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**Embellishments Turned into Challenges.
The Transformation of Literary Devices in the Art of
the *sāhityāvadhāna****

SUMMARY: The article focuses on the centuries-old Indian practice of the *sāhityāvadhāna*, ‘the literary art of attentiveness’, a sub-genre of the *avadhāna* (‘attention’, ‘attentiveness’), in which extraordinary memory, ability to concentrate and creative skills are tested through the realisation of various challenges. Numerous tasks within the *sāhityāvadhāna* have their roots in the theory of literature and poetic embellishments (mostly the so-called *śabdālankāras*, figures of sound or expression) described by Sanskrit theoreticians. A survey of such devices as *niyama*, *samasyā*, *datta* and *vyutkrāntā* and their application in the *sāhityāvadhāna* shows possible re-adjustments of figures of speech brought about by the requirements of practical implementation in the literary performative art.

KEYWORDS: *avadhāna*, *sāhityāvadhāna*, figures of speech, literary games, performing arts.

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Introduction

Through the centuries of its existence and transformations, the *avadhāna* (‘attention’, ‘attentiveness’, ‘intentness’) developed into a rich conglomerate of arts situated in the domain of liminoid cultural performances encompassing acts of showcasing highly developed cognitive capacities put to test in the form of miscellaneous tasks accomplished in the presence of other people.¹ It embodies the idea of heterogeneity. *Sāhityāvadhāna*, the literary variation, is the paradigmatic form of the art of attentiveness, known especially for its classic genre, the *aṣṭāvadhāna* (‘the eight-fold art of attentiveness’).² From the point of view of poetics it is also the most important. As the name suggests, during the *aṣṭāvadhāna* spectacle eight challenges—also known as the *vibhāgas*, ‘parts’, ‘sections’—are posed to the performers (the *avadhānīs* or the *avadhāninīs*).³ But the repertoire of tasks is much richer. Some of them are canonical and employed in full in nearly all literary *avadhānas*, others occur rarely. The scope of challenges grows constantly; even nowadays, the performers and the questioners (*pr̥cchakas*) come up with new tasks to be performed during the *sāhityāvadhānas*. But what are the sources of dares faced by the poets-*avadhānīs*?

¹ The *avadhāna*, based on the available epigraphic sources, can be dated to at least the 11th–12th century CE. Unfortunately, a detailed analysis of this material as well as a comprehensive account of the *avadhāna* and its kinds lie beyond the scope of the present article. More about the practice and its systematization can be found in Sudyka and Galewicz 2012 or Cielas 2017. Interested reader may refer also to Telang 1944 or the *Avadhanam* entry in Datta 1987.

² More about the beginnings of the *sāhityāvadhāna* as well as its epigraphic, historical and literary sources, in Sudyka and Galewicz 2012.

³ The term *avadhānī* denotes a male performer of the *avadhāna*, while the term *avadhāninī* refers to a female practitioner of the art. Although less often, women also take part in the *avadhāna* contests (e.g. Muppavarapu Aparna, Pullabhatla Naga Santhi Swaroopa, Tangirala Udaya Chandrika or Kompalle Kameswari). Some of the most famous *avadhāninīs* are Rāmabhadraṁbā, Madhuravāṇī, Muddupaḷani, Raṅgājamma. Unfortunately, a detailed analysis of their achievements is beyond the scope of the present article.

The main aim of the art's performative examination (apart from verifying the ability to focus, the foremost purpose characterizing all types of the *avadhāna*) is to demonstrate performer's proficiency in the field of poetics and his/her adroitness in impromptu composition. Consecutive challenges, therefore, utilize various aspects of literary art.

A *sāhityāavadhāna* performance consists of two main parts: the *pūraṇa*, 'completing', and the *dhāraṇa*, 'recollecting'. During the first phase the *avadhānī* composes poetical stanzas step by step, according to the rules laid down by the questioner. The *pūraṇa* is divided into four rounds as most of the verses are created fragmentarily, quarter by quarter, in each subsequent stage. Later on, in the *dhāraṇa*, the *avadhānī* recalls all previously created compositions, recites or sings the complete stanzas and supplements them with explanatory and amusing commentaries referring both to their form and content.

The purpose of the present paper is to identify and describe selected *sāhityāavadhāna* tasks which have their roots in specific literary devices mentioned by Sanskrit theoreticians. The comparison between the definitions given by the authors of theoretical works and the regulations governing the execution of analogical *avadhāna* challenges portrays the process of transforming literary embellishments into means of an examination, suitably adjusted to the needs of the art of attentiveness.

Something taken away, something added

The first challenge, usually opening the literary *aṣṭāavadhāna* performance, is known as the *niṣedhākṣara*, 'the forbidden letter'. The task is to be completed in four rounds. The designated questioner called *niṣedhākṣarī* specifies the topic and metre of the composition. Moreover, he prohibits the use of a given, opening sound. In each round with this *prcchaka* the *avadhānī* composes one of the four *pādas* of the stanza. Each *pāda* is composed interactively with the questioner, syllable by syllable. Every time the *avadhānī* specifies the next sound the questioner limits the choice of the sequential *akṣara* by prohibiting the use of a syllable of his choice in the following position. The challenge

requires the performer to have a thorough knowledge of prosody and an exceptional command over rich vocabulary. By prohibiting certain sounds, the *prcchaka* may block the possibility of creating the originally planned composition. In such a case the *avadhānī* needs to find an alternative solution matching the given topic and metre. The completion of the *niṣedhākṣara* takes the form of a verbal exchange between the performer and the questioner and the formula of the gradually created obstacles is both entertaining and engaging for the audience.

The idea of this challenge plays with the concept underwriting the *niyama*, the ‘limitation’, a well-known figure of speech and a literary puzzle minutely described by Sanskrit theoreticians. According to texts on poetics, the *niyama* can be understood in two ways; as a simile “in which the similitude is said to be limited to the object in question” (Gerow 1971: 159) or as “a verse whose phonetic content is limited to certain vowels, consonants or points of articulation” (Gerow 1971: 184). In the context of the *niṣedhākṣara* the second definition is more important. The *niyama* is mentioned, for example, by Daṇḍin (c. 7th century) in his treatise, *Kāvyaḍarṣa*, among the figures called *duṣkara*, ‘difficult’.⁴ In KĀ 8.38, the author enumerated three kinds of ‘difficult limitation’:

⁴ In various translations of the *Kāvyaḍarṣa* and in works devoted to its analysis (e.g. Böhrling 1890; Dimitrov 2011; Panda 2008), the word *duṣkara* is understood as an adjective denoting ‘difficult’ examples of figures. While the literal meaning ‘difficult to compose/achieve/create’ is correct, I think that *duṣkara* should be considered a technical term hence taken as a noun and not a mere adjective. I propose this on the basis of the structure of the text and the tradition of such understanding of *duṣkara* in the context of figurative and visual poetry it refers to. The term occurs in the relevant passage of *Kāvyaḍarṣa*’s third chapter (which encompasses *gomūtrikās*, *ardhabhramas*, *sarvatoḥhadras* and *niyamas*) exactly three times: at the beginning (KĀ 3.78), in the middle (KĀ 3.83), and at the end (KĀ 3.96). By placing the word *duṣkara* in these positions Daṇḍin seems to create a compositional pattern emphasizing the need of separating figures described in the passage in question. Although he did not present *duṣkara* as a separate figure of speech, he might have understood it as a class of *śabdālaṅkāras* constructed on the same principle and known under one name. Similar view was presented by Gerow. In *A Glossary of Indian Figures of Speech*, under the entry ‘*duṣkara*’, he wrote that “the *Agni Purāṇa* apparently follows Daṇḍin’s usage of the term, but it makes an explicit distinction between three types of *duṣkara* (...)” (Gerow 1971: 184).

the *svaraniyama*, ‘the limitation of vowels’, the *vyañjananiyama*, ‘the limitation of consonants’ and the *sthānaniyama*, ‘the limitation of place of articulation’. Similar division is mentioned in the *Agnipurāṇa* section devoted to the theory of literature (c. 9th century). The *niyama* is placed among the *duṣkaras* (AP 342.28, Bhattacharya 1976: 166) and divided into the same three kinds. The later theoreticians proposed further specifications in respect of the figure. In the 11th century, Bhoja, the author of *Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharāṇa*, went a step further, suggesting in his treatise treating the *niyama* as a type of the *citra*, ‘the picturesque’ or ‘the astonishing’ (SKBh 2.107cd: *niyamas tad budhaiḥ ṣoḍhā citram ity abhidhīyate*, “*niyama* is termed the sixfold *citra* by the learned”),⁵ and to three forms enumerated in *Kāvyaḍarśa* and *Agnipurāṇa*, he added *gatiniyamas*, ‘the limitations of moving’, *ākāranīyamas*, ‘the limitations of form’, and *bandhaniyamas*, ‘the limitations of pattern’ (SKBh 2.107). In his *Kāvyaṇuśāsanaviveka*, Hemacandra (1088-1173) too introduced the *niyama* as a kind of *citra* but from Bhoja’s classification he removed the *bandhaniyamas*.

The described task of the *avadhāna* exploits the same mechanism—the limitation of syllables used in a composition. But in the case of the *niṣedhākṣara*, the restrictions do not consist of specifying or denying the use of certain sounds belonging to one group throughout the whole stanza. The restrictions are only gradually revealed, originating as the *prcchaka*’s response to the *avadhānī*’s creation. The final stanza does not necessarily contain the *niyama* figure. It is not composed according to a certain, single constrain but follows as many restrictions as there are syllables in the stanza. Every time, just before the *avadhānī* utters the next sound, the *prcchaka* determines the *vyañjananiyama* applicable to this particular position. This modification of the *niyama* feature has a double cause. First of all, it raises the difficulty level of the task, and secondly, it makes the challenge more dynamic. The *niyama* itself constitutes an interesting literary puzzle demanding ingenuity from the poet. The practice of the *avadhāna* adds a performative aspect to it.

⁵ All the translations in present article are mine unless otherwise stated.

The formula of the *avadhānī-ṛcchaka* dialogue makes the challenge more complex and gives the audience an insight into the process of creation, keeping spectators interested not only in the final outcome but also in the interaction between both figures present on the stage.

A noteworthy instance of an erudite completion of the *niṣedhā-kṣara* task was recorded by Abhinaya Bharati and released in the form of a documentary film on DVD in 2006. It presented the art of the *avadhāna* through the example of a Sanskrit *aṣṭāvadhāna* performed by R. Ganesh, one of the most famous contemporary practitioners of the literary art of attentiveness. During the event the role of the *niṣedhākṣarī* was played by H.V. Nagaraja Rao, a distinguished scholar, writer and poet, and a retired professor of the Oriental Research Institute, Mysore. The questioner proposed the description of the ongoing *avadhāna* assembly as the topic of the composition. In four rounds filled with knowledgeable dialogues and through constant engagement between the *ṛcchaka* and the *avadhānī*, R. Ganesh created the following stanza:

śrīvāksattvaparā bhadrā bhāvvyātrātaḥ pade pade |
sakhīvāste 'vadhāv asmin mamaiṣā yutimagnabhūḥ ||⁶

[It is] the supreme essence of illustrious Speech, auspicious, to be accomplished—hence here, at every step and at this time—for me this assembly⁷ is like a friend.

The overview of the syllables prohibited by the questioner during the completion of the described *niṣedhākṣara* shows clearly how very often had the *ṛcchaka* blocked the possibility of using the syllable *sa*. The consecutive *akṣaras* prohibited by the questioner in the course of

⁶ Sanskrit text based on the *avadhāna* recording included in the documentary film, *Sanskrita Ashtavadhanam. A Unique Literary art-sport of India*, directed by S. R. Leela and released by Abhinaya Bharati in 2006.

⁷ *Yutimagnabhū*, translated here as ‘assembly’, literally means ‘a place of being immersed in a meeting.’ In his commentary delivered during the *dhāraṇa*, the author of the stanza, R. Ganesh, suggested that the phrase be understood simply as ‘assembly’.

a recent creation were: *sa, ya, na, bha, sa, da, ha, va* (for the first *pāda*); *ya, ta, sa, sa, ka, ra, sa, ra* (for the second *pāda*); *śa, bha, ka, ca, na, ca, na, ta* (for the third *pāda*) and *sa, ta, va, sa, ja, ra, ta, ta* (for the last *pāda*). By excluding the above syllables in subsequent positions, the *prcchaka* was blocking the possibility of using them in any kind of combination—the *avadhānī* could not deploy them in conjuncts or in combination with any other vowel, not only with the inherent *a*. Since H.V. Nagaraja Rao had asked R. Ganesh to compose a verse depicting the ongoing assembly, he naturally expected that the *avadhānī* might want to include, at some point during the performance, one of the words like *sabhā, samsthā, samīti, samāja*, etc., all denoting a meeting, coming together. Hence, again and again, he introduced constraints as to the use of *sa*. However, the performer, aware of the questioner's intentions, circumvented the trap and used the less obvious and more poetic word—*yutimagnabhū*. Further relish was provided by the employment of the phrase, *avadhāv asmin*, which can be translated as 'at this time' but concurrently refers to the practice of the *avadhāna* since *avadhi* means 'attention' as well.

The next canonical challenge from the repertoire of the *sāhityā-avadhānī* is the *samasyāpūraṇa* or 'the completing a stanza with the last line given'. According to the rules, the questioner recites a *pāda* which is to be supplemented by the performer. The given quarter needs to be incorporated into the composed stanza as its last line. The set task is not only to create a poetical text which would be metrically correct but also to do it in such a way that the double authorship might not be discerned. Moreover, to make the challenge even more difficult, the given *pāda* usually contains some paradoxical, vulgar, nonsensical or contradicting common truth statement. The *avadhānī* has to solve the problem by incorporating it in his composition. There are a number of ways to achieve this goal. One of them is to complete the rest of the stanza in such a way that the overall meaning of the text is brought under control and reformulated. Another solution is to modify the sense of the *prcchaka*'s text by changing particular words and their meaning through the use of prefixes or making it a part of the nominal compound,

etc. This can be resorted to only if the problematic expression within the *pāda* given by the questioner is at the beginning of the verse (at the beginning of the fourth quarter of the stanza). Then, modifying it, with a prefix, may influence the meaning and neutralise its nonsensical or vulgar connotations. The third way is to propose an alternative division of *sandhi* in the given *pāda*. Such adhibition usually requires additional commentary to be provided by the *avadhānī* at the end of the performance.

An interesting example of a *samasyā* completed during an *avadhāna* performance was described by Telang who gave account of a public display of the art of attentiveness, which took place in 1878, in Benares, with certain Rangacharya Shastri in the role of the *avadhānī*. One of the questioners, Bala Shastri Rande, presented the *avadhānī* with this *pāda*, *otunā bhakṣitaḥ śivaḥ*, meaning “a cat ate Śiva” and asked Rangacharya Shastri to compose the three first quarters of the stanza (Telang 1944: 158). The phrase given by the *prcchaka* was purely nonsensical but Rangacharya Shastri managed to successfully complete the challenge in the following way:

payahsiktam biḍālena līḍham liṅgam vilokayan |
bālo vadati he mātār otunā bhakṣitaḥ śivaḥ || (Telang 1944: 158)

A boy observing *liṅgam* sprinkled with milk licked by a cat says
“Oh Mother! A cat ate Śiva!”

The absurdity of the phrase suggested by the questioner faded away in the context of the new, complete stanza. Using the fact that *liṅgam*, one of the aniconic representations of god Śiva, is traditionally sprinkled, in the act of adoration, with milk (known also as cats’ favourite food), the *avadhānī* managed to infuse sense into a potentially nonsensical statement. Moreover, Rangacharya Shastri included in the stanza a little tease: words *bālo vadati*, “boy says”. Not coincidentally this phrase humorously pointed to the *prcchaka*’s name—Bala Shastri Rande.

The *samasyāpūraṇa* challenge continues the old tradition of a popular literary art mentioned in numerous texts, known by many names, e.g. *kāvya-samasyāpūraṇa*, *samasyāpūraṇavidhi*, *samasyākhyāna* or simply *samasyā* (Sternbach 1975: 77; Sudyka and Galewicz 2012: 176). The art of completing a part of a stanza, its possible variations and attestations were closely examined by Sternbach (1975: 77-81). Vātsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra* mentions it among the *caturśaṣṭikalās*, 'sixty-four arts' (KS 1.3.16) which are the *aṅgavidyā*, 'auxiliary sciences', complementing the theory of love. As described by Lienhard, they "were part of the education of the highly skilled hetaera (*ganikā*) and the spoilt town-dweller (*nāgara*) who devoted his life to the enjoyment of love and art" (Lienhard 1984: 150). Another work referring to the *samasyā* is the *Agnipurāṇa* which lists it as one of the seven kinds of the *citra* and briefly explains:

suśliṣṭapadyam ekaṁ yan nānāślokāṁśanirmitam |
sā samasyā parasyātmaparayo kṛtisamskarāt ||

That is the *Samasyā* (Putting Together) which consists of one verse, involving good puns and composed of various fragments. It arises from the blending of the composition of others and of one's own self and others.⁸

The contemporary *avadhāna* has established the rules of the *samasyāpūraṇa* challenge as a spontaneous and gradual, three parts composition of the first three quarters of a stanza as a response to the last *pāda* given by the questioner. But the same literary game practiced independently from the art of attentiveness allows also different rules. It consists of reciting any part of a stanza (one, two or three *pādas* of a freely chosen position) and requesting another person to complete it. Moreover, final stanza may have not only double, but also triple or quadruple authorship. This happens when more than two people participate in the creation and each

⁸ AP 342.27. Bhattacharya 1976: 166 (Sanskrit text), 211 (translation).

of them composes a portion of a stanza. In the present day *avadhāna* performance these regulations are standardised. But not such a long time ago the rules governing the tasks of the art of attentiveness were not minutely specified. Different practices relating to the *samasyā* are attested to in the sources. At the end of 19th century, Śrīmad Rājacandra⁹ was recorded as having successfully solved the *samasyās* with one or two quarters of a stanza given as a part of his fifty-two-fold *avadhāna* performance (Govardhandas and Patel 1994: 25). Wood and Telang mention various forms of setting up the challenge, like completing the stanza when the first line (two *pādas*) is given (Wood 1945: 128) or else, when one *pāda* is missing (Telang 1944: 158). Similarly, in the following example, the performer was presented not with the last quarter of the stanza but with the last two quarters. Vāsiṣṭha Gaṇapati, an *avadhānī* living at the turn of 19th and 20th century, faced a difficult challenge—he had to remove vulgar connotation of the given phrase saying, *stanavastram parityajya vadhūḥ śvaśuram icchati* (Leela 1999: 52), “having removed the upper garment a young wife desires [her] father-in-law”, which was further qualified by an additional question-remark: *kim tu anavadyacaritā*, “but how is her conduct blameless?” Vāsiṣṭha Gaṇapati solved the *samasyā* in the following manner:

hidimbā bhīmadayitā nidāghe gharmapīḍitā |
stanavastram parityajya vadhūḥ śvaśuram icchati || (Leela 1999: 52)

Hidimbā, Bhīma’s beloved, is afflicted by heat in the hot season. Having removed the upper garment a young wife desires [her] father-in-law.

⁹ Śrīmad Rājacandra (1867–1901) was a Jain layman from Gujarat who practiced the eight-fold *avadhāna* as well as the twelve-fold, sixteen-fold, fifty-two-fold and one hundred-fold forms of the art of attentiveness. At the age of twenty he stopped performing almost entirely (Shah 1944: 282; Salter 2002: 133).

In this case, the *avadhānī*'s composition was inspired by the story of Bhīma, one of the five Pāṇḍava brothers depicted in the *Mahābhārata*. Bhīma's father was Vāyu, the Wind, so by removing her upper garment Hidimbā was hoping that a passing breeze might cool her body afflicted by the heat wave. Adroit completion of the *samasyā* removed vulgarity of the questioner's phrase.

The *samasyāpūraṇa* is the perfect task to examine performer's proficiency in the poetic art and his/her ability to modify and complete the text begun by someone else. It also allows the questioner to display his/her own literary talent by formulating the *pādas*, to be given to the *avadhānī*, in a way that takes into account the merits of poetry and at the same time, poses a difficult challenge to the *avadhānī*. The results of this endeavour, namely the stanzas completed according to the rules of the *samasyā*, often reach beyond the immediate audience of the particular *avadhāna*. Their oral embodiments acquire life of their own outside the performative frame of the art of attentiveness.¹⁰ The *samasyās* composed during particular *avadhānas* are stored in collective memory and permeate public consciousness. Every so often they are written down and incorporated into the collections of verses; at other times, they circulate only in the oral tradition. The context of the *avadhāna* sometimes fades away—the verses are repeated without specifying the author or authors of the composition. But at times, they live on in people's collective memory as stanzas attributed to certain poets.¹¹ The circulation

¹⁰ This statement is true not only in the case of stanzas composed during the completion of the *samasyā* task but also in reference to verses created in the course of other challenges. The products of the so-called *āsukāvya* ('fast poetry') or *āsukavitva* ('swift poetic art'), the challenge in which poets spontaneously compose stanzas in given metre on ordered topic, are most often circulating as the *cāṭus*, or independent verses disseminated primarily in the oral form and existing in the collective memory of the connoisseurs of poetry. More on the *cāṭus* (also those created by the *avadhānīs*) in Narayana Rao and Shulman 1998.

¹¹ In the case of the best *samasyās*, composed so their multiple authorship cannot be discerned, often only the person who completed the verse is remembered. But even then, the *samasyās* are not viewed as semi-plagiarised. The theoreticians were always of the opinion that the *samasyā* challenge was the only case when using someone

of verses (in many cases, of the *samasyās*) created during the *avadhānas* is one of the factors sustaining the art of attentiveness and contributing to its longevity.

The *samasyā* figure described by the theoreticians did not require further modification by the practitioners of the art of attentiveness. It was already a literary riddle combining all the factors crucial from the point of view of the *avadhāna*—challenge, need of poetic talent, playfulness and lively interaction between the performer and the questioner. The *samasyā* was thus incorporated into the art of attentiveness in an unaltered form because no further adjustments were deemed necessary.

The third canonical task performed during the literary *avadhānas* is called the *dattapada*, ‘the given word’. The name of the challenge brings to mind the *datta* figure mentioned, for example, in the *Agnipurāṇa* (AP 342.20). The latter refers probably to “a group of conundrums which function by adding certain significant parts of the written Sanskrit sentence, as vowel indicators, nasal vowel marks (*anusvāra*), final aspiration (*visarga*) and perhaps consonants” (Gerow 1971: 183). Gerow’s explanation is in harmony with Bhoja’s understanding of

else’s composition as part of one’s own could be taken as a meritorious and fully justified act. In his *Vāgbhaṭālamkāra*, Vāgbhaṭa (12th century) observed,

parārthabandhādyaś ca syād abhyāso vācyasaṃgatau |
sa na śreyān yato ‘nena kavir [em; kaver ed.] bhavati taskaraḥ ||
parakāvya-graho ‘pi syāt samasyāyām guṇaḥ kaveḥ |
arthaṃ tadarthānugataṃ navam hi racayaty asau || VA 1.12-13

Forming the poetical combination of the tenor of the composition of other poets may be (some sort of) exercise. It is, however, not very fair, because the poet thereby becomes a thief [12].

Only in the *samasyā* the borrowing from other *kāvya*s becomes a merit rather for the poet, for then he produces a new tenor, which combines with the tenor of the (prior poem) [13].

Sanskrit text based on the *Kāvyamālā*’s edition (1895) of *Vāgbhaṭālamkāra*, English translation: Nobel 1925: 60–61.

Deliberately, for the purpose of getting rid of [her], agitated by the slaughter of sages, the best of Raghu's race inspiring great respect in the Daṇḍaka forest and ready for ordeal, the glorious one desired by her, through the power of destiny addressed the dreadful woman blinded with passion in [her] yearning as 'the Wide-Eyed One'.

The topic laid down by the questioner was the meeting of Rāma and Śūrpanakhā and the English words to be included into the stanza were 'hello', 'hi', 'sweet' and 'honey'. The positions in which the *avadhānī* placed the homophonic equivalents of the given *pādas* are marked above in bold.

Another method of a skilful fulfilment of the *dattapāda* requirement (also attested, in a way, in the above example) is using the given word as a part of another word matching the composition in a better way. For example, the *avadhānī* challenged to use in one of the lines the word *mukha*, 'face', is allowed to incorporate into the stanza *āmukha*, 'prelude'; *divasamukha*, 'dawn'; *parāṇmukhatva*, 'aversion'; etc. The most important requirement is that the given word be included into the composition, even if in a covert way.

In the case of the *dattapada*, the art of the *avadhāna* borrowed from the description of the figures of speech only the concept of giving or adding a certain significant part of the sentence. In comparison to the *datta* or the *dattākṣarā*, the added element is much bigger; it is a whole *pada*, here understood as a word. Moreover, the *avadhānī* does not only solve the riddle. Completing the challenge does not depend on the modification of a given text thus leading to the solution of the riddle. If that were so, the task so set would not be able to test practitioner's skilfulness in composing poetry. It appears that in

his personal blog (<https://balramshukla.wordpress.com/2015/10/>) on 25th Oct. 2015. The composition was also used in the promotional materials of the Chinmaya Vishwavidyapeeth announcing a five-days-long workshop on the art of *avadhāna* which took place in March 2020 (https://www.facebook.com/Chinmaya.VV/posts/806372736440750?comment_id=808583522886338).

case of the *datta* challenge performed in the setting of the *avadhāna*, both the sequence of events and the roles are reversed. The conundrum described by the theoreticians was to be solved by adding an element to an already composed text. In the *avadhāna*, the questioner is the one who specifies the units to be incorporated into a stanza by the *avadhānī*. On the one hand, the *dattapada* simplified the regulations of the *dattākṣarā* (the given elements are bigger, there is no puzzle which is solved by the figure's application, etc.). On the other, it was modified in such a way that it still tests practitioner's adroitness in poetic composition and, because added elements are words, allows for new possibilities of creating obstacles, like incorporating words from foreign language or words lacking any kind of association with the topic at hand. Like in the *cyutadatta*—something has been taken away, and something else added.

The *vyastākṣara*, 'the disarranged syllables', is another common task in the field of the *sāhityāavadhāna*. The questioner presents the *avadhānī* with a miscellany of syllables, usually thirty-two or sixty-four, which seem to sound meaningful but in fact are devoid of any sense. The mechanism of the *vyastākṣara* challenge is similar at its core to the principle governing the *vyutkrāntā*, 'the transgressed', 'the gone apart'—a riddle listed for example by Daṇḍin (KĀ 3.99). In the *Kāvyaḍarśa*, Daṇḍin mentioned it as one kind of the *prahelikā*. According to Sternbach, the *vyutkrāntā* "is a riddle which causes confusion by the employment of words belonging together and which are in great distances from one another; there, the meaning is concealed by intermediary words" (Sternbach 1975: 40). This definition is basically a paraphrase of Daṇḍin's statement that "vyutkrāntā causes perplexity by the employment of great distance [between words]" (KĀ 3.99ab: *vyutkrāntātivyavahitaprayogān mohakāriṇī*).¹³

In the *vyastākṣara*, differently than in the *vyutkrāntā*, the disarranged elements are the syllables, not the words. But the idea of displacing or jumbling them up and hiding the sense is the same. The questioner

¹³ Sanskrit text after Böhtlingk 1890: 107.

provides *avadhānī* with disarranged syllables (one at a time) along with the numbers indicating their position in the stanza. The performer's task is to change their order and rearrange them according to the given information, in such a way that the syllables create a regular, meaningful stanza. All of this happens in four stages, resulting in the composition of one *pāda* in each round. The presentation of consecutive syllables provided by the *ṛcchaka* can take either oral or written form.

In the record of the performance of the *vyastākṣaralekhana* (a variant of the task's name) by Vāsiṣṭha Gaṇapati we read:

Even while the Avadhāni is engaged in performing the different feats of the Avadhāna programme, one of the examiners shows on a slip of paper one letter at a time of a *śloka* once, at different intervals. After all the letters of a *śloka* are shown (at different intervals, of course) the Avadhāni should complete the verse starting from the reverse order. (...) Gaṇapati Śāstry, after seeing the letters wrote down the *śloka* in full from his memory and showed it to the assembly. It was orally recited by him in the *pāda* (one quarter of a verse) order (Leela 1999: 73–74).

The stanza which was the subject of this *vyastākṣara* challenge was composed by Narayana Sudarsan in the role of the *ṛcchaka*. The questioner, trying to disconcert the *avadhānī*, used the long, twenty-one-syllable *sragdharā* metre. Once rearranged, the syllables created the following stanza:

*apsām drapsām alipsām cirataram acaram kṣīram adrākṣam ikṣum
drākṣām sākṣād ajakṣam madhurasam adhayaṁ drāg avindaṁ marandam |
mocām ācāmam anyo madhurimagarimā śankarācāryavācām
ācānto hanta kim tair alam api ca sudhāsārasī sārasimnā ||*
(Leela 1999: 75, fn. 3)

I ate diluted curd free from desire, I drank thickened milk for a long
time, I saw the sugar-cane,
I personally ate grape, I drank the honey-nectar, I quickly consumed
the flower-juice,

I ate the banana. Alas! What is the point of these? The inexhaustibility of sweetness and weight of Śaṅkara's words is sipped—Enough of stretching out the limit of nectar's shower!¹⁴

Vāsiṣṭha Gaṇapati successfully managed the challenge and completed the task. But the story of the above-quoted verse did not finish there. The next challenge of the described *avadhāna* was the *kāvyaavācana*, 'the recitation of poetry', in which, as is the custom, the *avadhānī* is presented with a stanza drawn from classical *kāvya* literature. He has to identify the verse and specify its source by giving the work's title and the name of its author. After that, the performer provides the audience with his own commentary on the recited stanza, explains its context and analyses the text taking into account its poetic merits or used embellishments. In the course of Vāsiṣṭha Gaṇapati's *avadhāna*, instead of quoting a stanza from a well-known work, Narayana Sudarsan asked the performer to comment on the verse *apsām drapsām* of his own creation. The *avadhānī* took the opportunity to enumerate multiple mistakes, incongruities and demerits within the aforementioned stanza: the grammatical and stylistic flaws, nonsensical and absurd expressions, wrong application of poetic figures. For instance, the author proposed a phrase, *mocām ācāmam*, in the sense, "I ate the banana". However, as noticed by the *avadhānī*, the verb *cam* prefixed with *ā* "is used in the particular sense of sipping a spoon of water placed in the middle of the palm (...). It is never used in the sense of eating" (Leela 1999: 78). Also, the last quarter of the text contains a serious mistake: in the passage, *sudhāsārasī sārasīmṇā*, the word *sārasī* is incorrect (according to the grammatical rules, it should be *sārasya*). Similar incongruities occur frequently in Narayana Sudarsan's verses.¹⁵ All the shortcomings were meticulously enumerated by Vāsiṣṭha Gaṇapati. This example shows how verses created during the *avadhāna*

¹⁴ The translation was made keeping in mind remarks given by Vāsiṣṭha Gaṇapati and recorded in the Supplement to Chapter 12, Flaws in the verse *apsām drapsām*, in Leela 1999: 76–9.

¹⁵ For detailed analysis of mistakes pointed out by the *avadhānī* see Leela 1999: 76–9.

performances (also depending on whether they were composed by the *avadhānīs* or by the *pr̥cchakas*) vary in terms of their literary value.

In another part of the work devoted to Vāsiṣṭha Gaṇapati, the *vyastākṣara* was mentioned once again but the explanation of its execution was described differently:

(...) the scholar requested Kāvya-Kaṇṭha¹⁶ to express his views on *kāvya* in the *Vasanta-tilaka* metre (fourteen-syllabled classical metre of four lines). He also got a chalk-board on which he marked fifty-six houses (since $14 \times 4 = 46$) and gave it to Kāvya-Kaṇṭha. In each of the houses indicated by the scholar Kāvya-Kaṇṭha wrote a letter. The houses were not shown systematically but in random. The composer had no time to think of the suitable letter to fill the house. The composer had to fill them spontaneously. (...) This problem is *vyastākṣarī* (Leela 1999: 194).

These accounts show that the challenge known as the *vyastākṣara* is varied and can be completed in more than one way as long as the main idea of the task—assembling and rearranging syllables given by the questioner in a disordered manner—is kept. The original concept of the *vyutkrāntā* is only slightly modified. Like in the case of the *datta/dattapada*, it is the ‘size’ of components that has changed and the mechanism accordingly altered; while the figure of speech (*vyutkrāntā*) operates on the level of words, the *avadhāna* challenge (*vyastākṣara*) works with smaller units, the syllables. The reason for the modification was analogical to the previously described alterations. Sportive character of the anagramic task was kept but the displaced units were reduced to single syllables so as to pose an additional challenge.

The *vyastākṣara* can be also substituted by its variant called the *nyastākṣara*, ‘the fixed syllables’. In this variety, the *pr̥cchaka* designates the metre, topic and exact placement of some syllables. The number of pre-given syllables is not fixed although the *avadhānī* is usually presented with twelve sounds to be placed in certain positions. One may

¹⁶ One of the Vāsiṣṭha Gaṇapati’s titles (HC).

be asked, for instance, that the sixth *akṣara* be *ya*, the tenth be *sa*, the fourteenth be *kha*, etc. The questioner chooses the ordered sounds freely, but their placement cannot violate the needs of the stipulated prosodic pattern.

Conclusion

The art of attentiveness exploits various fields in which practitioners prove their mettle and skills obtained through expanded ability to concentrate. It is not unusual that the literary form of the *avadhāna* draws inspiration from the rich tradition of Indian poetics. The abovementioned tasks are the best example. Not coincidentally, all the figures used as the basis of the consecutive challenges belong to the domain of *śabdālaṅkāras*, embellishments of sound or expression, in particular to the group of the *prahelikās*, literary riddles or conundrums which Gerow defines as “a sort of verbal jujitsu” (Gerow 1971: 210); the *citras*, the ‘wonderful’, ‘surprising’ figures; or the *duṣkaras*, distinguished due to their difficulty. The formula of playful literary puzzle among other embellishments introduced by the theoreticians matches perfectly the *avadhāna* concept. By using these devices one can examine poet’s knowledge of poetics through the entertaining riddles. This feature was noticed already by the authors of works on the theory of literature. No matter how the aforementioned figures were classified, the theoreticians described them as difficult, exciting curiosity, recommended for scholarly and sportive meetings. In the context of the *prahelikās*, already Daṇḍin observed that

*krīḍāgoṣṭhīvinodeṣu tajjñair ākīrṇamantraṇe |
paravyāmohane cāpi sopayogāḥ prahelikāḥ ||*¹⁷

Praheḷikās are employed by those who know them in pleasure of sportive gatherings, in private counselling in crowd¹⁸ and even for perplexing the others.

¹⁷ KĀ 3.97, Böhrtlingk 1890: 106.

¹⁸ The remark probably refers to the possibility of using the *prahelikā* as a mean of communication—even in a crowded place a message can be passed (thanks to the use

This passage was quoted later by Bhoja (SKBh 2.144, Siddhartha 2009: 334–5) who apparently shared Daṇḍin’s views. Similar perception of the *prahelikā* must have probably prevailed as in the 13th century in a commentary on the *Kāmasūtra* titled *Jayamaṅgalā*, Yaśodhara Indrapāda described the figure as “acknowledged in the world, for play and for contest” (*lokapratītā, krīḍārthā vādārtha ca*, Durgaprasad 1891: 37). Also, similar features were assigned to the *citra* and the *duṣkara*. The *Agnipurāṇa*, for instance, characterized the former as “a composition of words which excites curiosity in a learned assembly” (transl. Lidia Sudyka, in Sudyka and Galewicz 2012: 174, AP 342.20: *goṣṭhyāṃ kutūhalādhyāyī vāgbandhaś*) and the latter as a figure “composed with great difficulty, designating poet’s abilities and, even though tasteless, [causing] great joy for clever men,” (AP 342.28: *duḥkhena kṛtam atyartham kavīsāmarthyasūcakam | (...) nīrasatve ‘pi vidagdhanām mahotsavaḥ*). The question of the poetic value of a literary production endowed with conundrums is another matter. The above passage from the *Agnipurāṇa* is just the tip of an iceberg. Subsequent generations of theoreticians, to mention only Ānandavardhana’s depreciating opinion about the *citra*,¹⁹ Hemacandra’s contemptuous attitude toward the *praśnottaras*, the *prahelikās* and the *durvacakas*²⁰ or Viśvanātha’s denial of riddle’s presence among the *alamkāras*,²¹ could not finally agree whether literary puzzles and riddles deserve a place among figures of speech, and even, whether they should be called poetry at all. The figures which eventually became the basis of the *sāhityāvadhāna*

of the figure) in a coded way, not intelligible to everyone, which allows for a private exchange of thoughts.

¹⁹ *Dhvanyāloka* 3.42–43, *vṛtti*: (...) *ālekhyaprakhyam yad ābhāsate tac citram | na tan mukhyam kāvyam | kāvyānukāro hy asau* | “What manifests [itself] looking like a picture is *citra*. It is not a meaningful poetry. It is just an imitation of poetry.”

²⁰ *etac ca kaṣṭakāvyatvāt krīḍāmātraphalatvāc ca na kāvyarūpatām dadhātī na pratanyate* | (Parikh 1938: 323) “Since it is bad poetry and because it results only in great entertainment, it does not constitute poetic composition, thus [this topic] shall not be continued.”

²¹ SD 10.13cd: *rasasya paripanthivān nālamkāraḥ prahelikā—‘prahelikā* is not an *alamkāra* because of the hindering *rasa*.”

tasks have created confusion as the theoreticians could not decide how to classify them. Nevertheless, the devices themselves are present in the theoretical discourse. Their popularity and playful, entertaining character have determined the fact that the authors of the theoretical treatises could not leave them out without first defining their own attitude towards them. The above characteristics were also the decisive factor inducing the incorporation of the described figures into the practice of the *avadhāna*. Some of those figures, as shown using the example of the *datta* or the *vyutkrāntā*, were modified to meet the expectations of the challenging, performative formula of the art of attentiveness, while others, like the *samasyā*, already endowed with such features, remained unchanged. Through the centuries, the *sāhityāvadhāna* endured as one of the extensions of the *kavigoṣṭhī* ('the assembly of poets'), nurturing the idea of intellectual literary games built on the basis of poetic devices defined by Sanskrit theoreticians. The transformation of embellishments within the practice attests to the possible adjustment of figures of speech due to the requirements of practical implementation in the art which moves beyond purely literary domain and blends together poetics, creative talent, concentration and performance.

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