Chapter 6
Critical Evaluation

Intrinsic to the human self is the constant search for the beautiful which makes Aesthetics a fascinating and essential subject for study. It has sealed its permanent place among the various branches of knowledge both by its imaginative, emotional impact and by its intellectual approach to analysis. As the study of the physical expression of mental states, it has been studied empirically and scientifically in psychology; as a qualitative study of values it is on par with logic and ethics, as an integral branch of philosophy, it has claimed its rightful position as the philosophy of art creation, appreciation and criticism.

The Indian tradition reveals the literary critic in ancient Sanskrit literature as an unrelenting crusader of analytic and critical methods of studying and understanding a work of literature. Though the emphasis has been on literature, the theories have been widely applied to all works and spheres of art. Many of the aesthetic terms and concepts have evolved through centuries, meticulously analysed, furiously debated, temporarily abandoned, subsequently revived and finally expressed in a specific format, based on their universal applicability and overall acceptability.

Among the numerous creative and original thinkers of our land, there are certain names whose contributions have been pioneering and revolutionary. Standing tall in their midst is Abhinavagupta, the Kashmir Saivite philosopher from the 11th century. His commentary ABh., on the Nø, the primary focus of this thesis, has been the water-shed point in the glorious history of the Indian aesthetic tradition. Abhinava's ability to understand not only the tenets of the text, but also envisage its subsequent possibilities has helped lay the foundation for future generations to comprehend the subtleties of the art form. The effect his theory has had on different fields of art is comprehensive and relevant even today. The philosophical implications seem inexhaustible revealing ever new meanings. His
erudite scholarship is a springboard for greater understanding of the arts, giving a fresh impetus to research and study of the same. To appreciate the significance of his philosophical interpretation of aesthetics, it has been necessary to analyse the concepts in both philosophy and art. The evolution of aesthetic concepts prior to Abhinavagupta is elaborated in the earlier part of the thesis. His aesthetic theories and its impact on art is elaborated in the later chapters.

The philosophical tradition to which Abhinava belongs is the highly complex āgama-Tantra oriented Īaivism of Kashmir. The metaphysical postulates of the school are based on the Non-dual Ultimate Reality ōiva, conjoined with ōakti as Prakāśa-vimarśa-maya, the embodiment of knowledge and activity. A cognizing and dynamic principle, its svātantrya or freedom expresses itself in lāa or divine play. In keeping with the bimba-pratibimbavāda, it manifests itself through the descent of the thirty-six tattva-s, as the myriad creations in the world. Conversely, the ascent of the jāvā to the ōiva-tattva takes place through sādhana guided by dākūa from a qualified Guru and by the anugraha of the Lord. The four upāya-s help erase the mala-s or bonds of an individual, leading to mokā. Breaking away from the bonds, the jāvā is liberated by being in the empirical and not by a negation of it. The special world of dance, drama and music is integral to Tantric liturgical practices which also include esoteric rituals. The terms and concepts of Īaivism with multi-layered symbolism become pointers to Abhinava's analysis of aesthetics. The unique capacity of Abhinava to build a holistic philosophical paradigm is seen in his attempt to synthesise the many separate yet important schools of Īaivism in Kashmir then. In the process, he has successfully incorporated principles from these schools and transformed them in the presentation of his aesthetic theories.

With an understanding of his Īaivite background, it has been the endeavour of this thesis, to elaborate on the influence of the aestheticians who went before him. It was Bharata who propounded the rasa theory in his magnum opus Nō,
with successive thinkers between the sixth and the ninth centuries emphasizing one or the other concept as the soul or essence of poetic work. While Bhäuseraka considers alaśkàra-s and later with Kuntaka, vakrakrti, as the most important ingredient in aesthetics, Dañoín and Vàmana shift the focus to ràti. A section of aestheticians favour guòa-s, while theorists like Kuntaka, ánandavardhana and Kùemendra concentrate on aucitya or appropriateness. Abhinava is inspired not only by aestheticians but by grammarians like Bhartçhari (by his theory of sphoña) and philosophers like Gauòapàda (for concepts like spanda, pratyabhijñà, turùya etc) and Mànàs saka-s (for their exposition of the òâda-artha relation). While the deep influence of øankara and the Buddhists is unmistakable, the deviation from them is equally significant. Abhinava reiterates the non-dualism of øankara, the main departure being the conception of the Ultimate as Consciousness enjoined with the power of activity. Similarly, he accepts the changing, dynamic nature of reality as per the Buddhists but subsumes it under the eternal Godhood of øiva. Despite his criticism of the earlier commentators on Bharata's rasa-sådra and their theories, he openly approves of øì øaïkukà's inclusion of the sahçdaya and Bhañña Nàyaka's elaborate treatment of sàdhàraõãkaraõa. The greatest influence on him besides his teachers Bhañña Tauta and Bhaññenduraja is ánandavardhana.In his Locana, Abhinava heaps praises on ánandavardhana's intricate analysis of dhvani and holds it up as the soul-mate of rasa in poetry. With all these inputs of scholarly predecessors, the stage is set for Abhinava's celebrated entry into the aesthetic stage for a grand philosophically artistic performance.

A brief capsule of Abhinava's original contributions has been presented. He formulates his own theory of Abhivyakti-vàda or creative manifestation of the conscious principle through suggestion, in aesthetic experience. The importance of the philosophical revival of the No by Abhinava, as expressed in the ABh., has far reaching implications in the enhancement of art. He pointed out that we cannot
apply arbitrarily the laws of the physical world to the world of art which is alaukika or extra-ordinary. The work of art follows its own laws, though based on the logic and science of natural phenomena. Abhinava accepts both the reality of the empirical world and the leap to the trans-empirical artistic world. He strongly believes that the loka is essential for an understanding of the world of art and it is through the sublimation of the finite, physical spheres that one can attain aesthetic relish.

Abhinava's approach is comprehensive because he comments on two original texts, both catering to two levels and two essential components of the aesthetic experience. The Dhvanyâlóka of ânandavardhana deals with the râvya or that which is heard, in which the various aspects of poetic creation and appreciation are dealt with. The Locana, his commentary on it, traverses the vast range of poetic possibilities, burnishing each concept with a plethora of examples. It also fortifies the theory of Dhvani or aesthetic suggestion as the core of poetic expression. The Nø on the other hand, deals with the Dçâya or that which seen (as well as heard), in which the various aspects of dramatic creation and presentation are analysed. Abhinava's commentary on it, the ABh., delves deep into the innumerable facets of dramaturgy drawing from literature, performing arts and life. In the process, it strengthens the theory of rasa or aesthetic experience (rasa-anubhava) leading to delight (â nanda).

Coming to the text itself, the focus of Nø is the performer and the entire text elaborates on the necessary conditions for a successful presentation of an aesthetic situation in Nàñya. Though øri øaï kuka and Bhañña Nàyaka shifted the importance to the spectator, it was Abhinava who unified the artiste and spectator in one unique aesthetic experience. Bhàva as giving rise to rasa is discussed in great detail from Bharata downwards. However, the performer's role in the expression of bhàva and her/his experience of rasa in the transmission of bhàva is Abhinava's specific contribution. His brilliant analysis of pratibhà brings out the
innate inspirational genius of the dramatist and performer, the raison-d’etre for any creative activity. Likening the artiste to Prajapati, Abhinava reveals how pratibha as a reflection of øiva who is Prakàâ-à-vimaràa, propels him to ever new creative activities. Consciousness being also the nature of activity (øakti) makes the performer a consciously active artiste. Further his specific analysis of sàtvikàbhinaya by Bharata, is to showcase the unique capacity of the performer to transmit her/his personal experience, inspired from within, as compared to the other three abhinaya-s(àïgika, vàchika and àhàrya).

Recognising the varied nature of Nàñya, (which he calls vividhà-àraya), Abhinava compares it to the alàta-cakra, which though made up of individual parts is seen as one due to the skill in whirling it and our associative perception. Similarly, Nàñya appeals to different sense organs and gives rise to different sensory inputs. The harmonizing quality of consciousness (øiva as sat-cit-ànanda) and a sense of equilibrium in the performer (àntarasa) alone can integrate the different inputs into one holistic experience of aesthetic bliss (rasànanda). It is then that the artiste aspiring for aesthetic acme shares ground with the aspirant (sàdhaka) seeking the truth (Sathya). Abhinava, the øaivàcàrya non-pareil, as a logical conclusion to his analysis of aesthetics, reinforces the rasa-dhvani theory from the philosophical standpoint culminating in rasànanda as akin to Brahmànanda.²

The contextual relevance of Abhinava’s rasa theory with reference to the varied aspects of Nàñya when studied, reveals the meaning underlying verbal and non-verbal symbols of communication. The four-fold abhinaya enumerated by Bharata covers the entire gamut of the above communication. Abhinava in his usual comprehensive style, puts forth the impediments or vighna-s to rasànanda from the point of view of the artiste, the art form and the spectator. He enlists the different means to overcome them. Further, the two great symbols of øaivism, Nataràja and Ardhnaràsvara, elucidate both the micro-cosmic and macro-cosmic
levels of creation. They become representative of the σiva-akti-sāmarasya which according to Abhinava sets the entire creative universe in motion.

The contemporary relevance of Abh is unmistakable and undeniable. As a commentary, its purpose is linked with that of the original text, the Nā. Nāya was created by Brahma the Prajāpati, as a panacea for the ills afflicting the world of human beings, as a result of the negative emotions of greed, jealousy and anger. The solution to these problems was expected to educate people about the high standards of ethical and spiritual behaviour but in an entertaining and delightful manner. Centuries after the Nā was written, can we perceive any fundamental difference in the problems existing then and now? If we admit that they still exist, then the relevance of the Nā and thereby of the ABh., is settled beyond doubt. The function of art is not to give voyeuristic pleasure or individual satisfaction of desires. It is to satisfy the need for the public expression of shared values and emotions. Since tauryatrika (ref) means the combination of dance, music and drama, any theory of rasa will apply equally to all of them.

Today, in dance as with other art forms, an over emphasis is placed on the mastery and complete control of a given technique, often to the exclusion of a deeper understanding of fundamental principles. This however limits the aesthetic experience, as it overshadows the awareness which makes the art meaningful. A form which expresses only some technique remains incomplete without the necessary anchorage in its spiritual origin. The Nā despite being a manual with detailed description of the different aīga-s, upaīga-s, càri-s, hasta-s, karaōa-s, angaharā-s etc., is really talking of the standard ways of doing them, occasionally citing how they should be done and what should be avoided. Though it is more normative than instructional, one can extract the application of the textual instructions through Abhinava's commentary. It is not easy to encapsulate the dynamics of a live performance in a single dimensional page. Bharata gives the `what' and the `how' but it is Abhinava who gives the `why' of action and thereby
of performance. While it requires intelligence and diligence to follow the numerous verses in the Nø, the ABh., works at the level of awareness of one's body, control over one's mind and disciplined ascent of one's spirit. Mere prayoga for Abhinava is converted into sàdhana with viveka and vairàgya. There is no denying that in the strenuous and often all consuming pursuit of mastery over technique and choreographed items, the dancer is left with no time to even dwell on the underlying symbolism and layers of meaning, leave alone the elevated seeking of enlightenment. For professional performing artistes of today, studying the ABh., may seem like a post retirement past-time. Dance is a physical art form and active artistes are not to be faulted in preferring the performance format to researching texts and concepts. Yet, if we are sensitive to Abhinava's concerns, we can sense an urgent necessity and a responsibility on the performer's part to raise herself, her art form and thereby the audience to spiritual heights.

Regarding performance itself, is it not true that the same oral and textual tradition is followed by all dancers and still we categorise them as mediocre, bad, good or even excellent artistes on the basis of their performances? What is it that transforms an also-heard melody into a soul stirring song? To several questions concerning aesthetic judgment and criticism, it is Abhinava's analysis that shows the way. The apparent empirical enumeration of movement and music in the text is geared for a trans-empirical elevation of the jâva into a state of active awareness. This energises the performance itself making it more meaningful and capable of achieving its intended purpose of rasànanda. Abhinava issues a word of caution if the basic issues in Nàñyotpatti and Nàñyàvataranam, (the origin and descent of drama) are ignored. The former reveals the status of drama as a solution to the problems besetting mankind. The final chapter in the Nø on Nàñyàvataranam expounds the ethical responsibility of the Nañâ-s in preserving the sanctity and purpose of Nàñya, utilizing it for the welfare and upliftment of humanity.
6.2. Direction for possible future research

The sheer potential of the ABh., is so immense, that no thesis can exhaust its scope and range. Yet an attempt has been made in this thesis to indicate the significance of Abhinavagupta's work in both the fields of philospohy and art. The Abhinavabharati though a commentary on an older text the NS, stands out as the fountainhead of exceptional and original thinking with incisive insight into earlier theories and future possibilities. It is to the credit of a dynamic and intellectually stimulating tradition that creative minds like that of Abhinavagupta profess views different from yet complementing those whom they comment upon. Like in the case of the Locana, the Abhinavabharati has raised the benchmark of a commentary by analysing concepts with fidelity to the original tenets and constructive criticism. It has thus made a mark as a text with a mind of its own.

The content of this thesis can raise questions that can support or indicate areas that need further understanding or exploration. The concept of communication is a vibrant field for study, particularly with reference to gesture language as a non-verbal mode of expression. The focus of the present thesis did not envisage greater involvement in this area though it has been indicated in chapter four.4 A full fledged study can be undertaken on Tantra and its relation to art, which though touched upon in this thesis, is outside its immediate purview. An understanding of Abhinavagupta's analysis of Tantra can help lead the performing artiste to the source and meaning of her art.

It is clear that nāma and rāpa (name and form) are immediate parameters for any object aesthetic or otherwise and nāda, tāla and vastu (aesthetics of sound, rhythm and architecture) are specific aesthetic categories. All of them are governed by the same aesthetic theories and principles, the difference being due to the medium rather than the content or the purpose. A realization of this underlying commonality becomes essential for artistes to see the holistic and integrating nature of art. The domain of performing arts originally belonged to all strata of people. Abhinava is right in reinforcing the all-inclusive nature of
aesthetic experience brought out through concepts of tanmayābhāvana and sādhāranākaraāa. Hence, not only are the knowledge systems of the various arts inter-related but the arts themselves are governed by common principles of dhvani and rasa.

The Abhinavabhāratā stands as the perennial fountainhead of direct and hidden meanings of concepts and theories, a virtual goldmine for serious researchers. Revival of the text would reinvigorate knowledge and praxis with Abhinava's original vision of the universality of aesthetic and spiritual experience. The present thesis is an index to aestheticians, philosophers and performing artistes, to comprehend the 'ever-renewing, ever-energising' contribution of Abhinava. For, not only is Abhinava the most profound philosopher, he is the epitome of artistic sensibilities and the most empathetic aesthete.

Notes and References

1. Infra, Chapter IV, 6.4.1., for a detailed explanation of pratibhā as given by Abhinava.
3. For a detailed analysis of the Ardhnarāva concept in Kashmir śaivism, see Pārvatidarpaāa, Harsha V. Dehejia, M LBD, New Delhi, 2010.
4. The other area of research possibility is the relation between the sign language of the hearing impaired and the gesture language practised by dancers. Both are culture specific (we have American, British, Indian sign languages) and both are carriers of meaning. Though this area is not of direct bearing on philosophical principles, it enlarges the scope of the philosophical branch of study called aesthetics.