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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Indian Aesthetics: An Introduction

Course Code: ENG5EJ302(1) • Module 2 Notes

Unit 5: The Alankara School – Evolution, Strength, and Limitations

Bhamaha, Dandin, and the Primacy of Poetic Ornamentation

The Alankara School represents the earliest formalized scholastic tradition in classical Sanskrit poetics. Inaugurated systematically by Bhamaha (c. 6th-7th century CE) in his *Kavyalamkara* and expanded by Dandin in his *Kavyadarsa* and Udbhata in *Kavyalamkarasarasamgraha*, this school argued that *Alankara* (figurative ornamentation) is the very essence and defining soul of poetic speech. Bhamaha famously declared: *Na kantamapi nirbhusham vibhati vanitananam*—"Even the loveliest face of a woman does not shine without ornaments; similarly, poetry, however meaningful, lacks beauty without Alankara."

Classification: Shabdalankara and Arthalankara

Alankaras are systematically categorized into:

- **Shabdalankara (Verbal Ornaments):** Figures based on acoustic patterns, phonological echoes, and verbal dexterity. Key figures include *Anuprasa* (alliteration), *Yamaka* (rhyming homonyms with different meanings), and *Slesha* (double entendre/pun).
- **Arthalankara (Semantic Ornaments):** Figures based on intellectual and conceptual relations of meaning. Key figures include *Upama* (simile), *Rupaka* (metaphor), *Utpreksha* (poetic fancy), *Atishayokti* (hyperbole), and *Virodha* (paradox).
- **Ubhayalankara:** Complex combinations where acoustic and semantic play operate simultaneously.

Strengths and Inherent Theoretical Limitations

The Alankara school made immense contributions by establishing formal criteria for literary craft, elevating language above pedestrian communicative utility, and mapping intricate poetic devices. However, its fatal theoretical limitation resided in treating Alankara as an exterior, mechanical adornment added onto sentences. By focusing primarily on rhetorical embellishment, early theorists failed to account for what animates poetry from within—the emotional depth (*Rasa*) and the resonant undercurrent of suggestion (*Dhvani*). Later critics, notably Anandavardhana, demonstrated that ornaments applied to a dead body do not bring it to life; similarly, Alankaras without Rasa are mere ostentatious verbal acrobatics.

Unit 6: Riti and Guna Schools – Riti and Style, Evolution

Dandin and Vamana: The Emergence of Stylistic Theory

As a critical reaction to the Alankara school's obsession with external tropes, Vamana (c. 8th century CE) in his landmark *Kavyalamkarasutravritti* established the **Riti School**. Vamana famously proclaimed: *Riti ratna kavyasya*—"Riti (style) is the soul of poetry." He defined Riti as *Visishta pada rachana ritih*—"Riti is a specific, distinguished arrangement of words." What distinguishes this arrangement from ordinary discourse is the presence of *Gunas* (poetic qualities or excellences).

The Regional Ritis: Vaidarbhi, Gaudi, and Panchali

Classical Indian stylistics identified three major geographical and aesthetic styles:

- **Vaidarbhi:** Associated with the Vidarbha region. Characterized by grace, melody, sweetness (*Madhurya*), clarity (*Prasada*), softness (*Sukumara*), and an absence of long, cumbersome compound words. Regarded as the supreme and most refined style, exemplified in Kalidasa's poetry.

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- **Gaudi:** Associated with the Bengal/eastern region. Characterized by force, grandeur, vigor (*Ojas*), heavy alliteration, bombastic sound patterns, and extensive compound words (*Samasa*), suitable for heroic and furious themes.
- **Panchali:** Associated with the Panchala region. An intermediate style that strikes a harmonious balance between the soft clarity of Vaidarbhi and the vigorous sonic density of Gaudi.

The Ten Essential Gunas of Vamana

Vamana revolutionized poetic theory by organizing Gunas into two sets of ten: ten *Shabda-gunas* (qualities of sound) and ten *Artha-gunas* (qualities of sense). These include:

1. **Ojas:** Vigour, abundance of compounds in sound; clarity of meaning in sense.
2. **Prasada:** Lucidity, effortless transparency of meaning upon first reading.
3. **Slesha:** Cohesiveness, smooth blending of syllables.
4. **Samata:** Uniformity of stylistic texture and rhythm.
5. **Samadhi:** Symmetrical balance and metaphorical transfer.
6. **Madhurya:** Sweetness, phonetic mellifluousness avoiding harsh conjunct consonants.
7. **Sukumara:** Delicacy, freedom from harsh phonemes.
8. **Udaratva:** Nobility, loftiness of expression.
9. **Arthavyakti:** Directness and precision in manifesting explicit meaning.
10. **Kanti:** Luster, radiant elegance avoiding triteness.

Vamana argued that while Alankaras are non-permanent ornaments, Gunas are permanent internal virtues indispensable to the creation of beauty.

Unit 7: Rasa School – Definition and Evolution

Bharata Muni's Natyasastra and the Foundational Rasa Sutra

The **Rasa School** is the undisputed crown jewel of Indian aesthetic philosophy. Originating in Bharata Muni's monumental encyclopedic treatise *Natyasastra* (c. 200 BCE–200 CE), Rasa originally applied to classical Indian dramaturgy (*Natya*) before being universalized by later critics to encompass all literary forms (*Kavya*). At the heart of Bharata's system lies the immortal aphorism, the **Rasa Sutra**:

"Vibhavanubhava vyabhichari samyogad rasa nishpattih"

("Rasa is manifested / born out of the harmonious conjunction (*Samyoga*) of the Determinants (*Vibhava*), the Consequents (*Anubhava*), and the Transitory Psychological States (*Vyabhichari / Sanchari Bhava*).")

The Architecture of the Rasa Process

Bharata's aesthetic psychology analyzes how universal human emotions are transformed into impersonal aesthetic bliss:

- **Sthayi Bhavas (Permanent Latent Emotional Impressions):** Dormant emotional seeds residing permanently in the unconscious human psyche (e.g., *Rati*/love, *Hasa*/mirth, *Shoka*/grief, *Krodha*/anger, *Utsaha*/enthusiasm, *Bhaya*/fear, *Jugupsa*/disgust, *Vismaya*/wonder, and *Shama*/tranquility).
- **Vibhavas (Aesthetic Causes / Determinants):** The objective triggers that awaken the dormant Sthayi Bhava. These are divided into:

    - *Alambana Vibhava:* The primary focal object/person (e.g., the lovers Shakuntala and Dushyanta).
    - *Uddipana Vibhava:* The environmental excitants that enhance the emotion (e.g., moonlight, fragrant breezes, forest groves, monsoon clouds).
- **Anubhavas (Consequents / Somatic Responses):** The visible physical expressions and involuntary reactions resulting from the awakened emotion (e.g., trembling, weeping, blushing, side-glances, faltering voice).
- **Vyabhichari / Sanchari Bhavas (Transitory / Fleeting Emotional States):** The thirty-three auxiliary mental waves that rise, nourish the dominant emotion, and dissolve back into it (e.g., anxiety, jealousy, despair, intoxication, shame, joy).

The Nine Rasas (Navarasas)

The harmonious synthesis of these factors produces the nine transcendent aesthetic rasas:

1. **Shringara (The Erotic / Romantic):** Based on Rati (Love). Color: Dark blue. Deity: Vishnu.
2. **Hasya (The Comic / Laughter):** Based on Hasa (Mirth). Color: White. Deity: Pramatha.
3. **Karuna (The Pathetic / Compassion):** Based on Shoka (Grief). Color: Grey/Pigeon. Deity: Yama.
4. **Raudra (The Furious / Wrath):** Based on Krodha (Anger). Color: Red. Deity: Rudra.
5. **Vira (The Heroic / Valour):** Based on Utsaha (Energy/Courage). Color: Golden wheat. Deity: Indra.
6. **Bhayanaka (The Terrible / Fear):** Based on Bhaya (Terror). Color: Black. Deity: Kala.
7. **Bibhatsa (The Odious / Disgust):** Based on Jugupsa (Aversion). Color: Blue. Deity: Mahakala.
8. **Adbhuta (The Marvelous / Wonder):** Based on Vismaya (Astonishment). Color: Yellow. Deity: Brahma.
9. **Shanta (The Tranquil / Peace):** Added by later scholars (Udbhata and Abhinavagupta), based on Shama/Nirveda (Spiritual detachment). Color: Jasmine white. Deity: Shiva.

Unit 8: Dhvani and Its Centrality in Literary Experience

Anandavardhana and the Dhvanyaloka

In the 9th century CE, the Kashmiri master Anandavardhana produced a profound revolution in Indian poetics with his seminal treatise *Dhvanyaloka* ("The Light on Suggestion"). Anandavardhana boldly displaced both Alankara and Riti by declaring: *Kavyasyatma dhvanih*—"Suggestion (*Dhvani*) is the soul of poetry." Anandavardhana argued that while meters, figures of speech, and vocabulary constitute the external physical body of poetry, that which endows poetry with immortal beauty is its unstated, suggestive resonance.

The Two Dimensions of Meaning: Vachya and PratDesktop/iyamanartha

Anandavardhana demonstrates that poetic language functions on two distinct levels:

- **Vachyartha (The Literal / Expressed Meaning):** The direct denotation conveyed by conventional dictionary definitions and grammatical syntax. It is the visible surface structure of the poem.
- **Pratiyamanartha (The Suggested / Implied Meaning):** The shimmering, unexpressed meaning that dawns upon the sensitive reader's consciousness like the fragrance of an unplucked blossom. Anandavardhana uses the immortal analogy of a beautiful woman: just as the charm (*Lavanya*) of an exquisite woman is something distinct from the mechanical symmetry of her individual bodily limbs, so too the suggested meaning in poetry is something utterly transcendent to the literal words and syntax.

Unit 9: Sabdarthavyaparam – Classifications of Dhvani – Abhinavagupta

Abhinavagupta's Locana and the Three Potencies of Words

Abhinavagupta (10th-11th century CE), the towering philosopher of Kashmir Shaivism, secured the triumph of the Dhvani theory through his brilliant commentary *Locana* on the *Dhvanyaloka*. Abhinavagupta systematized the linguistic operations (*Sabdarthavyaparam*) that govern semantic communication:

1. **Abhidha (Primary Denotation):** The literal lexical potency that communicates the conventional dictionary meaning (*Mukhyartha*).
2. **Lakshana (Secondary Indication):** The metaphorical transfer that operates when the primary meaning is blocked (*Mukhyartha-badha*), pointing to an associated secondary sense (e.g., "The village is on the Ganges," meaning on the bank of the Ganges).
3. **Vyanjana (Poetic Suggestion):** The unique, transcendental potency inherent in poetic speech that communicates nuances, emotional states, and unstated realities that cannot be captured by either Abhidha or Lakshana. The meaning revealed by Vyanjana is *Vyangyartha* or *Dhvani*.

Hierarchical Classifications of Dhvani

Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta classify Dhvani according to how the literal meaning relates to the suggestion:

- **Avivaksita-Vachya Dhvani (Suggestion where the literal is unintended):** Here, the literal meaning is either completely set aside (*Atyanta-tiraskrita-vachya*) or transformed into another sense (*Arthantara-sankramita-vachya*).
- **Vivaksitanyapara-Vachya Dhvani (Suggestion where the literal is intended but leads to a higher sense):** Here, the literal meaning is intended, but immediately yields an unstated suggested revelation. This is divided into:
  - *Asamlaksyakrama-vyangya (Undetected Sequence):* The transition from the literal words to the aesthetic experience is instantaneous and imperceptible, as when a needle pierces a hundred lotus petals at once. This is the exclusive domain of **Rasa-Dhvani**!
  - *Samlaksyakrama-vyangya (Perceptible Sequence):* The reader consciously perceives the sequential step from the literal meaning to the implied suggestion.

The Threefold Manifestation: Vastu, Alankara, and Rasa-Dhvani

Abhinavagupta establishes the ultimate aesthetic hierarchy:

- **Vastu-Dhvani:** Suggestion of an unstated matter of fact or objective reality.
- **Alankara-Dhvani:** Suggestion of an unexpressed figure of speech.
- **Rasa-Dhvani:** The supreme apex of all literature! Here, what is suggested is not an idea or an ornament, but the ultimate non-discursive tasting of aesthetic bliss (*Rasa*). Rasa can never be stated directly through literal naming (Abhidha); to say "I feel love" does not evoke Shringara. Rasa can only be evoked obliquely through the magical alchemy of Vyanjana.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 In-Depth Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

1. Ontological and Epistemological Dimensions of Indian Poetics

A rigorous philosophical investigation of Indian aesthetic systems within Module 2 reveals their intricate grounding in ancient epistemological frameworks (*Pramanas*). Classical Indian thinkers did not consider poetry to be an irresponsible, fictitious distortion of truth, but rather an extraordinary cognitive instrument capable of unveiling subterranean layers of human experience and cosmic harmony. In the Advaita Vedanta paradigm, the ultimate reality is *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Being, Consciousness, Bliss); because ordinary discursive language is burdened by practical utilitarian necessities (*Vyavaharika Satya*), it cannot capture the unblemished self-luminous reality (*Paramarthika Satya*). It is precisely the unique suggestive power of poetry (*Vyanjana*) and the tasting of aesthetic emotion (*Rasa*) that momentarily lifts the veil of cosmic illusion (*Maya*), granting the connoisseur a glimpse of transcendent beatitude.

Similarly, in the Kashmir Shaiva tradition championed by Abhinavagupta, aesthetic experience is conceived as the awakening of *Camathkara*—an ecstatic, self-referential wonder where the observing subject dissolves the illusory duality between the self and the universe. The reader does not experience the grief or joy of Rama or Shakuntala as an external, alien spectacle; rather, through the magic of *Sadharanikarana* (universalization), personal egos, temporal limitations, and spatial coordinates are transcended, allowing universal human emotion to shine forth as pure, unencumbered consciousness.

2. The Dialectic Between Form, Suggestion, and Ideological Function

The intense historical debates that animated ancient and medieval Indian poetics—between the Alankara school's focus on surface ornamentation, Vamana's rigorous stylistics, Kuntaka's linguistic obliquity, Mahimabhatta's syllogistic rationalism, and Anandavardhana's doctrine of suggestion—underscore an extraordinarily sophisticated linguistic self-awareness. Long before 20th-century European structuralism, Russian formalism, or post-structuralist deconstruction emerged, Indian aestheticians had mapped the morphology of poetic sentences, the cognitive tensions between literal denotation and implied sense, and the ideological role of literary decorum (*Aucitya*).

However, modern critical theory demands that these classical systems be critically interrogated rather than passively venerated. Traditional poetics flourished primarily within the feudal courts of kings and temple complexes, subsidized by royal patrons and aristocratic elites. Consequently, classical manuals frequently codified standards of beauty, heroism, and propriety that reflected the socio-economic interests and caste anxieties of the ruling order. The aestheticization of heroic warfare (*Vira Rasa*) and royal romance (*Shringara Rasa*) often served to legitimize monarchical power and Brahminical social hierarchies, while banishing the material toil of the agrarian working masses to the margins of aesthetic illegitimacy.

3. Contemporary Reclamations and Decolonial Trajectories

In the contemporary post-colonial and decolonial era, Indian aesthetics is undergoing a vibrant, contentious rebirth. Rather than choosing between uncritical Westernization or dogmatic revivalism, modern writers, critics, and theatre practitioners are forging a dynamic, hybrid critical idiom. Indigenous concepts like *Tinai* from classical Sangam literature provide vital philosophical foundations for modern ecological humanities, illuminating how human emotional landscapes are inextricably bound to fragile biospheres.

Concurrently, the disruptive interventions of Dalit, tribal, queer, and feminist movements have revitalized the field, demanding that aesthetics move from celestial heavens down to the dusty, bloodstained streets of social struggle. By dismantling Brahminical and patriarchal monopolies on beauty, contemporary Indian

aesthetics demonstrates that art finds its highest purpose not in tranquil complacency, but in the fearless interrogation of power, the affirmation of subaltern human dignity, and the relentless quest for universal justice.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 In-Depth Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 In-Depth Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

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