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## UNIT 5 INDIAN AESTHETICS

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### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this unit is to acquaint you with the theories of literature of Indian antiquity as they have come down to us in Sanskrit texts. I do this mainly because of the growing feeling among Indian academics that we have forgotten our own aesthetic traditions, and have been enslaved by Western theories of art and literature. You may be aware of some members of this nativistic school, such as Ganesh Devy and Kapil Kapoor. The first has a book called *After Amnesia*, for which he won the Sahitya Akademi award some years ago. We at IGNOU want to do our bit to "decolonize" our mind by paying special attention to our cultural heritage. I also want to point out some similarities and differences between the two traditions whenever the occasion so demands. I draw upon works of scholars such as Kapoor and Y.V. Katak (who has analysed Aristotle's theory of imitation and our theory of *amukarana*).

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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You may have come across such binaries as Indian or Eastern versus Western. In fact, I have myself talked about "Western" philosophical traditions all through my block. But "West" is not a monolith, nor is, for that matter, "East". Even so, we go on using such categories for our convenience, which is alright, but we must be very careful. Even "India" is a difficult conceptual terrain in this critical-historical over-eagerness at easy and secure categorization. I have always felt uneasy about this. I have also thought, what nowadays largely passes as "Indian" aesthetics is actually a Hindu view or theory of literature. I received corroboration of this when, browsing the Internet once, I found the heading: "Hindu Aesthetics". The thought that had occurred to me was: once you say, "India", you refer to the colonial political entity, where a large number of diverse cultures not only exist but coexist--the composite culture where many traditions have existed. The terms oriental as opposed to occidental are often simply distinguished as geographical entities on a simplistic basis. Oriental art and oriental aesthetics are terms which are used to designate all art

and aesthetics produced in the Eastern Hemisphere. "Indian" aesthetics, however, is not an easy category, as I have already pointed out. When what passes for Indian aesthetics now was happening during the Mayuran, Gupta, and such other empires, the political geography was different from what it became later. Also, diverse foreign influences have made "Indian" culture even less homogeneous. So, we cannot talk about Indian literature and yet ignore these foreign traditions, the Islamic and European, as they have taken root and developed here. But this has been the accepted way, and cannot be remedied by me in this block. In any case, this being a troubled territory, I let that pass. All that I wanted to do by mentioning my nagging doubts to you is to make you wary of too easy a generalization.

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## 5.2 RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS

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Religious and philosophic thought is quite significant as a factor in the social context of art in any moment of history. If you list the dominant religions of Oriental antiquity, you will realize how varied the inspiration of these religions were to artists. This is especially the case, you will agree, with the Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic faiths. All these religion-based cultures were producers of art. The development of the religions was accompanied by a corresponding growth in vivid imagery. Thus, much Indian art and criticism had a religious form and content. Thus it is that these aesthetics had a spiritual base or context. This is evident from the link that one can make between the *rasa-lila* of Krishna and the *Gopis* and the *rasa* theory. Also, the artists, rulers, and spectators-audience show a willingness to accept fantastic representations of the supernatural. You might have noticed how emphasis is placed on mystic symbolism in the arts, in dance and theatre in particular. A more or less theoretical discussion followed, rather than preceded, these performances. You may recall how Aristotle's *Poetics* was similarly based on certain epics and tragedies and other art forms which had already been performed.

Most Indian art can be given a religious interpretation by persons of a strongly theistic inclination. This was not necessarily the intention of the artists or of his first audiences. You can, if you so like, apply religious interpretations to the most humble, utilitarian products as also to the most magnificent structures. Of course, there have been many Indian works and their interpretations which include ideal representations of gods and spirits, which are theistic.

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## 5.3 NON-SPIRITUAL EXPRESSIONS

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Many Indian aesthetic theories run down the *indriya* perceptions as *maya* or illusion. Even so, you notice many works of art employing sensory experiences. Apart from the sensory, naturalistic and humanistic expression have also made a mark in India's long philosophical traditions. Aesthetics was preoccupied with the production or stimulation of *rasa*, or *rasotpanna*. As we shall have occasion to see, *rasa* had a spiritual as well as sensuous dimension to it. It was seldom that these were blended.

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## 5.4 MYSTIC FUNCTION

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But as I have said already, art was produced and received in the framework of the spiritualism of the time. Mural paintings, scrolls, and stone or bronze sculptures helped, or were at least thought to help, stimulate the desired attitude, as a means of achieving *moksha*, or *mokshaprapti*. Accordingly, aesthetics was preoccupied with mystic symbolism. The bronze icon of the dancing Shiva is a symbol of the cosmic rhythm of creation and destruction.

The myths and legends related to Krishna have contributed to Indian aesthetics in a major way. Krishna, after all, is the archetypal *rasika*. A great god, he is also the mischievous child, the divine flute-playing lover, and religious-moral teacher, propounding, what is often referred to as the "Hindu" world view, the Karmic view. Indian philosophers have called attention to the importance of *rasa* in the experience of creation and appreciation of the arts in general, and particularly the theatre arts. They have also emphasized that *rasa* is not of one kind but of many, and constituted of many ingredients. An allied concept is that of *guna* or value that goes with *rasa*. The *rasa* theory as it is known to many Indian language-literature critics was originally formulated by Bharata in his treatise, *Natyashastra*. After him Abhinavagupta developed the theory further in his *Dhvanyaloka*. There were many others too in between. Almost all these texts have been handed down to us orally until a time when they were turned into written texts. It is, therefore, difficult if not impossible to talk about definitive texts. Most of the important ideas have been derived from these two principle thinkers; and I concentrate on them rather than the others (Bhamaha of the sixth century, Rudrata of the ninth century, Dandin of the seventh century) for my introduction. Also, I take up their major theories instead of taking them up in two different sections.

### 5.5.1 Rasa

The word "*rasa*" was originally used for the drink, of the gods (*somarasa*) and men alike, and also for such non-drinks as mercury. In Sanskrit aesthetics, the term was employed initially in the context of drama and later to poetry. From Bharata onwards, the term signified, and still, does aesthetic pleasure or thrill, invariably accompanied with joy that the audience/spectator/reader, experiences while witnessing/hearing the enactment or reading of a drama or poem.

In Bharata, it is the effect of drama. For him the main purpose of dramatic performance is to create or enact the *rasas*. Without *rasa* drama can have no appeal to the spectator: "*na rasadrite kaschid arthah pravartate*." "*Artha*" means "meaning". *Rasa* is *artha per excellence*. Bharata's famous *sutra* is, "*vibharambhva-vyabhichari sayogad rasanishpattih*". This means that *rasa* emanates from a combination or comingling of *vibhavas* (causes), *anubhavas* (effectes), and *vyabhicharis* (accessories).

He clarifies his point by using an analogy: just as *rasa* (flavor) issues from the combination of many spices, herbs, and other *dravyas*, so does *rasa* in drama, as it comes from the combination of many *bhavas*. The concoction is made by the combination of such diverse substances as molasses, spices, and herbs; similarly permanent or universal emotions, called *sthayibhavas*, crystallize into *rasa* when they are nourished by the accompanying *bhavas*. Bharata coined the term *rasa* for aesthetic relish because it can be tasted: *rasaaswadan* or *asvadyatvat*.

This is then an affective theory of art, as Aristotle's theory of *catharsis/purgation* is. Of course, they are very different in their respective conception. The point of similarity is that in each case the theorists are looking at the psycho-physiological being effected on the spectator or listener as the case may be. The two theories are not about the text/performance per se; but the composition/performance has to be such that such a evocation/production of *rasa* or pity and terror would be the result.

### 5.5.2 Rasa after Bharata

Bharata's explanation of *rasa* may not answer all the problems arising out of it, but these problems were extensively discussed by many of his interpreters, such as Bhatta Lollata, Bhattanayaka, and Abhinavagupta.

Bhatta Lollata is of the view that a *sthayibhava* (stable emotion), when intensified by poetic description or histrionic representation through *vibhavas*, *anubhavas* etc., becomes *rasa*. The *rasa* primarily resides in original characters like Rama and Sita, since they were the first to experience a wide range of emotions from love to grief. But through *amusadhana* (a mental activity, and act of imagination) the actor attributes to himself the role of original characters and thus experiences *rasa* secondarily. Lollata ignores the poet and the audience in this transaction of *rasa*.

Shankuka considered the effect of *rasa* on the spectator through the latter's involvement in the action (inference). This is explained through the analogy of a picture horse. When we see the picture of a horse or wooden horse, we accept it as a real horse. This is the case when the spectator sees the faked emotions or *rasas* of the performer.

However, it is Bhattanayaka who clearly asserted that *rasa* affects the spectator, and developed the theory further by saying that poetic language is different from ordinary language. He imposed on the *rasa* theory a system of theology and philosophy. He spiritualises it to a great extent by saying that through *rasa* the spectator's self becomes one with the divine soul, the *paramatma*. Through this he achieves a flash of bliss. He treats the *rasa* experience in terms of *swarupananda*, which is a kind of infinite subjectivity. The individual soul becomes the supreme soul. What is achieved is self-realization: *atma-sakshatkara*.

### 5.5.3 Rasa and Jouissance

When you read about structuralism and post-structuralism in a later block, you will be introduced to Roland Barthes' idea of *jouissance*, or bliss. Barthes talks about the reader's freedom from the oppression of authorial intention. For him what is important, after the "death" (not real but metaphorical) of the author is the gay abandon of the reader, who can discover his meaning in the text. [Critics like Stanley Fish added to this idea by talking about the creation of the text by the reader. (See the latter's *Is there a Text in the Class?*)]

Barthes thinks of the modernist novel as the text of rapture or rupture, which gives rise to the text of *jouissance*. For the reader discovers the fissures and gaps in the text which gives him pleasure. Though the theory of *rasa* is different from this idea of Barthes in many ways, it is noteworthy how both insist on the effect a literary text might have on the reader. In that sense, therefore, both are reader oriented theories. Also both the metaphors have undertones of sexual pleasure.

### 5.5.4 Dhvani

This word means "sound" literally, but does not deal with the function of sound in the musical sense. The theory was first propounded by Anandavardhana, the ninth century thinker, in his treatise, *Dhavanaloka* (*Dhvani+aloka*). The *Dhvani* theory considers the indirectly evoked meaning or suggestivity as the characteristic feature of literary utterance. This feature separates and determines the literary from other kinds of discourse, and is an all-embracing principle which explains the structure and function of the other significant aspects of literary utterance: the aesthetic effect or *rasa*, the figural mode and devices (*alamkara*), and so on. In Kapoor's words, "all the subsequent literary theorists in the tradition found the combination of *rasa* and

*dhvani* theories both adequate and sufficient to analyse the constitution of meaning in literature."

In his treatise I have mentioned before, Anandavardhana has given a detailed description of structural analysis of indirect meanings. According to him, if we can explain how indirect meanings arise systematically, we can claim that all potential meanings inhere in a text. Anandavardhana uses the term *dhvani* to designate the universe of suggestion. (The soul of *kavya* is *dhvani*, he says).

His preference for the term sprang from the fact that grammarians before him had used the term to denote several concepts. First, to denote the sound structure of *śabda* or words; second, to denote the semantic aspect of *śabda*; and third, the complex of the now revealed suggested meaning and the process of suggestion involved. Thus *dhvani* theory is a theory of meaning (an Indian hermeneutics or sorts), of symbolism. The thrust of this theory is towards claiming a greater value for the poetry of suggestion.

Anandavardhana integrates the theory of the *rasa* with his *dhvani* theory; that is, he says that *dhvani* is the method through which the effect of *rasa* is achieved. *Rasa* is the effect of suggestion.

### 5.5.5 Criticism of the *dhvani* theory

Subscribers to two schools of thought, the *nyaya* and *mimamsa* subsequently raised objections to the above theory on three counts: (a) *dhvani* is nonexistent; (b) it is a product of inference and is to be included under *lakhsana*; and finally (c) it is beyond the realm of words.

### 5.5.6 *Sphota*

In order to arrive at his own theories, Anandavardhana was indebted to Bhratrihari's *sphota* theory. Let me try to explain the latter. Bhratrihari says in his treatise, *Vakyapadiya*, that what communicates the meaning of a word or sentence is technical called *sphota*. It is of three kinds:- i) *Varnasphota* i.e. the *sphota* of *Varna* which literally means the alphabet; so that *Varnasphota* is a reference to the meaning of letters. ii) *Padasphota*: *sphota* of *padas*. That is the meaning of words. iii) *vakyasphota*: the meaning *vakya* that is sentences. The philosophy behind this theory is that, since *varnas*, *padas* and *vakyas* are all momentary (particularly when spoken), they are forever passing as the next letter, word or sentence is uttered/produced. Thus the coexistence of several letters, words and sentence is not possible. Consequently, conveying or understanding the meaning through utterance is impossible. Bhratrihari says that there is no knowledge which can be expressed without its relation with words. This epistemological position has been reiterated by many Western philosophers. For, says Bhratihari in his work that

all kinds of meaning depend upon the power of words ... it is though words that all is difference as perceived ... there is no cognition in the world in which language does not figure... all knowledge is at worse intermingled with language ... it is through the word that the object is established...all this world [result or product or consequence] of language.

Thus the concept of *sphota* is developed by the Sanskrit grammarians to turn it almost into epistemology.

It explains how meaning is communicated even though the letters, words or sentences do not exist at the time of communication or reception.

The *Shastras* also agree that the property of *sphota* is to express the primary meaning (*mukhyaartha* = *mukhya* + *artha*). The philosophers of *Sanskrit* grammar held that the indivisible, external utterance is called *sphota* [the dictionary meaning of *sphota* is "bursting forth". The image that comes to my mind is the bursting off of seeds for disposal in a pea-pod. Here Derrida's theory of "dissemination" comes to our mind]. *Sphota*, they further held, is the root cause of creation. It is the *shabdabrahma*.

Let me try to explain. Speech or word (*logos*) in a state of *Sphota* is external (*nitya*) and perception itself is a proof of it. The letters pronounced separately are detached from each other and are not *shabda* itself; they are merely sounds as a means of expressing the word. Further, they are produced and destroyed; they again expose the 'word' which is more than mere conglomeration of some letters.

The letters producing sounds are actually minute air particles. When they are written down, in their written form they are encoded in lines and marks of different kinds. Thus the meaning produced through the bursting forth described above is neither the air particles nor the lines. So it makes no sense to divide sentences into words and letters; but the grammarians do so just for convenience so that the primary approach to the study of language can be made, says *Bhratihari*.

The sum and substance of *sphota*, therefore, could be that the sound-medium is the external word, that is *sphota*; that only makes the target object of the word expressed. The first letter gets defined better and better till the word is complete, the word gets defined and redefined as the sentence unfolds itself and so on... Thus meaning is always unstable.

The philosophical schools of *Samkhya*, *Minank*, *Vedanta*, *Nyaya* and *Vaisheshika* do not accept the concept of *sphota* for the purpose of understanding the word, meaning, or interpretation. For them letters and their sound are competent enough to convey the meaning, and indication/suggestion (*samketa*) is of help in the process.

### 5.5.7 Alamkara

Basically this is a study of language. If you have studied the grammar of any Indian-language, you must have come across repeated use of this word, which literally means "ornament". But, of course, *alamkara* is not mere decorative poetry, or embellishments in literature. The *alamkaras* are various figures of speech but with these latter are models of how meaning is or ought to be apprehended. *Bahama*, *Dandin*, and *Udbhata* of the sixth, seventh, and ninth centuries respectively have all talked about this literary device. The first among them, *Bahama*, talks of the pleasure of multiplicity of meaning inherent in certain *alamkaras* such as *samasukti*. (In Oriya, my language, this mode is adapted to suit its local needs; "*smasa+ukti*".)

As the tradition was developed, *Anandavardhana* sought to integrate with *dhvani* and *rasa*. *Dhvani* is evoked by figures of speech (*alamkara*). And as we have already seen, the former leads to an evocation of *rasa*. Some theorists have categorized *alamkara* as both phonetic-based and meaning-based: *sabdaalamkara* and *arthalamkara*. Though these are two main categories, there are numerous subcategories into which *alamkara* has been divided. I list some of them for you, with help from *Kapoor*.

- 1) *Sadrusya*(similarity)
- 2) *Virodha* (opposition)
- 3) *Srnkhalabadha* (chain bound)
- 4) *Tarka nyaya* (reasoning logic),
- 5) *Lokanyaya* (popular logic)
- 6) *Kavyanyaya* (logic of poetry)
- 7) *Gudharatha pratiti* (interference of meaning)

Mammata enumerates sixty one figures and groups them into seven types:

- 1) *upama* (simile)
- 2) *rupaka* (metaphor)
- 3) *aprastuta prasamsa* (indirect description)
- 4) *dipaka* (stringed figures)
- 5) *vyatireka* (dissimilitude)
- 6) *virodha* (contradiction)
- 7) *samuccaya* (concatenation).

### 5.5.8 Aucitya

The theory of propriety or appropriateness claims that in all aspects of literary composition, there is the possibility of a perfect, the most appropriate choice - of a subject, of ideas, of words, of devices. As such, it has affinities with Longinus's theory of the sublime (*On The Sublime*). The concept of propriety with reference to custom, subject, character and sentiment recurs in almost all theorists and is often discussed in association with figures of speech, *guna/dosa* and *ritis*. Anandavardhana relates this principle specifically to *rasa* (*Dhvanyaloka*). It has been used for propriety in delineating *bhavas* according to characters, and in the choice of *margas* (for example, in the use of compounds, etc.) according to the speaker, content and type of literary composition. Ksemendra made *Aucitya* the central element of literariness. He defines *Aucitya* as the property of an expression (signifier) being an exact and appropriate analogue of the expressed (signified) (see *Aucityavicaracarca*, verse 6).

In verses 8-10 of his book, Ksemendra enumerates the areas, locations or sites of literary compositions where the concept of *aucitya* is pertinent:

*Pada* (phrase), *vakya* (sentence), *prabandhartha* (meaning in whole composition), *guna* (excellences, qualities), *alamkara* (poetic figure), *rasa* (state of being), *karaka* (case ending), *kriya* (verb), *linga* (gender or marking), *vacana* (number), *visesana* (qualification), *upsarga* (prefix), *nipata* (redundancies), *kala* (time, tense), *desa* (country), *kula* (family), *vrata* (custom), *tattva* (truth), *sattva* (inherent self), *abhipriya* (motive), *svabhava* (nature), *sara samgraha* (essential properties), *pratibha* (inmate ability), *avastha* (condition, state), *vicara* (thought), *nama* (name), *asirvada* (blessings).

### 5.5.9 Sruti

In Hindu culture, the word *sruti* ('that which is heard') is used to refer to their most sacred works. The emphasis here is on spoken language, as opposed to written language in the Western tradition. This comes directly out of Hindu metaphysics, according to which, the entire world is made up of different frequencies of vibration. In other words, the universe is sound. In addition to this, there is an Indian oral culture, which dates back to around 8,000 BCE, so there is yet another reason to emphasize speech.

In Hinduism, the world is divided between what is manifested and what is unmanifested, which makes up the majority of the world (three-quarters). This corresponds to the relationship between sound and silence, in which there is always a silence that underlies everything said. Because of this, the highest speech is considered to be that which brings sound back to silence. This leads to a very different idea of poetry, since the goal of Hindu poetry is to bring about silence in the mind.

There is a strong and diverse tradition in India of scholarship on the sacred texts, in fact, this tradition is much more diverse than any religious tradition in the west, since there are even purely atheist traditions. The Vedas (sacred texts) are in Sanskrit, which is considered to be the oldest language, and therefore a "natural language" based on onomatopoeia. Thousands of people come together to hear the Vedas being read, and most of them neither speak nor understand Sanskrit, and this does not matter at all.

According to at least one grammatical theory, for the Vedas, and other poetry, the "meaning" is very different from the Western ideas of meaning. It is something to be evoked rather than something conveyed. That is, the meaning of the Veda is its effect upon the hearer when chanted, and knowledge of the language is irrelevant to this. There is a definite connection here to the Speech Act Theory.

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## 5.6 THE CONCEPT OF THEORY IN INDIA

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Indian literature traditionally, like all other ancient literatures, has been oral. In this context of orality, literature has been an act of public communication. It has been a kind of performance. Even non-Hindu and non-native literatures have been performative, often extempore. *Mushaira* for example. These are performances of sorts. This is why all literature is classified either as *śravya* (aural) or as *prekṣa* (visual) or as *śravya-prekṣa* (aural-visual). This fact of aural, *śravya* literature practices determines the nature of compositions, the relationship of the literary compositions to the audience/viewer/reader and therefore the concepts of literary theory. In this context the word *literature* itself is only partly appropriate. For "literature" is of letters, of the visible and lisible marks on the page. Hence we have this notion that everything in print is literature, and we define literature in one of the ensuing sections. But it is sufficient to say that what we have are compositions, and for the poet/writer, the term *composer* is more appropriate. It quite rightly evokes associations of classical European music. As a poet is like a musician in that part of his art which lies in shaping sounds, the speech sounds. Again we cannot use the word "reader" as in the case of the Western audience. Should we say "audience", "participant", "hearer" or "viewer"? Perhaps the Indian term *sahradya*, one having the same kind of heart, i.e., one who is able to empathize, is a satisfactory term. It creates an entity that is more fluid and is richer. A *sahradya* has the competence analogous to that of the poet/composer to see, to hear, to feel, to participate, to experience.

Also, the theory of *rasa* makes us wonder whether too much theory spoils the relishing of a work of art? What all this amounts to perhaps is that literature in the Indian context is to be relished through a combination of two attitudes: those of *sahradya* and *rasika*.

There is also a growing and important school of thought spearheaded by Harish Trivedi who thinks that Indian students of English literature need not be puritanically nativistic. They could study literature with a five-pronged approach, which he calls *panchadhātu* or the five elements, to wit: English literature, literature in English from countries other than England, literature in English translation, literature of an Indian region in the local language, and a classical literature in its original language.

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## 5.7 LET US SUM UP

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My purpose in this unit has been to introduce you to some basic concepts of Indian Aesthetics. I have generalized and simplified each of them so that you are not unnecessarily put off by the remoteness of the concepts. But if you have some knowledge of your own grammar (Telugu, Oriya, Bengali, Hindi, etc), you will find it easy to grasp some of these ideas.



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## 5.8 QUESTIONS

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1. Write short notes on the following:
    - a. rasa theory
    - b. dhvani theory
    - c. sphota
  
  2. In Kapoor's words, "all the subsequent literary theorists in the tradition found the combination of *rasa* and *dhvani* theories both adequate and sufficient to analyse the constitution of meaning in literature." Do you agree with this view? Try and analyse any literary work keeping in mind this statement.
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## 5.9 GLOSSARY

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Find below a list of words from Hindu aesthetics which you may need to refer to from time to time.

*abidha* : primary power of words to denote, to express a direct or literal meaning

*advaita* : nondualism; vedantic doctrine of the identity of *Brahman* with the universe or the individual self

*alamkara* : the cause (person or event) with reference to which a sentiment (*rasa*) arises

*anukarana* : representation (of an event, emotion or state of mind); imitation

*bhasa* : speech; language

*bhasya* : explanatory commentary

*Brahman* : the supreme spirit investing the universe

*dhvani* : suggestion; sound

*dosa* : flaw; shortcoming

*mula* : original; source, root; basic

*nimmita* : instrumental or efficient cause

*nirguna* : devoid of all attributes; the supreme spirit

*rasa* : the essence of anything; juice of plants; water; liquor; poison; an essential fluid of the body; taste; flavour; relish (one of the twenty-five *gunas*; attributes, in *vaishesika* philosophy); a poetic sentiment or state of being (in *rasa* theory); love

*rasa-bhava* : resultant sentiment and casual emotion

*santa* : tranquil (one of the nine *rasas*, states of being, in *rasa* theory)

*sphota* : the abstract linguistic sign (that which when articulated brings to the hearer's mind the cognition of an object)

*sruti* : term for the body for received literature, ie, the veda; a vedic text; hearing; a quarter tone or an interval in music; sound in general; the constellation *sravana*

*upama* : similarity; simile (a figure of speech); a likeness

*upameya* : the object of comparison

*vak* : speech, sentence

*Vak* : vedic God of speech.

Catharsis (Greek 'Purgation') : Aristotle uses the word in his definition of tragedy (Ch VI of *Poetics*). It means in a sense, that tragedy arouses powerful feelings in the spectator, that also has a therapeutic effect, the climax normally leading to a sense of release from tension, a sense of calm.

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## 5.10 SUGGESTED READING

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