

Reorienting Genre Division in Sanskrit Poetics*

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Sanskrit poetics classifies literary works of art under two major heads *śravyakāvya* or poetry and *dṛśyakāvya* or drama. *Śravyakāvya* is further classified under the heads as *padyamayakāvya* or verse-poetry, *gadyamayakāvya* or prose-poetry and *campūkāvya* or poetry in both prose and verse. Verses are of five types such as *muktaka*, *yugmaka*, *sandānitaka*, *kalāpaka* and *kulaka*, and verse-poetry is subclassified as *mahākāvya* (epic), *khaṇḍakāvya* (lyric) and *koṣakāvya* (lexicon). Prose-poetry is of four types: *muktaka*, *vṛttagandhī*, *utkalikāprāya* and *curṇaka*. It is also classified another way into *kathā* and *ākhyāyikā*. *Campūkāvya* as a eulogy of a king is known as *viruda* and when it comprises various languages it is called *karambhaka*.¹

Agnīpurāṇa presents a five-fold classification of the prose *kāvya* namely *ākhyāyikā*, *kathā*, *khaṇḍakathā*, *parikathā* and *kathānikā*.² Excluding *ākhyāyikā* the other four categories differ slightly from each other and may be counted under the *membric kathā*. Many Sanskrit critics have noted the points of difference between these two species, *kathā* and *ākhyāyikā*. According to Bhāmaha (c.7th century A.D.) the earliest rhetorician, *ākhyāyikā* is a kind of literary work composed in prose, which employs words pleasing to the ear and suitable to the matter intended. It deals with an elevated subject-matter and the sections of the narratives are called *ucchvāsas*. Here the hero himself gives an account of his exploits. In it the verses in *vaktra* and *aparavaktra* metres intimate future events on befitting occasions and the poet is free to offer imaginary events and situations. It describes the kidnapping of a maiden, a battle, separation of lovers and the final triumph of the hero. But the *kathā* does not contain verses in *vaktra* and *aparavaktra* metres and its divisions are not called *ucchvāsas*. It may be composed either in Sanskrit or in *Apabhraṃśa*. An account of the deeds of the hero is given by somebody other than the hero himself as it would be discourteous on the part of the hero to boast of his won merits.³ Daṇḍin (8th century A.D.) criticizes Bhāmaha and argues that *kathā* and *ākhyāyikā* are only two divisions of prose *kāvya*. *Ākhyāyikā* is a recounting by the hero himself and the other (the *kathā*) by the hero or by someone else. As the hero represents reality the faithful description of his own heroic deeds should not be considered discourteous. But this rule is not universal as persons other than the hero also are narrators in *ākhyāyikā*. Therefore the narrative point of view (in the first or third person) should not be considered a criterion. Similarly the use of particular metres (*vaktra* or *aparavaktra*) and the titling of the chapters as *ucchvāsas*

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should not also be considered differentia of an *ākhyāyikā* as they may also be used in case of *kathā*. Daṇḍin approves of freedom of expression for the poetic genius.⁴ Vāmana (8th century A.D.) mentions the two divisions of prose *kāvya* as *ākhyāyikā* and *kathā*. He omits their definitions because, he thinks, they are either insufficient or confusing. He remains indifferent to the opinions of Bhāmaha and Daṇḍin both.⁵ *Rudraṭa* (9th century A.D.) gives a detailed account of the two species of prose composition apparently modeled on Bāṇa's works.⁶ Viśvanātha Kavirāja (14th century A.D.) a propounder of the *rasa* school of Sanskrit poetics defines *kathā* in terms of his general definition of poetry as a statement the essence of which is *rasa*. According to him both *kathā* and *ākhyāyikā* are prose narratives with plots generating *rasa* (*sarasaiti vastu*). *Kathā* is interspersed with the verses in *vaktra* and *aparavaktra* metres. In the beginning there are prayer to the meritorious and denouncement of the wicked. An *ākhyāyikā* has only some conventional structural differences such as eulogy of the poet's own pedigree (*vaiśānukirtanam*) and of other poets as well. The story at some places is interspersed with verses in *āryā*, *vaktra* and *aparavaktra* metres and its sections are titled as *āśvāsas*.⁷ The words used apart from their semantic depth, must have phonetic excellence. As regards the narrative technique and prosodic convention, Viśvanātha endorses upon his predecessors.

Now it appears that the genre division of the ancient and medieval Sanskrit critics is mostly technical or formal without any criteria that take account of a precise aesthetic foundation. Especially the prose genres are not formulated on the specific aesthetic qualities. The definition of *kathā* and *ākhyāyikā* by Viśvanātha is perhaps more appealing than his predecessors' on the ground that he considers both *kathā* and *ākhyāyikā* as poetic as other forms of literature in as much as *rasa* is their essence (soul or *ātman*). Among the formal differences, the narrative technique adopted in both the forms, *kathā* and *ākhyāyikā*, is an anticipation of the prose narratives of the recent times. Writers like Bāṇabhaṭṭa have sufficiently proved that the aesthetic merit of a literary discourse does not consist only in a stylized composition. What is necessary for a poet is not mere versification of a piece of practical communication. In other words, the Sanskrit critics had a very clear view that verse is not a criterion of poetry. They rightly perceived the difference between communication (*vārtā*) and poetry (*kāvya*).

In fact, what compels the Sanskrit tradition to rank Bāṇabhaṭṭa with Vālmīki and Kālidāsa is the creation of images and the generation of *rasa*. The Sanskrit critics would have agreed with the Russian formalists and Structuralists as also with the New Critics that language is not merely a vehicle of thought in poetry. But at the same time, they would not agree with the formalists that poetry is merely a specific use of language or a linguistic device ('defamiliarization': Mukarovsky; 'automatization': Sklovsky) where human contents like emotions, situations, and reality are only contextual. Nor would they agree with the humanism of the New Critics that poetry is a linguistic order that deals with human understanding: a specific attitude towards human life. When the New Critics have not emphasized the emotional aspects of poetry, the Sanskrit critics are insistent upon it. One

may of course, think that the schools of *alanikāra*, *rīti*, *guṇa* and *dhvani* have not emphasized emotion as the central point of poetry in their preoccupation with the linguistic character of poetry on both the semantic and phonetic levels. But Abhinavagupta concludes that *alanikāradhvani* and *vastudhvani* lead to *rasa-dhvani*. If *rasa-dhvani* is the suggestion of an emotion it pinpoints the argument of Abhinavagupta that human emotion is the central point of poetry, and it is on this point that practical discourse differs from literary discourse.⁸ The tenants of *dhvani* school and *rasa* school may be very suitably combined in saying that literary discourse suggests human emotion not through references (as in practical discourse) but through images (*lakṣaṇā* and *vyāñjanā*).

Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Kādambarī* and *Harṣacarita* are the brightest prose narratives in Sanskrit literature fulfilling the central demand of the Sanskrit critical culture: Both of them suggest human emotions through imagery. If *Kādambarī* suggests the emotion of love *Harṣacarita* suggests the emotion of courage by powerful imagery. When these basic elements are with these basic qualities, a prose narrative differs from other forms of literature, particularly epic and lyric, for its specific narrative technique. To distinguish *kathā* from *ākhyāyikā* on this ground is justified. If *ākhyāyikā* is a narrative of first person, *kathā* is a narrative of third person or first person. Accepting these two criteria as vital (such as kidnapping of a woman etc.) are without any aesthetic interest.

It appears that while subclassifying the prose narratives the Sanskrit critics have not been sufficiently aware of the thematic differences. To count the prose narratives of varied nature like *Pañcatantra*, *Kādambarī* and *Harṣacarita* under the same category of *ākhyāyikā* would certainly appear unsystematic for a modern critic. The recent thematic approaches would classify these three as allegory, romance and biography respectively. Of course, broadly speaking, they may be said to be *ākhyāyikās*. To count such diverse texts as *Pañcatantra* and *Harṣacarita* under the same category of prose narrative would certainly appear uncritical in our times. Most probably the Sanskrit critics were not aware of any thematic classification. Even if the general definition of poetry as "delightful statement" is accepted, the delight due to the discourse of *Pañcatantra* and *Harṣacarita* must not be having the same root. One might compare the 'Book of Job' in the *Old Testament* and Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* and can imagine counting them under a single category. Current scholarship has reasons to ridicule such categorization, which is based on narrative technique or some minor elements. The Aristotelian categorization of literature on the ground of the nature of action they represent is undoubtedly more rational. Epic and tragedy differ on the ground of narrative technique, i.e., on the manner of representation: Epic is narrative (it narrates the action) and tragedy represents the action dramatically (the agents of action directly presents it). One may argue that if epic and tragedy are differentiated on the ground of narrative technique or manner of representation, then distinction between *kathā* and *ākhyāyikā* on the ground of narrative technique and some minor characteristics is not inappropriate. But one should remember that Aristotle would never have counted *Pañcatantra* and *Harṣacarita* under the same category as the action of the latter is serious

and that of former is ludicrous in spite of the strong moral level underlying it. When Aristotle says that epic and tragedy represent serious human action, he is thematically counting them under the same category and is distinguishing comedy from both of them. The point is that the Sanskrit critics should have subdivided the prose narratives with whatever name they might have chosen under the character of the action that is represented in the plot of each category. Therefore, the distinction between *kathā* and *ākhyāyikā* should have been more appropriate on the basis of this nature of action that is represented so that *Harṣacarita* would have been distinguished from both *Kādambarī* or *Vāsavadattā* on the one hand, and from *Pañcatantra* on the other. In the language of Sanskrit criticism all the four forms of Greek literature—epic, lyric, tragedy and comedy are delightful statements or discourses that generate *rasa*. But as our enjoyment of comedy differs from that of tragedy so also our enjoyment of *Harṣacarita* is of a different category from that of the enjoyment of *Pañcatantra*. This needs no further elaboration. One can easily say that the *rasa* of *Pañcatantra* is of comic character or *hāsya* whereas the *rasa* of *Harṣacarita* is *vīra* or of a serious nature which is altogether different from the former one. We want to say that even on the ground of *rasa* the subclassification of this prose narrative is inappropriate.

We might reorient the traditional subclassification of prose narrative of Sanskrit literature in the light of modern literary criticism. The literary works of Sanskrit on the thematic ground—on the ground of the nature of action represented in the literary work concerned are proposed to be called ‘biography’ (in Sanskrit, say, *Caritakāvyam*), and the rationale of this proposal is based on the established form of this genre in the Western literary history from Plutarch to Lytton Strachery. As this biography is a thematic classification, it does not concern with the medium of narration whether in prose or verse. In the traditional criticism works like *Buddhacarita*, *Raghuvamśa* and *Śaṅkaradigvijaya* are counted under the same category, the epic. When it is proposed to distinguish *Harṣacarita* from *Pañcatantra* it is also proposed to distinguish *Buddhacarita* from *Raghuvamśa* because whether written in prose or verse they represent the type of action clearly distinguished from the type represented by the other works. *Buddhacarita* represents the serious actions of a person of history, may be with mythical ornamentations, whereas *Raghuvamśa* is the representation of a series of serious actions of several mythical persons, may be with historical references. Similarly *Harṣacarita* represents the serious action of a historical person with mythical allusions, whereas *Pañcatantra* represents the actions of human beings, lower animals and birds with allegorical references, and *Kādambarī* represents the actions of imaginary persons with a high pitch of literary devices. *Buddhacarita* and *Harṣacarita* would differ from any historical account of such persons as depicted in the works concerned for the way they have treated these actions. If Plutarch is not a Herodotus or Strachery is not a Toynbee, *Aśvaghōṣa* and *Bāṇabhaṭṭa* also are not the Indian counterparts of Herodotus and Toynbee.

In this connection the credit must go to Amarasimha, the famous Sanskrit lexicographer (4th century A.D.) who has distinguished *kathā* from *ākhyāyikā* on the ground

that the first is a prose narrative that represents imaginary human action (*prabandha kalpanā kathā*) and the latter is a prose narration that represents the action of history (*ākhyāyikopalabdhartha*).⁹ Without any mention of the differences in narrative techniques Amarasimha's categorisation is of a sound critical order which has been surprisingly ignored by the poeticians. When Bāṇabhaṭṭa himself is categorizing *Kādambarī* as *kathā*¹⁰ and *Harṣacarita* as *ākhyāyikā*,¹¹ it is very difficult to say whether he is doing so on the basis of narrative technique or prosodic convention or on the nature of the action represented—imaginary or historical. But his own categorisation has always set a model for the latter critics like *Viśvanātha* who has clearly kept *Harṣacarita* in view while defining an *ākhyāyikā*. Keeping Amarasimha in view our present categorization of a class of writing as biography on the ground of the nature of action represented-imaginary or historical-is not, however, without critical justification.

Notes and References

- ¹ *Sāhitya Darpaṇa*, VI. 314-337.
- ² *Agnipurāṇa*, 337-112.
- ³ *Bhāmaha, Kāvyaṅikāra*, I. 25-29.
- ⁴ *Daṇḍin, Kāvyaḍarśa*, I. 23-30.
- ⁵ *Vāmana, Kāvyaṅikāra Sūtra Vṛtti, Vṛtti* on I. 3. 32.
- ⁶ *Rudraṭa, Kāvyaṅikāra*, XVI. 20-23.
- ⁷ *Sāhitya Darpaṇa*, VI. 332-36.
- ⁸ *Locan on Dhvanyāloka*, I. 5.
- ⁹ *Amarakoṣa*, I. 6. 5-6.
- ¹⁰ *Kādambarī, Prāstāvika Ślokāḥ*, 20.
- ¹¹ *Harṣacarita*, I. 19.

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