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## Grammar, Literature and Poetics – An Indian Approach

Dr. Vijayalaxmi Koppikar

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### Abstract

Anandvardhana identified *rasa* as the goal of poetry, with *dhvani* as its means. *Dhvani* means ‘sound’, ‘echo’, ‘reverberation’. Anandavardhana was clearly indebted to earlier grammarians, especially Bhartrhari, who first espoused *sphota* theory which describes the ‘bursting’ of meaning upon the hearing of an utterance. Unlike his predecessors, Anandvardhana was interested only in the aesthetic value of words within the poetic context. *Dhvani* theory describes the significant range of a word or an utterance, and Anandvardhana understood it as a step beyond both literal and metaphorical meanings. Mary Ann Selby interprets *dhvani* in the following manner:

*Dhvani* theory is a system of meaning in which the signifier is fixed, but its corresponding signifieds are theoretically infinite. Included in the resonant

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potential of an utterance is its lexicality that is full lexical range, and its associative elements, those things that cannot be expressed by mere lexicality. Additionally, these elements encompass the associations a reader may have with an utterance (that sometimes seem to border on synaesthesia), and can even include its opposite meaning.<sup>i</sup>

This paper aims to study how meaning at the level of *abidha*, *lakshana*, *vyanjana* and ultimately *rasa* is conveyed through language in poetry as viewed by ancients with special emphasis on the *dhvani* theory propounded by Anandvardhana. Examples are cited from *Gathasaptasati* (a Prakrit text, and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, and Shakespearean plays. It will lend new and meaningful dimensions and enrich our understanding of Indian culture in particular and of stylistics as a whole.

### ***Rasa and Dhvani as Enunciated by Anandavardhana***

Anandvardhana identified *rasa* as the goal of poetry, with *dhvani* as its means.<sup>ii</sup> *Dhvani* means 'sound', 'echo', 'reverberation'. Anandavardhana was clearly indebted to earlier grammarians, especially Bhartrhari, who first espoused *shpota* theory which describes the 'bursting' of meaning upon the hearing of an utterance. It was upon this that Anandavardhana based his *dhvani* theory of meaning.<sup>iii</sup> Unlike his predecessors, Anandvardhana was interested only in the aesthetic value of words within the poetic context. *Dhvani* theory describes the significative range of a word or an utterance, and Anandvardhana understood it as a step beyond both literal and metaphorical meanings. Selby interprets *dhvani* in the following manner:

*Dhvani* theory is a system of meaning in which the signifier is fixed, but its corresponding signifieds are theoretically infinite. Included in the resonant potential of an utterance is its lexicality, that is full lexical range, and its associative elements, those things that cannot be expressed by mere lexicality. Additionally, these elements encompass the associations a reader may have with an utterance (that sometimes seem to border on synaesthesia), and can even include its opposite meaning.<sup>iv</sup>

### A Traditional Illustration of *Dhvani*

The following example from the second-century Prakrit anthology, the *Gathasaptasati*, may be considered:

Why are you crying  
with your head bent down  
as the rice fields must turn white?  
The hemp field's like a dancer's  
face daubed with yellow paint<sup>v</sup>

### Mathuranath Sastri's Exemplification

Mathuranath Sastri of the twentieth century gives the following head note to exemplify *dhvani* in his Sanskrit commentary: "There was a meeting place, a rice field, which was frequented by a certain woman in the company of some man. Then, when the rice ripened, seeing that the spot was ruined, a girlfriend informed the crying woman that another meeting spot was available".<sup>vi</sup>

The idea is that the rice is ready to be harvested, and if the field is cut, the cover for the woman's amorous meetings is gone. The girlfriend is indicating to her that the hemp field is now a suitable spot for romantic meetings with her lover. The above head note is not at all enough for Mathuranath Sastri who claims that every single word of the *Gathasaptasati* contains the potential for *dhvani*. He explains the simile, then suggests other possible levels of meaning, again paraphrasing and expanding upon *Gangadharabhata*.

Here are the options that Mathuranath Sastri presents (He first focuses on the phrase *hariāla-māndia-mukhi*-“face adorned with yellow paint”):

(1) The mouth of the hemp field's entrance path is adorned with a group of yellow monkeys, and because there are no people around, it is indicated, as a meeting place. (2) A girlfriend suggests to the heroine with the phrase “face which is adorned...” that, “just as the hemp field has a decorated face, so should you... adorn yourself and perform an erotic dance.”

(3) The act of lifting up the face is indicated by the phrase “head bent down,” that is, “having bent down your face, why do you stand here? Look at my gestures.” (4) Since the ripened rice field can still be a meeting place (that is, the rice has not yet been harvested), some woman whose meeting place is this rice field is mocked for her crying by some other woman whose habits are derisive.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Room for Reader Intervention – *Dhvani* Theory**

The example given by Mathuranath Sastri shows that interpretive modes of reading propounded for Sanskrit poetry and for poetry in any language, *dhvani* theory allows room for reader invention, even readerly “chaos”. *Dhvani* appears to undermine the notion of convention, as well as the very idea of literary competence, to a certain extent.

The commentaries on the *Gathasaptasati* represent a “demand for sense”, but also seem to underscore the idea that language and meaning are all things that will always outrun the grasp of the reader.<sup>viii</sup> *Dhvani* desystematises the more regular and classically accepted modes of reading Sanskrit and Prakrit poetry. It explains the variance in interpretation that extends far beyond mere *double entendre*. Perhaps *dhvani* most accurately describes the act of reading. It certainly accounts for the shadings of words and the different nuances of resonance for each poetic context. According to Selby, “This poem exudes an elusive, polysemic *dhvani*. Literary conventions in the *rasa dhvani* approach differ from other approaches in the techniques of reading, depending largely in precisely what a reader has to know to decode specific paradigmatic symbologies in order to make sense out of a poem”<sup>ix</sup>

### **Experience of *Rasa***

*Rasanubhava*, the experience of *rasa*, is a factor which is common to both, a *kavi*, the poet and a *sahrdaya*, the aesthete. The *kavi* and *sahrdaya*, in their creative and ecstatic moments, share the identical *rasanubhava*. As V. Venkatachalam points out,

The creative faculty, which is the distinguishing mark of the poet is to be found in the *sahrdaya* too, with just a little difference. Whereas the poet creates a world of his own and shapes it in words, the *sahrdaya* re-creates from those very words the poet's world once again. <sup>x</sup>

### **The Poet and the Connoisseur**

In fact, it is this commonality that makes *kavi-rasika-hrdaya-samvada*, the communion of the poet and the aesthete, a possibility.

Since the writer transmits the transpersonalised *bhavas* across to the reader, *rasanubhava* is revealed in and through a close scrutiny of the work of art, and still further, through the minute study of words employed by the writer. Whichever method of evaluation we may adopt, our judgment of a work of art chiefly and finally rests on the study of words and our ability to make use of words to the fullest extent, while comprehending the work. Luckily, the Sanskrit scholars have made an elaborate study of what a word is and what it does in a work of art. Having realised the value of poetic language, Sanskrit scholars have paid attention to the theory of meaning and, in so doing, they have made fine distinctions and developed a highly sophisticated terminology. To arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, we must first get acquainted with the terminology.

### **Power of Words**

A word, as we all know, conveys a lexical sense. It is constructed out of molecular syllables or letters which retain their distinct sounds. We utter a particular word and it evokes a specific meaning. This power of a word to evoke a specific meaning is designated *abhidha*. The Sanskrit scholars think that *sanketa* or convention plays an important role in attributing a specific meaning to a particular group of sounds. A group of sounds which indicate an object, the meaning thus evoked by the group of sounds, and our perception of the meaning are three different things. And yet, we come to attribute a specific meaning to a particular stratum of sounds because of what the Sanskrit scholars call *itaretaradhyasa*.

To explain this, J.B. Paranjape gives an example from the speech of Tull in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* when he says that Anse's 'overalls are faded':

Now, the sound-word 'overall,' the object indicated by that sound-word, and our perception of the meaning of the word 'overall,' can be logically distinguished. And yet, in our consciousness, the three things appear as though they are fused. When the graphic equivalent appears before us, we readily recognise the *sanketa* which makes this word intelligible. Memory, too, plays a vital role in attributing a specific meaning to a particular sound-word because the reader will hardly be able to comprehend the denoted sense, if the *sanketa* is not readily recalled.<sup>xi</sup>

### ***Abhidha-vyapara* - General Reference of Words: The Power of Denotation**

It may be noted that in the *abhidha-vyapara*, a sound-word does not refer to objects in particular: it refers to objects in general.

A sentence is constructed out of words. But the meaning of a whole sentence is not evoked by the *abhidha-vyapara*. As the field of *abhidha* is restricted to the denotation of objects in general, we have to turn to *tatparya-sakti* or the purport in order to make out the meaning of the complete sentence. Attempts have been made to extend the field of *abhidha* to include in its fold the function of *tatparya*. These critics refuse to concede *tatparya* as an independent power.

### ***laksana-vyapara* Implied Meaning, Inferential Meaning**

Sometimes a reader fails to make out the meaning denoted by *abhidha-vyapara*. He then turns to comprehend it by relying on the *laksana-vyapara*. The secondary meaning, thus evoked in *laksana*, is inferentially related to the primary meaning. Convention and the intention of the writer are the two decisive factors which determine the secondary meaning. Take, for instance, these expressions: *gangayam ghosah* (A hamlet on the Ganges), or *simho batuh* (He is a lion).<sup>xii</sup> Apparently expressions of this kind appear to be meaningless and ineffectual, if we restrict ourselves to the *abhidha-vyapara* or the power of denotation. Certainly, there are obvious difficulties in accepting the primary meaning or the purport.

In order to make the meaning clear, we read these expressions as “A hamlet on the Ganges,” or “He is like a lion.” This word-activity is the means by which the writer seeks to express the meaning by resorting to indirections. The implied meaning comprehended by the reader is designated by the term *laksana-vyapara*.

### **Secondary Meaning**

The secondary meaning is called *lakshyartha*, and the sound-word which expresses this content is called *laksaka*. Mammata says that the primary meaning is and can be subordinated to the secondary meaning only if the three conditions of *lakshyartha* are satisfactorily fulfilled.<sup>xiii</sup> The nature of determinant in accepting the primary meaning is of two kinds: the primary meaning may be incompatible with the facts of life or it may contradict the intention of the writer or the speaker. K. Kunjunni Raja translates the verse II as follows:

The three essential conditions generally accepted by the later Alankarikas as necessary in *laksana* or transfer are (a) inapplicability or the unsuitability of the primary meaning in the context, (b) some relation between the primary and the actual referent of the word, and (c) sanction for the transferred sense by popular usage, or a definite motive justifying the transfer.<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Meaning by Convention**

The primary meaning is also called *sanketika* meaning (the meaning sanctioned by convention). It, however, does not mean that convention has no role to play in hinting at the secondary meaning.

### **Suggestive Sound-Word**

Apart from the two aspects of words, *abhidha* and *laksana*, literary critics have given sanction to one more power, namely *vyanjana* or the power of suggestion. This power of words to suggest the tertiary meaning is designated by the term *vyanjana-vyapara*. The suggestive sound-word is called *vyanjaka*, and the tertiary meaning, thus suggested by the *vyanjana*, is called *vyangyārtha*. Critics give the most traditional and handy example to prove the existence of *vyanjana-vyapara*.<sup>xv</sup> However, Abhinava makes it explicitly clear in the *Locana* that the

citation like that which is given above cannot be taken as a proper illustration of *dhvani* because mere suggestion does not make a poem. What makes poem a poem is nothing but *carutvaprati*.<sup>xvi</sup>

The tertiary meaning depends upon the primary or secondary meaning. But in a way it also transcends them. That is why Anandavardhana compares the tertiary meaning with the loveliness of a woman which depends upon the component parts such as limbs, etc., but which also transcends them.<sup>xvii</sup> The peculiar feature of *vyanjana-vyapara* is that the suggested or tertiary meaning itself can suggest *rasa* or *bhava*. In other words, meaning denoted by *abhidha*, or hinted by *laksana* or suggested by *vyanjana* finally terminates into a *rasa*.

### Overlapping Relations

Of the three functions of a word, *abhidha* is the most natural and independent activity. The chief function of a word is to communicate the primary meaning, and hence, it is designated by the term *mukhya-vyapara* or principal function.<sup>xviii</sup> In the *laksana-vyapara* we reject the primary meaning as well as purport, and in a way, we also reject the natural meaning of words. Mammata, therefore, describes it as superimposed function.<sup>xix</sup> A word, before it becomes suggestive, must either express the primary meaning or the secondary meaning. While laying stress on the supremacy of the tertiary meaning, Anandavardhana points out that the primary meaning serves the purpose of *upadana*.<sup>xx</sup> *Abhidha* and *vyanjana* may co-exist and function simultaneously. The kind of denoted or transferred meaning can be grasped by anyone, but for the comprehension of the tertiary meaning, the reader must have imagination and a trained poetic sensibility which is essential for the true understanding of literature.<sup>xxi</sup> The primary function of the power of revelation is to remove the thick curtain of the detracting factors which stand as a barrier between the reader and the appreciation of *rasa*, and which forbid the reader from being enlightened by *rasasvada*. The existence of *gunas* and *alamkaras*, the absence of *dosa-s* in a poetic work, and the four kinds of representation in the dramatic work enable the reader to apprehend *rasa*.

### Role of Reader's Trained Sensibility

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Anandavardhana and Abhinava are, therefore, at pains to lay stress on the fact that the reader must have that trained poetic sensibility, which is an essential condition for the proper appreciation of different *rasas*. Just as a piece of classical Indian music cannot be appreciated by those who do not have that cultivated ear for that kind of music, a piece of literature can never be appreciated by one who has no gift of poetic sensibility.<sup>xxii</sup> More than once, it has been pointed out that *rasa* cannot be directly and explicitly stated: it is always suggested.

Just as Soul manifests itself through the body, so also *rasa* manifests itself through the body. The words and meaning which together constitute the body. The chief intention of the writer is or ought to be that of transmitting this *rasa* by way of suggestion.

It may be noted here that the writer does not transmit his sorrow, or his anger, or his joy to the reader. Sorrow, anger, fear and joy etc. are stripped off their individual aspects or local colouration.

So, the kind of sorrow experienced by the great sage, Valmiki, when he saw that one of the pair of *kraunca* birds was killed, is qualitatively different from the sorrow that the poet decided to suggest through his poem.

### **Personal Sorrow vs. Aesthetic Sorrow**

Abhinava warns us that we must make a clear distinction between the kind of sorrow felt by the great sage and the transpersonalised *sthayin* called *soka* which the reader relishes at the aesthetic level.<sup>xxiii</sup> Whatever other extraneous intentions the poet may have for creating a new order of reality through his poem, the chief intention is not that of offering lessons (*bodha*) but that of evoking a *rasa* by objectifying the experience.

The objectification of experience implies the presentation of *vibhava*-s, *anubhava*-s and other things, in such a way that the proper mixture of these enables the reader to intuit the suggested *rasa*.

## **Mental Recreation**

The concept of *rasa* cannot be, therefore, nailed to words and meaning or to any other constituent in the work of art. *Rasa*-activity, as a whole, is meaningful. In the dramatic performance we witness the action on the stage; in poetry and other forms of literature we solely depend upon the language employed by the writer because only the *sahrdaya* who can mentally re-create the situation can participate in the aesthetic activity.

While making a distinction between the poetic and non-poetic language, the early Sanskrit scholars laid an emphasis on the different critical terms such as *uktivisesa*, *vakrokti*, *amukhya-vyapara*, *riti*, and *vrtti*. It was Anandavardhana who made a systematic study of the various concepts in the early literary criticism and brought them under a wider fold of *dhvani*.

## **Rasadhvani Process**

The *Rasadhvani* process-the *vibhavadis* conjointly by means of *vyanjana* (suggestion) evoking a *rasa* (emotional response from the reader) – is conducted on what may be called the “conscious” plane and is largely determined by cultural conventions and contracts. Now this description of the reading experience does not have an absolute and invariable applicability. It gets problematized when, for example, we come upon Anandvardhana’s identification of the *rasa* of the *Mahabharata*, tale of deception, betrayal, outrage, bestiality, privation and pain. How can it be *santa*? Some readers find it difficult to accept the explanation that the approach to the ending of the epic and the ending itself establish “Calm of mind, all passions spent,” or exercise “an exalting effect.” Surely, the dominant *rasa* of a poem is what the entire poem, and not just the finale, evokes. One finds on the other hand, that down the enormous length of the narrative of the *Mahabharata*, subverting the violence and turbulence on the surface, there courses an undercurrent of quietude and serenity. Anandvardhana’s willed selection of *santa* may have been dictated by his intention to treat the *Mahabharata* as a *sastra-kavya* upholding *moksa* as the supreme human goal. However, at the level of instinctual perception, the *sahrdays-cakravartin* must have sensed a stratum of tranquility.

## A Parallel

An uncannily close parallel to Anandvardhana's reading of the *Mahabharata* is T.S. Eliot's reading of the play, *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* by Shakespeare's contemporary, John Marston.

In both works-the *Mahabharata* and *Sophonisba*-the dominant *rasa* formed beneath the surface bears to the visible verbal structures a relation not of congruence but of contradiction, so that the process of suggestion of the emotion is, rather as in the case of the figure of irony, a process of signification by means of the contrary. Although this is how we would describe it today, traditionally such absence of congruity between the *rasa* and the *vibhavadis* was classed as an artistic failure or flaw; it was termed *pratikula-vibhavadigraha*. In fact, as is well known, Eliot dismisses the play *Hamlet* as an artistic failure because the objective correlative of the dominant emotion, disgust, is not adequate.<sup>xxiv</sup>

If in *Hamlet* the textual objects are not adequate equivalents of the principal emotion, in the *Mahabharata* they are not equivalents at all, but quite the opposite, with the result that the principal emotion is partly or wholly subsurface. In Eliot's words in a different connection, "beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions ... there is a fringe, or indefinite extent, of feeling ..." Eliot's criticism is strewn with numerous such asides on the subject, which, however fail to add up to a coherent theory. What is of some relevance to our examination of *rasa-dhvani* in Shakespeare is Eliot's statement in the essay on Marston : "It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once."<sup>xxv</sup>

A well-known Shakespeare critic of Eliot's generation also speaks of the submerged level of feeling in the plays. In the soliloquy "To be or not to be," says L.C. Knights "...such ideas as it contains are held loosely in relation to a current of feeling which is the main determinant of meaning." Similarly in Macbeth's soliloquy "If it were done when 'tis done," "...the meaning', says Knights, "is composed of an emotional current running full-tilt against an attempted logical control."<sup>xxvi</sup> Two concrete concepts emerge from these remarks-one is that the meaning of the play is

chiefly determined by the emotional undercurrent; the other is that this subsurface level of meaning is not only discrete from but can even be opposed to the level of rational statement, which, Eliot and Knights agree, is mostly the level of plot and character.

What agent is it that generates and sustains this emotional undertone—for an undertone it assuredly is, a current below the surface with a direction opposite to that of the surface current? In *Macbeth* there are frequent images of the positive elements of existence—birth, breeding, food, sleep, fellowship—which build up the life-affirming emotion that persists obstinately as a sub-text and at times weakens the over-arching sense of evil in the play. In *Hamlet*, the reigning emotion is a sense of guilt: Hamlet's sense of a culpability that could be his or someone else's. The play, however, has an abundance of images of decay and disease that create a subliminally sensed climate of universal corruption which cancels out the individual's special burden of complicity.

### **Local Semantic Activity**

*Dhvani*, can also be seen as semantic activity, which is local rather than textwide, textural rather than structural. This would consist of the output of suggested meaning—unstated, indirect, relatively imprecise, highly interpretable, multiple, associative, non-referential—from a single word or utterance, an individual image, or a piece of rhythm. The ideal reading strategy would presuppose a maximally perceptive and sensitive reader, a *sahrdaya*, who would have no difficulty in getting on the right wavelength to receive the multiple implications and overtones of the word in its particular context and its accumulated literary and cultural associations. For a given reader, a word can acquire several coats of remembered meaning grown out of his or her own previous encounters with it in its own guises and contexts.

The two key words in the *Dhvanyaloka* are *dhvani* and *rasa*. The understanding of the first term may stand in good stead to follow the full implication of the second term of pivotal significance, i.e. *rasa*. While reading—experiencing the plays of Shakespeare or indeed any literary work in the light of the twin theories of *rasa* and *dhvani*, a reader today could encounter resistance from the work if he or

she fails to bring into play the concepts implicit in reformulations, adjustments and extensions which have become desirable and possible since. The *Rasadhvani* process is conducted on what may be called the “conscious” plane and is largely determined by cultural conventions and contracts.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>ii</sup> See Daniel H.H. Ingalls, *The Dhvanyaloka of Anandvardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, trans. Daniel H.H. Ingalls, Jeffery Masson and M.V. Patwardhan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Introduction ix.

<sup>iii</sup> K. Kunjuni Raja, *Indian Theories of Meaning* (Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1963) 277-78.

<sup>iv</sup> Martha Ann Selby, “Rasa and Mey-p-patu in Sanskrit and Tamil Poetics,” Special Issue of *The Journal of Oriental Research*, Vol. LXVII 20

<sup>v</sup> Satavahana, *Gathasaptasati*, ed. Durgaprasad and W.L.S. Pansikar with the commentary of Gangadharabhata, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Kavya Mala Series 21, (Bombay: Nirnaya Sagar Press, 1911) 181.

<sup>vi</sup> Paul Dundas, “The Sattsai and Its Commentators,” *Indologica Taurinensia*, Vol. 17 (1985) 9.

<sup>vii</sup> Jonathan Culler, “Literary Competance,” *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Structuralism*, ed. Jane Tompkins (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980) 111.

<sup>viii</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963) 174.

<sup>ix</sup> Selby 26

<sup>x</sup> V. Venkatachalam, “The Inter-relation of the Kavi and the Sahrdaya in Sanskrit Literary Criticism”, *Principles of Literary Criticism in Sanskrit*, ed. R.C. Dwivedi (Delhi; Varanasi; Patna: Motilal Banarsidass 1969) 40.

<sup>xi</sup> J.B. Paranjpe, *Old Lamp for the New* (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company Ltd., 1982) 6.

<sup>xii</sup> Masson and Patwardhan, Vol.I 15-16.

<sup>xiii</sup> See Mammata 26.

<sup>xiv</sup> Kunjuni Raja 231-32.

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<sup>xv</sup> Masson and Patwardhan, Vol. I 15-16.

<sup>xvi</sup> Locana 59.

<sup>xvii</sup> D. Al., Vol. I 18.

<sup>xviii</sup> See Mammata 26.

<sup>xix</sup> See Mammata 26.

<sup>xx</sup> D. Al., Vol. I 179.

<sup>xxi</sup> Locana 26.

<sup>xxii</sup> D. Al., Vol. I 173.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Locana, Vol. 1 159.

<sup>xxiv</sup> T.S. Eliot "Hamlet and His Problems", *The Sacred Wood*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1934) 101.

<sup>xxv</sup> Eliot, *Shakespearian Criticism* 299.

<sup>xxvi</sup> L.C. Knights, *Some Shakespearian Themes* (London: Methuen, 1965) 62.

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