

The Theory of *anukṛti* in the *Abhinavabhāratī*

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Anukṛti as a term and concept is most misunderstood in the historiography of Indian art. It has been banished as a keyword in Indian art and its marginalization has a lot to do with the colonial heritage of art history as a discipline.

Engaging with the traditional discourse around *anukṛti* poses a four-fold problem:

1. A historiographical problem—it is important to understand the reasons why *anukṛti* has been neglected in Indian art history and the anxiety surrounding this term in art historical writings.
2. What are the types of traditional sources that offer information about this term and the discourse surrounding it? It involves mapping the terrain of the usage of the term and its cognate concepts such as *satya* (truthful), *sādrśya* (similitude), *pratibimba* (reflection), *pratīkṛti* (portrait), etc.
3. The problem of translation of the term *anukṛti* into English for which there is no singular term that captures its meaning. This is not just a linguistic problem but a philosophical one.
4. A move towards a post colonial art theory: By revisiting this forgotten discourse, my attempt is not only to contest the current hegemonic discourse of transcendentalism inaugurated by A. K. Coomaraswamy, but to consider *anukṛtivāda* as a valuable discourse in its own right. In articulating the theory of representation addressed by *anukṛtivāda*, there is a possibility of creating a dialogue with the past from a post colonial perspective that rethinks representation without lapsing into the essentialism of colonial binary logic.

***Anukṛti* in Indian Art Historiography**

The fact that *anukṛti* has not received due recognition within art historical discourse takes us to the colonial conditions under which art history as a discipline emerged in India.

Anukṛti got caught up in the nationalist defense of Indian art against the colonial view that Indian art was barbaric and lacked fine arts. To defend Indian art, the *śilpaśāstras* that had recently been discovered proved instrumental in the argument that fine arts in India existed both in theory and practice. When Indian art history was witnessing a 'textual' turn starting from the 1920s, the pioneering art historians had made claims of transcendentalism as a way to place Indian art on a higher plane than that of the naturalistic, degenerate western art. It was around the alleged absence of 'naturalism' that the discourse of transcendentalism was led, and hence any reference to *anukṛti* with its mimetic connotation was either avoided or conceptually recast as spiritual or mental.¹ The two pioneering art historians A. K. Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch have done a great service to art history on the one hand, but as far as the *anukṛti* debate is concerned, they have bypassed it, falling under the spell of colonial art theory that accepted mimesis as a western domain. Rather than contesting such an ethnographic appropriation of mimesis, Coomaraswamy strengthened the colonial view by creating a binary between the materialist west that adopted mimesis in art as opposed to the spiritual east that not only shunned naturalism but declared the perceptual world as redundant to the project of pure transcendentalism. Such a construct gave rise to a myth that portraiture never existed as a category in Indian art.

Today, from a postcolonial perspective, it is possible to assert that the defense that placed Indian art in an advantageous position came at a price. To counter the weapon of naturalism in art that had been used to condemn Indian art, the cultural nationalists forged a more effective tool in the form of transcendentalism. Western artists may have mastered naturalism in their art; yet their art was impoverished in its spiritual quotient, an exclusive hallmark of Indian art. In this contestation, any reference to *anukṛti* would have destabilized the terms of defense leading to an anti-*anukṛti* bias. The very foundation of Indian art history was created in suppressing *anukṛti*.

¹ Cf. Mukherji 2001: 3.

Revisiting the Textual Archive to Explore *anukṛti*

There are a range of textual sources that offer us information about *anukṛti* from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a number of *śilpaśāstras* such as the *Citrasūtra*, *Mānasollāsa*, *Śilparatna* and several examples of classical Sanskrit literature. In the case of the first two categories, *anukṛti* was assumed to be central to drama and visual arts such that there was no need to formulate a discourse around it. It was only when it got challenged and for the first time its efficacy was questioned that a complex debate grew around it. It is the *Abhinavabhāratī*, Abhinavagupta's commentary on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* that bears witness to this important debate around *anukṛti*, and it is ironical that this debate is preserved in the text which undermined the importance of *anukṛti* in its conclusion.

It is here that the problem of historiography and interpretation of portraiture in literary sources that have a bearing on representation gets entangled. As pointed out by Phyllis Granoff:

Despite the ample evidence in literature that portraits were representations of individuals, not “types”, it is clear that modern scholars are uncomfortable with accepting this evidence as proof for the existence of realistic portraiture in pre-Moghul India. Two factors seem to be involved; the first is the widespread interpretation of Indian art since Kramrisch and Coomaraswamy as dealing with “inner essences” or “spiritual essences” rather than external realities. The second is the lack of sufficient extant examples of portraiture, painted or sculpted, that could support the remarks in Sanskrit literature.²

In Sanskrit literature, there is no dearth of the theme of portraiture and the latter recurs as a literary device in many plays.³ One such example is the *Pratimālakṣaṇa* of Bhāṣa in which Bharata, who was not aware of the death of his father, King Daśaratha, entered a Royal Portrait gallery where sculptural busts of dead kings were displayed. Recognition of his father's face in the portrait is the tragic moment for Bharata; for me, equally lamentable is the colonial misrecognition that claims that even in literary imagination, portraiture based on likeness to the sitter never existed!

²Granoff 2001: 66, fn. 6.

³Cf. Saunders 1919: 299–302 as cited in Granoff 2001: 65, fn. 5.

What I call as the colonial bias or misrecognition continues down to recent times. Until quite recently, anyone who closely read *Pratimālakṣaṇa* continued to rely on Coomaraswamy's construct to conclude that attention to physical characteristic was alien to pre-modern portraiture in India.⁴

Molitor, according to Granoff, misses

Bharata's visual engagement with the statue and moment of recognition and reads the text to say that Bharata had to be told the statue was of his father. [...] In fact I think that the actual text tells us in a dramatic fashion that the image was a likeness and that Bharata recognized his father but could not accept fully the implication of what he was seeing.⁵

Portrait-making was certainly not alien to the literary imagination where references could be cited to show how portraits not only resembled the person but acted as substitutes for real people and underwent even marriage ceremonies. (The *Svapnavāsavadatta* mentions that when Udayana and Vāsavadatta eloped, their parents got their portraits married!) Some Sanskrit dramas, such as Rājaśekhara's *Viddhaśālabhañjikā*, treat of exact representation in portraits as a point of departure for philosophical discussions about the very nature of art and reality.

***Anukṛti* and the Problem of Translation**

Etymologically, *anukṛti* is constituted by *anu* + *√kṛt* which literally means "following the action of" and in that sense, imitation or mimicry in a performative sense seems close enough.⁶ However, what complicates a simple translation is the fact that the English term carries a long history of shifting usage from the time of Plato till today.

Difficulty in translation may be seen as a productive terrain to explore an equally complicated history of the usage of *anukṛti* in pre-modern art theory in India. The very fact that there exists no one to one correspondence between *anukṛti* and mimesis takes us into the heart of a theoretical problem of cultural difference and simultaneously compels us to take up a comparative approach that can register cultural overlaps and differences.

⁴Cf. Molitor 1985, cited in Granoff 2001.

⁵Granoff 2001: n. 6, pp. 66f.

⁶ *Anukṛti* defies a straightforward translation. When forced to translate *anukṛti*, I prefer "performative mimesis."

Towards a Postcolonial Art Theory

Within the debates around global art history, there is a growing allegation made towards art historians and art critics in India that their conceptual tools are derivative of western methodology. I don't wish to enter into essentialised terms of such a debate but propose comparative aesthetics as a way to a postcolonial art history within which I locate my interest in the theory of *anukṛti*. Current poststructuralist theories about representation from Derrida to Deleuze can be a frame of reference for revisiting the pre-modern art theory and approaching the past from a contemporary perspective.⁷

Anukṛti in the *Abhinavabhāratī*

It was my deep disenchantment with the transcendentalist discourse started by A. K. Coomaraswamy, following my critical edition of the *Citra-sūtra*, that alerted me to the discussion on *anukṛti* in the *Abhinavabhāratī*.

Let me focus on a particular section of a Sanskrit text, the *Abhinavabhāratī* of approximately the 10th century CE, which is a commentary by Abhinavagupta on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. 2nd cent. CE). It offered a unique conjunctural space that brought together aesthetics, philosophy, dramaturgy, visual arts along with logic and linguistics. The text has preserved a vibrant debate surrounding the question of visual representation in drama. A divided opinion existed concerning the relevance of *anukṛti*. There prevailed a group of aestheticians that embraced *anukṛti* (Bhaṭṭa Lollaṭa, Śrī Śaṅkuka) as the constitutive element of performance and visual arts whereas another group (Bhaṭṭa Tauṭa, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, Abhinavagupta himself) vehemently countered its importance. Despite the fact that in the debate it is the latter group that emerges as the more dominant, the arguments by the defeated side are compelling and seem to have held sway before the discourse rejecting mimesis grew stronger.

Given the fact that the entire discussion around *anukṛti* occurs within the commentary on *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the context of drama is central. This does not preclude the theorists from drawing examples and parallels from visual arts that are particularly illuminating on what *anukṛti* implied in visual arts. It is the context of Bharata's *Rasasūtra*, after verse 31 of

⁷Cf. Derrida 1987.

the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s 6th *adhyāya* (NŚ), that serves as a starting point for the debate, ABh 3.2:

vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārisamyogād rasaniṣpattiḥ.

The coming together of the primary mental states, the consequences and the transitory mental states produces *rasa*.

Abhinavagupta acquaints us with earlier theorists who embraced *anukṛti* as a basic explanatory model (cf. ABh 3.3 ff.). Bhaṭṭa Lollaṭa's theory of intensification (*upacitivāda*) explains *rasa* as the imitation of *sthāyībhāvas* or a permanent mental state that is accompanied by intensification of emotional expression. When one of the eight basic mental states or *sthāyībhāva* gets intensified in the actor who plays the role of Rāma, the audience accepts the actor as Rāma. In other words, *rasa* is nothing other than intensified *sthāyībhāva* achieved through *anukṛti*. This view is refuted by his successor, Śrī Śaṅkuka who displaces *upacitivāda* with *anukṛtivāda* by drawing a distinction between a literary text that accomplishes *anukṛti* by verbal means—*vācika*—as opposed to a dramatic performance where the *naṭa* or actor combines the verbal with the performative—i.e., *vācika* with *abhinaya* or acting. Through physical means, the actor brings the emotion to the level of perception (*pratītiyogya*). Śaṅkuka subsequently launches into a defense of the illusion that a dramatic performance inevitable involves by invoking Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*.

Light given out by a jewel and a lamp may appear similar to two people who move towards it hoping to find a jewel. The light may have a different causal efficiency or *arthakriyākāritva*, as it may either lead to a lamp or a jewel, but both are examples of a mistaken cognition. In case of the latter, to take light which is an attribute for a substance is mis-cognition, according to this school of Buddhism. But at the level of perception, a shining jewel and flickering light of a lamp appear indistinguishable and impel the two people in the same way. While Śaṅkuka subscribes to Dharmakīrti to defend illusion in drama, he was also a Naiyāyika and gave a new twist to visual illusionism, deploying the Nyāya concept of inference or *anumāna*.

The manner is interesting in which Śaṅkuka interweaves *anukṛti* with inference as a special feature of dramatic performance. Being a Naiyāyika, he believed that human emotion can never be directly represented by an actor on stage and the only way it can be conveyed to the spectator is by its visual signs and symptoms. Just as fire in the mountains which is beyond the scope of visual perception is signified by smoke, in the same manner actors understand there is a universal concomitance between a

certain state of emotion and its corresponding symptoms, grimaces and gestures. For example, the *śṛṅgārarasa* or the erotic sentiment is conveyed through sidelong looks, play of eyebrows, and hand and body gestures of the actor. This is where his training and skill in dramatic performance are brought to play where we slide from actor who experiences the emotions artificially (*kr̥trima*) to Rāma, the character for whom these emotions are real or *pāramāṛthika*. The actor succeeds when he creates a correspondence or *anusandhāna* between the simulated and the real.

To elucidate the role of illusion in drama, Śaṅkuka brings in the analogy of the painted horse, *citraturaganyāya*. Just as when we stand before a painting of a horse, we tend to take the given configuration in paint as standing for a horse, in the same way we accept the actor for the character without falling prey to a mere delusion. Śaṅkuka makes a distinction between illusion that any creative act is predicated upon and delusion that springs from an untrained response of a spectator who tends to ask wrong questions before a painting or a drama.

- Is this a real horse or a real Rāma? — A question of *samyajjñāna* or right cognition.
- Is this a false horse or a false Rāma? — A question of *mithyājñāna* or wrong cognition.
- Is this a real or a false horse / a real or a false Rāma? — A question of *saṁśayajñāna* or doubtful cognition.
- Does this painted horse resemble a real horse? Does this actor resemble Rāma? — A question of *sādṛśyajñāna* or cognition of resemblance.

Only an uncultured viewer takes resort to the four modes of questions as the first question arises from the naive idea that an artist aspires to bring a real horse into a painting! In the same way, the aim of the actor is not to bring on to the stage the real Rāma who is a mythological or historical personage; hence the question of right cognition has no place in visual arts and drama.

The second question is also predicated upon a false notion of authenticity when the question of the real is itself suspended. Doubt which may have a legitimate place in a discussion in epistemology or ontology which deals with the distinction between truth and falsity makes no sense in a world of representation. The rejection of similitude or *sādṛśya* as non-valid cognition is odd given the example of a painted horse but it was perhaps

to drive home the point that aesthetic experience is in no way cognitive. It produces no knowledge. A painted horse need not resemble a real horse in a one to one correspondence and yet it can be interpreted as a horse through the marks that make up a painting. The skill of the artist is involved in creating the *anusandhāna* between the marks and the horse, just like the universal concomitance between the fire and the smoke. I suppose any consideration of resemblance would have implicated Śāṅkuka in referentiality that he rejects at the outset.

It is Abhinavagupta's teacher, Bhaṭṭa Tauṭa who systematically objects to the *anukṛtivāda* and demolishes it stage by stage by raising questions as follows:

If *rasa* is said to be the imitation of *sthāyībhāva*, is it so from the point of view of a) the spectator, b) the actor, c) critics or d) Bharata himself?⁸

The first proposition is rejected on grounds of referentiality so avidly rejected by Śāṅkuka. A painter can imitate the appearance of a horse and the painting is a valid mode of *anukṛti* as the object of imitation is accessible for all to see. This mode of painterly *anukṛti* is equated in drama to the actor's miming through gestures. So if an actor pretends to drink wine while drinking water, such an imitative act is permissible. But to imitate emotion of Rāma through action is not feasible because emotions are not like objects of visual perception. We grasp emotions through the mind and not the eyes. Emotions and actions belong to two distinct domains of knowledge which don't intersect and fall under different sense organs.

The critics pose their questions thus: How is it possible that the actor is able to imitate Rāma? For there to be any imitation, access to the original is vital. There can be no copy without the original. How can the actor claim to have seen the emotions experienced by Rāma? If you limit *anukṛti* to bodily gestures, or if you take imitation to mean any action based on a previous action, then it will lead to another logical absurdity of *atiprasakta* or a category that is too capacious to be useful, as the real life is full of repeated actions!

Bhaṭṭa Tauṭa rejects the theory of imitation from the point of view of the critics. The critics will not allow creative license to inference which for them was strictly a logical category of knowledge. He challenges Śāṅkuka's use of inference as an explanatory model for *anukṛti*:

⁸Cf. ABh 5.15–20 for these questions. The discussion of the first three options is found in ABh 5.21–9.3; it is my basis for the following paragraphs.

If you say we have no direct access to emotions but they are to be inferred from the visible signs of facial expression and gestures; and if it is admitted that in case of the actor, emotions acted are artificial, but in the case of Rāma, the character, they are real, it would imply that the corresponding signs and symptoms that the actor acts out will also have to be regarded as unreal. This raises a logical problem as, while real smoke can lead to the inference of real fire, an artificial smoke or that which simulates smoke, as for example mist, cannot lead us to fire, but to a copy of fire, as in red hibiscus flowers! When the *liṅga* or sign itself is artificial, then how can it lead to a real inference in form of fire! What the spectator will arrive at will be a false inference or *ābhāsānumāna* in form of red flowers!

Here, the relation of smoke and fire corresponds to that of mist and red flowers.

In fact, the *anukāravādins* insisted that it is possible to move from a false sign to a logical inference, i.e., in this case, perceiving mist in place of smoke, the only inference we can reach is that of fire and not of red flowers!

*yatrāpi liṅgajñānaṃ mithyā tatrāpi na tadābhāsānumānaṃ
yuktam* (ABh 7.4–5)

Where the cognition of the sign is false, it need not lead us to a false inference!

It seems that *anukṛtivādins* were attacked by the opponents on logical grounds that were resisted by Śāṅkuka who had passionately argued for aesthetic conditions of viewing as opposed to the logicians' conceptual framework.

To counter the objection of the wrong use of inference to explain *anukṛti*, the *anukṛtivādins* kept underlining the distinction between the real and the represented. They drew a distinction between an actor who is not really angry but who puts on an appearance of anger. In other words, the actor resembles an angry man in as far as he contorts his eyebrows in a frown, etc.

Anti-imitationists—“So you invoke the relation of resemblance between the actor and an angry man?” Here, the anti-imitationists draw upon *upamāna* as one of the four *pramāṇas* or sources of knowledge. The standard example used by Naiyāyikas to illustrate analogical knowledge

was the resemblance between a cow and a *gaya*, a cow-like animal. After attacking inference, the critics take the *anukṛtivādins* to task by refuting yet another *pramāṇa*, *upamāna* or analogy deployed to buttress arguments for *anukṛti*. When we come face to face with a strange animal, a *gaya* in a forest, and we recognize it as resembling a familiar animal, a cow, it leads to analogical knowledge, *upamāna* (when we use “cow-like” as an analogy to explain the meaning of *gaya*). *Upamāna* is here held up by the critics as instantiating resemblance without imitation. When we understand a *gaya* as looking like a cow, we don’t say that a *gaya* imitates a cow! *Upamāna* stands for resemblance without imitation and hence serves no purpose to defend *anukṛtivāda*.

Attacking from yet another angle, the anti-imitationists bring up the question that there may be several actors who play the role of Rāma—so while the object of imitation or *anukārya* remains the same, the agents of imitation (*anukarṭr*) keep changing when different actors are involved. Does this imply that what the actors imitate is a generality or *rāmatva* or Rāmaness and not some empirical entity? For the Naiyāyikas, this was not a problem as generality was a real category and was assumed to exist in the world instantiated by individual particulars.

But for the critics, the way different cows instantiated cowness could not be extended to Rāmaness and the way different actors brought this generality to a spectator’s perception through their individual performance.

The most potent objection against the imitationists is that when the spectators observe the actor, the latter is not seen as an empty vessel (*pātra*) but a sentient being that, in the act of imitating Rāma, stirs his own emotions. Thereby the distinction between the object of imitation (*anukārya*) and the agent of imitation (*anukarṭr*) vanishes.

svātmāpi madhye naṭasyānupraviṣṭa iti galito ’nukāryānukarṭrbhāvaḥ (ABh 8.17–18)

In this imitation, the actor’s personal reactions are also implicated. The distinction between the object of *anukṛti*, *anukārya*, and the subject of *anukṛti*, *anukarṭr*, collapses.

One of the fundamental presuppositions of the *anukṛtivādins* was that a minimum distance had to be posited between the actor and the character for *anukṛti* to work. Once the critics declare the actor’s performance to be based on identification rather than imitation, they seem to pull the carpet from under the feet of the *anukṛtivādins* and their project of representation. The basic logic of representation is predicated upon the dis-

inction between the one who represents and that which is represented. The critique of the *anukṛtivādins* ultimately translated into a critique of representation itself.

Be that as it may, the arguments put forward by the *anukṛtivādins* indicate that their position was not an exclusive instance of theorizing, but partook of a widespread acceptance of *anukṛti* in art practice, drama and literature. Currently our knowledge of this discourse is at a preliminary level, having been marginalized for decades owing to the colonial bias.

The most challenging task that needs to be undertaken is to understand the performative dynamics of *anukṛti* in Indian visual arts and in drama where the epistemological status of an image need not coincide with its truth claim. This might help us to better grasp the Citrasūtra's famous but misunderstood statement (Citrasūtra 35.5):⁹

yathā nṛtte tathā citre trailokyānukṛtiḥ smṛtāḥ

As in dance, so in painting, the imitation of the three worlds is prescribed.¹⁰

A. K. Coomaraswamy deployed this statement to undermine the importance of *anukṛti* in Indian arts. He claimed that if the three worlds included the fictitious, then *anukṛti* was meaningless in the arts. Emphasizing the linguistic component of any representation, the fictitious status might matter little as long as even something inexistent (rabbit's horn) can be plausibly rendered in a representation.

If we open our minds to *anukṛti* as an evolved concept, which was endorsed from the time of Bharata until Abhinavagupta's time, and which underwent various shifts via *upacitivāda* and *anukṛtivāda*, we can engage more seriously with literary references to representation, and achieve corroboration between various kinds of discourses such as aesthetic, philosophical, and literary. Shifting the frame of reference from transcendentalism to *anukṛti* may foreground the sensual and physical dimension of the creation and reception of art in premodern Indian art and let the works of art strike us with a new resonance.

⁹A very important discussion on the performative aspect of knowledge is given by Balgangadhara 1994: 418.

¹⁰Cf. Mukherji 2001.

Abbreviations

ABh Abhinavagupta. “Abhinavabhāratī”. In: Gnoli 1968, 1–22.

Citrasūtra “Citrasūtra”. In: Mukherji 2001.

NŚ Bharata. “Nāṭyaśāstra”. In: Kavi 1956.

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