

# Embodied Aesthetics: Application of Sanskrit Alankāra Theory in Temple Iconography

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## Abstract:

The term of Alankāra, one of the fundamental terms of Sanskrit poetics, represents the idea of the embellishment of the expression for aesthetic purposes. In the traditional sense, Alankāra has been limited to literary theories, such as those present in the Kavyadarsha and Kavyalankara texts. However, it is also applicable to the realm of visual arts, which will be considered in this study as well. The notion of the temple ornamentation of India can be seen from the viewpoint of Alankāra as the “visual language” associated with the aesthetic values expressed by the ornaments. The ornaments used in temples symbolically represent the ideas of different figures of speech, such as Upamā (simile), Rūpaka (metaphor), and Atiśayokti (hyperbole). With respect to this, the idea that visual representations are integrated into the aesthetic structure represented in the Natyashastra can be discussed in this context. Indeed, the use of ornaments, as well as the other aspects of temple art, can be seen as an aesthetic practice guided by the rules specified in the śilpa śāstra.

**Keywords:** alankāra, indian aesthetics, sacred art, temple iconography, cultural heritage.

## Introduction:

The Alankāra refers to the principle of ornamentation which enhances the aesthetics and expressions of poetry in the study of Sanskrit poetics. As Bhamaha defines, poetry is an aesthetic harmony between word and meaning “śabdārthau sahitaū kāvyam” – suggesting beauty results from artistic ornamentation<sup>1</sup>. For centuries, it has remained a concept applied only in literary contexts, wherein figures like Upamā, Rūpaka, and Atiśayokti help enhance poetic expression. But Alankāra can also have an expanded scope to include other forms of expression. The carvings, designs, and symbols that one sees on Indian temples are examples of visual elements which convey a certain meaning to viewers. In much the same way as poetry uses figures of speech to create an imaginative effect on the mind, visual ornamentation used in temple sculptures is an equivalent method for communicating certain messages. Thus, it could be suggested that visual ornamentation serves a similar purpose as Alankāra in poetry. There is very little academic study on how Alankāra can be applied to visual arts like painting

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<sup>1</sup> Bhamaha, Kāvyaalankāra, I.16

and sculpting. It is the purpose of this paper to analyze the relationship between the visual ornamentation and Sanskrit poetics by interpreting temple designs as ‘visual poetry’.

### **Central Thesis Statement:**

The following paper attempts to prove that the theories of Sanskrit Alaṅkāra school, formulated by scholars such as Bhamaha and Dandin, serve as an embodiment of the aesthetic discourse in Indian temple iconography where sculptural forms and gestures become a visual manifestation of literary figures, such as Rūpaka, Upamā, and Atiśayokti. Through this analysis, it becomes clear that the notion of iconography itself serves as a complex visual language, which represents the principles of the Sanskrit poetics, and connects Indian literary theories with performing arts and sacred architecture.

### **Purpose of the Research:**

First and foremost, the main objective of this study is to understand how the theory of Sanskrit Alaṅkāra applies outside the realm of literary criticism and expresses itself in Indian temple iconography. The key tenets of the concepts advanced by Bhamaha and Dandin will guide the attempt to interpret the visual motifs on Indian temple structures as representations of poetic figures such as Rūpaka, Upamā, and Atiśayokti. Ultimately, the study hopes to prove that temple art is not just aesthetically pleasing but also bound by a consistent set of aesthetic principles similar to those presented in Kavyadarsha and śilpa śāstra. In this manner, the study will be able to bridge the two fields of Indian studies, thus offering an innovative insight into the nature of Indian aesthetics through the lens of interdisciplinary analysis.

Finally, the research hopes to make an academic contribution to the general body of knowledge about Indian aesthetic theory by demonstrating how Alaṅkāra can serve as an umbrella concept for integrating literature, performance tradition, and architecture.

### **Literature Review:**

There is a vast literature dealing with Alaṅkāra, which has been studied extensively within Sanskrit poetics, although there is comparatively less scholarship that applies it to visual culture. The earliest work that describes Alaṅkāra includes the Kavyalankara by Bhamaha, who identifies it as the distinctive element of poetic beauty through ornamentation. On the same lines is the work by Dandin named Kavyadarsha, which deals with the significance of various figures of speech in the making of poetry. Scholars who came later, such as Anandavardhana, brought into the discourse the concept of Dhvani, which means suggestion. On the other hand, aesthetic theory in performance art is systemically outlined in the Natyashastra written by Bharata Muni. It highlights Rasa as the central concept of aesthetics. In the field of visual art and architecture, the body of knowledge referred to as the śilpa śāstra covers proportion, iconography, and ornamentation. However, these treatises do not engage with Alaṅkāra theory.

Modern research on Indian temple art has considered various methodologies including the approaches of iconology, symbolics, and religion studies. Nevertheless, it must be noted that no attempts have been made to apply concepts from Sanskrit poetics Alaṅkāra to interpret visual arts. Therefore, the present study proposes to bridge the identified gap using methods borrowed from poetics and art history.

### Concept of Alaṅkāra in Sanskrit Poetics:

In Sanskrit Poetics, the word Alaṅkāra means “ornament.” These refer to features that add to the beauty of poetic composition. In the classical Sanskrit tradition, Alaṅkāra is considered to be an integral constituent of the beauty of poetic creation. Dandin, in his *Kavyadarśa*, describes Alaṅkāras as follows: “kāvyasobhākarān dharmān alaṅkāraṇ pracakṣate”<sup>2</sup>. This implies that Alaṅkāras constitute qualities that result in śobhā (beauty) in poetry. Likewise, Bhamaha, in his *Kavyalankara*, recognizes the indispensable nature of ornamentalization of poetry in achieving a certain degree of charm through figures of speech<sup>3</sup>.

In the *Kavyalankara*, Bhamaha categorizes Alaṅkāras into two types: Śabdālaṅkāra (figurative use of sound) and Arthālaṅkāra (figurative use of meaning). Śabdālaṅkāras pertain to the phonetic beauty of poetry. They include such figures as Anuprāsa (alliteration), Yamaka (repetition), and Śleṣa (pun). Such figures contribute to the music of the poem as they create rhythmic effects by making use of sounds. For example, alliteration brings about harmony through repeated consonant sounds.

As opposed to Śabdālaṅkāras, Arthālaṅkāras focus on the sense of the poem. They include figures like Upamā (simile), Rūpaka (metaphor), and Atiśayokti (hyperbole). These figures facilitate cognitive and emotional participation of the reader as they establish relationships between the objects of expression, amplify meanings, and expand interpretations. As described by Dandin, such devices elevate the ordinary language into a suggestive one.

Later scholars continued working on the notion of Alaṅkāra. For instance, Anandavardhana in his *Dhvanyāloka* emphasized Dhvani rather than external ornamentation, while not rejecting the importance of Alaṅkāra per se, but subordinating it to Dhvani<sup>4</sup>. This way, Alaṅkāra became an important element of poetic creation in the overall context of poetics. It should be noted that Śabdālaṅkāra and Arthālaṅkāra could be extended beyond poetry, as their main features include rhythm, repetition, analogy, and metaphorical thinking. Due to this fact, the principles of Alaṅkāra poetics were applied to art in general.

### Visualization of Alaṅkāra:

While the transition from verbal to visual representation of Alaṅkāra may seem abrupt and challenging at first glance, the fact remains that it arises organically from India's aesthetic traditions. The concept of intensification of expression achieved by use of imaginative devices works just as effectively when applied to stone instead of language. Indeed, while poetry is the vehicle of communication in literary Alaṅkāra, stone is used in temple iconography as an analogous device to communicate ideas.

Among the Arthālaṅkāras, Upamā can be considered one of the simplest to understand and visualize. While in literary usage, it implies a resemblance between two entities, in visual arts it can be understood as their symbolic depiction. Deities can be shown holding objects that

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<sup>2</sup> Dandin, *Kāvyadarśa*, I.2

<sup>3</sup> Bhamaha, *Kāvyālaṅkāra*, I.16

<sup>4</sup> Anandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka*, I.4

symbolize certain aspects of their nature - a lion in case of śakti, lotuses symbolizing purity, or even flowing curves implying grace. Such symbols serve as visual equivalents to the literary simile. And just as in the example provided by Dandin in his *Kavyadarśa*, the principle of such visualization lies in the power of resemblance in facilitating understanding and aesthetic perception.

Rūpaka, on the other hand, being a more potent figure of speech, represents a more profound process of visualization. Unlike *Upamā* that relies on a comparison between two concepts, Rūpaka involves their total identification. In temple iconography, this idea is conveyed by showing how a deity is an embodied version of a cosmic force. Thus, the multi-armed gods are visual metaphors of cosmic forces, rather than similes comparing deities to them.

Moreover, another literary device called *Atiśayokti* (hyperbole) is also used by sculptors in their creations. Like how Sanskrit poets exaggerate to create wonder (*adbhuta rasa*) or to show a higher-than-life image of the subject, the sculptors of temples use exaggerated features such as elongated limbs or bigger eyes. These are not flaws in anatomy because these are intentional aesthetic decisions that express transcendence and grandeur. Through the exaggeration in the sculpture, the viewer's emotional reaction will be heightened just like the requirements mentioned in the *Natyashastra* of Bharata Muni.

The *Alaṅkāras*, however, do not only work in terms of singular sculptures but also when looking at the whole composition. Repetitive elements throughout the temple walls can be seen as the equivalent of *Anuprāsa* (alliteration), while stories in panels are like *varṇana* (poetic description).

Therefore, temple art may also be considered a kind of “visual poetry” because of the concept of *Alaṅkāra* as the basic framework of visual communication. Ornaments are not simply decorative but constitute an effective aesthetic technique for converting the philosophy and emotion embodied within them into a tangible reality. From this perspective, the temple becomes a live canvas in which poetic imagination takes concrete shape for the viewer, offering him or her an equivalent sensory delight.

### **Temple Art and Ornamentation:**

The *śilpa śāstra* text types treat temple architecture as a harmonious combination of *māna*, *samatā*, and *alaṅkāra*. *Alankara* here does not mean some supplementary decorations but rather a principal factor making the temple sensible and emotional. The carved surface with floral scrolls, *vyālas*, *gandharvas*, or narrative friezes serves as a semantic layer which helps transform metaphysical notions into concrete images.

One can analyze such decorative elements using the concepts of Sanskrit poetics. The repetitive use of certain motifs on different levels of decoration results in the creation of rhythmical continuity similar to that created by alliteration, *anuprāsa*. In the same way as repeated phoneme creates soundscape, repetitive usage of some decorative motifs creates a kind of visual harmony and makes it easier for the viewer to perceive it. Repetitive motifs also create transitions between architectural elements, just like meter does between verses.

The narrated scenes decorating the outer wall of the temples work the same way as ākhyāna. Sequences of episodes drawn from epics and purāṇic cycles create narratives in the way in which sequences of stanzas create poems. Walking around a temple, pradakṣiṇā, the pilgrim reads these visual episodes just as he or she would read verses.

It is also important to mention the concept of suggestion in the sense of dhvani. Some motifs may not have any explicit meaning, instead, they evoke some notion-fertility and union in the case of mithuna figures, purity and life-giving force in the case of lotuses. Thus meaning is suggested to the spectator in the way suggested by the poetic theory of Anandavardhana. Thus ornaments in temple architecture serve as a kind of visual language which is used to encode meaning.

### **Rasa and Alaṅkāra in Visual Culture:**

Indian art is based on the principle of Rasa, which Bharata Muni methodically explained in the Nāṭyaśāstra: “vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārisaḡyogād rasanīṣpattiḥ”<sup>5</sup>. This idea naturally permeates visual culture, including temple art, even if it is framed in the framework of drama. In this instance, Alaṅkāra is both helpful and essential in enhancing the visual experience.

Temple iconography uses sculptural techniques including stance (sthāna), gesture (mudrā), and face expression (mukhabhāva) to convey bhāva (emotional condition). These components allow the spectator to receive and integrate emotional material by acting as visual versions of anubhāvas, or expressive markers. Through refining the means of expression, such as graceful forms, proportionately stylized figures, and detailed symbolism to maximize the emotive effect of the artwork, Alaṅkāra contributes greatly to this end.

This can be demonstrated through such instances when certain postures and movements will imply the effect of vīra or raudra rasa, whereas, a calm deity will convey Śānta rasa. The emotive impact in this instance is accentuated by the use of symbolism, either by way of analogy or exaggeration. The overall result produced in this case is that of a theater-like production where the sculptural images themselves become a part of an aesthetic performance rather than simply forms.

### **Case Illustration:**

Alaṅkāra's function in the context of Indian temple arts can be exemplified by temples such as Khajuraho and the Konark Sun Temple. The sculptures' composition reflects a carefully structured aesthetic process that adheres to the principles of Sanskrit poetry instead of random decorative additions.

For instance, the depiction of mithuna couples in Khajuraho can be considered a Rūpaka or metaphorical technique because it employs the imagery of human lovers to signify more profound philosophical ideas such as creation, procreation, and the merging of puruṣa and prakṛti. It is an ontology of metaphysical concepts represented physically, unlike other rhetorical devices used for illustration purposes. In the same way that Anuprāsa, repetition achieves unity and consistency in the poem, figure placement creates a visual rhyme scheme.

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<sup>5</sup> Bharata Muni, Nāṭyaśāstra, VI.31

The depiction of Atiśayokti at the Konark Sun Temple includes larger-than-life features such as the huge wheels and dynamic poses of the figures. The divine energy of the sūrya deity is meant to be communicated via their exaggerated size and heightened physical traits. It is reinforced further by the rhythm created through ornate craftsmanship and repetitive patterns.

Together, they create a multilayered visual representation, with exaggeration, rhythm, and metaphor functioning as techniques in literature and artistry, respectively.

### **Conclusion:**

The concept of Alaṅkāra is extremely helpful for understanding the artistic elements of Indian temples, despite its origin in the domain of Sanskrit poetics. The idea that ornamentation is an inseparable component of aesthetics has been espoused by poets such as Bhamaha and Dandin, who argued against the notion that it is only used to embellish the work. The architecture and sculptures of temples should be understood as meaning systems rather than mere ornamentation when this theory is employed to comprehend the visual arts.

Ornamentation may be considered a language when one understands the way in which spatial compositions, imagery, and sculptures function as literary figures such as Rūpaka, Upamā, and Atiśayokti. These elements do not merely embellish temples but convey philosophical ideas, stimulate emotions, and guide the viewer's aesthetic experience. Consequently, temples are where literature, performance, and visual arts converge.

From such a perspective, Indian temple art can be considered an embodiment of poetry in which the stone itself, forms, and space perform like words, metaphors, and rhythms. The grammatical framework of this expression is based on Alaṅkāra, offering a richer comprehension of the continuity within Indian aesthetic theory. This methodology emphasizes the intellectual unity of India's artistic legacy and generates new possibilities of interdisciplinary study through the integration of literature and visual culture.

Under this approach, Indian temple art can be considered as an embodiment of poetry, where the stone itself, forms, and space play the roles of words, metaphors, and rhythms. The grammatical framework of such an expression rests upon Alaṅkāra, thereby ensuring a richer comprehension of the continuity within Indian aesthetic theory. This methodology ensures the intellectual unity of India's artistic tradition and offers new possibilities of interdisciplinary study.

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