



DEVELOPMENT OF THEORIES OF ALANKARA

(Academic Script)

*“A song without any alankara,
would be like a night without a moon,
a river devoid of water,
a vine without any flower,
and a woman without any ornament.”*

—**Natya Shastra 29.75**

Bharata Muni (200 BCE-200 CE)

According to Indian Aesthetics, Alankara means ornament or decoration. It is deeply rooted in the theories of Indian Classical Music (instrumental and vocal) and Poetry. It is also called ‘palta’ and ‘alankaram’ depending on region to region or languages.

Basically Alankara is ‘the beauty in poetry’, music or any other creative artistic composition.

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The Alankara principle in Sanskrit Poetics is perhaps as old as the theory on 'poetry' itself. The term Alankara has a broad as well as a narrow connotation. It stands for Kavyasaundarya or poetic beauty itself in broad significance. In its narrow sense, it applies poetic figures like Upama, Rupaka, etc. In this sense Alankara is a means of beautifying poetry.

A figure of speech is a deviation from the plain and ordinary mode of speaking, for the sake of greater effect. It is an unusual form of speech."¹ The expressional deviation, the striking disposition of words and ideas, Alankara. It constitutes the beautiful poetic form.

Alankara in a restricted sense also means any trope or figure of speech that adorns a literary composition. There is a detailed treatment of such figures of speech from Bharata, the author of Natya Shastra.

The Vedic term Alankara has a double connotation — one aesthetic and the other magical. The strength of a thing makes it an amulet and also an ornament. We have an analogy in the English word “charm” wherein both the magical and aesthetic shades are equally blended.

Ability of an artist, poet, musician or vocalist depends upon his vision of creating Alankara in his compositions.

In music Alankara is created in a succession of Svaras. Alankara can be produced in any type of classical music be it Carnatic Music or Hindustani Music.

It is a beauty that adds grace to composition. Alankara is a result of what the artist has chosen for his/her creative work. Already a lot of research is done on the Indian Aesthetics, which includes many ancient texts and



theories. Each scholar who has studied these theories presents diverse point of views.

Datilla discussed 13 Alankara, Bharata Muni presented 33, Sarngadeva described 63 Alankara, while mid medieval scholars presented numerous more.

Ananda Vardhana, in his Dhvanyaloka, formulates some rules for the proper employment of figures so that they enhance the intrinsic beauty of a poem:

- a) Alankaras shall be intended to suggest rasa.
- b) It shall be born along with the artist's delineation of rasa.
- c) It shall be naturally and easily introduced and,
- d) The artist shall not stop to make a fresh and extra effort to achieve it.

An Alankara cannot be supplementary added. It must be rooted in and it should be integral to the composition.

Generally Alankaras, in poetry, are categorised into two types:

1. Shabdalankara:
2. Arthalnakara:

Shabdalankara has three classifications:

- I. **Anupras (Alliteration):** The repeated appearance of a consonant in a sentence is known as Anupras. In other words, the consonant that comes in sentence more than once is called as Anupras. For example, "Charu Chandra ke Chanchal Kirane, Khel Rahi hai Jalthal Me". Here, 'C' is repeated three times.
- II. **Yamak (Homonym):** When similar kind of word repeats more than once, but appears with different meaning is known as Yamak. For



example, “Sajana hai mujhe sajana ke liye” Here, ‘Sajana’ means make-up as well as a beloved person.

- III. **Shlesh (Pun):** A word, which used once, but it shows more than one meaning. For example, “Rahiman pani rakhiye, bin paani san sun, pani gaye na ubte moti manush chun”. Here, ‘Pani’ means water and also in second line ‘pani’ means tears.

Arthalankara has been divided into three parts:

- I. **Upma (Simile):** When a person or thing is appreciated or compared in a poem with a well-known thing or a person then it is known as upma. For example, Geeta sings like Lata Mangeshkar. Here, Geeta singing is being compared to famous singer Lata Mangeshkar.
- II. **Rupak (Metaphor):** An implicit comparison between two things or objects that are completely different from each other, but have some similar characteristics is known as Rupak. For example, “Payo ji maine ram rattan dhan payo”. Here, Lord ‘Ram’ is compared with ‘Ratan’ (Precious Stone and ‘Dhan’ (Money).
- III. **Atishyokti (Hyperbole):** The words that are used to exaggerate something or someone are known as Atishyokti Alankara. For example, “Hanuman ki puunch me lagan na paayi aag, lanka saari jal gayi gaye nishachar bhag. Here, the poet has described that the Lord Hanuman’s tail sets fire to the entire Lanka region.

Theory of Alankara is a well researched field; they insist that Alankara is an essential element in any creative art form.



The basic idea that appears indicates that every notion can be expressed in infinite forms. But to be able to use these forms, one needs to master the language.

Kuntaka in his *Vakrokti- jivita* (Ca. 10th century) says:

*“Sabdau vivaksitartha kavachakautheyshu sathvapi
arthah sahrudaya ahladkari sva spanda sundarah”*

“The Real word is that which is chosen out of a number of possible synonyms and that which is capable of expressing the desired sense most aptly. And the real sense is that which by its alluring nature, delights the mind of the Sahrudaya (person of taste and culture)”

There are distinctions found between figures of sound (Sabda-alamkara) and the figures of sense (Artha-alamkara). In the Sabda-alamkara many and varied options of paraphrasing are used. Here, the option to express something in an obvious, simple and clear manner i.e. to say exactly what one means is avoided. Such plain statements are considered Gramya (rustic) in contrast to urbane and refined (Nagarika) expressions.

For instance; Bhamaha gives prominence to Alankara, though he considered Rasa as important element.

Alankara transforms an ordinary speech into extraordinary poetic expression. The term Alankara stands for embellishment itself as well as the means for embellishment.



Alankara is comprised of endless divisions and sub-divisions. In the later poetics, Alankara is almost exclusively restricted to its denotation of poetic figures as a means of embellishment.

A brief glance on the early theories in regard to Alankara is necessary to understand, which forms the starting point for all semantic investigation. They insist that poetic language is fundamentally distinct from everyday speech or *varta*. Shastras or ancient texts give this distinction, the name of Alankara, whose field was theoretically as wide as to embrace all shades of felt beauty in poetry.

Kuntaka explains Vakrokti as the artistic turn of speech (*vaidagdhya* *bhanga*) or the deviated or distinct from the common mode of speech. *Vakratva* is primarily used in the sense of poetic beauty. It is striking, and is marked by the peculiar turn imparted by the creative imagination of the poet. It stands for charming, attractive and suggestive utterances that characterize poetry. The notion of *Vakrata* (deviation) covers both the word (*Sabda*) and meaning (*Artha*). The ways of *Vakrokti* are, indeed, countless. *Vakrokti* is the index of a poet's virtuosity—*kavi kaushala*. Kuntaka describes the creativity of a poet as *Vakra-kavi-vyapara* or *Kavi-vyapara-vakratva* (art in the poetic process). This according to Kuntaka is the primary source of poetry; and, has the potential to create aesthetic elegance that brings joy to the cultured reader with refined taste (*Sahrudaya*).

The Indian music traditions categorize Alankara as rational or irrational, wherein irrational Alankara being those that cannot be reduced to a fixed scale degree pattern. The Indian theory of *Gamaka* covers the group of irrational Alankara.



Gamaka Swaras are subtle decorations of musical notes, usually referred to as the shaking of notes or vibration of Swaras. They come in various forms and are incorporated into Ragas, giving each note a unique characteristic and delicate beauty. Gamaka plays a very essential role in Indian music, whether Hindustani or Karnataka, classical or otherwise. It is even considered the very essence of music, without which music tends to become flat, pale and anesthetic.

Purandara Dasa, the father of Carnatic music, developed learning exercises for students based on Alankara and svaravali, where the student systematically repeats a certain set of patterns over three octave registers, across various ragas and talas.

A new kind of painting developed during the fifteenth or sixteenth century, known as Ragamala, that attempted to capture in imagery the moods of famous passages of classical music. The artists of Ragamala painting were inspired by classical music and its elements of rasa, Alankara, Bhava and more. They captured moments of happiness or sadness, fierceness or silence. They depicted daytime or night-time, the summer or winter, and illustrated these subjects over and over again.

The miniature paintings in India present ragas and Kavya elements beautifully by court artists who had an ample knowledge of music and poetry, religion and mythologies.

Ragamala consisted of paintings based on various sub categories of Ragas. Raga mala has six parent or male ragas, thirty raginis, also called their



wives or female ragas, and forty eight sons. A brief view of these ragas is mentioned in the following points:

(1) Parent Raga: Bhairav raga

Wives: Bhairavi, Bilawali, Punyaki, Bangli, Aslekhi.

Sons: Pancham, Harakh, Disakh, Bangal, Madhu, Madhava, Lalit, Bilaval.

The Indian national anthem Jana gana mana is sung in raag Bilawal.

Bilawal is a morning raga to be sung with a feeling of deep devotion and repose, often performed during the hot months.

(2) Parent Raga: Malkaus raga

Wives: Gaundkari, Devagandhari, Gandhari, Seehute, Dhanasri.

Sons: Maru, Mustang, Mewara, Parbal, Chand, Khokhat, Bhora, Nad.

(3) Parent Raga: Hindol raga

Wives: Telangi, Devkari, Basanti, Sindhoori, Aheeri.

Sons: Surmanand, Bhasker, Chandra-Bimb, Mangalan, Ban, Binoda, Basant, Kamoda.

Basant is known as son ragini of Hindol raga, also famous as a spring raga, dating from the 8th century. Guru Nanak, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadar composed Shabads in this raga. Performed in slow tempo, this gentle melody depicts quiet joy. The descending scale is usually found at the beginning of a composition with the ascending form follows later.

**(4) Parent Raga: Deepak raga**

Wives: Kachheli, Patmanjari, Todi, Kamodi, Gujri.

Sons: Kaalanka, Kuntal, Rama, Kamal, Kusum, Champak, Gaura, Kanra

Raga Deepak is known as the most passionate raga usually sung at noon during summer. It is said that raga Deepak, when sung dedicatedly, had the power to generate so much heat that it lighted up the oil lamps.

The subject is a couple in the midst of a passionate tryst. This depiction at first seems relatively cool; however, if one looks closely, the flames of passion are imprinted on the man's robe and his turban ornament—usually a feather—is in fact ablaze.

(5) Parent Raga: Sri Raga

Wives: Bairavi, Karnati, Gauri, Asavari, Sindhavi.

Sons: Salu, Sarag, Sagra, Gaund, Gambhir, Gund, Kumbh, Hamir.

(6) Parent Raga: Megh raga

Wives: Sorath, Gaundi-Malari, Asa, Gunguni, Soho.

Sons: Biradhar, Gajdhar, Kedara, Jablidhar, Nut, Jaldhara, Sankar, Syama.

This miniature painting belongs to the Mewar School of miniature painting, and it is painted by Nasiruddin.

Poorvi is a Thaat raga, its notes represent the substance of a whole family of North Indian ragas. Poorvi has a deeply serious, quiet and somewhat mystical character. It is uncommon in performances today.



An Indian king is seen playing a rudra vina, accompanied by two musicians. This is an unusual portrayal of a king as performing raga in paintings from the Bundi and Kota courts. The work also references the fall harvest festivals, a time for relaxing and celebration. The complex architectural setting and the jewel-like treatment of flowering tree are typical of Bundi painting.

Bhairavi Ragini is a Ragamala painting, from the Manley Ragamala. It depicts a female devotee with an attendant, worshipping a Shiva-linga, placing garlands on it and chanting, keeping time with the cymbals she holds in her hands. She sits in a temple, surrounded by water, with lots of lotuses and water birds.

A bull is sitting or sleeping peacefully in the foreground on the steps and various ritual vessels kept near the linga.

Poetry and music have separate Alankaras. Some common types of Alankara used in classical music are:

- **Meend:** a technique of singing notes in a fluid manner with one note merging into the next - there are many different kinds of meend.
- **Kan-swar:** grace notes - the use of grace-notes depends on the raga being performed.
- **Andolan:** a gentle swing on specific notes, used selectively.
- **Gamaka:** a heavy to-and-fro oscillation involving two or three distinct notes.
- **Khatka/gitkari:** a rapid rendition of a cluster of notes distinctly yet lightly.
- **Murki:** an even lighter and more subtle rendition of a cluster of notes.



The Alankara School is said to have its origins in the works of Bhamaha and Dandin, they lived through a common period (6th or 7th century) or the time-interval between the two was not much. However their theories were based on the treatment of poetics presented in the 16th Chapter of Natya Shastra.

Their thesis provides us with simplified and uncomplicated views on Alankara and its attributing elements. Dandin and Bhamaha began serious discussion on Poetics as an independent investigation into the virtues of the diction, the language and Alankara (embellishments) of Kavya.

If we observe formally, the theories of Bhamaha and Dandin, we will find similarities in their point of views. Both strived to define the Mahakavya or Sargabandha. Both have made observations on the qualities of Shabda and Artha, in poetics. It is presumably possible that both had referred to a common ancient text, probably the Natya Shastra, to explore and extent their views of the poetics.

It is obvious to have variations in point of views of two different people; the major thrust of both the works pursues a discussion on the distinctive qualities (Guna) of Alamkara and debilitating distractions (Dosha) of poetic expressions.

Though Alankara is generally related to Poetics, but the figures of speech like Anuprasa, Upama etc. and the concepts of Rasa, Guna, Riti were also brought under the umbrella of Alamkara.

During the period of Bhamaha and Dandin, the plot of the Kavya was seen as its body. That, somehow, seemed to suggest that what is said is not as



important as to how it is said. The artistic expressions – ornate language, polished phrases seemed to be the prime issue. Therefore, the forms of Alankara such as rhetorical figures of speech, comparisons, rhythms and such others gained more prominence.

Another celebrated text is from the 10th Century, named 'Alankara Sara Sangraha' by Udbhata. He focused and researched on the forms of Alankara mentioned by Bhamaha. It defines 41 Alankaras in about 79 verses, divided into six chapters.

Vamana wrote about Alankara, *"it might belong to body of Kavya, but to a gifted poet it comes spontaneously without much effort; and, that does help the suggestion of Rasa. As Vamana said, Kavya springs (Kavya bija) from poets creative genius (pratibha). It is the beautiful mind that gives birth to beautiful expressions; and beautiful expressions bring forth beautiful suggestions. And, all suggestions need not be poetic"*.

The early scholars of Indian Poetics, somehow, seem to come in pairs. It was Bhamaha and Dandin followed by Udbhata and Vamana; and then came Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta.

Udbhata and Vamana were both said to be in the service of King Jayapida of Kashmir (Ca. 776-807 AD). Udbhata followed Bhamaha while Vamana followed Dandin. They developed upon and expounded the distinctive features of Dandin and Bhamaha; as also upon the differences that separate the two.

Early theorists believed in a Kavya that is presented in a charming manner, decorated with choosiest rhetorical devices or figures of speech – Shabda-alamkara and Artha-alamkara. The early theorists believed that Kavya is a



verbal composition conveying a definite sense. It must be presented in a charming manner.

*“nilotpalavaneSvadya carantah
carusamsravah nilakauSeyasamvitah
pranrtyantlva kadambah”*

Sahara, the author of Purvamimamsa- sutrabhasya, quoted an example from secular poetry and shows how its concern is exaggerated praise (arthavada) through the medium of laksana or indirect use of language. The verse cited is a lovely svabhavakti of black swans singing and moving gaily amidst dark lilies, as if danseuses dressed in black silk

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According to the Upanishads, Ananda is the absolute source and end of all life. But it is achieved from various rasas and Alankaras, its manifestation as the external world and inner realm of mind, is by way of beauty or Alankara—

“Ya ya prakrtirudara Yo yo’ pyanandasundaro bhavah

Yatkimcid ramaniyam vastu Sivastattadakah”

(Commentary on Atharvasira Upanisad)

‘Whatever is striking in Nature, whatever feeling or being is charming and joy-giving, in short, whatever object is beautiful—all are so many manifestations of God Himself.’ Sri or Laksmi is the name of beauty in general in Sanskrit and when personified, we have the Goddess of Beauty.



In the Lakshmi Tantra, the goddess says:

"I am inherent in existence. I am the inciter, the potential that takes shape. I manifest myself. I occupy myself with activity and finally dissolve myself. I pervade all creations with vitality, will and consciousness. Like ghee that keeps a lamp burning, I lubricate the senses of living beings with the sap of my consciousness."

The first images of Lakshmi were found in the sculptures of Kaushambi in northern India during the 3rd century BC. Later Gupta dynasty coins were engraved with Lakshmi images around 4th Century AD.

Lakshmi is seen seated on a lotus surrounded by white elephants. White elephants symbolizes power and fertility. In the lower foreground we see married couples, who are symbols of conjugal bliss and worldliness.

In ancient Indian art or sculpture Lakshmi is shown either standing or seated on a large lotus flower and holding a water pot and single lotus flower in her hands.

She is benevolently blessing and showering coins on devotees with her other two hands. The goddess usually wears a pink sari and is accompanied by established symbols of good luck such as painted elephants decorated with garlands of flowers, often spraying water from their trunks.

In most of the art works of ancient and mainly medieval time, Lakshmi appears beside her husband Vishnu, especially in the temples. She is often seen massaging his feet with lotus flowers or riding his gigantic man-bird vehicle Garuda.



As Mahabharata mentions:

Lakshmi was born from the stirring of the primeval milky ocean by the gods and demons. Following the intervention of Brahma and Vishnu, Lakshmi unbelievably appeared from this sea of clarified butter. She wears all white that radiates her youth and beauty. The goddess is also called 'daughter of the sea of milk'. Lakshmi immediately gave herself to Vishnu's protection and for this reason she is said to dwell on Vishnu's chest giving rise to one of the god's alternative names, Shrinivas meaning 'the dwelling place of Sri'.

Sri or Shri means prosperity, and is another of Lakshmi's many names. According to the Harivamsa Purana, Lakshmi is the mother of Kama, who is known as the god of love, this theory provides an interesting parallel to the Greek goddess Aphrodite and her son Eros, and she was also born from a foaming sea.

If we look around the world history and mythology, this practice of personifying the beauty and bounty of earth as a goddess was prevalent in most of the ancient cultures.

The Greeks had Core, the corn-goddess, who was known to Romans as Demeter. The Egyptians had Isis, Sumerians had Innana, Babylonians had Ishtar, Persians had Anahita and Vikings had Freia. Similarly, the Hindu religious texts confirm that Shri-Lakshmi is the timeless mother-goddess who nurtures and nourishes all life.



In the Gita it is declared —

“Yadyad vibhutimat sattvam srimadurjitameva va

Tattadevavagaccha tvam mama tejomsa-sambhavam”

‘Whatever object in the universe is imposing, beautiful or spirited, take it to be a product of my own brilliant aspect!’ — This concept of beauty is further elaborated in many religious hymns of praise.

Another good example is of Sankaracarya, who has called one of his most renowned hymns by the name Saundaryalahari. The goddess of beauty is named as Lalita and Tripurasundari besides Laksmi. The beauty of the Goddess is such that it is beyond the imagination of ordinary beings and even Lord Brahma; the Creator should strain himself to comprehend it. Celestial nymphs like Rambha and Urvasi too fail to realise it and imaginatively become one with Siva so that they might catch a glimpse of that universal Beauty —

*“Tvadyam saundaryam tuhinagirikanye tulayitum kavindraha kalpante
kathamapi virinciprabhrtayah yadalokautsukyadamaralalana yanti manasa
Tapobhirdusprapamapi girisasayujyapadavi.”*

Srivatsanka Misra states — ‘Whatever glory the Lord enjoys, whatever beauty grace and goodness are manifest in the universe — all that is dependent on you.

It is indicated that the Gods are identified with “you” and called Sri or spoken of as graced with Sri’ —



“Aisvaryam yadasesapumsi yadidam saundarya-lavanyayoh rupam yacca hi mangalam kimapi yaloke sadityucyate tatsarvam tvadadhinameva yadatah srirityabhedena va yadva srimaditidsena vacasa devi prathamasnute”.

Such is the religious and philosophical theory of beauty reflected in Indian sacred texts.

According to Indian rhetoricians there cannot be good poetry without Alankara. Good poetry is one which gives pleasure to the connoisseur.

I hope you find this episode helpful in gaining knowledge of Alankara.