

## Abhinavagupta's Contribution to the Tradition of Commentaries

(With Reference to *Rasa* -Theory)

Dr. Richa Biswal<sup>‡</sup>

Abhinavagupta's theories are studied widely throughout the world. Assessment of *rasa* in any work cannot be possible without studying his magnum opus *Abhinavabhāratī* which proves to be a complex and well-read commentary on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. *Abhinavabhāratī* explains Bharata's *rasasūtra* in consonance with *Abhivyaktivāda* propounded in Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* along with the tenets of the *pratyabhijñā* - philosophy of Kashmir. According to him, the aesthetic experience is the manifestation of the innate dispositions of the self, such as love and sorrow, by the self. It is characterized by the contemplation of the bliss of the self by the connoisseur. It is akin to the spiritual experience as one transcends the limitations of one's limited self, because of the process of universalization taking place during the aesthetic contemplation of characters depicted in the work of art.

Abhinavagupta has introduced many improvements by adding new thoughts into the systems of Sanskrit Literary Criticism. He was bold enough to reject the

---

<sup>‡</sup> Department of English & MEL, University of Allahabad. Residential Address: 57, Vasant Vihar, Jhusi, Allahabad - 211019

views of his earlier thinkers and commentators of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, namely, Bhaṭṭa Lollaṭa, Śaṅkukaand Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka. The later poeticians from Mammaṭa to Paṇḍitarāja Jagannātha held him in high esteem. Being a competent commentator, he was capable to explain the text without any ambiguity. He has explained difficult and vague portions of *Nāṭyaśāstra*. His commentary is indispensable as he gives his own interpretations not found even in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. He explains the text very exhaustively quoting all available views from several works lost today. He sums up the discussion in a masterly fashion. He often criticizes and makes fun of the *Sāṅkhya* views in this context.

Abhinavagupta's influence has been profound and pervasive on his succeeding generations of *Nāṭyaśāstra* who have been guided by his theories of *rasa*, *bhāva*, aesthetics and dramaturgy. Thus, *Abhinavabhāratī* serves as a bridge between the ancient forgotten wisdom and the succeeding generations of scholarship. Abhinavagupta accepts *bhakti* as an important component of *śāntarasa* helping the later rhetoricians to reckon *bhakti* and *vātsalya* in the periphery of *rasa*-world. Abhinavagupta's doctrine is known as *Abhivyaktivāda* in Sanskrit poetics. He formulated his theory of revelation on the basis of *vyañjanā*, the third word-power along with *abhidhā* and *lakṣaṇā*. He feels, the soul is immortal and the souls of *sahṛdayas* have implanted certain basic impulses of *vāsanās* which is called *sthāyībhāvas* in the jargon of poetics. With a vivid representation of *vibhāvādi*, the corresponding impulses are evoked to facilitate the overwhelming thrill of joy. Thus, *Rasa* is the revelation and manifestation of the inherent basic implanted impulses, freed from all limitations of time and space by the magic of the poetic art called *pratibhā* by which representation is elevated.

Abhinavagupta points out that in the actual aesthetic experience; the mind of the spectator is liberated from the obstacles caused by ego. If transported from the realm of the personal and egoistic to that of the general and universal, one is capable of experiencing *nirvāṇa* as he is transported to a trans-personal level. This is a process of de-individualization or universalization, technically called *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*. His discussion of *rasa* is based on two terms: *saṃyoga* and *rasa-niṣpatti*. *Rasa* is based on the psychological theory as one's personality is constituted of primary emotions like amorous, ludicrous, pathetic, heroic, passionate, fearfulness, nauseating and the wondrous along with peaceful or intellectual, devotional and filial etc. technically called the dominant emotions (*sthāyībhāvas*).

Objective of my study is to examine and highlight the status of *Abhinavabhāratī* as a commentary. My investigation is confined to *Rasa*-theory so that real justice can be done to arrive at the findings of the study.

Keywords: Abhinavagupta, *Abhinavabhāratī*, *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*, *rasa-niṣpatti*, *Abhivyaktivāda*

.....  
.....

Abhinavagupta (ca. 950-1020), the great Kashmiri Saivite spiritual leader and a *yogī*, was a Kashmirisaiva philosopher, who lived in 1000 A.D., exactly a millennium ago. He was one of the world's greatest philosophers and literary critics, and a mystic and aesthete par excellence. His contributions to Indian philosophy, literature, drama and performing art are immense. He is so to South Asia what Plato and Aristotle were to western civilization. Abhinavagupta's most important work on the philosophy of art is '*Abhinavabhāratī*', a long and

complex commentary on *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata. It is the oldest commentary available on the treatise. This work has been one of the most important factors contributing to Abhinavagupta's fame until present day. No doubt his most important contribution was to the theory of *rasa* (aesthetic savour). In this monumental work, Abhinavagupta explains the *rasa-sūtra* of Bharata in consonance with the theory of *abhivyaṅgi* (expression) propounded in Ānandavardhana's work *dhvanyāloka* (aesthetic suggestion), as well as with the tenets of the *pratyabhijñā* philosophy of Kashmir.

According to Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic experience is the manifestation of the innate dispositions of the self, such as love and sorrow, by the self. It is characterized by the contemplation of the bliss of the self by the connoisseur. It is akin to the spiritual experience as one transcends the limitations of one's limited self, because of the process of universalisation taking place during the aesthetic contemplation of characters depicted in the work of art. Abhinavagupta's work is almost unparalleled in Indian intellectual history. Although he is labelled as a Śaiva philosopher, his work comprises of various currents of intellectual thinking such as aesthetics, dramaturgy, music, *tantra*, *yoga*, literary criticism, devotional poetry, cognitive science, emotions, philosophy of mind, language. His works fall in various categories such as commentaries, poems, manuals of religious rituals and philosophy etc.

*Abhinavabhāratī* is the most famous and the most erudite commentary that we find on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata by Abhinavagupta. We come to know about many lost works and old authors from this commentary. Abhinavagupta has introduced many improvements and new thoughts into the systems of Sanskrit Literary Criticism. All the later writers beginning with Mammaṭa (11<sup>th</sup> century)

and ending with Paṇḍitarāja Jagannātha (17<sup>th</sup> century) have held him in very high esteem. Secondly, he has rejected the views of earlier thinkers and commentators of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* such as Bhaṭṭa Lollaṭa, Śāṅkuka and Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka. He was a very able commentator, who had the capacity to explain in a best suitable manner, the text without any ambiguity or confusion. He has invariably constructed every sentence of his text so well as to convey rational and appropriate sense beyond our expectation. He has clarified satisfactorily every doubt which is likely to arise in the mind of every thinking man who may attempt to understand the text. *Abhinavabhāratī* was written only after the work of Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, as it becomes evident from the fact that Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka has been quoted by Abhinavagupta. Abhinava's commentary is the best on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Abhinava has explained difficult and vague portions of *Nāṭyaśāstra*. But at places he gives his own interpretations that are not found in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. His commentary is indispensable. Whenever he has to explain any theory or problem concerning the dramatic art or general aesthetics, he does it very exhaustively by quoting all available views on the same and often cites examples from a vast number of dramatic and other lost works. Often he sums up the discussion in a masterly fashion. One thing that we find remarkable in his commentary is that he often criticizes and makes fun of the *Sāṅkhya* views, as is seen in his commentary on the production of *Rasa*. At many places (for example in the sixth chapter on *Rasa*) the commentary of Abhinavagupta is tinged with his philosophical thoughts.

Abhinavagupta, the son of Narasimhagupta, was born in Kashmir during second half of 10th century of a famous *Brahmin* family. He has earned his reputation in the field of aesthetics through a commentary on *Nāṭyaśāstra*

(*Abhinavabhāratī*) and a commentary on Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* in which Abhinavagupta played a major role in developing *Dhvani*-School. According to Abhinavagupta, *Rasa* is not revealed but it is a perception. Abhinavagupta explained the *Rasa*-theory propounded by Bharata on the philosophical way and raised the experience of *Rasa* i.e. *Rasāsvāda* similar to the experience of the highest bliss i.e. *Brahmāsvāda*. Abhinavagupta's *rasa*-theory had a great impact on the *rasa*-school of Sanskrit poetics as a whole. *Abhinavabhāratī* is considered a landmark and it is regarded important for the study of *Nāṭyaśāstra* as it predates all the known manuscripts of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* which number about 52. *Abhinavabhāratī* is a monumental work largely in prose and it illumines and interprets the text of Bharata at many levels and comments practically on every aspect of *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Abhinava's commentary is therefore an invaluable guide and a companion volume to Bharata's text.

*Abhinavabhāratī* is the oldest commentary available on *Nāṭyaśāstra*. All the other previous commentaries are now totally lost. The fact that such commentaries once existed came to light only because Abhinavagupta referred to them in his work and discussed their views. Abhinava is the only source for discerning the nature of debate of his predecessors such as Bhaṭṭa Lollaṭa, Śaṅkuka, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka and his guru Bhaṭṭatauta. The works of all those masters can only be partially reconstructed through references to them in *Abhinavabhāratī*. Further, Abhinavagupta also brought to life and breathed life into ancient and forgotten scholarship of fine rhetoricians like Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin and Rājaśekhara etc.

Abhinavagupta's influence has been profound and pervasive. Succeeding generations of writers on the science of *nāṭya* have been guided by his concepts

and theories of *rasa*, *bhāva*, aesthetics and dramaturgy. No succeeding writer or commentator could ignore Abhinavagupta's commentary and the discussions on the crucial 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> chapters of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* on *rasa* and *bhāva*. *Abhinavabhāratī* is thus a bridge between the world of the ancient and forgotten wisdom and the scholarship of the succeeding generations. Abhinavagupta mentioned *bhakti* as an important component of the *śāntarasa*. Following which the later poetic traditions reckoned *bhakti* (dotion) and *vātsalya* (affection) as a part of the *navarasa*.

Abhinava begins by explaining his view of aesthetics and its nature. Then goes on to the state how that aesthetic experience is created. During the process he comments on Bharata's concepts and categories of *rasa* and *sthāyībhāva*, the dominant emotive states. He also examines Bharata's other concepts of *vibhāvā*, *anubhāva*, *vyabhicārībhāvas* and their subcategories such as *uddīpana* (stimulant) and *ālambana* (ancillaries). Abhinava examines these concepts in the light of Śaiva philosophy and explains the process of one becoming many and returning to the state of repose.

Abhinavagupta took inspirations from his predecessors. His doctrine is known as *Abhivyaktivāda* in Sanskrit poetics. Abhinavagupta formulated his theory of revelation on the basis of *vyañjanā* which he accepts as the third power of a word along with *abhidhā* and *lakṣaṇā*. According to him, the soul is immortal and all souls, particularly of *sahṛdayas* or responsive critics, have implanted certain basic impulses of *vāsanās* which in the jargon of poetics is called *sthāyībhāvas*. When there is a vivid representation of *vibhāvādi*, the corresponding impulses are evoked and it gets developed to a pitch where it is realised in the form of an overwhelming thrill or joy. Thus, *rasa* is the revelation

and manifestation of the inherent basic implanted impulses which is freed from all limitations of time and space by magic of poetic art that is *pratibhā* by which representation is elevated.

From the above discussion, it is obvious that Abhinavagupta has sought to explain *rasa* as the enjoyment of the spectator's or reader's own emotions. But here the question arises that how do they appear? And the answer may be that it is realised in a generalised form. When the spectators see the stage-performances of a dramatic work and actors and actresses move before them playing their roles, then these *vibhāvās* and their *anubhāvas* at first suggest spectators the original character's mental conditions in the individual forms but later on gets generalised due to the efficiency and excellence of actors and actresses. The effective scenic representations and the *pratibhā* of the creator who elevates ordinary utterances by employing the *gunas*, *alaṅkāras*, and *rītis* etc. Then an individual becomes stripped off or divested of personal peculiarities. The emotions, thus, get generalised, for example, mutual love becomes love in general between a man and a woman. Then the *vibhāvās*, the *anubhāvas* and mental conditions are generalised and excite the latent impressions in the spectator. Thus, the individuality is lost in *sthāyībhāvas*, if individuality is allowed, generalisation is possible.

Thus, to Abhinavagupta, the relation that exists between *vibhāvā* etc. is the *vyāṅgya- vyañjaka-bhāva*, that is the relation between the suggestor and the suggested in case of the *bhāvas* of the original characters and of the revealer and revealed from the view-point of the *sthāyībhāvas* of the spectators and the term *niṣpatti* to Abhinava means *abhivyakti* or manifestation. Besides *Abhinavabhāratī*, his other important work is *Tantrāloka*, which is an



encyclopedia of *Tantra* and synthesis of the 'Trika' system. The supplementary work to *Tantrāloka* is *Tantrasāra* which is a summary of the *Tantrāloka*. His commentary on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* known as *Abhinavabhāratī* forms an essential part of the Indian discourse on poetry, drama, dance and music. Other writings include *pratyabhijñā*, which stands for 'identifying' and not attaining.

He is regarded as one of the highest geniuses in the field of drama and aesthetics. In fact, he was a master of many more subjects like poetics, *tantra*, philosophy and particularly Kashmir Śaivism. Tradition tells us that he approached many teachers to learn various subjects. Similarly, he has also written voluminous treatises on all subjects, mainly in the form of commentaries like *Abhinavabhāratī*. In his commentary on the *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana, all the views of Abhinavagupta are elaborated in details and they constitute practically the last word of the Indian dramaturgy, poetics and aesthetics. He is regarded as a mastermind and the founder of religious cult and *Tantras*, mainly belonging to Kashmir Śaivism known as *pratyabhijñā* School of philosophy. His philosophical works are many and they are mostly published in the Kashmir government Sanskrit Series. He also wrote a philosophical work known as *Tantrāloka* in twelve volumes. They are published in a digest in one volume. He also wrote a commentary on scholarly work *Īśvarapratyabhijñāvivartinī* which is regarded as a masterpiece. In fact, he symbolizes the entire traditional scholarship existing at his time.

Along with Bharata, Abhinavagupta established a complete philosophical theory as the basis of the *rasa*-theory. For this purpose he has given some excellent examples of *rasa* and *dhvani* in his commentaries, *Abhinavabhāratī* and *Dhvanyālokalocana* respectively. The first of this is a relevant example in the

*Rāmāyaṇa's 'Krauñca' episode*. Yet Abhinavagupta has pointed out one important theory regarding the application of *rasa*. The idea of sorrow i.e. *karuṇarasa* manifested in the verse '*māniṣāda....*' not only applies to sage Vālmīki nor to any other particular person but it is applicable to the whole of humanity (i.e. the idea of *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*). Ānandavardhana takes another example of *rasadhvani* from *Abhijñānśākuntalam* describing the pursuit of the deer by King Duṣyanta in the Act one '*grivābhaṃgābhirāmam....*' Here Abhinavagupta points out that the sentiment of fear (*bhayānaka*) is not experienced only by the deer but it becomes a general sentiment which does not belong to the deer only, nor does it belong to anybody else only. Therefore, this may be described as a sentiment generalized and universalized. In this process of universalisation the sentiment of *bhayānaka* is taken out from the limited situation of the deer and therefore, it belongs to nobody in particular or it belongs to everybody facing that situation. Abhinavagupta further states that this sentiment of fear becomes more pleasant or relishable, wherein it is suggested artistically by the poet or dramatist. Abhinavagupta has also discussed the manner in which the spectator enjoys the play. He states that in drama there are a number of sentiments presented by the author. When a spectator visits a theatre he completely forgets the restriction of place and time i.e. various circumstances in course of witnessing the play. Every person or spectator possesses various kinds of impressions he has received. These *vāsanās* or *saṃskāras* are invoked. The result is that the spectator becomes eligible to enjoy the situations belonging to all the *rasas*. He has the sensitivity to enjoy them on the stage. Similarly, Abhinavagupta also states that the actor in the play more or less incarnates the

sentiments of the play. He is a generalized man. When the spectator abandons his particular environs, he is able to appreciate the play in an objective manner.

Abhinavagupta's contributions to Poetics is note-worthy. He has contributed immensely to the *rasa*-theory, *rasa-bhāva*-theory, *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*-theory, *saṃyoga*, *rasa-niṣpatti*, *sthāyībhāva* and Indian Aesthetics. The *Rasa-bhāva* is the central concept in Indian performing arts such as dance, drama, cinema, literature etc. *Bhāva* means 'to become'. *Bhāva* is the state of mind while *rasa* is the aesthetic flavour that results from that *bhāva*. The *bhava* themselves carry no meaning in the absence of *rasa*. Thus, *rasa* is basically the forms and manifestations of *bhava* in the form of sensations through taste, emotion and delight. In other words, *rasa* is the dominant emotional theme that is invoked in the audience. When we watch a movie, a sad scene makes us cry and that is *karuṇa-rasa*. The *rasa-bhāva* is what establishes a relationship between the performer and the audience.

Abhinavagupta wrote *Abhinavabhāratī*, a commentary of *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata. For the first time he bought a technical definition of *rasa*. As per his views, *rasa* is the universal bliss of the *ātman* coloured by the emotional tone of a drama. Abhinavagupta introduced the 9<sup>th</sup> *rasa* called *śāntam* which denotes the peace or tranquillity. These nine *rasas* in totality make the concept *navarasa*. Abhinavagupta points out that in the actual aesthetic experience; the mind of the spectators is liberated from the obstacles caused by the ego. Thus, transported from the realm of the personal and egoistic to that of the general and universal, we are capable of experiencing *nirvāṇa* or blissfulness. In the aesthetic process, we are transported to a trans-personal level. This is a process of de-individualization or universalization. The Indian Aestheticians consider this

process as *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*. The real discussion of *rasa* was started by Abhinavagupta in his commentary on Bharata's maxim on *rasa*. The discussion was based on two words: *saṁyoga* (conjunction) and *rasa-niṣpatti* (manifestation of *rasa*). *Rasa* is based on the psychological theory that our personality is constituted of a few primary emotions which lie deep in the subconscious or unconscious level of our being. These primary emotions are the amorous, the ludicrous, the pathetic, the heroic, the passionate, the fearful, the nauseating, and the wondrous. Other aesthetic psychologists have in later times, added to them the peaceful or intellectual, the devotional and the filial. These emotions are there in all, and so these are called the dominant emotions or *sthāyībhāvas*. Each emotion in its manifestation shows a composition of diverse sentiments which produce the appearance of a permanent flame. The flames of diverse sentiments give expression to the permanent emotion of love or hate, heroism or anger. No emotion is called *rasa* unless it is aesthetically excited.

The *rasa-sūtra* in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, viz., *vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārisaṁyogādrasaniṣpattiḥ*, along with Abhinavagupta's commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* on it, has been regarded as the classic exposition of the theory of Indian Aesthetics. In the course of his commentary, and to the lesser extent, in the *locana* commentary on Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka*, Abhinavagupta elaborates not only his own and Bharata's views on the theory of *rasa* or aesthetic joy, but also those of his predecessors, viz., Bhaṭṭa Lollaṭa, Śaṅkuka, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka and the *Sāṅkhya* writers. In fact, whatever earliest reliable information we gather about the views of these theoreticians, is exclusively from the *Abhinavabhāratī*.

## Bibliography

1. Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavabhāratī*. Trans into Hindi with commentary by Visheshwara *Siddhānta* Siromani. Delhi: Delhi UP, 1968.
2. Abhinavagupta and His Works, Chowkhambha Oriental, Delhi, 1980.
3. Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavabhāratī*. Pune: Gaekwad Oriental Series, 1960.
4. Abhinavagupta. *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta*. Ed. and trans. Raniero Gnoli. 2nd ed. Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1968.
5. Kavi, Ramakrishna. (Ed.) Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstram* with *Abhinavabhāratī*.
6. Kavi, Maravalli Ramakrishna. *Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra with Commentary of Abhinavagupta's Commentary* edited in several volumes. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1959-1969.
7. Kedarnath, Pandit, ed. *Nāṭyaśāstram*. Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1998. Print.
8. Masson, J. L., & Patwardhan, M.V. *Śāntarasa and Abhinavagupta's Philosophy of Aesthetics*. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Series. (1969)
9. Walimbe, Y. S. *Abhinavagupta on Indian Aesthetics*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1980. Print.
10. Gnoli, Raniero. *The Aesthetic Experience according to Abhinavagupta*. 3rd ed. Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1985.
11. Gupta, Manjul. *A Study of Abhinavabhāratī on Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra and Avaloka on Dhanañjaya's Daśarūpaka*. Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1987.