CHAPTER - I

The Foundations of Indian Literary Criticism

The first thing that attracts a student of Indian Literary criticism is undoubtedly its antiquity. Like our rivers and our mountains, like our temples and our arts criticism too can boast of a long and hoary tradition. This is worthy of mention because literary criticism in the English-speaking world is of relatively recent origin. It is well known that there was virtually a cessation of critical activity after Aristotle and Longinus in the West. In striking contrast to what are usually known as the Dark Ages of Europe, India witnessed an outburst of creativity during the period, as a long list of names like Bharata, Bhamaha, Dandin, Vamana, Anandavardhana, Kuntaka Mammata, Abhinavagupta and Kshemendra and their contributions of various epoch-making critical theories, astonishingly modern in character like Rasa, Alankara, Riti, Dhvani, Vakrokti and Aucitya to Sanskrit Poetics testify. In more ways than one they anticipated the New Critics of the West and "discussed their newest approaches threadbare before the first millennium A.C. was out."\(^1\) In such a context our continued and wholesale dependence on the Western critics appears all the more deplorable. It is ironical that the Indian student of literature today should

\(^1\) C.D. Narasimhaiah, Literary Criticism: European and Indian Traditions (ed) (University of Mysore), pp. 7-8.
draw his stimulus regarding literary enjoyment: the critic's equipment, standards of judgment or tools of criticism from European critics as if they were the pioneers or have an immediate relevance to him when literally a rich treasure has been lying buried for ages in the backyard of his own home, as it were. Thanks to the sustained efforts of some recent Indian critics in English, there is a revival of interest in this neglected branch of Sanskrit Literature both at home and abroad.

In days of yore Criticism was regarded in India as the sum of all sciences, of all learning: *Samastih Sarvasastranam Sahityamiti giyate*, for criticism as a science avoided arbitrary methods and demanded of the critic reasonable awareness of everything around him and in history (*Vyutpatti*, as it was known). Like the poet, he too had to be at "the most conscious point of the race in his time" and be the point at which "the growth of the mind shows itself." It is interesting to come across the view that Indians never challenged the claims of criticism for the status of a science though the puritanical ones did sometimes question the value of literature itself.\(^2\)

Scientific analysis and scientific exactitude in India might well have been born of a desire for a proper disciplining of the mind and of the soul. Grounded in a desire for disinterestedness and detachment criticism could never

have thrived as a luxury trade here; it was a way of living, living governed by long-tested values. Even here a Critic was a doctor caring for the health of the mind as well as a judge of values. The subject of values should take us back to the very beginnings of Indian culture and philosophy which also mark the beginnings of literary criticism in India. The foundations were perhaps laid when the **Taittiriya Upanishad** set down its aphorism:

Raso Vai Sah. Rasam hi evayam lardhvanandi
bhavati . . . . .

*(Rasa, verily is He. One enjoys Supreme Bliss on attainment of this Rasa)*

The theory of **Rasa** which has, since its inception, invited endless interpretations has been rightly claimed to be ancient India's chief contribution to the world of literary criticism. It has also been adequately demonstrated by theorists how **rasa** can bring aesthetic experience into close relation with the ineffable peace of **moksha** or self-perfection. It came to be well formulated about the 9th Cent. A.D. and has virtually superseded all other theories. It is observed that our ancient theorists went so far as to not only compare aesthetic bliss to **yogic** bliss but also extol the former as rather within the reach of man than the other. Such a view can best be appreciated when we take into account the fact that the process of the evolution of Indian aesthetics followed closely that of general philosophy. Literary criticism, too, which was born out of
an essential philosophical outlook of the people was naturally bound to be dominated and governed by the Indian conception of the four Purusarthas or ends in life and the well-known principle of Satyam, Sivam, Sundaram. Life itself was a rhythm of God and the realization of the Self as Sachchidananda, the end of human existence. The Taittiriya Upanishad was echoing the aspirations of the people when it said "man desires to attain the immortal through the mortal," for the prevailing belief was that all life and thought were in the end a means of progress, towards self-realization and God-realization. Hence, Indian Aesthetics cannot be studied in isolation from Indian Philosophy or culture because it was part and parcel of the people's total outlook and living. Nataraja, the King of dance and drama was also the source and the goal of their existence. This explains why the Indian critics equated Rasanubhava (aesthetic joy) with Brahmananda (Bliss of Brahman). Indeed, it was twin brother to the tasting of Brahman (Brahmasvada-Sahodarah). At times they varied these terms and spoke of akhandananda or anandacarvana as worthy of being bracketed with Atmananda. All these terms implying absolute and infinite joy make one wonder whether any other civilization attached this kind of importance to literary experience. These words in Sanskrit have a special connotation to anyone with some knowledge of the language and so the pride of place given to aesthetic joy evokes even greater admiration. All human pursuits were
therefore valued only in so far as they served as means to the attainment of this \textit{Ananda}, the peace that passeth understanding and literature was no exception. The divine faculty of the poet to perceive "the gleam, the light that never was on sea or land" helped poetry serve as a bridge between the visible and the invisible, the time and the timeless.

Poetics in ancient India was known as \textit{Alankara Sastra}, meaning the science of poetry or the study of beauty in poetry, (it might be noted that beauty also is a philosophical concept). The principle of \textit{Alankara} which is supposed to be one of the most important contributions of Sanskrit Criticism approximates to the modern conception of imagery in poetry. This, however, is a very inadequate definition, as \textit{alankara}, which literally means ornament or embellishment, was originally even a synonym for \textit{saundarya} (beauty). And for poets as well as philosophers beauty was a road to transcendence. Like the true and the good, the beautiful also ultimately came to be correlated in India to the highest ideal of man. Prof. Hiriyanna explains this relationship between Beauty and Reality, Aesthetics and Metaphysics in the following words:

The pursuit of the beautiful may help the attainment of the ideal. By carrying us to the threshold, as it were, of the ideal and giving us a glimpse of it, art but inspires us with a desire for realizing it.\textsuperscript{3}

Aesthetic experience derived from the contemplation of beauty in art was, as has already been mentioned, comparable only to the highest Bliss, for the joy that both the experiences brought along with them was pure and untainted, transcendental in character. Hence Prof. Hiriyanna is absolutely right in looking upon art not as a "mere sanctuary of escape from the troubles of life" but an 'intimation' to man of the possibility of realizing the ideal. He quotes from Kavya-Prakasha: Brahmasvadamiva anubhavayan to impress upon our minds the old belief that the goal of perfection, in its essence, is already within the experience of all that are familiar with art. He reiterates again and again in that classic of a book The Quest After Perfection that art experience is altogether impersonal and is marked by pure and spontaneous delight. His view is based upon the assumption that man not only grows unselfish while contemplating a work of art but also forgets himself completely and in the supreme aesthetic moment, when he is conscious of nothing but the work of art before him he attains the status of what the yogins term savikalpaka-samadhi, in which one loses oneself, as it were, in contemplative union with the object. He proceeds to describe that, as a result of this self-forgetfulness man can rise above the cares and worries of his

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4 The Quest After Perfection, p. 58.
5 Ibid., p. 49.
daily life and experience a rare kind of satisfaction that characterizes the realization of the ultimate ideal and like the final ideal is sought for its own sake and not as a means to anything else. This accounts for the fact that the ancient Indians pursued the arts prayerfully and religiously. Art gave them a foretaste of the ideal state and might have served as a more powerful incentive to its pursuit than anything else. After all "Art is the response of man's creative soul to the call of the real." By provisionally fulfilling the need felt by man for restful joy, it may induce him to do his utmost to secure it finally. Tagore makes a reference in his essay What is Art? to the rhetoricians in old India who had no hesitation in saying that enjoyment is the soul of literature, the enjoyment which is disinterested.

(italics mine) To Hiriyanna art is like niskama-karma which purifies our emotions (Chittashuddhi); it is the layman's yoga, for the spell-binding effect it makes on our minds is so complete; and finally it is capable of becoming a sample or pattern of moksha, for it satisfies man's impulse for supreme peace during this attitude of detachment it evokes in him.

Now do we understand why music, one of the arts, appears to be recommended as

6 The Quest after Perfection, p. 49.
8 The Quest, p. 58.
10 The Quest, p. 33.
worthy of man's serious pursuit in the *Yajnavalkya-smrti.* And now do we also appreciate the old saying, that only the fortunate can taste *rasa* or aesthetic ecstasy, for it is so much like *yogic* experience.

Poetry in India was *dhyanamantra,* the result of meditation. The attitude of the poet towards poetry was that of the devotee towards his god. The *Kavi* in the *Rig Veda* meant a seer, one who has *seen* and not merely *seen* but *shows,* a *Darshanika* — one who shows the way. He not merely *sees* himself but helps us *see.* In this respect a critic is not very much different from a poet, for the office of the critic also was to see, create, show the way and generalize his experience (*sadharanikarana*). Hence a critic was regarded as much a creator as the poet and the term used in Sanskrit for the critic was *Sahrdaya,* one alive to the essence of poetry, a *rasika,* a man of refined taste who alone can respond, who alone is specially qualified to appreciate, appraise and enjoy poetry. Once again we can only turn to Prof. Hariyanna for his splendid analysis of the critical process, stage by stage wherein the rapport between the poet and the critic is established, resulting in a "spiritual welding of hearts".

Briefly the mind of the responsive reader first becomes attuned to the emotional situation portrayed (*hrdayasamvada*), through one or more of the knowing touches which every good poem is
worthy of man's serious pursuit in the *Yajnavalkya-smrti*. And now do we also appreciate the old saying, that only the fortunate can taste *rasa* or aesthetic ecstasy, for it is so much like *yogic* experience.

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Briefly the mind of the responsive reader first becomes attuned to the emotional situation portrayed (*hrdayasamvada*), through one or more of the knowing touches which every good poem is
sure to contain; he then gets absorbed in its portrayal (tanmayi-bhavana); and this absorption, in the manner already explained, results in the aesthetic rapture of Rasa (rasanubhava).

It is interesting to learn that the difference between this aesthetic enjoyment and the Bliss of Brahman is only one of degree and not of kind. The Rasa-dhvani theory of poetry is thus related to the main Vedantic tradition in Indian philosophy and also accounts for the constant mingling of aesthetic and spiritual values in Indian literature. The theory of Dhvani, considered separately, also remains characteristically Indian. According to Coomaraswamy also "rasa and Dhvani theories are essentially metaphysical and Vedantic in method and conclusion." (italics mine) In upholding the view that suggestion is the soul of poetry, the Indian critic means that "the ultimate content of poetry baffles direct expression, and accordingly values suggestion not as a mere trick of style but as the sole means of communicating what is otherwise incommunicable" which "may remind one of the Vedantic view of Brahman which words and thoughts, as it is said, alike fail to grasp".

Reverting to the theory of Rasa, the word literally means 'taste', 'savour', 'relish' or

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14 Ibid.
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'flavour' and of course, by metaphorical extension it comes to mean the same as the Delightful experience when the final ideal of life (moksha) is realized. Thus the poet who experiences this unique joy and expresses it and the critic who responds to it are both creators, exercising the god-like function of creativity, esteemed and revered by society as the "two eyes" of the Muse of Poetry.

While the writing of poetry in India dates back to the Vedic period (and possibly earlier, archaeological discoveries are beginning to reveal) when the early Aryans sang in joy and awe at the splendour of the elemental forces, the beginnings of criticism also can be traced to prehistoric times and support can be drawn for this inference by recalling to ourselves that Indian philosophy abhorred mere guessing and speculation and believed in analysing even the abstract with ruthlessness. Centuries later, Vivekananda, the proud inheritor of this tradition was to make an impassioned plea to his countrymen that he would rather have them all atheists than a set of three hundred million superstitious fools, for while there was hope for an atheist, there was none for an irrational fool! It has been pointed out that ancient Indians believed in two kinds of knowledge, prama (the right or valid knowledge) and bhrama (illusion). The proximate means to right knowledge was called pramana by them. Pramana effectively introduces us to the critical capability of the Indian people, their
capacity to distinguish right and wrong, *vidya* and *avidya*,
illusion and reality. Prof. Hiriyanna in his book, *Indian Conception of Values* describes the word *pramana* (criteria) as derived from the root *ma*, 'to measure' and signifies 'that by which we measure' or 'the means of measurement'. This etymology he thinks, gives us a clue to the aim of *pramana* as first understood in Indian philosophy—measuring or ascertaining the correctness of experience. According to him the need for *pramana* arises when a thing is vaguely known, but knowledge about it is still uncertain. It signifies that nothing should ever be accepted for true which has not been by a proper scrutiny of it, shown to be such. He informs us that this concept of *pramanas* was discussed in a prominent way at the time of the Greek invasion, which enables us to fix the date of their first formulation early in the post-vedic period. Philosophy had for the most part become a matter of conflicting tradition and the chief function of *pramanas* was naturally conceived as one of scrutinising this tradition. Hence Prof. Hiriyanna is perfectly justified in defining Indian philosophy as a 'Philosophy of Values' and as a 'criticism of values' (italics mine).

The absolute ideal of self-perfection induced in the people a need for self-consciousness (taken in the sense of

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15 *Indian Conception of Values*, p. 35.
introspection) and self-criticism. The hard, continuous discipline of self-criticism was even encouraged to be practised, for "'that alone can make one secure in times of strain'". The need for criticism will continue until an ideal, free of all imperfections and completely satisfying is reached. As is commonly recognized, the chief point of difference between man and the rest of sentient creation lies in man's ability to become self-conscious and aware of his own identity. "This capacity for self-criticism necessarily points to an awareness of a standard by which he judges; and that standard can be nothing short of absolute perfection .... In fact, man would not feel that he was imperfect if he had not within him such an ideal, latent though it may be." Literary criticism also must have had its genesis in man's urge to establish standards by which to measure, to examine life's values. The earliest seeds of critical endeavour were sown by the Upanishadic man, when in his desire to know the truth asked in a spirit of questioning and enquiry why the wind should blow ceaselessly; at whose bidding the water flowed and why the mind of man was forever restless, thus redeeming himself by not taking anything for granted including the mightiest of the forces.

It is observed that the Upanishads rely so much on intellectual


17 The Quest after Perfection, p. 48.
analysis that they regard the intellect as higher than intuition. Along with this the Nyaya system of philosophy gave the Indian mind a clear method of reasoning and even taught it to believe: "clear reason is the road to salvation." It would not be far-fetched to believe that the ground for literary criticism in India was prepared and nurtured right from those earliest times. Since philosophy was a way of life in India and not just a rigorous and systematic study of the various sastras, it permeated the minds of even the critics to such an extent they applied almost the same ideals and principles to their analysis of works of art. One could consider the intimate relationship between philosophy and aesthetics repeatedly pointed out in a variety of contexts by Prof. Hiriyanna in his Art Experience: 19

The ego-centric predicament must be transcended, a point of detachment has to be reached (p. 9).

It is not given to the ordinary man to transcend personal relations; art by its unpersonalized forms affords the best means for a temporary escape from the ills of life arising from such relations. (p. 13)

The nature of the aesthetic attitude is one of samvit, i.e., contemplation dissociated from all practical interest as is shown by visranti — 'composure'. (p. 15)

18 Chaitanya, A New History of Sanskrit Literature, pp. 141-2.

19 M. Hiriyanna, Art Experience (Kavyalaya Publishers, Mysore, 1954).
The aim of art .... is to induce a mood of detachment. (p. 15)

According to idealistic Vedanta, art serves as a pathway to Reality. (p. 16)

It is this transcending of self-consciousness—this migrating from our narrow self, to put it otherwise, that constitutes the secret of aesthetic delight. (p. 20)

Art experience consists in the disinterested contemplation of beauty. (p. 46)

... Such peace (spiritual) is fundamental to the human heart. Art has the power of itself to enable him to attain, albeit only for a while, the peace of spirit which, as an old Indian critic has observed, even a Yogi has to strain himself long to win. (p. 64)

The poet should satisfy the well-known aesthetic requirements such as lifting them above the purely personal level. (p. 78)

It is this unified whole of experience that constitutes aesthetic value here and not mere delight.... That is, we seek art not merely for the pleasure it affords, but for the unique experience it brings. (p. 80)

The use of such significant terms as 'transcend', 'impersonal', 'detachment', 'disinterested contemplation' 'ego-centric predicament' leaves us in no doubt of the vital part played by philosophy in shaping our kind of criticism. Yet most of us had to wait for Arnold and Eliot to recover
this past for us and exhort us to an appreciation of 'the
Indian virtue of detachment', criticism as 'a disinterested
endeavour' 'an extinction of personality' and impersonal
emotions in poetry.

One might consider the innumerable ways in which
literature and philosophy came to be governed by the same
set of ideals. Aucitya meaning propriety had to be observed
both in life and in art and anything which was improper
(anaucitya) had to be rejected. A poet was a nimitta matra,
a mere agent through whom the Word of God was expressed
poetically. A poet was expected to transfigure (alaukika)
an emotional situation with his sensitive nature and
imaginative power and not represent it as it actually was
(laukika). The contemplation of a work of art had to be
disinterested so that in turn it could awaken disinterested
attitudes. Small wonder that Bharata's Natya Sastra should
be looked upon as the fifth Veda, an encyclopaedia of
nearly all the fine arts. The Italian philosopher Croce
was indeed right in describing religion as not a separate
form of experience, but a "'hybrid activity of the mind,
in part art and in part philosophy.'" 20

Surveying the
cultural history of India, we feel convinced at every stage
that art and philosophy are after all variations of the

20 Art Experience, p. 84.
same ideal, indicating the essential character of the ultimate goal of human existence. Kavyananda can lead to Brahmananda. The imagination of the poet (pratibha) is the third eye of Lord Shiva and in the words of Nilakantha Diksita:

Even the omniscence of God Siva who adorns his crest with the moon is limited by his cognition of reality; the imagination of poets, however, surpasses even that by virtue of its boundless extension which pervades spaces that even Siva is not aware of. 21

It is a fine tribute to the cultural advance of a people who could place a poet higher and freer than even the Creator, (all the more significant that the compliment should come from the same people who believed in one's total surrender and subordination to the Mighty Principle of the Absolute) though one surmises that Dikshita may well have taken this stand in order to drive home the importance of the poet, for Siva is reality, in which case awareness cannot be aware of itself!

The relation between poetry and poetics has an interesting origin. Dr. K. Krishnamoorthy quotes the example of Rajashekarara, the author of the famous Kavyaminamsa who develops the conception of Kavyapurusa, the spirit of

21 Essays in Sanskrit Criticism, p. 201.
poetry, son of Sarasvathi who marries sahitya Vidya or Science of Poetics. In fact, we ought to remember that the whole theory of Rasa is based on the "recognition of an affinity of nature between the poet and the reader of poetry; and, on the basis of this affinity, it is explained that appreciation of poetry is essentially the same as the creation of it." It is important to bear in mind that critics with taste were honoured and regarded as the only proper judges of poetry and not scholars or grammarians (in our sense of the term) in ancient India. We gather that reputed literary critics lived in important cities like Ujjayini and Pataliputra who adjudged the merits of poets like Kalidasa, Bharavi and others with a sharp critical acumen. Indeed,

They had a well-defined scale of assessment to measure not only poetic success but also poetic failure, a scale admitting of more than a dozen precise categories of poets — good, bad and indifferent — the highest being that of 'Kaviraja'.

If genius creates beauty, taste recognizes it; it is a full circle. The joy of creation inevitably led to the joy of appreciation and even discovery. As they had realized the value of aesthetic experience, tall claims were made on behalf of poetry by ancient Indian theorists.

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22 Ibid., p. 198.
23 Art Experience, p. 39.
24 Essays in Sanskrit Criticism, p. 2.
They claimed that through poetry, all the known values of life could be realized and the validity of this view can best be tested by applying it to our own epics which are considered great for their poetic as well as ethical or spiritual value. "Indian criticism is not prepared to recognize a poem as 'great' solely on aesthetic grounds if it is ethically hollow, if its philosophy of life is not profound, if its extent is not vast."25 Against this background it would be monstrously wrong to generalize that the Sanskrit theorists of the old possessed a flair only for hair-splitting distinctions and pettifogging rules, which is a sign of the decadent ages that followed the long period of creativity. Their emphasis on the organic unity of form and content (Sabda and Artha) in poetry, structure, language and more importantly their insistence that rasa should be the goal of poetry suggests adult critical intelligence of the highest order.

25 Ibid., p. 5.