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Mammatabhaṭṭa's Theory of Kāvyadoṣa (Poetic Flaws): A critical study

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Abstract
The theory of kāvyadoṣa (poetic flaws) is an essential branch of Sanskrit poetics (Alaṅkāraśāstra). Among the major theorists of poetic blemishes, Mammaṭa Bhaṭṭa holds a central place due to his systematic synthesis of previous traditions in his seminal work Kāvyaprakāśa. By establishing "freedom from defects" (ADOṢA) as a foundational criterion for defining poetry, he provides a comprehensive understanding of both verbal and semantic flaws. This article examines Mammaṭa's classification of poetic defects, his theoretical foundations, illustrations, and his contribution to the evolution of the doṣa theory in comparison with earlier scholars like Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin, and Ānandavardhana.

Keywords: Mammaṭa, Kāvyadoṣa, Alaṅkāraśāstra, Kāvyaprakāśa, poetic blemishes, Sanskrit poetics, doṣa theory

Introduction
In the history of the evolution of poetic blemishes (kāvyadoṣa), the place of Mammata Bhaṭṭa is especially significant. Understanding the inevitability of the absence of faults in poetic composition within Alaṅkāraśāstra, he mentions the adjective adoṣa ("free from defects") at the very outset of his definition of poetry. Among the several essential elements of poetic composition, he first determines the nature (svarūpa) of defects. While explaining the nature of defects, he says: "mukhyārthahatiḥ doṣaḥ", "A defect is that which harms the principal meaning." By 'mukhya' he means "rasaś ca mukhyaḥ" rasa itself is primary. Therefore, whatever harms the principal meaning of poetry rasa is to be regarded as a defect.

Discussion
The ancient rhetoricians discussed poetic defects as either śabdadoṣa (verbal flaws) or arthadoṣa (semantic flaws). But according to Mammata, some of these may be reclassified: certain verbal flaws may actually be semantic, and vice-versa. While discussing verbal flaws, he mentions three categories: (1) flaws related to the word (pada), (2) flaws related to part of a word (padaikadeśa), and (3) sentence-level flaws (vākyagata). While discussing padadoṣa, he enumerates sixteen types of defects.
He first cites the following example regarding the defect called śrutikaṭu (harsh-sounding). He states that the excessive use of harsh consonants constitutes this defect. Example:

"ananga-maṅgala-gṛhāṇāṅga-bhaṅgita-raṅgitaiḥ
āliṅgitaḥ sa tad-vasyā kārttārthāṃ labhate kadā"

Then, describing chyuta-saṃskṛti doṣa (violation of grammatical rules), he says that using a word without proper grammatical foundation constitutes this defect. Example:

"prāntaṃ hasta pulinda-sundara-kara-sparśa-kṣamaṃ lakṣyate"
"etad-manda-vipakka-tinduka-phala-śyāmodarā-pāṇḍura
tat pallī-pati-putra kuñjara-kulaṃ kumbhābhayārthanā
dīnaṃ tvām anunāthate kuca-yugaṃ patrā-vṛtaṃ yā kṛthāḥ"

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Here, in the meaning of yācñā (supplication), the use of the Atmanepada form anunāthate derived from the root nāth has been marked by Mammata as a defect.

Next, regarding aprayukta doṣa (unconventional usage), he says that even if a usage is approved in lexicons and grammatical texts, if it is not employed by good poets, its use becomes a defect. Example:

"yathā hy ayaṃ dāruṇācāraḥ sarva-deva vibhāvyate
tathā manye daivatohasya piśāco vibhāvyate"

Here, the word daivata is an example of aprayukta doṣa

Regarding asamartha doṣa, Mammata says that after describing aprayukta, a word incapable of conveying the intended meaning is called asamartha. Example:

"tīrthāntareṣu snānena samupārjita-saṃskṛtiḥ
sura-srotasvinī-meṣa hanti samprati sādarām"

Here, the word hanti is an example of asamartha doṣa

If a polysemous word is used not in its well-known meaning (prasiddhārtha) but in an uncommon one (aprasiddhārtha), the intended meaning is delayed due to the intrusion of the well-known sense. This is nihitārtha doṣa. Example:

"yāva-rasa-adro-pāda-prahāra-śoṇita-kacena dayitena
mugdhā sādhvasataralā vilokya paricumbitā sahasā"

Here, śoṇita is used in its uncommon meaning (reddening), hence the doṣa occurs

Next, he discusses anucitārtha doṣa, a defect newly formulated by Mammata. When the meaning of a word suggests a property that contradicts the intended meaning, it becomes anucitārtha. Example:

"tapasvibhir yā sucireṇa labhyate prayatnataḥ
satribhir iṣyate ca yā prayānti tām āśu gatiṃ yaśasvino
raṇāśvamedhe paśutām upāgatāḥ"

The use of paśutām here is defective

Further, discussing nirarthaka doṣa, he states that using a meaningless or needless word causes distaste in sensitive readers, or delays comprehension as the reader searches for the poet's intention.

Then, he describes avācaka doṣa. Based on the etymology of avācaka, it is that which does not denote the intended meaning. Since it may overlap with asamartha doṣa, Kāvya-pradīpa explains: That which nowhere denotes the intended property or subject is avācaka. Two types of non-denotation exist: (a) where the denotation depends on semantic capacity of the noun, (b) where it does not.

Examples follow for all these types, including cases where either the qualifier or qualified lacks denotative power, or both lack it, or where prefix usage creates semantic shift, causing avācaka.

Next, discussing aślīla doṣa, Mammata says words suggesting shame, disgust, or inauspiciousness create this defect. In rasa-oriented poetry, such suggestions harm rasa; in non-rasa poetry they obstruct aesthetic charm. Words that evoke vulgar meanings also generate this defect. Example:

"sādhanaṃ samuhat yasya yan nānyasya vilokyate
tasya dhīśālinaḥ ko hanyoḥ sahetā hara-līṭāṃ śrubham"

Here, sādhana is considered indecent (aślīla)

Regarding saṃdigdhā (ambiguity), Mammata defines it as a word with identical phonetic form that equally allows two different meanings, creating uncertainty. Example:

"surālaya-ullāsa-paraḥ prāpta-paryāpta-kampanaḥ
mārgeṇa pravano bhāsva bhūtir eṣa vilokyatām"

Here, mārgaṇa and bhūti cause semantic uncertainty

A word used only in a specific śāstra and unknown in general usage becomes apratīta doṣa.

Mammata's definition of grāmya doṣa is similar to that of Bhāmaha: words common in colloquial or rustic speech constitute this defect. Example:

"rākā-vibhāvarī-kānta-saṅkrānta-dyuti te mukham
tapanīya-śilā-śobhā kaṭiś ca harate manaḥ"

Words like kaṭi used in folk speech are considered grāmya.

Discussing nyāyārtha doṣa, he says that using lakṣaṇā (secondary meaning) where there is no need for convention or necessity constitutes the defect. Example:

"śarat-kāla-samullāsi-pūrṇimā-śarvarī-priyam
karoti te mukhaṃ tanvi capetā-pātanātithim"

Here, capetāpātanātithi is unnecessarily used in a secondary sense

Next, Mammata explains kliṣṭa doṣa difficulty of comprehension. Two types exist: (1) when sentence-connection is unclear, and (2) when a compound causes delayed understanding. Example:

"atri-locana-sambhūta-jyotir-udgama-bhāsibhiḥ
sadṛśaṃ śobhate hatyārthaṃ bhūpāla tava ceṣṭitam"

Here, the compound delays comprehension, making it kliṣṭa. Then comes avimṛṣṭa-vidheyāṃśa doṣa. What Mahimabhaṭṭa calls vācyābācya, Mammata names avimṛṣṭa-vidheyāṃśa. When the order between subject and predicate is violated, and the predicate fails to appear as the main element, this defect occurs. Kāvyapradīpa explains that when the predicate does not follow the subject (or lacks predicate-hood), the defect arises. Examples follow.

Finally, regarding viruddha-matikṛt doṣa, following Rudraṭa and Bhoja, Mammata says: Whenever an expression evokes a contradictory or absurd meaning that defeats the intended sense, it becomes viruddha-matikṛt. He cites the relevant example afterward.

Conclusion

Mammaṭa's theory of kāvyadoṣa represents a sophisticated culmination of earlier traditions in Sanskrit poetics. By connecting defects to the obstruction of rasa, he elevates the discussion from technical lapses to fundamental aesthetic principles. His classification of verbal, semantic, suggestive, and aesthetic flaws continue to guide literary criticism in Indian poetics. Ultimately, his theory teaches that poetry achieves excellence not only through embellishment but also through the removal of all factors that hinder aesthetic relish

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