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**Title: Aucitya and Decorum: A Study  
in Affinity between Western and  
Indian Aesthetics**

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In the West the idea of decorum or what the Indian theoreticians call Aucitya can be traced back at least in its seminal form in the seventeenth chapter of Poetics where Aristotle recommends that a tragic poet would do well to visualize every scene that he wants to compose so that what he devises is appropriate and free from incongruities. In Rhetoric also he raises the question of propriety in his discussion of style. Cicero thinks the word prepon that Aristotle uses in his discussion of style is actually what the Latin writers – Longinus and Horace, for example-- call decorum. Decorum, in poetry is propriety or what the Indian aestheticians call Aucitya.

In course of his discussion of the conditions of successful oratory, Cicero, like Aristotle, focuses on the fact that the purpose of the orator being broadly to teach, to delight and to move, his style must be a combination of different kinds to suit the different purposes; simple for teaching middle style, coloured yet restrained for delight and sublime for moving men's emotions. In other words, the style must be in accordance with the aim it is intended to serve. The idea naturally leads on to the discussion of decorum. The methods employed are the outcome of the principle of decorum which became in course of time the all-embracing critical doctrine of Roman criticism. Cicero says that a perfect orator should speak in whatever style the case may demand. He must only observe propriety in his work as a whole as well as in parts thereof. There must be a perfect correspondence between the subject matter and the style, or the matter and the manner at every stage. Cicero also quotes approvingly the dictum of the actor Roscius who said that a sense of fitness is the

most important thing in art, although that is something which cannot be taught. To put it in a broader perspective the idea of decorum is actually a matter that fully concerns the sensibility of a person. In art we only apply what is essentially relevant to life. Decorum thus is a principle of life transferred to art. Cicero then discusses style, and there, too, the guiding principle is decorum or propriety. What Cicero says in this connection would at once remind one of Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction propounded a few centuries later. Cicero says that a good style is one that is based on a choice of fit words, that is words selected from the language actually used by men, not a separate jargon; words that are free from commonplace elements and yet words that comprise unusual forms and metaphors to give elevation and colour to the effect. Words in a certain combination produce a certain kind of effect. The same is true about sentences. Each sentence has its peculiar harmony and rhythm. In this respect there is affinity between prose and poetry, and like Coleridge, again, a few centuries later he believes that there is no essential difference between poetry and literary prose. The difference exists only between poetry and scientific prose. According to Cicero the words must be chosen in a way that they sound well and have a harmony and produce sensuous pleasure. But, at the same time, Cicero hastens to add, that a sentence should be interrupted by smaller clauses so that there is a variation in cadence. Cicero analyses the style of many orators and, almost in a manner of practical criticism, points out their distinctive features and their effectiveness in fulfilling the purpose they are intended to serve. An orator has to appeal to many persons at a time, and the ears of the people are the instruments on which the orator has to play (oratori populi aures tibiae sunt). Moreover, the artistic appeal must be felt naturally. In this connection Cicero makes a statement the echoes of which would reverberate for centuries in the West, and would find its approval in the East as well, though arrived at independently. Cicero says "Art being derived from nature, seems to have effected nothing at all, if it does not move and delight naturally" (nisi natura moveat ac delectet) [De Oratore III 197. In Atkins II 39]. Cicero is never tired of insisting that works of literature and oratory are not isolated phenomena, but are intimately, almost symbiotically related to one another. He also shows fine original insight when he says that every age has its peculiar style of speaking, (aetates singulae singula propria genera dicendi) and suggests the relativity of aesthetic standards.

Before we come to Sanskrit poetics, particularly the works of Ksemendra whose Aucityavicāracarcā is the most important exposition of the theory of propriety it will be salutary to have a brief look at few other Roman critics who also insist on propriety, among other things: Philodemus, Horace, Dionysus of Halicarnasus, Longinus and Quintilian. When Philodemus talks about the inseparability of form and content – the theme and form must be combined to produce the true effect of poetry -- he is virtually talking about propriety, and is saying what Kālidāsa would say in the very beginning of Raghuvansam

“Vāgarthābibasamprktau vāgarthapratipattaye

jagatah pitarau vandye pārvatiparameśvarau” (I pray to the parents of the world – Paravati and Parameśwar that in my poetry there should be a perfectly harmonious blending of Vāk ( thought) and Artha (meaning).

It was during the time of Horace, that is during the Augustan period , that a fresh dignity was accorded to decorum. Although Horace never used the word decorum in his *Ars Poetica*, his chief doctrine was literary propriety. The favourite passage for his modern disciples was lines 89-127, wherein Horace argued that each style should keep its proper place since a speaker's words should never be discordant with his station. He argued that it makes a great difference in who is speaking, whether a god or a hero or a slave , an old man or a youth, a great lady or a nurse, a merchant or a plowman, an Assyrian or a Greek. He, moreover, also pointed out that comic themes are distinct from tragic, and the two should never, or very rarely, be mingled. Horace is the most important exponent of Roman criticism. But there is no need to discuss all his ideas or contributions to criticism for our purpose.

In *Ars Poetica* Horace discusses poetry under three heads: *poesis* or the subject matter (ll 1-41), *poema* or form (ll 42-294) and *poeta* or the poet (ll 295-476). In the very opening section Horace talks about the need of organic unity and propriety (ll 1-37). After a brief note on the arrangement of material he proceeds to deal in detail with poetic style or expression commenting in detail on the proper choice of poetic diction or arrangement of words particularly in metrical form and finally on style or tones appropriate to the different dramatic genres and characters. Concerning the function of poetry Horace says that the poet's function is either to improve (*prodesse*) or to give delight (*delectare*), or again to combine both the aims. The combination of the effect will be utilitarian (*utile*) and hedonistic (*dulce*). But for Horace the poetic style calls for proper choice of words and their arrangement in composition and metrical form. This is the law of decorum or literary propriety or appropriateness. If Horace's idea of decorum which partly harks back to Cicero and at the same time has an affinity with Kṣemendra's theory of *Aucitya*, his views on the aesthetic side of poetry, the nature of the pleasure aimed, at once calls to our mind the Indian theory of poetry and poetic pleasure.

The concept of *Aucitya* or propriety is actually touched upon by all the poeticians in one way or the other. It is discussed by the exponents of the schools of *Dhvani*, *Rasa*, *Rīti* and others. This is in the fitness of things, because propriety has to be an important concern for all the theorists who are interested in the ideal kind of poetry. For the exponents of *Alamkāra* it is supremely important that the right figure of speech is used to convey the particular kind of perception. Similarly unless there is propriety *Rasa* cannot be generated. The same is true about *Rīti* or style and deviation or *Vakrokti*. Thus the concept of propriety embraces all the schools and all the aspects of poetry; the texture and the structure, the meaning and the music, the symbols and the images, the diction and the character etc. The *Bhāvas* must be delineated according to the characters represented. And the style and diction must be according to the cultural level of a particular character.

However it is Kṣemendra who develops *Aucitya* as a consistent theory and he is therefore regarded as the most important exponent of *Aucitya*. In his theory of *Aucitya* or propriety he takes as his thesis the treatment by Ānandavardhana of the question of propriety in relation to *Rasa* . The famous verse runs as follows:

Anaucitāad rte nānyad rasa-bhaṅgasya kārakam

Prasiddhaucitya-bandhas tu rasasyopanisat parā

The verse means: There is no other circumstance which leads to the violation of Rasa than impropriety; the supreme secret of Rasa consists in observing the established rules of propriety. Rasa can never be created or even depicted unless there is an intelligent and alert attention to the established rules of propriety. The idea was also suggested by Bharata though very briefly, almost in passing, by way of obiter dicta where he speaks of the proper employment of Anubhāvas. Bharata says that a subject may take different forms depending on the nature of the subject matter, the character of the speaker, the nature of the sentiment evoked or the means by which it is evoked. All those who discuss Dhvani theory discuss propriety. Ānandavardhana, in fact, offers elaborate rules for avoiding Anaucitya in episodes and whole works. Kuntaka shows how the sixth Act of Abhijñānaśakuntalam which portrays the love pangs of Dusyanta after he recovers from the effect of the curse of Durvāsā causing amnesia, is proper for the delineation of the purified character of Dusyanta who half redeems himself through these genuine pangs of separation. Kuntaka gives equal importance to all the aspects of a poem: structure, texture, rhythm, imagery, diction etc. The post-Dhvani writers discuss it in relation of the treatment of Guṇa and Doṣa. The credit goes to Kṣemendra for developing this idea to its extreme and suggesting that Aucitya is the essence of Rasa – Rasajībitabhuta as he calls it. He argues that it is Aucitya which constitutes the basis of the charm or aesthetic rapture underlying the relish of Rasa. The Alamkāra and Guṇa in poetry are justified by, and receive their true significance from, this element of Aucitya which, therefore, he claims can be called the soul of poetry. What is proper or most befitting for an object is Ucita in its relation to that object. In verses 8-10 Kṣemendra calls attention to the various aspects of a metrical composition where the concept of Aucitya effectively operates. These are: Pada or phrase, Vākya or sentence, Prabandārtha or the composition as a whole, Guna or excellences; Alamkāras or the poetic figures, Rasa or the sentiment of a poem, Kriyā or the employment of verb, Kāraka or the use of case, Linga or the use of gender, Vacana or the number, Viśeṣaṇa or the qualifiers, Upasarga or prefix, preposition and particle, Nipita or redundancies, Kāla or time and tense, Deśa or country, Kula or family, Vrata or custom, Tattva or truth, Sattva or the inherent self, Abhiprāya or motive, Svabhāva or nature, Sārasamgraha or essential properties, Pratibhā or natural talent, Avasthā or the particular condition or state, Vicāra or judgement, or thought, Nāma or name and Āśirvāda or blessing. As Kṣemendra presents it there are as many as twenty-seven forms or kinds of Aucitya. Kṣemendra goes on to illustrate each of those items with a number of examples from Sanskrit texts taken from different works by different poets. And this he does by drawing parallels and contrasts. One example that illustrates the item as a successful employment of the theory of Aucitya is followed by a few examples of failure where propriety has not been maintained. Even then there is hardly anything original in the theory of Aucitya as propounded by Ksemendra's. Ultimately it boils down to what Ānandavardhana and his followers call Sahrdayatva which implies propriety. Moreover it is never possible to draw up a complete list of areas of the functioning of propriety, as it is not possible to exhaust the universe of poetry. At the same time as S. K. De has rightly pointed out there is a value of this kind of list as a guidance for the aspiring poet, a warning about the important areas which demand his alert attention and practical consideration. However he credit should go to Kṣemendra for attending an untrodden path. While other theoreticians are myopic in their approach to poetry, confined to the special school that they are exponents of, Kṣemendra

discusses Aucitya in a manner which is more Catholic and universally applicable to all kinds of poetry and all schools of poetic theory. Moreover, his practical criticism that reminds one of the New Critics in general and I. A. Richards in particular is of immense value. Unless a theory is illustrated it lacks conviction. It needs a great deal of critical acumen to establish the propriety or the impropriety of a particular use, be it a lexical item or an image or a figure of speech. Kṣemendra also shows great humility when he does not hesitate to point out areas where his own verses have gone wrong. It is not that he finds faults only in others; he finds faults in himself as well. Another aspect of Kṣemendra's treatment of Aucitya that deserves mention is his courage of conviction in challenging established opinion regarding even a canonical literature. For example he censures Kālidāsa's treatment of the love of Hara and Pārvatī in terms of love-making of the ordinary mortals. Incidentally Milton had to face the same kind of problem in describing the love between Adam and Eve in the fourth book of *Paradise Lost*.

In the Western context, as well as in the Indian context, it means that in a good poem action should be appropriate or befitting the character, there must be a perfect correspondence between matter and manner, between subject and lexis. A mighty character must be described in a dignified manner and trifling matters must be treated with humbleness. While Cicero applied the term to real life, suggesting that in real life a man should behave the way he is expected to behave in accordance with his social position and cultural level, he suggested that in oratory the choice of vocabulary and style should be in keeping with the nature of the subject on which the lecture is delivered.

Throughout the Renaissance and long afterward this doctrine of decorum was paramount in the theory of poetry and highly influential in its practice. Milton, in his *Tractate of Education*, spoke of the crowning study of poetry as "that sublime art" which in Aristotle's *Poetics*, in Horace, and the critics of the Italian Renaissance like Scaliger, Castelvetro, Minturno, Tasso, Mazzoni, and others, "teaches what the laws are of a true epic poem, what of a dramatic, what of a lyric, what decorum is which is the grand masterpiece to observe". As interpreted by the critics and commentators, decorum called for distinct poetic genres, consistent characters, and the careful observance of the classical hierarchy of grand, moderate, plain style. Neoclassical decorum came to emphasize literary propriety in the sense of elegance and correct taste, a propriety that avoided the vulgar as well as the unconventional. Pope in his *Essay on Criticism* very emphatically said that when Ajax is struggling to lift a huge rock the line should also labour and the reader should have a feel of Ajax's struggle.

Even while this neoclassical theory of decorum was still in its formative stage, it was being challenged by some poets. Croce insisted in his *Aesthetics*, that art is intuitive, and so the intuitive poets are always upsetting the rules. Medieval poets had more often than not either ignored or modified classical decorum, and many Renaissance poets, influenced by the Bible and Christian literature as well as by the medieval anarchy of forms, flouted fixed genres, conventionalized characters, the hierarchy of styles, and studied elegance of expression. Thus flourished comical tragedies, tragicomedies, histories, romances, simple narrative poems and lyrics. To name just one example among several notable, the actor playwright Angelo Beolco better known as Ruzzante from his favourite role, understood classical decorum, which

fostered “literary” poetry, but argued for a different kind of artistic propriety, namely, simple nature. The characters in his peasant eclogues and farces spoke in their native dialects, using the most native and sometimes the coarsest expressions.

Ruzzante of Padua was a naturalist, and soon turned from verse to prose as even more appropriate for his representation of pure nature. The naturalists in poetry, however, have always distrusted the conventional and traditional decorum. Wordsworth’s revolt against “false refinement” and “poetic diction” was in large part the revolt of the naturalist against an artificial decorum by recommending “selection of language really used by man”. Although Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria*, showed that the very act of “selection” and the use of meter removed this poetry from rusticity, Wordsworth was demonstrating the truth of Croce’s assertion that the intuitive artist is always upsetting the rules. For Wordsworth, not rules but the author’s own feelings were his “stay and support”.

It should, however, be noted that although decorum in its Augustan sense had subsequently fallen into disrepute the theory of decorum in its original sense as suggested by Aristotle and subscribed to and reinforced by Cicero, Longinus and most importantly by Horace is still valid, as Marvin T. Herrick has pointed out: “No sensible poet or critic can quibble very much with the admonition that it is unseemly to use high-sounding expressions when speaking of the gutter and equally unseemly to use mean expressions when speaking of the majesty of Rome” (Preminger 188).

When we compare the Western stand on propriety or decorum and the Indian speculations on propriety or Aucitya we are bound to be amazed by the meticulous care and elaborate treatment of the Indian aestheticians in expounding the idea of propriety although the basic stand is the same.

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