

## Poetic Communication: The Art of Saying the Unsaid

### **Abstract:**

We are concerned with the nature of communication implied through poetry (*kāvya*). Using (classical) Indian poetic theories, a case has been put forward where it is necessary to construct a medium for communicating what cannot be, to convey the formless through form, and to evoke an experience free from space-time reality. The construction of the poetic medium, however, correlates strongly with the zeitgeist. It is thus imperative for a society, interested in communicating poetically, to understand and evolve a contemporary medium to allow so. The article concludes with two examples: one each from the occident and the orient.

“And since the eternal and intelligible models<sup>i</sup> are supersensual and invisible, it is evidently “not by observation” but in contemplation that they must be known. Two acts, then, one of contemplation (*Dhyāna*) and one of operation (*karma*), are necessary to the production of any work of art.”

-Anand K. Coomaraswamy<sup>ii</sup>

### ***The purpose of poetry***

The purpose of art (poetry, drama, sculpture, etc.) is to ‘communicate’ and not ‘exhibit’. The exhibitory art aims at pleasing the senses and is thus purely emotional in nature. It becomes subjective and it is the artist rather than the art that then matters. The pleasure is solely derived from the physical form, be it a composition of colors, of sounds, or of words. Such art rarely attempts to convey the unexpressed knowledge; the essential idea behind the order of the physical form. The work of art should rather communicate, and communicate effectively<sup>iii</sup>, with accuracy and perfection of the ‘imitations’, the divine truth<sup>iv</sup>. It does so by using forms with right analogies and balanced ornamentation (*alankāra*), eventually to establish a harmony between the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘intellectual’ self and the universal truth<sup>v</sup>. The later, in poetry, is savored through the generated ‘flavor’ (*rasa*), which is known only through ‘tasting’ it.

The poetic experience is a state of contemplative-beatitude (*cinmaya-ānanda*). It is not for poetry to educate morals and facts, at least not as an end<sup>vi</sup>. The ultimate aim of poetry is to provide ‘aesthetic rupture’; an experience above all physical things; an ecstasy of ‘tasting’ the ‘God’. Such an experience is a harmonious combination of emotional and intellectual elements, but more profound than the emotional and more colorful than the intellectual experience.

### ***The craft of Poetry***

Art proceeds by ‘transforming’ the medium, on which it operates, into an appropriate form. For poetry, the medium is language and the raw material is speech (*vāk*). Speech is an effective organization of words (*pada*) which, themselves, are a combination of vocable

(*śabda*) and sense (*ārtha*). The external reality represented by words (*padārtha*) has to be appropriately moulded with the inner reality (*bhāva*) to produce the desired *rasa*. Bhamaha of the seventh century maintained a distinction between the ordinary speech (*vārta*) and the poetry. Ordinary discourse is either *lokavārta*, news about the happenings of the world, or *sastravārta*, about scientific and analytic descriptions. Poetry, on the other hand, is where word and meaning, sound and sense, dissolve coherently to communicate the transcendent (*alaukika*).

The fountainhead of poetic criticism in India<sup>vii</sup> was realized in a ninth century work *Dhvanyāloka* of Anandavardhana<sup>viii</sup>. Using terse elucidation, the work established (once for all) the theory of suggestion (*dhvani*<sup>ix</sup>) as the ‘soul’ of Indian poetics. It is only through suggestion that one can experience *rasa*. To clarify the nature of *dhvani* in poetry, Anandavardhana categorized the meaning of poetry into ‘expressed’ and ‘implied’. The ‘expressed’ is either the literal meaning or the one conveyed through figures of speech (such as simile). The ‘implied’ meaning, which arises from the ‘inner power’ of the ‘expressed’, can be either a simple idea; a figure of speech (such as metaphor); or a *rasa*. Ananda considered deliverance of *rasa* as the soul of poetry. The ‘expressed’ meaning should escape once it has ‘flashed’ the ‘implied’. If it still persists, then it does so only at the peril of being a defect (*doṣa*). *Dhvani* poetry is one where both the ‘conventional’ and the ‘expressed’ meaning subsides to give way to the ‘implied’ (as a *rasa*). Such an ‘implied’ meaning has to dominate once it has been realized and should be the most important goal of a poetic work. Instances otherwise would not be attributed as *Dhvani*. Much of *Dhvanyāloka* is occupied with dividing, finely, the suggested meaning (into several sub-categories) and explaining the distinctive character of each of the division<sup>x</sup>.

The soul of poetry and the associated *rasa* being immortal, the medium (language) and the raw material (speech), are however dynamic in character. It is required for every generation to reinvent them in tune with the zeitgeist. The poet has to be clearly conscious of the ‘expressed’ meaning and its prevalent usage. Only then, he will be able to ‘effectively’ communicate the ‘implied’.

### ***Two Examples***

We end this brief note with two examples, both pregnant with *dhvani* and *rasa*. First, we mention a few lines from one of the late poems of Friedrich Hölderin. He writes:

Is God unknown? Is He manifest as the sky? This rather I believe. It is the measure of man. Full of acquirements, but poetically, man dwells on this earth. But the darkness of night with all the stars is not purer, if I could put it like that, than man, who is called the image of God.<sup>xi</sup>

According to Hölderin, by dwelling poetically, man measures himself to the idea of God<sup>xii</sup>. Here dwelling ‘implies’ - ‘to be’; and poetry as ‘the authentic gauging of the dimension of dwelling’. God for Hölderin is unknown, but one which is manifested in what is known; and

whose revelation constitutes ‘the measure of man’. The words ‘dwells’ and ‘measure’ carry strong suggestions in this poem, while departing severely from their expressed meanings.

Next, we consider the following lines appearing towards the end of long poem *andhere mem* by Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh<sup>xiii</sup>:

अनखोजी निज-समृद्धि का वह परम उत्कर्ष,  
परम अभिव्यक्ति  
में उसका शिष्य हूँ  
वह मेरी गुरु है,  
गुरु है !!  
:  
खोजता हूँ पठार...पहाड़...समुन्दर  
जहाँ मिल सके मुझे  
मेरी वह खोयी हुई  
परम अभिव्यक्ति अनिवार  
आत्म-सम्भवा।

Muktibodh’s usage of language, with its intricate rhythm and imagery (and the ensuing suggestive force), has become an epitome for the new poetry in Hindi. These last lines of the poem reflect a compelling desire of the poet towards that ‘identity’ (*asmitā*) which has become most crucial for the contemporary man and his society. The poet searches for his completely expressed ‘being’, who is both, his ideal and his guide.

(Article written by Anurag Gupta for Directions, May 2010)

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> According to a central thesis of Coomaraswamy, all arts are “imitative”; imitations of “models” of the divine and the ultimate truth; of “God” himself. Here imitation is not used in the usual sense of a copy or similitude, but instead as a relation to bring out the essence of the idea. See Coomaraswamy, *Figures of speech or figures of thought*, Munshiram Manoharlal Pubs, p 16-19 and p 134-144.

<sup>ii</sup> op. cit., p 19.

<sup>iii</sup> The effectiveness in a work of art (beauty) is measured by how accurately an “imitation” has been achieved.

<sup>iv</sup> “all recited poetry and all chant, without exception, are aspects of *viṣṇu*, of the greatest being, clothed in sonorous chant”, Trans. from *viṣṇupurāna*.

<sup>v</sup> “...one which is inexpressible through speech, but which provides it the expression; that is ultimate truth...one which cannot be imagined, but which imagines the mind...one which is invisible to the eye, but which provides it sight...one which cannot be heard, but which provides the knowing to the ear...one that is independent of the flow of breath, but which facilitates its flow: That is ultimate truth.”, Trans. from *anāmdāsa kā pothā* by Hazari Prasad Dwivedi.

<sup>vi</sup> A message can only be present intrinsically, left unsaid, only to be brought out as a spontaneous awakening in the reader.

<sup>vii</sup> Detail histories of Indian poetics are given in P. V. Kane, *History of Sanskrit Poetics*, Motilal Banarsidass Pubs, Delhi; S. K. De, *History of Sanskrit Poetics*, Oriental Press, Calcutta; and E. Gerow, *Indian Poetics*, Vol. V, Fasc. 3 of A History of Indian Literature, Jan Gonda Ed., Otto Harrassowitz-Wiesbaden, 1977.

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<sup>viii</sup> *Dhvanyāloka* has been translated in English by Krishnamoorthy, Poona Oriental Agency 92, Oriental Book Agency, Poona; and Ingalls et al., Harvard University Press, Cambridge. An authoritative Hindi translation has been done by achārya Vishveswara, Jnanmandal Ltd., Varanasi.

<sup>ix</sup> The grammarians understand the word *dhvani* as the sounds heard from a speech. Ananda, however, uses it with four meanings: “i) the function of suggestion, ii) suggestive expression or meaning, iii) suggested content and iv) poetry with principal suggestion.” Cf. Krishnamoorthy, op. cit. Note 17.

<sup>x</sup> This paragraph is a highly condensed form of the first chapter of *Dhvanyāloka*.

<sup>xi</sup> Extracted from: “In lieblicher Bläue...” Translation by Michael Hamburger, *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, Anvil Press, 2004, p 789.

<sup>xii</sup> Cf. M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (Tr. A. Hofstadter), Harper Colophon Books, 1975, p 211-229.

<sup>xiii</sup> From *chaand ka munh terha hai*, Bhartiya Jnanpith, 2001, p 295-296.