

## A Brief History of the Development of *Dhvani* School

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**Abstract:** Treatises on aesthetics and poetics first appeared in India around first century A.D. One of the earliest and most famous of such treatises is the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata. It is from this work that Indian aesthetics developed and reached its culmination in later centuries. *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana, a pivotal work in the history of Indian poetics, with the *Locana* of Abhinavagupta, dominated traditional Indian theory on poetics and aesthetics. Abhinavagupta is the great devotee of the "Supreme Self" or Śiva. Though there are several works attributed to him, our chief concern is his commentary on Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka*. This work revolutionized Sanskrit literary theory by proposing that the main goal of good poetry is the evocation of a mood or "flavour" (*rasa*) and this process can be explained only by recognizing a semantic power beyond denotation and metaphor, namely, the power of suggestion or *dhvani*.

**Keywords:** *dhvani*, *sphota*, *rasa* and *sahridaya*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The origin of the *dhvani* school is related to ancient Indian linguistic theories. Kanti Chandra Pandey clearly points out that the theory originated in connection with *Sphota -vāda* (1: 281). S. K. De observes that a clear formulation of the theory of *dhvani* is found in the verses of Dhvanikāra, who must have lived close to the age of Ānandavardhana (2: 139). The very first verse of *Dhvanyāloka* states that the theory that *dhvani* is the essence of poetry was traditionally maintained by earlier thinkers (De 2: 137). Dhvanikāra is one such writer in whose memorial verses the first clear formulation of the theory of *dhvani* is found. It is also believed that Dhvanikāra derived the essence of this theory from the works of early grammarians and their semi-philosophical speculations on speech (De 2: 142). Ānandavardhana demonstrates that the system of *dhvani* is built on the system of grammarians who were the earliest theorists to apply the term *dhvani* to the spoken letter that reveals the *sphota* (142). As De observes, Abhinava explains that "the theory was stated in unbroken tradition by previous thinkers, without it being discussed in particular books" (2: 141).

The *sphotavāda* was meant to explain how the uttered sound manifests sense in a language. "*Sphota*" literally means "bursting out" or the releasing of energy when something is broken. The grammarians' view was that the individual sounds in a word are not competent to convey meaning. The sound manifests "an external imperceptible element" *sphota*, which really conveys the idea that strikes the mind of the listener. The seeds of the modern discovery of the difference between signifier and signified can be found in this. The resonance that manifests *sphota* is termed *dhvani*. The *dhvani* theory of poetics is analogous to this theory of *sphota* as it postulates the different constituent elements of a poetic composition, which when taken together, reveal a deeper meaning, unexpressed by any of the individual parts — a meaning that flashes upon the *sahridaya* instantaneously (Vijayavardhana, 101).

One of the earliest references to the suggestive power of language is found in the *Bālakānda* of the *Rāmāyana*. The poet Valmiki's reaction to the killing of a pair of *kraunca* birds makes him utter the following: "Hunter, may you never get any peace. You have killed one of the pair of *Kraunca* in the state of infatuation with love" (qtd. in Pandey 1: 261). The grief and anger experienced by the poet are not directly expressed, but suggested.

Before the *dhvani* theory was established, only three powers of language were accepted. Pandey (1: 268) gives the following division:

1. *Abhidhāśakti* or the power of the word to arouse a conventional image of an object in the mind of the hearer.
2. *Tātparyāśakti* or the power of the individual words of a sentence to arouse individual images completely cut off from one another.
3. *Lakṣanāśakti* or the secondary power of words, the often cited *Gangāyāmghosah* (Hamlet on the Ganges). In reality, a hamlet cannot stand on the current of water. However, the meaning implied is that the hamlet is situated on the bank of the Ganges and that it is cool and holy.

The development of the fourth power of language is found in *dhvani* theory (Pandey 1: 267-270). The fourth power of language or *dhvani* can be illustrated by the following story of a pair of lovers who select a garden near the river Godavari for their secret meeting. The woman arrives a bit early and finds a religious minded man gathering flowers for worship. She knows that he is afraid of a dog that is roaming about in the place. With the intention of driving the person away, the woman makes a very suggestive statement:

O religious minded man! You can now roam freely over this place. For, the dog, of whom (sic) you were so afraid, has been killed to-day by the proud lion, who, as you know very well, lives in the impervious thicket on the bank of Godavari. (qtd. in Pandey 1: 270)

This statement, which seems positive, is actually a negative one conveying the message to the religious person that there is risk to his life because of the presence of the lion and it is better to leave the place as soon as possible. This example is a clear illustration of the suggestive power of words. The literal meaning is positive, that there is no fear of the dog, but the suggested meaning is negative and is favourable to the woman.

The history of *dhvani* covers a period of three hundred years, from the first half of the eighth century to the middle of eleventh century (Pandey 1:265). The fourth power of language, which was called *dhvani* by grammarians and *alankārikas*, existed in oral tradition long before it was clearly formulated by Ānandavardhana. The full development of the theory can however be found in *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana and *Locana* of Abhinavagupta. Ānandavardhana developed the theory in full detail refuting and explaining all possible objections of its opponents. He also speaks about many linguistic functions of poetry. The first is *abhidha* (*śabdavyāpara*) or denotative meaning. The second is *gunavrittiorlakṣana*, the secondary meaning used in poetry. According to him, serious poetry uses also the third function of language namely, suggestion (*vyājanā*) (Masson 1: 15).

*Dhvanyāloka* is written in both prose and verse like the majority of Sanskrit scientific classics. The prose portion is called *vṛtti* and the poetry section is called *kārikā*. It is written in four chapters called *udyotas* or “Flashes.” The first chapter deals with the objections that could be raised against *dhvani* theory. In the second chapter, we can find sub-divisions of the theory. The concepts such as *guna, rīti* and *alankāra* are discussed in detail. The third chapter deals with the process of composition and some of the sub-divisions that are not discussed in the previous chapters. The fourth chapter discusses in detail *pratibhā* or poetic imagination, which brings forth innumerable compositions on a single subject. The classification of the subject into four chapters is not exclusively done. Very often, we can find interpenetrations of the discussions of the topics.

According to Ānandavardhana, the difference between explicate and implicate meanings is a predominant theme of Indian philosophy and poetics. As Krishnamoorthy says,

It was commonly held by all that words denote primarily a conventional meaning and secondarily an implied one. The former type of sense, the one that is direct, primary and conventional, they called *Abhideya* as opposed to the latter of (sic) secondary signification (*Lakṣya*) (*Dhvanyāloka and Its Critics* 101).

According to Krishnamoorthy, Ānandavardhana has given supreme importance to the suggested sense: “any great poet is enough to prove that it exists and that it strikes us in a singularly delightful manner” (102). The beauty of suggested sense is not identical with the beauty of its components, but something over and above it. “This unique phenomenon can be likened to the bewitching beauty in lovely women pervading their whole physical frame and yet exceeding the symmetry of harmony of their various limbs” (Krishnamoorthy, *Dhvanyāloka and Its Critics* 102).

Ānandavardhana makes a distinction between *alankāra* and *dhvani*. Though there are certain elements of suggestion in some forms of *alankāra*, it is not highlighted as the most essential quality. To illustrate this Ānandavardhana remarks:

The twilight (heroin’s face) with twinkling stars (shining pupils) was illumined (kissed) by the moon (the hero) glowing red (overcome by emotion) so suddenly (with such love) that the entire mass of darkness (black garment) disappearing in the east (slipping even in front) due to illumination (love) was not at all noticed. (21)

Ānandavardhana has already elevated *rasa* as the soul of poetry. He bases his theory of *dhvani* also on *rasa*. Among the different kinds of suggestion tested by him, *vastu* (idea), and *rasa* (figures of speech) are given utmost importance (Krishnamoorthy, *Dhvanyāloka and Its Critics* 103). Krishnamoorthy further observes, “amidst all the mass of Ānandavardhana’s scattered speculations, we are still able to recognize a running thread, it is entirely due to his steady and systematic appraisal of *Rasa* as the highest goal in poetry” (153). Ānandavardhana often examines the suggestive power from the point of view of the *sahridaya*. Other than metrical beauty and word meaning, the *sahridaya* derives an intrinsic pleasure from poetry (Krishnamoorthy, *Dhvanyāloka and Its Critics* 208). According to Ānandavardhana, a mere dictionary meaning will not enable one to enjoy the beauty of a poem. A true enjoyer is the one who can feel with the poet. Though Abhinavagupta is considered as a commentator of Ānandavardhana, according to Krishnamoorthy, “he is much more than a

mere commentator explaining the difficulties of text; he is an original thinker, representing the whole theory in fuller and more comprehensive form” (*Dhvanyāloka and Its Critics* 217).

According to Abhinavagupta, *rasa* is created in *sahrdaya* and the bliss experienced in *rasa* enjoyment is of a transcendental nature. “Though the individual self is none other than the omnipotent God, so long as there is no recognition of this, there is no bliss. The poet’s function also is said to be of the same category” (Krishnamoorthy, *Dhvanyāloka and Its Critics* 224).

Abhinavagupta makes a distinction between the ordinary and the poetical uses of language. In the ordinary use of language, meaning is limited by conventional needs of communication. In such situations, one cannot perceive two different meanings at the same time; when contrasting meanings emerge, they may be discarded for the practical purpose of communication. However, this is different in the case of poetical use. As Abhinavagupta says,

The case of the poetical word is however different. Here, indeed, the aesthetical expression, etc., once perceived, tends to become itself an object of aesthetic experience and one has therefore no ulterior application of convention. (Gnoli, Introduction xxxiii)

He adds that in aesthetic experience what happens is, instead, the birth of the aesthetic tasting of the artistic expression:

Such an experience, just as a flower born of magic, has, as its essence, solely the present, it is correlated (sic) neither with what came before nor with what comes after. This experience is therefore different both from the ordinary experience and from the religious one (Gnoli, Introduction xxxiii-xxxiv).

It is to be noted that in the *dhvani* theory of Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta the multiplicity of meanings or resonance is admissible only in poetic utterance. In the ordinary use of language, that tendency remains restricted. “Therefore, what reason can one adduce for the fact that, on hearing the phrase: ‘He who desires Heaven, must offer the fire-sacrifice’, one does not perceive the meaning, ‘he must eat dog-flesh?’” (Gnoli, Introduction xxxiii). In poetic expressions, language is released from its restrictions of conventional meaning. As Gnoli says, “the words, in poetry, must therefore have an additional power, that of suggestion, and for this very reason the transition from the conventional meaning to the poetic one is unnoticeable” (Introduction, xxxii). Gnoli further remarks that Abhinavagupta was indebted to Dharmakīrti’s *Pramānavārttika* and Bhartrhari for his discussion of the practical purpose of language (Introduction xxxii).

From the foregoing discussions, it is clear that it is the suggestive power of language that enables a poet to produce the aesthetic experience that can lead to higher consciousness in the *rasa* experience. However, Abhinavagupta by maintaining the distinction between the aesthetic experience and the mystical experience paves the path to move from one state of consciousness to the other, through *dhvani* and *rasa*. According to Masson and Patwardhan, “Abhinavagupta is the first writer in India to deal with issues of religion in terms of literary criticism” (1: 7).

It is often observed that the aesthetic consciousness is capable of developing into religious or mystical consciousness. As Gnoli observes,

Religious experience . . . marks the complete disappearance of all polarity, the lysis of all dialectic in the dissolving fire of God: Sun, Moon, day and night, good and evil are consumed in the ardent flame of consciousness. The knots of “I” and “mine” are, in it, completely undone. The yogin remains, as it were, isolated in the compact solitude of his consciousness, far beyond any form of discursive thought. (Gnoli, Introduction xxxix-xl)

Bhattachanāyaka too discusses the relationship between the aesthetic and the mystical experiences. But Abhinavagupta did not fail to show the boundary line separating the mystical consciousness from the aesthetic consciousness.

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