

Technical and Aesthetic Theories of Poetry in Sanskrit

THE Indian conception of poetry in its technical and aesthetic aspects is, indeed, distinctly represented in the early and later stages of Sanskrit poetical theory, respectively. The study of these aspects, which we attempt in this paper, is all the more significant and interesting in view of the same distinction established in Western art criticism, which speaks of the early acceptance, (according to critics like Collingwood) in Greek and ancient Western literature, of the technical or technic criteria in art appreciation whereas the moderns without emphasising that aspect of art, consider aesthetic criteria and standards as more valuable in the evaluation of what is termed 'a work of art.'

The technical theory of art has been primarily advanced in order to interpret and explain the artistic activity, centering round the production of artifacts among primitive peoples throughout the world. It was later extended in its scope to cover literary activity, too, because it was felt by some that the theory fitted into the 'craft' of poetry, which apparently employed similar techniques and devices.¹

A technical theory of poetry, exactly similar to that of the Greek theorists (outlined by Collingwood),² had been conceived by the ancient Indian poets and poet-theorists of the Rgveda as early as the second millennium B.C. Though considered barren by many from the point of view of poetical theory, the Rgveda yields abundant information about the poetical processes and techniques the authors (of the hymns) employed in the writing of poetry and the views they held about the function of words and their significance in poetry. We often come across references made to the poets who take special care to compose an original hymn (*navyam brahma*). Sometimes the 'composer' of a hymn refers to the devices he uses to make the composition look more original than that of his rival. These devices are, in his opinion, analogous to the methods and means employed by a weaver, chariot-maker, carpenter or smith—all common vocations among the Aryans—producing an artifact. Thus a hymn speaks of his art in such terms as these,

1. See R. G. Collingwood—*The Principles of Art*, Chapter II—*Art and Craft*—for a full discussion of the technical theory of art.

2. Collingwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

Indra brahma kriyamānā juṣasva
yā te śaviṣṭha navyā akarma
vastreva bhadrā sukṛtā vasūyū
ratham na dhīraḥ svapā atakṣam³ (Rv. V. 29.15).

where, the poet, Gauriviti, asks Indra to take delight in his new poem which he has fashioned in the same way as a 'maker' turns out beautiful robes or as a carpenter makes a chariot.⁴ This analogy and similar others are often used by the poets, especially, in the Family Books, to describe the aptness and effectiveness of the new poetical devices invented by them. The most striking parallelism is drawn, in another hymn,⁵ between the art of decking a horse and the artistic technique of the poet, where the necessity to chose and arrange words with due regard to metre and rhythm, not ignoring the decorative function of 'the alankaras,' is significantly compared to the efforts employed in grooming the horse and rendering it fit for the fray. We observe, therefore, that the technical theory of poetry, which emerges from the Rgveda, is something consistent with their general approach to art and life, which was viewed more from utilitarian ends than from the strictly aesthetic angle.

It is clear, nevertheless, that this conception of poetry is particularly associated with the older strata of the Rgveda, as suggested by the Family Books, where the connexion between poetry and the crafts, known to the Aryans, had been established on the basis of technical skill. At a later period (in the parts of the Rgveda considered relatively late) the more reflective among the poets, or—we may even call them—poet-theorists began to theorise on the efforts of earlier and contemporary poets. As the efficacy of their prayers and supplications to the deities depended on the correct and purposeful use of language attention was directed to the power of words, in their literary function and in their religious function as a means of obtaining divine knowledge.

In the hymn,⁶ discussing the theme of Knowledge (Jñānam), the varied functions of Vāk (Speech) as it impressed on the author, Bṛhaspati, are mentioned. It describes, at the outset, how language originated when names were given to various objects and how great value was attached to their meaning, which is described as something hidden (guhā). It

3. The use of the root √takṣ (atakṣam) here is very significant as shown by the following parallelisms.

See Burrow—Sanskrit Language § 9, p. 79. Skt. takṣ "to construct in wood (as a carpenter)" Avstan-taṣ, Greek-technē (art) <tek, tékton "carpenter" (cp. Skt. takṣan-carpenter")

4. See Diwekar—Les Fleur de Rhetorique dans l'Inde p. 5.

5. See Rv. I. 130.6

6. Rv. X. 71.

resorts to the simile of 'men sifting corn-flour in a cribble'⁷ to illustrate how the 'wise' chose their language, and proceeds also to speak of various types of people, who could be graded according to the impressions they receive from Speech (Vāk). In the commentary to the hymn Sāyana uses expressions like 'vāci arthajñānam paśyāmah ityarthah, jñātārthā āhuh,' showing that the hymn attempts to extol those who used language with a full awareness of the significance of words. It is therefore possible to assume that views like these on the function of language and of meaning influenced the conception of poetry too and that a tendency to attach more importance to the internal substance of poetry than to its external form (as is observed in the earlier hymns) had already manifested itself before the compilation of the Rgveda was completed.

The study of the etymology of words, whose meaning had become obscure in the course of the growth of the Veda into a Samhitā, received priority among the varied aspects of Vedic learning (Vedāṅga) and developed as the Nirukta Vedanga as it was considered indispensable for all literary studies. In the Nirukta, the celebrated work of Yāska, there is definite evidence of the impact of the tendency to emphasise the role of meaning in language, as observed in the later vedic hymns. From a study of the Nirukta one is able to see how Yāska attempted to formulate a theory of poetics with particular reference to the semantic function of words in the poetry of the Rgveda.⁸ To him, therefore, Vedic poetry had lost its early technical and craft-like significance and offered a much more fruitful field of investigation into the processes of language and imagery.⁹ Throughout his work Yāska shows a critical approach in the scrutinisation of the literary material of the Rgveda, throwing out valuable suggestions and ideas, which, even if they are not directly connected with the later aesthetic conception of poetry, seem, at least, to bring it nearer to us.

We have no definite evidence about the date of the origin of the truly aesthetic theory of rasa in the history of art and literary criticism in India on account of the general uncertainty with regard to dates in Indian literary history. Although the theory receives a full and comprehensive treatment in the Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata, assigned within the broad limits of the 2nd

7. Ibid. X. 71.2. Also words which have no significance are described as yielding "neither fruit nor flower" (aphalām apuspām) Ibid. 71.5.

8. It was he who emphasised, as a theorist, the dual aspect of language consisting of "word (vāg) and meaning (artha)," an idea which formed the basis of all later definitions of poetry. Diwekar. op. cit. p. 25.

9. Yāska has made a significant contribution to early poetical theory in his critical study of the simile based on the data supplied by the Rgveda.

century B.C. and the 2nd century A.D., Bharata himself admits that the theory had been traditionally handed down.¹⁰ We may, however, infer from this specially in view of the mnemonic system of imparting instruction (prevalent in the period just after Yāska and the grammarians) that the theory dates back to a period just after Yāska when the technical theory of art was being gradually superseded in the light of the developments and advances in the fine arts as opposed to the technical or practical arts (crafts). Bharata's work also shows the influence dancing and music, especially, among the fine arts, had on this new conception of art, where the emotive and imaginative content of the new artistic media easily lent itself to a new orientation in the approach to art criticism. The exposition of the theory in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* appears to be so comprehensive that we must postulate a period of continuous activity spread over centuries prior to Bharata resulting in its formulation in such a complete form as found in his time. Bharata may, perhaps, have systematised the concept traditionally known, and raised it to the level of an acceptable theory applicable to both art and literature.

The aesthetic character of the theory lies in its recognition that music, dancing and literature or for that matter all forms of art contain an element of emotional stimulation (*bhāva* producing *rasa*) which was rarely grasped by the earlier theorists who were more concerned with the external and formal aspects of the literary and artistic forms. It is perhaps the specific literary genre, the drama, to which, in Bharata's own words, (*nāṭye rasāḥ smṛtāḥ*) the *rasa* theory is first applicable, that helped him to analyse clearly and critically, the gamut of feelings, impressions and images arising in the mind of the spectator during the significant stages of a play. The antecedent states of mind, called the *bhāvas*, necessary for the production of *rasa*, in the spectator, also point unmistakably to the dramaturgic origin of the concept for they are strongly associated with the gestures and movements of the actors and dancers.¹¹ It is also obvious that a theorist could make a psychological or aesthetical approach to the analysis of the feelings of an actor or dancer on the stage more readily than those of the characters of a written poem or story. Here, therefore, for the first time in the history of literary activity, attention was focussed on the central problem of literary appreciation—the analysis of the psychological processes involved in critical judgment. The emphasis on external features of the literary form by

10. Bharata refers to Druhinā as the exponent of the *rasa* concept. See *Nāṭyaśāstrā* VI. 16.

11. *Nānābhīnayaśambandhān bhāvayanti rasān imān*
Yasmāt tasmād anī bhāva vijñeyā nāṭyayokṭṛbhiḥ Nṭ. XI. 34.

Kalidasa also refers to the manner in which a dramatic performance is capable of evoking *rasa* when accompanied by graceful dancing. See *Mālavikāgnimitra* Act I v. 4.

critics of the earlier period appeared, indeed, as a very amateurish effort at literary criticism in the light of the *rasa* theory which had the distinctive merit of being applicable to any artistic or literary form known at the time. Thus the significance of this new criterion became such a decisive factor in literature that it not only influenced every writer of Sanskrit and naturally entered into the vocabulary of criticism from then on but also formed the basis for the formulation of still more critical concepts like *dhvani*. But before we examine how the theory of *rasa* came to be closely linked with the very revolutionary theory of *dhvani*, it is interesting to observe how the *rasa* concept gradually undermined the exaggerated importance of the *alaṅkāra* concept which had motivated the literary conceptions and aims of poets for centuries.

Soon after its formulation by Bharata, the *rasa* theory asserted itself as a very useful criterion influencing both poets and dramatists in their works. Its influence on Kālidāsa is quite patent in his works, especially, in the *Mālavikāgnimitra*. We may even go further and add that Kālidāsa's conception of *rasa* and its kindred principles marks an important stage in the process of its evolution from a theoretical concept, in Bharata's times, to a criterion applied in drama and poetry, later. But, in spite of the refreshing novelty and aesthetic value of this new concept, the tyrannising dominance of the 'alaṅkāra' school of Sanskrit poetics persisted, as is observed in the (*mahākāvya*) writings of the post-Kālidāsan poets like Bhaṭṭi, Bhāravi and Māgha, and in the theoretical manuals of Daṇḍin and Bhāmaha, the two outstanding critics of that school. Even in the next important period in the history of Sanskrit poetics—the period of Vāmana—the full impact of the *rasa* theory on critics and their standards is not seen although the 'alaṅkāra' criterion does not loom so large in his new approach to criticism through 'rīti.' He had also laid the right emphasis on the 'soul' (essence) of poetry (in his new definition of *rīti* as the 'soul of poetry')¹² in contrast to what his predecessors, Daṇḍin and Bhāmaha, had emphasised,—the (external) 'body' of poetry (*kāvyaśarīra*),—which, in their opinion, had necessarily to be 'ornamented' (*alaṅkṛta*). He also set the tradition of substantiating his observations in poetical theory with reference to the literary usage of known poets and dramatists—a step which led to the elevation of literary standards in no small measure.

Towards the end of the ninth century A.D. almost all the important literary works had been produced and the new critical outlook displayed

12. *Rītir ātmā kāvyasya. Kāvylankārasūtra. II. 6.*

by Vāmana, in the *Kāvya-lāṅkārasūtra*, focussed attention on the necessity of assessing afresh the available literature, examining also the validity of the criteria and methods of criticism employed till then. The new school of criticism, *dhvani*, which emerged in this period is of immense significance for not only did it tackle the outstanding problems of poetics in a forthright manner but it also influenced the attitudes and conceptions of later schools.

There seems to be hardly any doubt that by the time the *dhvani* school came into being the aesthetic approach to art had been firmly accepted. But the *dhvani* theorists found that the criterion of *rasa*, which was primarily of dramaturgic origin, was in itself inadequate for the criticism of poetry, where the judgment of a poem or composition depended on the effective use of language in conveying the purport (*artha*). Thus Ānanda-vārdhana and Abhinavagupta, the authors of the *Dhvanyāloka* and the *Dhavanīyālokalocanā*, respectively, and the chief protagonists of the new school, attempted to build up a composite theory called *rasa-dhvani* on the foundations of the old *rasa* concept with special reference to the varied import of words in the production of 'dhvani.' The *Dhvanyāloka* clearly shows the manner in which the traditional disciplines of grammar and logic helped the theorists in the formulation of the new concept. A term used by the grammarians to indicate a sort of mystic essence of sound, *dhvani* was adapted as a canon of literary judgment, the touchstone of all good and purposeful writing. It is not relevant for this discussion to trace the possible steps in the process of its adaptation from a grammatical concept to a poetical criterion. But we may inquire a little further into the salient features of this theory in so far as it signifies the greatest advance in the aesthetic sensitiveness of Indian literary critics.

Vāmana's conception of the 'soul' of poetry (as opposed to the 'body' of poetry, which constituted the basis of earlier definitions of *kāvya*) influences the *Dhvanyāloka* in its definition of *dhvani*, which is tersely put in the statement—*kāvyaśya ātmā dhvaniḥ*. Eschewing the external and superficial aspects of poetry in the definition, the authors of the *Dhvanyāloka* attempt to show how the new criterion helps in cultivating one's aesthetic aptitude for poetry and drama. The *Dhavanīyālokalocanā* clarifies the premises of this definition in maintaining that the 'soul' here is *rasadhvani*, the essence or substance of poetry, which is the most important out of the three elements (*vastu-dhvani*, *alaṅkāra dhvani*, and *rasa-dhvani*) that constitute poetry and which the critical reader (*sahṛdaya*) should always try to elicit in his appreciation (*rasacarvanā*—relishing or enjoyment) of literature.¹³ The

13. *Locanā* I. pp. 38-41.

critic himself is called 'sahṛdaya,' accordingly, as he is one whose mind is refined and perspicacious by his constant reading and intimate knowledge of poetry and the consequent ability to enjoy poetry through the process of identification with the characters and situations described in literary works.¹⁴ In other words he has attained a state of complete harmony or attunement with the poet or writer (*svahṛdayasaṃvādabhājah*) as the following analogy from the *Nāṭyaśāstrā*, cited in the *Locanā*, aptly illustrates.

Yo'rtho hṛdayasaṃvādī tasya bhāvo rasodbhavaḥ
Sāriraṃ vyāpyate yena śūśkam kāṣṭhamivāgīnā. (Nṭś. VII. 7).¹⁵

This definition of poetry is subsequently subjected to a detailed analysis with particular reference to the important literary works like the *Ramāyana*. The *Ramāyana* is held up as the earliest model of Sanskrit poetry which appeals to readers by the 'inclusion' of 'what is charming'—*lalita*—provided by style, imagery etc., and 'what is appropriate'—*ucita*—the proper treatment and development of the theme with a view to the evocation of *rasa*.¹⁶ The terms, *lalita* and *ucita*, acquire a significant value in later poetical theory for they seem to foreshadow the later concepts of *lālitya* and *aucitya*. The *Dhvanyāloka* attempts to prove that the entire purpose of the poet is to bring out a rich 'purport' (*artha*), which only the critically gifted reader could elicit. To this end it makes a distinction, dividing *artha* into *vācya* and *pratīyamāna* (out of which the *vācya*—expressed meaning—produced by means of the 'devices like simile etc.,' and accepted by theorists, traditionally, is not so important as the *pratīyamānārtha*, the implied meaning of poetry, a quality, elusive and undefinable, nevertheless, existent in all good writing, and constituting what is called 'beauty.'¹⁷ It then proceeds to establish the superiority of the *pratīyamānārtha* in Sanskrit literature, citing the *Ramāyana* as a poem illustrating its validity. Here the *Locanā* (commentary) adds that the *pratīyamānārtha* is none other than *rasadhvani* (suggestion of *rasa*) which the subsidiary factors (*vastu-dhvani* and *alaṅkāradhvani*) of *dhvani* help to evoke. It is from this standpoint that we are to evaluate the epic and in this connexion our attention is directed to its introductory episode where the feelings of grief roused in the author (Valmiki) on seeing the separation of the *krauñca* bird from its mate seem to move and inspire him to transmute his emotions into poetry (*śokah ślokatvam āgatah*) by a process of sympathetic identification and consequent sublimation, (*hṛdayasaṃvādātanaṃ mayibhavanakramād*

14. *Ibid.* I. p. 38-39.

15. *Ibid.* I. p. 38.

16. *Dhvanyāloka* I. p. 45.

17. *Ibid.* I. 49.

āsvādyamānatām pratipannāh).¹⁸ This manner of approach to criticism is consistently maintained throughout in the analysis of the detail processes which are said to produce dhvani. It is not possible, of course, to agree with the dhvani theory in all its details, but there can be no doubt that, at this period, Sanskrit poetics had not only developed in its theoretical aspect but evolved a comprehensive system of practical criticism.

Among the critics of the dhvani theory Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka attempted to invalidate the suggestive function (*vyāñjanā*) of poetry, yet retaining the essential aesthetic character of the rasa theory in his acceptance of the activity of *rasacarvanā* as the essential factor in literary appreciation. From the references made to him by Abhinavagupta in the *Locanā* we note that he was in agreement with the dhvani theorists in the acceptance of *abhidhā*, as the primary function of words, but differed from them in upholding that *bhāvakatva* (the generalising function attributed to rasa) and *bhojakatva* (the function of enjoyment or appreciation attributed to the saṃhādaya) indicate the nature of the processes at work, more clearly. The second function of *bhāvakatva* is derived from the activity of the bhāvas (bhavāyanti rasān iti bhāvāh), a stage in which the emotions, though appearing as individualistic, impress on the audience in a generalised, sublimated form. Contending therefore, that rasa is not something suggested (in the view of the dhvani theorists) but is experienced or relished (*bhojakatva*), he attempted to show that the processes involved in the appreciation of literature should be examined and defined, more from the point of the view of the audience or reader than from the angle of the literary work. The value of Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka's theory, reconstructed from these remarks in the *Locanā* is often minimised on account of the loss of the text, but it is undeniable that he was, himself, striving to define the nature of the aesthetic experience, as much as the dhvani theorists, and that, although he did not accept the dhvani concept altogether, he was somewhat influenced by it in the analysis of the various stages of his own theory.

The search for the 'beautiful' in poetry which was, as we observed earlier, the aim of the dhvani school, resulted in the popular acceptance of such terms as *saundarya*, *lālitya*, *cārutva*, *vicchitti*, *vakrokti*, *camatkāra* etc., by many critics of the period. New theories began to develop under the influence of these concepts. Kṣemendra advanced the theory of *aucitya*, as essential to rasa, while Kuntaka, a contemporary of Ānandavardhana, maintained that *vakrokti* (a much older concept than *aucitya*) is the 'soul' of poetry and defined it further as the beauty of language (*vācām vaici-*

18. Ibid. *Locanā* pp. 85-86.

tryam, vicchitti). In the works of the pro-dhvani critics the dhvani theory is unquestionably accepted, its premises being further clarified with reference to the usages of a still wider range of writers. Mammaṭa and Viśvanātha are the most outstanding critics among them, who in, a very eclectic manner, give us the most lucid treatment of the fundamentals of Sanskrit poetics, maintaining the aesthetic traditions of Bharata and Ānandavardhana. The exposition of the dhvani theory in the *Dhvanyāloka* is made in such an involved manner with refutations of the arguments and counter-arguments of its critics, that we have to look for the clearest statement of its basic premises in the *Kāvya prakāśa*,¹⁹ which leans heavily on dhvani. The *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, on the other hand, emphasises the rasa concept, as the foundation of dhvani, giving to poetry a definition—*vākyaṃ rasātmakam kavyam*²⁰—which has been accepted as the most critical and effective of all definitions of poetry in Sanskrit. Its analysis of rasa²¹ could be considered a distinct contribution to the subject since the rasa theory was put forward by Bharata. An attempt has also been made to define '*camatkāra*, the term which was perhaps accepted by many as implying the aesthetic experience, in the course of this analysis, and the views presented merit our attention as we observe therein a significant development in the interpretation of the old rasa theory. Defining *camatkāra* as 'a feeling of surprise accompanied by the up-swelling of the mind,' Viśvanātha, the author, quotes the view of a contemporary who held that 'the substantial content (*sāra*) of rasa is *camatkāra*, which, when existent, the feeling of the marvellous is enjoyed everywhere (in all literature.)'²² It is clear from an observation of this nature that later literary critics²³ were finding it difficult to accept, fully, the conventional rasa theory (with as many as eight or nine rasas) in view of the logical conclusion that the aesthetic function of all the rasas is nearly the same, being intended to evoke our feelings and sensibilities in a manner which makes our apprehension more intuitive than conscious. It is certainly this element of intuitive apprehension underlying the realisation of the aesthetic experience in art and literature, especially, in their religious aspects, that led to equating the artistic experience in its developed state with the mystic experience of religion. Jagannātha's definition (in the *Rasagaṅgādhara* of the 17th century A.D.) of rasa as 'that which gives disinterested pleasure' is evidently an attempt to compromise the accepted

19. See Chapter IV.

20. See Chapter I. p. 5. ed. Kane.

21. See Chapter III.

22. *Sāhityadarpaṇa*. Chapter III, p. 1. ed. Kane.

23. Bhoja (author of *Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharaṇa*) had put forward the view that *spṛṅgāra* (of all the rasas) is the real rasa, in the 11th century A.D.

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ends of artistic appreciation with the aesthetic purpose of the religious experience.²⁴ Later Sanskrit poetical theory, when it did not deteriorate into an elaborate recapitulation of the old alaṅkāra categories, tended in this direction finding in the artistic and literary creativeness of man an urge to enjoy spiritual bliss.²⁵

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24. cf. V. Raghavan—Some Concepts of the Alankārāsāstra. p.271.

25. See S. K. De.—History of Sanskrit Poetics. Vol. II. p. 328.