

***Vakrokti*: Kuntaka's Exposition on the Theory of Language of Literature**

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Abstract

This paper aims to study Kuntaka's exposition on the theory of language of literature. Kuntaka, in his *Vakroktijivita* establishes *vakrokti* as the theory of language of literature. The theory of *vakrokti* occupies a significant place in Indian literary criticism and stylistics. The key concept of the theory is that literary language is necessarily different from ordinary language both in terms of the use of words and the construction of meanings. The term *vakrokti* is defined by Kuntaka as an 'artistic turn of speech' (*Vakroktijivita* 1/10). *Vakrokti* literally means 'vakra-ukti', a stylistic concept of deviance (*prasiddhābhīdhānavyatirekiṇī*). Poetry is nothing but an artistic use of language. According to John Mukarovsky (1964:27), 'poetic language is a different form of language with a different function from that of the standard.' Modern critics consider the language of literature to be a deviant language. But Kuntaka establishes this theory long before with its different categories as a useful framework for stylistic analysis of literary language in the modern context.

Key-words: *Vakrokti*, *Kuntaka*, *the language of poetry*.

1. Introduction

In the Sanskrit literary tradition, a discipline called *Alaṃkāraśāstra* was developed throughout the ages which signifies a harmonious blend of aesthetics and poetics. Various poetic theories have been established over the years. It is accepted that Sanskrit poetics emphasises the theoretical aspects of poetry and develops rules and theories. In ancient India, comprehensive poetic theories were established in such a way that they are predominant in the whole canon of literature.

In ancient India full-fledged criticisms of works are not prominent; however, significant attempts have been made by Ānandavardhana and Kuntaka. Ānandavardhana, for the first time, supplemented practical criticism to the theoretical portions. However, Kuntaka gives a full-fledged criticism of literature. Dr. K. Krishnamoorthy rightly observes:

"In the whole range of Sanskrit poetical theory, we do not have anyone who can be termed a practical literary critic in the modern sense of the term except Kuntaka. Most of the early rhetoricians like Bhamaha and Dandin are so interested in rules and definitions that they offer examples of their own authorship for the points in question and they do not even select examples from master poets. Even those who do select examples from literature, like Vamana, are satisfied with illustrating pretty details noted by them and their works reveal but partial glimpses of literary beauty in individual bits. None of them even attempts the task of reviewing or appreciating a literary work as a whole, analysing the various elements that work up to a unity of impression. Bharata's rules regarding dramatic plot-construction, characters and *rasa* are simply taken for granted but never illustrated in detail with reference to any specific work. Though Anandavardhana subjected the two major epics to an examination revealing a total perspective, he too did not extend his literary analysis to the Sanskrit classics of poetry and drama. Kuntaka indeed is the only writer who attempted this task of literary analysis, critical appreciation and appraisal from a total perspective, of almost all the major poets and playwrights in classical Sanskrit literature."¹

Kuntaka, thus shows remarkable critical imagination in writing about a given piece of poetry. He selects very apt and beautiful examples to establish his theory. When he is writing about an individual verse, he has the context of the whole poem in view and what it aims at. Kuntaka evaluates every word and phrase insofar as they promote the central meaning of the poem.

Development of the Theory of *Vakrokti*:

The Indian theory of *vakrokti*, which has acquired particular significance in the context of new Criticism and stylistics, can be profitably considered the stylistic concept of deviance. Kuntaka, the greatest exponent of the theory of *vakrokti*, is one of the most original thinkers of Sanskrit literature. The basic

¹ The *Vakroktijivita* of Kuntaka (with English translation). K. Krishnamoorthy, Dharwar: Kamatak University, 1977, p. XXXV-XXXVI

postulates of the theory of *vakrokti* find many interesting echoes in modern aesthetic and linguistic concepts, including that of deviance.

Indian thinking on poetry is largely centred around language. Poetry has often been considered here primarily as a linguistic organization. *Vakrokti* (literally, a crooked or indirect speech), as conceived by Indian thinkers, consists of a strikingness of expression. Raghavan says that 'the two main facts recognised by Kuntaka in poetry are the utterance and its embellishment or its strikingness called *alaṅkāra* or *vakrokti*.'¹ According to Kuppaswami Sastri '*vakrokti* may be understood as a deviation in expression from the commonplace. This deviation may be due to various causes, but when the deviation is effective, it is termed *vakrokti*.'² The theory of *vakrokti* exhibits a remarkable divergence in conception and treatment and it is in its wider sense, i.e. a striking, deviating expression.

The detailed treatment of *vakrokti* is found in the works of Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin, Kuntaka and Bhoja. However, 'the concept of *vakrokti* must be older than Bhāmaha and Daṇḍin. Some scholars think that the earliest traces of the theory of *vakrokti* can be found in Bharata's treatment of Characteristics (*lakṣaṇas*) in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Bhāmaha (7th c.) is, nevertheless, the first scholar to assign a prominent place to *vakrokti*. While mentioning various subdivisions of Poetry, he refers to it as a distinguishing trait of poetic expression. It excels all day-to-day experiences (*loka-atikrānta-gocaram*) and it is considered desirable for the purpose of adorning poetic speech. Bhāmaha maintains that (II.85):

निमित्ततो वचो यत्तु लोकतिक्रान्तगोचरम्।
मन्यतेऽतिशयोक्तिं तामलंकारतया तथा॥

There is only one reference in Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* (II. 21, *vṛtti*) to *vakrokti* as an expressed Figure. Thus, Bhāmaha employs *vakrokti* as a collective designation for Figures of Speech. The term also connotes in his work a deviating strikingness of expression which underlies all Figures and is responsible for imparting distinguishing characteristics to them.

The next important treatment of *vakrokti* is by Daṇḍin (8th c.). He, too, uses the term *vakrokti* as a collective designation for all Figures, except *svabhāvokti*, which he regards as the first Figure of Speech (II. 8). 'It is *śleṣa*,' he remarks, 'that most often intensifies the charm in all literary compositions' (II. 363). Like Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin considers *atiśayokti* to be the best of Figures, for it originates from the poet's desire to describe a peculiar

trait in a manner which transcends the bounds of commonality.

Vāmana's (8th c.) use of *vakrokti*, by which he means a particular mode of metaphorical expression based on similarity: सादृश्याल्लक्षणा वक्रोक्तिः। (IV. iii. 8).

स चाक्षिप्तोऽलंकारो यत्र पुनः
शब्दान्तरेणाभिहितस्वरूपस्तत्र न
शब्दशक्त्युद्भवानुरणनरूपव्यंग्यद्विनियवहारः।
तत्र वक्रोक्त्यादिवाच्यालंकारव्यवहार एव।
3

However, in the third *uddyota* of *Dhvanyāloka*, he lends support to Bhāmaha's views on *vakrokti*: भामहेनाप्यतिशयोक्तिलक्षणे यदुक्तम्- सैषा सर्वैव वक्रोक्तिरनयार्थो विभाव्यते। यत्रोऽस्यां कविना कार्यः कोऽलंकारोऽनया विना॥ (III.37 Comm.).

Ānandavardhana's great commentator Abhinavagupta (11th c.), however, was distinctly aware of the concept of *vakratva* as propounded by both Bhāmaha and Kuntaka. He equates *vakrokti* with a consummate composition (*utkrṣṭā sanghaṭanā*) and considers it to be the generic quality that inheres in all Figures of Speech (*Locana*) It implies, according to him, a heightened form of expression which distinguishes poetic speech from the matter-of-fact speech of everyday life. All later scholars, however, except Kuntaka and Bhoja, accepted Rudrata's definition of *vakrokti* and reduced it to a *śabdālaṅkāra*.

Kuntaka's Exposition on the Theory of *Vakrokti*:

Kuntaka (11th c.) exhaustively considers *vakrokti*, delineating its nature, types and significance in Poetry. At the very outset, he states that his object in writing a fresh treatise on poetics is "to cause extraordinary charm in Poetry" (लोकोत्तरचमत्कारकारिवैचित्र्यसिद्धये) (I. 3). He affirms that it is a certain charming deviation from the ordinary mode of expression of ideas that constitutes the soul of Poetry, which he defines as follows: Poetry is that synthesis of word and meaning, embodied in an oblique expression, that constitutes the creative process and is a source of aesthetic delight to a connoisseur" (1.7).

शब्दार्थो सहितौ वक्रकविव्यापारशालिनि।
बन्धे व्यवस्थितौ काव्यं तद्विदाह्लादकारिणि॥

He, again, describes Poetry as a kind of *vicitra-abhidhā*. He conceives of *vakrokti* as a striking mode of expression depending on the peculiar turn given to it by the skill of the poet (वैदग्ध्यभंग-भणितिः) The

¹ Raghvan, V., Studies on Some Concepts of Alaṅkāraśāstra, The Adyar Library and Research Institute, 1942, p. 235.

² Sastri, S. Kuppaswami, Highways And Byways of Literary Criticism, The Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute, Madras, 1945, p. 28.

³ Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana, Uddyota II, ed. Bishnupada Bhattacharya, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1957, p. 85

language of poetry is different from the current mode of speech (अतिक्रान्त-प्रसिद्ध-प्रस्थान-सरणिः) as well as the established manner of expression which we find in the *śāstras*.

The nature of poetic language and its relationship with the standard language have been considered in detail by the Prague School linguists, particularly by Jan Mukarovsky. According to him, the hallmark of the language of poetry is 'foregrounding', by which he means the purposeful distortion of the components of language. It is the intentional, systematic violation of the norm of the standard language that "makes possible the poetic utilization of language; without this possibility there would be no poetry".¹

Vakrokti and deviance seem to attain greater relevance for the analysis of poetic language. Despite differences in approach and priorities, there emerges a marked affinity between them. Although the Sanskrit poetics do not use the terminology of modern linguistics and stylistics, their awareness of some of the crucial problems of the creative exploitation of language is undeniable. The theory of *vakrokti*, however, is far more comprehensive than it. It is a commendable effort to tackle the question of poetic communication more squarely. The scope of Kuntaka's six types of *vakrokti*, in fact, is so comprehensive.² The concept of deviance, on the other hand, is more individualistic and allows greater freedom to the creative writer.

The greatest exponent of this theory, Kuntaka, considers it in detail, delineating its nature, types, and significance in poetry. He affirms that *vakrokti* which he holds to be essential in poetry, is a certain charming duration from the ordinary mode of expressing ideas. It constitutes, according to him, the soul of poetry. He further describes *vakrokti* as a 'striking denotation' (*victra-abhidhā*). He conceives of it as a striking mode of expression depending on the peculiar turn given to it by the poet out of his skill. Kuntaka says that both words and meanings are to be embellished and their embellishment lies in their obliqueness. *Vakrokti* is a creative utterance peculiar to poetry and is distinct from popular usage. It is a clever turn of speech.

An ideal of the comprehensiveness of Kuntaka's concept of *vakrokti* can be formed from an analysis of his treatment of the *Sukumara Marga*. He observes that the 'artistic beauty of expression will form the vital essence of poetic style and that *vakrokti* alone should therefore be regarded as vital essence. To Kuntaka, *vakrokti* is the only embellishment possible to the word and its meaning and all poetic figures. But different manifestations of *vakrokti* are found. Both word and meaning are adorned, and their adornment

consists in the poetic process known as *Vakrokti*. Kuntaka has thus treated the subject of poetic expression in great detail. He has added new dimensions to the theory of *Vakrokti*. He established the concept and lent it unprecedented profundity.

Conclusions

An analysis of Kuntaka's theory of *vakrokti* shows that Kuntaka was highly acquainted with the problem of poetic expression. It is disappointing that his ideas are not fully developed by his successors. His views regarding strikingness or deviation as the central characteristic of the language of poetry, however, were widely maintained. Analysing the nature of *vakrokti*, Kuntaka explained the theory of language of poetry descriptively. This paper has focused on the central theory of *vakrokti* in a brief manner.

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¹ Mukarovsky, Jan, Standard language and poetic language. Chapters from the history of Czech functional linguistics. 2014. pp. 43, <https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/sites/default/files/pdf/131565.pdf>

² Kuntaka classified *vakrokti* primarily into six types as follows: वर्णान्वयासवक्रता, पदपूर्वार्धवक्रता, प्रत्ययाश्रयवक्रता, वाक्यवक्रता, प्रकरणवक्रता, प्रबन्धवक्रता. *Vakroktijīvitam*, Kuntaka, (ed.) Sushil Kumar De, Calcutta, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1977, pp. 29-40.

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