary bhavas.

They accompany the steady and continual experience of sthaivavas. They come and go. They are sporadic. They are short-lived mental states. The sanchari bhavas could include panic, fear, anger, a kind of hysteria or trembling, paralysis, stuttering and so on. So, the saatvik bhavas are very similar to the vyabhichari bhavas and the sanchari bhavas.

However, in dramatic enactment, it is quite difficult to imitate and perform the sathvik bhavas. Now, for the mental state or bhavas to be generated, there must be some cause or stimulus which give rise to an effect in a character or a subject or a situation. These causes, we could call them as antecedents or stimuli. They are known as bhavas. In turn, the bhavas generate consequences or effects, manifestations and these effects or manifestations are known as the anubhavas.

So, cause is bibhav, effect or manifestation of that cause is anubhav. So, bhavas or states may or may not be perceivable to our senses directly. So, these are the examples. To cite an example, let us take the example of anger. Anger in an individual person can never be communicated directly to another.

It can only be suggested, it can only be expressed through various manifestations, whereas, you know bibhavas in the form of stimuli or cause and anubhavs in the form of manifestation or effect can be directly seen, perceived, you know, observed, they can be enacted. The mental states or bhavas need not necessarily be directly perceivable. And [in this regard] very briefly I would talk about what T. S. Eliot is talking regarding the objective correlative. Now, let us talk about the origins of rasa, the concept of rasa. Where did it originate? Rasa as a meaningful word has been present in the ancient Indian culture for a very long time. It figures in Rig Veda and it also finds the mention in the Upanishads. It is found in our ancient treatises on chemistry and medicine as well.

So, the particular sense of rasa associated with the histrionics or dramaturgy is found in Natya Shastra by Bharat. It is a work of art, like I have already stated, which deals with dramaturgy in particular. Before Natya Shastra, rasa might have been used in other works of aesthetics as well, but such works have perhaps not been preserved. So, the oldest known work where rasa theory has been used in the context of art and aesthetics is Bharat Muni's Natya Shastra. The first existent work in which rasa has been used in an aesthetic context and with an aesthetic purpose is Natya Shastra.

So, according to Bharat without rasa there can be no drama such that it is the soul, it is the heart and soul of any play. The earliest use of this word rasa is found codified in the Rig Veda. In Rig Veda rasa has been used to variously refer to different things. It could mean water, the soma juice, the cow's milk and any flavor in general. Now, Atharva Veda

extends the meaning to the sap of the grain and also to taste, the sensation or the sense of taste.

Later on, usage of rasa in the sense of taste became more common and prevalent. In the Upanishads, the usage of the word rasa becomes less concrete. This is because the Upanishads are essentially metaphysical in content and symbolic in their use of words. So, all words in the Upanishadic context acquire a more filtered and metaphorical or symbolic or metaphysical meaning than they have been used in other contexts. So, even as the concrete sense is still present in the Upanishads, the concrete serves to highlight the abstract.

Hence, in Upanishad rasa is used in an entirely new way. While the concrete sense is used in the Upanishads, the concrete meaning does exist, a more abstract application of the word slowly makes its presence felt. The most important quality of any literature, any piece of art is to attract or draw attention to itself. The audience should be attracted to the work of art, to the art form and they should pay attention to this art. In the Upanishads in the Indian tradition beyond this mere act of drawing attention there is additionally a focus or an onus on the art being an appealing entity.

So, a work of art must appeal to the audience. In other words, it should not contain a mere shock effect, a shock value. This is to say that a lot of things come in vogue or trend and they afterwards subsequently are forgotten. Such things immediately catch one's attention, but later they fail to sustain us for a very long time. After the initial impact, the things in trend, the things in fashion may not have enough ingredient or impact to grip our thoughts or our attention.

Thus, in the Indian context, ancient Indian context a work of art is successful only when there is an appeal to it or associated with it. According to Bharat, without rasa there can be no appeal. Hence, without generating rasa, a work of art, in this case we are talking about a drama, a work of art, a work of drama is incomplete or unfulfilled. So, the main target of appeal for a drama work is the spectator or the audience. To appeal, the topic must have components that evoke rasa.

The major ingredients that induce or evoke rasa are available in the text. So, since a topic or a text can appeal to the audience only through an act of communication, it thereby suggests or implies that rasa arises through the communication of bhava present in an art to the audience. So, since a topic or a text can appeal to the audience only through an act of communication, it thereby implies that rasa arises through the communication of bhava that is present in a work of art to the audience. If we have to sum up, rasa is indispensable to any art form or work of art, and it plays an intrinsic fundamental role in successful execution, successful communication of an art form. With this, I am going to stop our lecture here today. Thank you. Thank you.