

Indian Philosophical Traditions and Poetics: An Overview*

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In India, although it has been recognized that the character of beauty is intrinsically related to metaphysics, it was felt that a distinction had to be maintained between the study of beauty in art and in nature.

Nature is a part of the reality into which the philosopher has to inquire. Hence the study of beauty in nature forms an intrinsic part of philosophy in India, as in the West. In some schools of Indian philosophy, like Sāṅkhya and Vedānta, the treatment is explicit; in others it is implicit but not absent.¹

Western scholars are of the opinion that Indian philosophy neglected beauty. Why were Indian philosophers not interested in the character of art, and why did they fail to appreciate its importance? Any discussion of the significance of art presupposes an understanding of its character. The reason lies in the unique status of the content of art which does not belong to the real world but it is a product of the artist's imagination. The ontological considerations are irrelevant to the character of art. Hence, the character of art does not presuppose any knowledge of reality and is in no way determined by the metaphysical view one may hold. Different philosophers hold different views of reality. Therefore, when a philosopher enquires into the problem of the character of beauty in art, he is bound to impose his particular metaphysical view on the solution of the problem, and try to evolve a theory of art that suits his theory of reality.

Indian philosophers believed that, for a proper understanding of the character of beauty in art, it is necessary to separate this branch of investigation from philosophy proper and entrust it to another class of thinkers, equally interested in art but not committed to any metaphysics, namely, the critics or *ālankārikas*. The separation of the inquiry into the character of art and philosophy proper has been borne out by results, giving rise to the evolution of a distinct

*Note: This paper is based on a lecture delivered at King's College, London University, London on 6 April 1995.

discipline. *Alaṅkāraśāstra* concerned itself with the nature of beauty in the world of art, and thus amounted to an aesthetics of art.

In India, *Alaṅkāraśāstra* enjoyed a degree of freedom which resulted in original discoveries.² Many who started as *ālaṅkārikas* and studied the structure and function of art were drawn into the deeper problem of the meaning of life. To understand this meaning, they looked to philosophy for principles of interpretation. Śrī Śaṅkuka and Mahimabhaṭṭa were influenced by the Nyāya school, Bhaṭṭanāyaka came under the influence of Sāṅkhya, Ānandavardhana belonged to the Pratyabhijñā school of philosophy and Jagannātha was drawn to the Vedānta school.

Some thinkers who came from the discipline of philosophy and were primarily interested in the significance of art entered the field of *ālaṅkārikas* and discussed the nature of art in the manner of the *ālaṅkārikas* themselves. Abhinavagupta is an outstanding example because he was one of the first teachers of Kashmir Śaivism. His contribution to *Alaṅkāraśāstra* is equally significant. Appayya Dikṣita, the great Advaita teacher who composed many works of philosophy, also contributed to the field of *Alaṅkāraśāstra*. It may be observed here that the historical development of the Indian philosophy of art was the result of the joint contribution of the *ālaṅkārikas* and the *dārśanikas*, each group complementing the other in regard to a special point of view in the investigation.

A *ṛṣi* or a *kavi* is a compiler of Vedic hymns. These two words relate to a person's knowledge or mental vision. According to Yāska, a poet is one who has a transcending or far-reaching vision.³ Thus it becomes clear that the artistic creation called 'ṛk' is, primarily, a product of intuition. Poetry was held in high esteem in the Vedic period, and was treated on par with philosophy and religion. In fact, it may be said that the Vedic seer's poetry, philosophy and religion were identical. There was no fundamental difference between the poet's vision of beauty and the mystic's vision of reality. It is said that one cannot be a poet unless one is a seer, and one is called a seer when one has a vision. And vision is the knowledge of truth of the nature and properties of various things. It is only by his vision of the truth that a person will be recognized as a poet. The *Aitareyāranyaka* refers to hymns as divine art (*devaśilpa*).⁴ The Upaniṣadic philosopher includes excellence, goodness and blissfulness in aesthetic experience, which suggests that art was considered an aid to spiritual realization.⁵ According to the *Upaniṣads*, the source, end, and object of all art and artistic activity is the Supreme Being. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* states that it is to the Supreme Being that they

sing with the lute.⁶ While commenting on the *Vedānta sūtra*, (I.i. 20), Śaṅkara makes it clear that as in sacred singing, so too in all secular singing, the theme is the Supreme Being.

The analogy of the body-soul (*śarīra-ātman*) relationship – a relationship which is an important concept in metaphysics – was effectively employed by Indian poeticians to explain their theories of content and method. The two-way analysis of the world and man, the objective and the subjective, carried out in the Upaniṣads, ultimately leads to the identification of *brahman* and *ātman*, as expressed in the principal statements (*mahāvākyas*) like 'that thou art' and 'I am *brahman*'. The three terms by which the ultimate reality is indicated are existence (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*) and bliss (*ānanda*). It is interesting to note here that this doctrine of the ultimate reality found in the Upaniṣads represents a transition from the 'outer' to the 'inner' view of reality. The spirit of this passage of metaphysical doctrine has greatly influenced Indian poeticians with regard to their conception of the proper content of poetry and its method.

According to Ānandavardhana, the *Mahābhārata* has, as its principal subject, the sentiment of spiritual quiescence (*śāntarasa*) which turns a man's attention to *mokṣa*. He argues that in the *Mahābhārata*, which is a *śāstra* (intellectual discipline) and a *kāvya* (poetry), the great sage has indicated the primacy of *śāntarasa* and *mokṣa* by describing the sad end of the Pāṇḍavas and the Vṛṣṇis as the conclusion of the poem. Abhinavagupta argues that *ātmajñāna* is the *sthāyin* of *śāntarasa*. All the *anubhāvas*, coupled with *yama* and *niyama*, will form its *anubhāvas*. *Vibhāvas* are the grace of God; love for humanity form the *vyabhicārins*. The spectators and readers who are initiated, and have developed the *saṃskāras* that form the seed of the knowledge of the *ātman*, experience a state of sympathetic response (*hṛdayasaṃvāda*). According to the *Saṅgrahakārika*, 'śāntarasa is to be known as that which arises from the desire to secure liberation of the self, which leads to the knowledge of truth and is connected with the property of highest bliss:

Mokṣādhyātmanimittaḥ
Tattvajñānārtha hetusaṃyuktaḥ!
Niḥśreyosadharmayutaḥ
Śānta raso nāma vijñeyaḥ!!

Of the three aspects of the *brahman*, if *sat* is taken as goodness and *cit* as truth, then the *ānanda* aspect can be identified with beauty. The indescribability of art reality bears an intimate resemblance to the central concepts of Advaita Vedānta. An art experience cannot be

said to be either real or unreal. In a play the story is not real, yet it cannot be unreal insofar as, for the duration of the play, it affects the spectator. Therefore, it can neither be called *sat* nor *asat* but forms a unique category called *anirvacanīya* (i.e., indescribable and indefinable). Jagannātha Paṇḍita takes the Vedāntic integration of *rasa* theory to its logical conclusion while explaining the process of relishing *rasa* when witnessing a drama. He even uses Advaitic epistemology.

Sanskrit poeticians and dramaturgists have clearly stated that the aesthetic experience is similar to the state of pure bliss. The *Daśarūpaka* states that as far as the actual world or the story is concerned, there may be the distinction of things beautiful and loathsome, grand and mean, pleasant and terrible, but in art everything attains a state of beauty and delectation.⁷ This is because, when these are relished in a poem or drama, they are, for the reader or spectator, detached from his or her own interest. Similarly, the *vedāntin* who has realized the *brahman* ceases to be an actor and becomes an onlooker. Thus the artist (or the actor or enjoyer of art) and the *jīvanmukta* (who is 'released' while yet in his embodied state) are alike.

Many distinguished writers on poetics belonged to the Kashmir school of Śaivism, such as Udbhāṭa, Ānandavardhana, Abhinavagupta and Kuntaka. These scholars not only wrote philosophical hymns but many poems, plays and poetic hymns, and evinced a flair for the arts and aesthetic inquiry. These writers identify the creative and critical activities of the poet and connoisseur with the two phases of their Supreme Being – *prakāśa* and *vimarśa* – which stand for Śiva and *śakti*. According to Bhaṭṭanāyaka, if God was not the ultimate meaning of all expression, no one would bother with the verbiage of writing.⁸

The key concept of classical aesthetics in Sanskrit is *rasa*. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* states that *rasa* is the essence and the most enjoyable part of a thing. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* uses this word more explicitly to mean the joy within one's own being.⁹ For aesthetics, this statement is of great importance because *rasa* is used here to mean bliss that is innate in oneself and which is manifested even in the absence of external aids to happiness. It emphasizes that this bliss is non-material (that is, intrinsic, spiritual and subjective). In the *Upaniṣads*, *rasa* stands for the ultimate reality, the basis of both object and subject – *brahman* or *āman*.

In another sense, *rasa* stands for the blissful experience, or realization, of this ultimate reality. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* states 'that

[*brahman*] is verily the source of joy, one becomes joyful on realizing that source of joy: *raso vai saḥ rasam hyevāyam labdhvā ānandī bhavati*'.¹⁰ It may be noted here that the term *rasa* in this *Upaniṣad* does not refer to aesthetic experience but to the highest experience – the experience of *brahman*. Poeticians use this term to refer to aesthetic experience because it bears a close similarity to it, although it is on a lower plane than the *brahman* experience. The process of aesthetic experience also includes transcending the notion of the object and the subject, which unmistakably resembles the process of realizing *ātman*. The aesthetic experience (*rasāsvāda*) is considered by some aestheticians to be the nearest to the delightful experience of *brahman* (*brahmāsvāda*). Therefore, Viśvanātha describes *rasāsvāda* as the *sahodara* of *brahmāsvāda*. Abhinava's final view on the relation between *brahmāsvāda* and *rasāsvāda* is found in his commentary on a verse composed by Ānandavardhna:

*Yā vyāpāravatī rasān rasayitum kācit kavīnām navaā
Dṛṣṭīryā pariniścītārtha viṣayonmeṣa ca vaipaścītī
Te dve apyavalambya viśvamaniśam nirvarṇayanto vyaam
Śrāntā naiva ca labdhamabodhiśayana tvadbhaktitulyamsukham .*¹¹

K. Krishnamoorthy has translated this verse as follows:

That fresh look of poets
Whose activity succeeds in enjoying sentiments all,
And that learned outlook which proceeds
Towards probing the truth of objects verily.
Both the outlooks we have tried to utilise
In figuring out the world so long
And we have become exhausted in the attempt.
O Lord, reclining on the sea,
We never obtained in any of these
Happiness comparable to devotion to thee.¹²

Abhinavagupta states the essence of this verse in these words: 'The happiness which results from the understanding of both seen and unseen objects which are ascertained by the means of valid cognition, or even that transcendental joy which consists of relishing an aesthetic experience of both these, the bliss that comes from finding rest in God is far superior, and aesthetic pleasure is only a reflection [*avabhāsa*] of a drop [*vipruṣ*] of that mystic bliss'. It is clear that, according to Abhinavagupta, the bliss that comes from realizing God is far superior (*pratyakṣyate*); and aesthetic pleasure (*rasāsvāda*) is

only a reflection (*avabhāsa*) of a drop (*vipruṣ*) of that mystic bliss. Jayadeva, in his *Prasannarāghava*,¹³ makes the comparison in favour of *rasāsvāda*. Neither the knowledge of *brahman* (spiritual bliss) nor the wealth of a king can be compared to poetry. Like a daughter married to an uncommonly worthy man, it creates joy in the heart when it is appreciated by an exceptional person:

*na brahmavidyā na rājalakṣhmītathā
yatheyam kavītā kavīnam!
lokottare puṁsi niveśyamāna putrīva
harṣam hr̥daye karoti !!*

Bhaṭṭanāyaka compares the aesthetic experience to yogic ecstasy on *brahmāsvāda*. In both there is the complete concentration and absorption of the person to the exclusion of everything, and the momentary interruption of his everyday life. But there is a distinction between the two experiences – while the *yogin* has to undergo laborious and severe discipline to equip himself for a glimpse of the Absolute, the reader of literature can be more passive. The power of literature will force attention to itself and make him enjoy its sweetness, just as a milch cow will give its milk to its calf voluntarily without any serious effort on the part of the calf:

*vāgdhenurdugha etam hi rasam yad balatṛṣṇayā!
tena nāsya samaḥ sa syā duhyate yogibhirhi yaḥ!!¹⁴*

Bhaṭṭanāyaka considers aesthetic experience to be superior to the bliss of yogic trance, since the former is easier and simpler.

The *rasa-sūtra* interpretation given by Sanskrit aestheticians is associated with *darśanas* (systems of philosophy). Bhaṭṭa Lollaṭa is thought to be a Mīmāṃsaka, Śāṅkuka is considered to have been influenced by the Nyāyadarśana, Bhaṭṭanāyaka is thought to have followed the Sāṅkhyadarśana, and Abhinavagupta is accepted to have interpreted the *rasasūtra* according to the Kashmir Śaiva philosophy. According to Śāṅkuka, the spectator apprehends the *sthāyī* abiding in the actor by inference, and derives pleasure there from. The *sthāyī* is cognized as abiding in the *anuykārya* (Rāma) by inference. Śāṅkuka makes it clear that, in this inference, the object inferred is not prosaic (like the object in the inference of fire from smoke). He says that the *anukartā* (actor) is identified with the *anukārya* (original character) as in the analogy of the *citra turaga* (the horse in a picture, which is taken for a real horse). For him this cognition is peculiar since it is distinct from true as well as false knowledge. When one looks at the

picture of a horse the cognition is not false since it is the same – unchanged – at all times and is not contradicted. Śaṅkuka's claim that the unreal *vibhāvas* make the spectator infer the *sthāyi* of the actor has no parallel in the *Nyāyāśāstra* because there cannot be any valid inference from an unreal mark (*liṅga*).

Bhaṭṭanāyaka's main contribution to the theory of *rasa* is the idea of universalization (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), where the *vibhāvas* are stripped off all relations – temporal, spatial and personal – and presented in a universalized form by a distinct function of words recognized by him. Bhaṭṭanāyaka's use of the word *sattvodreka* has led scholars to believe that he was influenced by Sāṅkhya philosophy. When the spectator witnesses a drama, the *sattva* quality becomes predominant. This gives rise to pleasure, which is similar to *brahmāsvāda*.¹⁵ Abhinavagupta's theory is the most convincing of all the interpretations of *rasa* theory. According to him, the *sthāyi* which belongs to the spectator (as suggested by the *vibhāvas*) is a universalized form because, at the time of witnessing the *nāṭya*, the spectator becomes a de-individualized cogniser. This *rasa* is not distinct from one's being, and hence is similar to *brahmāsvāda*.¹⁶

The emotions of art free the spectator from the bonds of self-interest and activity. He loses himself in bliss, which is nothing but a reflection in his mind of the mystic nature within. The Sāṅkhya and theistic schools of Vedānta describe aesthetic delight as the realization of the bliss of art and literature which rends the veil of ignorance from the connoisseur for the nonce, like yogic exercises. The mind's personal interests are said to be transcended in aesthetic experience, wherein only universalized art emotions are felt.

Post-Śaṅkara *advaitins*, like Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, have stretched the meaning of the word '*bhakti*' to mean the supreme delight resulting from *brahman* realization in order to accommodate it as *rasa* or aesthetic experience par excellence. Yet some *advaita* thinkers feel that *rasāsvāda* is not only inferior to but is also an impediment to bliss.¹⁷ According to them, even *śāntarasa* is merely a desirable means towards realization rather than a reward of it.

For the first time, Jagannātha Paṇḍita examines aesthetic theory in the light of established Vedāntic philosophy. The analogy of silver in nacre explains Jagannātha's novel view, which he ascribes to the new thinkers (*navyas*). The silver therein, according to *Advaita*, is not non-existent (*asat*). It is not existent (*sat*) either, because it is negated the moment the nacre is perceived. It belongs to a unique category called the indefinable (*anirvacanīya*). The object of art experience is presented to the eye by the individual's nascence (*ajñāna*), and the

desire to pick it up is also the effect of one's *ajñāna*. Similarly, a reader's inner self is brought into association with the emotions of imaginary characters, his nascence fools him into identifying them as his own, and in this state he delights.

Thus, according to these thinkers, aesthetic experience is no more than an illusory individual experience, though it comes into being as a result of the unique nature of the mind known as imagination. However, there is a difference between *rasa* and ordinary illusion. Ordinary *avidyā* in aesthetic experience releases one from personal interest and action. But, on that account, it cannot be equated with the actual realization of *saguṇa* or *nirguṇa brahman*.

The poet's creation is often compared with Lord Brahma's creation. Ānandavardhana's famous verse in this connection runs as follows:

apāre kāvyasaṁsāre kavirekaḥ prajāpatiḥ!
*yathāsmāi rocate viśvaṁ tathedam parivartate!!*¹⁸

The Lord Brahma creates this world of ours. The poet also creates his own world for us. Lord Brahma creates this world with atoms and the effects of *karma*, which serve as the material cause and the efficient cause of his creation respectively. But the poet requires nothing other than his own capacity to create the poetic world. He is not dependent upon any thing other than his own poetic genius. Creative power is compared with poetic genius. Poetic genius is called *pratibhā* whereas the power with which Maheśvara manifests himself is called *parāpratibhā*. *Kavipratibhā* holds within itself all the poetic ideas while *Parāpratibhā* holds within itself an endless variety of the objects of manifestation. Both the poet and Maheśvara manifest their respective worlds according to their own will. According to Kṣmirāja, a Śaiva monist: 'Sa svecchayā svabhittau viśvacitrāṁ unmīlayati'. Following Abhinavagupta it may be said that, from the mystical point of view, *pratibhā* is a spiritual power which makes its possessor rest in Śiva, the 'highest light', and enables him to realize that the entire objectivity is nothing other than Śiva. *Pratibhā* raises an individual from the level of individuality to the state of *sad-idyā*. In that state he is known as *śaktitattva*. If the person does not descend from the level of *sad-idyā* (*śakti*), he is liberated and becomes Śiva:

sa eva pratibhāyuktaḥ śaktitattvaṁ nigayate!
*tat pātāveśato muktaḥ Śiva eva bhavāṇṇavāt!!*⁹

Abhinavagupta was an ardent follower of the *pratyabhijñā* school

of Kashmir Śaivism, and considered the aesthetic experience of the art connoisseur to be on the same level as the religious experience of the mystic. In the *Abhinavabhāratī*, while dwelling on *rasasūtra*, he mentions the conception of the final stage of aesthetic experience in clear terms as 'asmanmate tu samvedanam eva ānandaghanam āsvādyate'.²⁰

According to him, aesthetic experience at its highest level is the experience of the self itself, as pure and unmixed bliss. He names this state as *mahārasa*. To him Śiva and *rasa* are coterminous. In his exposition of the *rasa sūtra*, which became the standard exposition for later writers on the subject, he utilized material from various philosophical systems to his liking.

Thus it is evident that the Indian aesthetics of art is not completely cut off from Indian metaphysics. Sanskrit aestheticians have voluntarily selected ideas from the philosophical schools to illustrate their concepts. It may be said that the *ātman* doctrine has suggested the criterion for judging the excellence of aesthetic bliss. Having established *dhvani* (suggestion) as the soul of poetry, the new school established by Ānandavardhana lays down the proper approach to the outer form of poetry. According to this school, it is wrong to regard the outward expression (consisting of the word and explicit meaning) as valuable in itself and look for beauty in it. We have to look at it only as a means through which we may catch the inner meaning. The model for this relationship between expression and suggestion in the poetic method is also based on the *ātman* doctrine. Thus it is clear that even where a new concept had to be evolved, examples of movements in philosophical schools often served to inspire and guide the poeticians. It may be said, in conclusion, that the influence Indian philosophical traditions exercised on *Alaṅkāraśāstra*, far from contradicting the latter's freedom, only complemented it.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. T.P. Ramachandran, *The Indian Philosophy of Beauty*, Part II (Madras: Madras University of Madras), pp. 31 ff.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
3. *Kaviḥ-krāntadarśano bhavati*.
4. *Aitareyāranyaka*, VI. 51; *Śilpāni śamsanti, devaśilpāni eteṣaṃ vai śilpānām anukṛtiha śilpamadhigamyate*'.
5. See V. Raghavan, 'Concept of Beauty' in *Vedanta Kesari*, Vol. 10. XCLVI, No. IV, 1959, pp. 181-84.
6. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, I.7.4.
7. *Daśarūpaka Upaniṣad* of Dhanañjaya, IV, 85.

