

Abhinavagupta and the Aesthetics of Liberation

Scholarly research on Abhinavagupta has mostly viewed his works as divided into two distinct lines (or even phases), the philosophical-religious one and the aesthetic one, occasionally crossing each other. This paper aims at basically unifying these two aspects and considering aesthetics as the very core of his religious worldview. But where does this aesthetic attitude to life come from? The answer we are proposing hinges on Abhinavagupta's social extraction. Being a Rājānaka, he belonged to the aristocratic class with open access to the royal court, the locus of *kāvya* and aesthetic speculation connected with it, and, moreover, the place where grace, subtle nonchalance and dissimulation of effort were praised as specific qualities of the aristocrat vis-à-vis the heavy labour of the vulgar man. But perhaps it is possible to go even farther by interpreting the radical paradigm change which took place between Somānanda and Utpaladeva - this latter being the cardinal figure of the whole Śaiva Advaita – in the light of the social distance of their respective milieus: Somānanda is a Bhaṭṭa, while Utpaladeva is a Rājānaka. And Rājānakas will be all the stars of the Paramādvaita constellation: Utpaladeva's disciple Rāmakaṇṭha, (most probably) Abhinavagupta's teacher Lakṣmaṇagupta, Abhinavagupta himself, his main disciple Kṣemarāja, his commentator Jayaratha, etc. A Rājānaka was even the last great figure of modern Trika, Swami Lakṣman Joo...

A major characteristic of the aristocratic attitude is the downgrading of all painful effort, seen as plebeian feature. The aristocrat intends to show that what inferior people can achieve only at the cost of long and painful exercises is accessible to him promptly and very easily. This can be detected in Abhinavagupta's attitude to yoga, or, to be more precise, to Pātañjala yoga. This aesthetic attitude is not limited to the sphere of art, but is expected to embrace life itself in its entirety. It achieves the uneasy task of making one accept and deeply taste the emotional lines of everyday life, while at same time creating a feeling of ineffable distance from them with the result of preventing the subject from being overwhelmed by them. On many an occasion, Abhinava carefully distinguishes aesthetic experience from religious experience - the latter allegedly belonging to a higher order, but at the same time he includes aesthetic experience (*rasāsvāda* is 'similar' to *brahmāsvāda*) in a wider horizon with respect to mere rejoicing for an intense poem or a moving theatrical representation: as he acutely remarks, *rasa* is able to be the agent of removing from the consciousness of the subject the thick obstruction caused by his innate nescience, and such an experience is in its essence 'fluidity, dilatation, expansion', is a state of 'intensification'.