

Poetry and Logic: Mahimabhaṭṭa's Epistemology

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Mahimabhaṭṭa's *Vyaktiviveka* was written with the avowed object of demonstrating that the so called suggested meaning postulated by Ānandavardhana as the soul of poetry is actually to be treated as inferred meaning. Inference is a key concept in Indian epistemological tradition discussed at length by earlier philosophers like the Buddhists and the Naiyāyikas. Hence the substantiation of Mahimabhaṭṭa's thesis naturally involves a lot of threadbare analysis of the process of inference related to language, an issue which is of pivotal significance to epistemology. This has resulted in the *Vyaktiviveka* becoming one of the few treatises on Sanskrit poetics which have discussed epistemological issues related to literature in a comprehensive manner. *Pramāṇa*-s constitute an important aspect in Mahimabhaṭṭa's discussion of inference since the very basis of inference is its validity ascertained through them. The present paper is an attempt to examine the historical evolution of the nature of the three fold *pramāṇa*-s, viz., *loka*, *veda* and *addhyātma* mentioned by Mahimabhaṭṭa in his epistemological discussions related to inference (*anumāna*).

In contrast with the majority of literary theorists who systematically distinguish creative literature (*kāvya*) from scientific discourses (*śāstras*), Mahimabhaṭṭa maintains that *kāvya* is also can be treated as a *śāstra*.¹ The reason implicit in his argument is that poetry, like a *śāstra*, imparts instruction to the reader about the dos (*pravṛttis*) and the donots (*nivṛttis*) in life. Mahimabhaṭṭa does not, however, accept the far reaching implications of this stand that poetry should, like *śāstras* always present valid knowledge. In fact, he maintains that the test of validity applied to the facts presented in poetry would amount to being ridiculous². However, he seems to contradict himself when he follows a vigorous methodology in the analysis of all linguistic

usage(*śābdavyavahāra*), in which he does not seem to make any concession for imaginative literature. From all this, we can conclude that while he is against the application of validity test to the facts presented in imaginative literature, he assumes that even in its realm, literature, being a linguistic communication, has to follow the logical structure of language. Poetry may create an illusion, but the logic of poetic language is that of the language of the real world³.

At the very outset of his epistemological discussions, Mahimabhaṭṭa maintains that the process of inference is present in the conviction generated by all types of linguistic communication⁴. This statement is very important in that it does not make a distinction between poetic and ordinary languages. An addresser uses language to persuade or dissuade the addressee; the former wants the latter to do certain things and to abstain from doing certain other things. Now nobody will be convinced about anything unless he/she understands the logic behind it and without generating such conviction, the addressor cannot expect the addressee to act in the manner which we feel desirable. This logical demonstration is the very foundational principle of all linguistic communication. Mahimabhaṭṭa demonstrates with great insight that even seemingly innocuous facts and statements presented in literary languages are carefully orchestrated attempts to substantiate arguments presented overtly or covertly. A logical relation involves the juxtaposition of *probandum*, (*sādhya*) the thing to be substantiated and *probans*, (*sādhana*), the means of its substantiation. It can be represented as ‘smoke, therefore fire’(x, therefore y). In actual linguistic usage, however, it is only sometimes that their relationship is thus expressly stated; in many instances, a smart listener grasps their latent connection even when it is not explicitly stated⁵. Mahimabhaṭṭa also maintains that in an ordinary sentence, it is the subject (*anuvādyā*) part which functions as the probans and the predicate (*vidheya*) which becomes the probandum. The following sentences ,randomly extracted

from Kālidāsa's poetry, could illustrate the relationship of *probans* and *probandum*.

1. 'He became the father of the subjects by instilling obedience in them, by protecting them and by ruling them.'
2. 'Being eager to meet the daughter of the mountain[Pārvatī], the lord of animals, [Śiva] also spent those [pre-marital] days with great difficulty.'

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In the first instances, we can see that fatherhood is substantiated by the instillation of obedience and the like. In the second sentence, the difficulty in spending the days on the part of lord Śiva is substantiated by the fact that he was very eager to meet Pārvatī.

All this logical relationship is at the level of the expressed meaning. Mahimabhaṭṭa maintains that it is the same relationship of *probans* and *probandum* also occurs in between the expressed meaning and the so called suggested meaning. The following verse, cited as an instance of suggested meaning (dhvani) by Ānandavardhana could be an example of it:

Three men reap the earth
Of its flower of gold
The warrior, the man of learning,
And he who knows to serve⁶

Here the explicit statement of three men harvesting earth of its flower of gold leads one to the inference that 'prosperity is abundant to these people everywhere'.⁷ Here also the relationship is 'x therefore y' between the expressed and the implied meanings. The expressed meaning of harvesting the earth of its golden flowers is an impossibility and it causes the inference of a meaning similar to it. Mahimabhaṭṭa clarifies the process as happening through subordinate function (*upacāravrtti*) of the sentence, but it becomes a bit unconvincing since he does not accept *upacāra* as a separate function apart from inference⁸

It is when dealing with the question of comprehending the invariable concomitance between the *probans* and the

probandum that Mahimabhaṭṭa touches upon the problem of the means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa-s*). According to him, it is through *pramāṇa-s* that one comprehends this relationship. In this connection, he mentions three such *pramāṇa-s*, viz, *loka*, *veda* and *adhyātma*, reinforcing his argument with a passage from the *citrābhinaya* chapter of *Nāṭyaśāstra* which he quotes anonymously⁹. The passage is translated as follows by Manmohan Ghosh: ¹⁰

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The people, the *vedas* and the spiritual faculty (*adhyātma*) are known as the three authorities. The drama is mostly based on objects related to the last two (the *veda* and the *adhyātma*). The drama which has origin in the Vedas and the spiritual faculty (*adhyātma*) and includes [proper] word and meter, succeeds when it is approved of by the people. Hence the people are considered as the [ultimate] authority on the drama.

However, the reference is beset with a lot of problems as, from the context it would appear that the passage does not refer to the comprehension of any inferred meaning at all. It actually refers to these *pramāṇa-s* as the ultimate point of reference in determining the type of specific acting. It is clear that the passage does not describe the three fold *pramāṇa-s* as the authority from which the invariable concomitance of the expressed and the inferred sense is determined. What the passage postulates is the intimate connection between theatre (*nāṭya*) and the scripture (*veda*) on one hand and theatre and spiritual faculty (*adhyātma*) on the other and finally between theatre and people (*loka*) in the judgment of the propriety of acting.

The three key terms in the original passage also furnish some difficulties in interpretation as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* does not care to define them. As to *veda*, there seems to be no problem since the passage alludes to the intimate connection between *nāṭya* and *veda*, which is regarded as the source of it in the myth related to its origin described in the first chapter of the text. *Loka* of course refers to the people at large. The intimate relationship between the

behavior of people and histrionic representation in theatre is accounted for in concepts like *lokadharmī* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. On the other hand, the term *adhyātma* which Dr. Ghosh translates as spiritual remains problematic since the word does not convey any specific meaning applicable to the context.

Abhinavagupta gives a totally different interpretation to the passage. However, the interpretation is not at all very clear and there are many obscurities in the Abhinavabhārati passage. According to him, *loka* means the threefold *pramāṇa-s* of perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*) and scripture (*āgama*), which tallies with the *pramāṇa-s* accepted in his Śaiva metaphysics. If this were the case, the inclusion of *veda* in the list will be redundant as *āgama* coming under *loka* will have already covered it. In order to overcome this difficulty, Abhinavagupta, in an obscure passage appears to have proposed the interpretation that it is meant to include systems like archery (*dhanurveda*) and music (*gāndharvaveda*), which are generally treated as *Upavedas*.¹¹ His interpretation of *adhyātma* also seems to be somewhat different from 'spiritual'. He seems to suggest that there are certain things grasped through intuition rather than through canonized texts. Thus, while the 'correlation of word', (*śabdamanvayaḥ*, probably meaning the appropriateness of the word), can be determined with the help of grammar and lexicon, the accuracy of meter is something grasped intuitively.¹² Abhinava suggests in this context that the elegance of the meter is something understood by oneself; thereupon, basing on this experience, one selects the appropriate melody and language for the song. The whole passage in the end reinforces the importance of *lokāin* drama as *śāstra* has very limited scope.

When we compare these passages of *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinavabhārati*, with *Vyaktiviveka* and the commentary of Ruyyaka thereon, we can see that Mahimabhaṭṭa has completely reworked on these concepts of *pramāṇa-s* to suit his own epistemological requirements. In

his concept, there is a sea change in the very notion and function of these *pramāṇa-s*. Unlike the *Nāṭyaśāstra* notion, these *pramāṇa-s* are not reference points to acting; on the other hand, they are adduced as the ground on which the invariable concomitance between the *probans* and the *probandum* is determined. Mahimabhaṭṭa also gives clear-cut definition of every *pramāṇa*. Thus, *loka* signifies that which encompasses anything well known in the world. *Veda* has an extended significance as it constitutes not only the vedas, but *itihāsas*, *purāṇas*, *dharmaśāstras* etc, which ‘owe their origin to vedas.’¹³ According to Mahimabhaṭṭa, *veda* thus refers to anything well known only in the domain of knowledge systems. According to Ruyyaka, this two fold distinction is intended to distinguish between textualised knowledge and mere folk knowledge not couched in texts.¹⁴ Mahimabhaṭṭa’s definition of *ahhyātma* is not clear. It is described as that which comes within the purview of the ‘soul’ (*ādhyātmikārthaviṣayam*), but Ruyyaka unambiguously interprets it as direct perception (*pratyakṣa*). He further clarifies the position that through this list, actually two means of valid knowledge are accepted, viz., perception and scripture, with the latter further distinguished into textualised and non- textualised forms.¹⁵ According to Ruyyaka, the omission of inference in the list is simply the fact that it is for the sake of inference that the assistance of other *pramāṇa-s* is sought.

A perusal of the profuse illustrations given by Mahimabhaṭṭa for the three fold *pramāṇa-s* will convince us that whichever may be the source utilized by him, he has been able to build up a consistent epistemological structure on the basis of it. According to him, the so called language is able to convince the reader of the validity of the substantiated facts with the help of the implicit logic we have already internalized through our previous direct perception and traditional acquired fund of knowledge available through textualised or oral sources.

Let us take up some examples cited in *Dhvanyāloka* and discussed by Mahimabhaṭṭa. The first verse

furnishes an example where the invariable concomitance is grasped from the world.

Go your rounds freely, gentle monk;

The little dog is gone.

Just today from the thickets of the Godā

Came a fearsome lion and killed him¹⁶

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The verse represents the words of a lady addressed to a mendicant who was plucking flowers from a beautiful creeper bough on riverside where the lady had promised to meet her lover. She wants the mendicant to go away from the place and accomplishes her objective in a covert way. All that she tells him is that he can wander freely there since the dog which was a menace has been killed by the terrible lion living on the banks of the river. Here the discerning reader cancels the expressed meaning and understands that the verse means exactly the opposite. The *probans* prompting the inference is the presence of an animal which is fiercer than the dog. One understands that for a person who is afraid of a dog will definitely be wary of a fiercer animal. The relationship between the two facts is understood from the 'world' (*loka*).

Mahimabhaṭṭa has furnished several examples of suggestive poetry wherein the implicit invariable concomitance of the *probans* and the *probandum* is grasped through direct perception.

Go, and let the sighs and tears

Be mine ;nor let them rise

from you as well, tortured

being without her, by your hateful courtesy.¹⁷

In the above example, the wronged heroine tells the hero, who had offended her by making love to another girl, to go away from her since she does not want to make the other girl also miserable. Here though Mahimabhaṭṭa maintains that the same results proposed in the dhvani theory can be obtained by applying inference, the inferred meaning according to his interpretation is different from what Abhinavagupta demonstrates in his interpretation. According

to him, the inferred meaning is that the hero has come there out of sheer courtesy [of pretending] to maintain their former relationship and actually he is a hypocrite.¹⁸ But in Mahimabhaṭṭa's interpretation, the meaning inferred is that the hero is in love with the other girl. This is prompted by the fact that on being separated from her, he may have symptoms of separation like deep sigh and weeping. The invariable concomitance between love and the pangs of separation is understood by a reader through direct experience.

It is somewhat intriguing that of the forty-six verses taken up for discussion from *Dhvanyāloka*, there is not a single instance wherein Mahimabhaṭṭa has taken recourse to *veda* to substantiate the invariable concomitance of the probans and the probandum. However, we are fortunate in recovering one verse of explicit *probans/probandum* at the expressed level authenticated by *veda*. In this verse, occurring in *Kumārasambhava*, Kālidāsa states that Himālaya was not in a position to make Śiva accept his daughter as the latter had not asked for her hand. Here, Mahimabhaṭṭa states that the invariable relationship between 'not being asked' and 'not capable of giving away the daughter' is known through *veda*. Here he cites the following verse from an anonymous source, which in all probability could be some version of the Mahabharata.

O the descendant of Bharata! All things are to be given unasked. Food, knowledge and a maiden are not to be given to people unless they ask for them.¹⁹

From all this, it can be seen that Mahimabhaṭṭa has shaped an epistemological structure using material from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* selectively and modifying them so as to suit his requirements. His eclectic project will be more clear if we consider that it is the inferential structure of the Buddhists which he deploys to counter the dhvani theory, as he uses concepts like identity (*tādātmya*) and causal relationship (*tadutpatti*) as the basis of invariable concomitance like the Buddhists and not mere invariable presence of the *probans* and *probandum*²⁰. But Mahimabhaṭṭa holds all the cards close to him and does not

find it incongruous to accept Veda as a *pramāṇa*, even while making use of Buddhist logic in his epistemology.

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¹*kāvyaśāstratvam pratipāditam eva, Vyaktiviveka*, p.483. See also C. Rajendran, 'Mahimabhaṭṭa's concept of poetry as a Śāstra', *Brahmavidya, The Adyar Library Bulletin*, Vol.53, pp113-120

²*kāvyaṣaṣṭaye ca vācyavyṅgyānām satyāsatyavicāro nirupayoga eveti tatra pramāṇāntaraparīkṣā upahāsāya eva sampadyate iti. Vyaktiviveka, p.78*

³ See, for details, Rajendran, C. ‘Is Rasa an Illusion? A study in Mahimabhatta’s Aesthetics’ *Brahmavidya* Vol. 68-70 pp.221-237.

⁴*sarva eva hi śabda vyavahārah sādhyasādhanabhāvagarbhatayā prāyeṇānumānarūpo ’vagantavyaḥ Vyaktiviveka, p.27.*

⁶*Mahābhārata* 5.35.64, translation by Ingalls et.al, *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, p.173

⁷*Vyaktiviveka*, p.57.

⁸*Vyaktiviveka*, p.473

⁹ I remember with gratitude that it was Professor K.Krishnamoorthy invited my attention to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* passage in a personal conversation way back in 1980

¹⁰ Manmohan Ghosh, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, English translation, Vol I, p. 509

¹¹*Abhinavabharati*, Vol. III, p.278

¹² Ibid.

¹³*vedagrahaṇm itihāsapurāṇadharmasāstrādyupalakṣaṇam teṣāṃ tanmūlatvopagamāt, Vyaktiviveka, p.53.*

¹⁴Ruyyaka, *Vyaktivivekavyākhyāna*, p.53.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶Sattasi, 2.75, Translation by Ingalls et.al, *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, p.83

¹⁷Ingalls et.al, *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, p.100

¹⁸ Ibid, p.101

¹⁹*Vyaktiviveka*, p.53.

²⁰ See for details, C.Rajendran, ‘Influence of Buddhist Philosophy on Mahimabhatta,’ *S.V.U Oriental Journal*, XLI, pp. 52-65
