

**Ques.** “Poetry without dhvani is mere ornate speech.” Discuss this statement with reference to Anandavardhana’s arguments.

**Ans.** The statement “Poetry without dhvani is mere ornate speech” encapsulates the central aesthetic conviction of Anandavardhana in his seminal treatise *Dhvanyāloka*. For Anandavardhana, **dhvani** (suggestion) is not an optional embellishment but the very *ātman* (soul) of poetry. Without it, poetic composition may display verbal beauty, rhetorical skill, and stylistic refinement, yet it remains externally decorative rather than internally alive. His argument marks a decisive shift from earlier formalist approaches toward an experiential theory of literature grounded in aesthetic resonance.

Prior to Anandavardhana, Sanskrit poetics was dominated by schools that identified the essence of poetry with external features. The Alankāra school, represented by thinkers such as Bhamaha and Dandin, emphasized figures of speech as the defining characteristic of *kāvya*. Poetry was understood as language distinguished by metaphor, simile, hyperbole, and other ornaments. Similarly, Vamana’s Rīti theory located poetic excellence in stylistic arrangement. While these theories enriched literary analysis, they treated poetry largely as a crafted object adorned with artistic devices.

Anandavardhana does not deny the importance of ornament or style; however, he questions whether these alone can account for the distinctive power of poetry. He observes that even highly ornamented language may fail to produce deep aesthetic experience. A verse filled with figures may impress the intellect but leave the heart untouched. Such poetry, he suggests, is comparable to a beautifully decorated body devoid of consciousness. It is attractive but lifeless. Thus, he asserts that ornament (*alankāra*) is comparable to bodily decoration, whereas dhvani is analogous to the soul that animates the body.

The theoretical foundation of this claim lies in Anandavardhana’s semantic analysis. He distinguishes three levels of meaning: *vācya* (literal meaning conveyed through denotation), *lakṣya* (indicated meaning conveyed through secondary implication), and *vyañgya* (suggested meaning conveyed through the power of *vyañjanā*). In ordinary discourse, language operates primarily at the level of *vācya* and sometimes *lakṣya*. Poetry, however, transcends these levels by

activating suggestion. The literal meaning becomes a vehicle through which deeper, unspoken meanings are evoked. When this suggested meaning predominates, the poem becomes *dhvani-kāvya*—true poetry.

The highest form of dhvani, according to Anandavardhana, is **Rasa-dhvani**, the suggestion of aesthetic emotion. Drawing upon the rasa doctrine of Bharata Muni in the *Natyashastra*, he argues that poetry achieves its supreme function when it evokes rasa indirectly. Emotion explicitly described remains confined to the psychological plane. Emotion suggested through subtle poetic means becomes universalized and aesthetically relishable. In this transformation lies the difference between ordinary speech and poetry.

For example, if a poet directly states that a heroine feels sorrow, the statement remains informative. But if the poet depicts fading moonlight, silent chambers, and a trembling sigh, the sorrow is not stated but suggested. The reader, as a *sahrdaya* (sensitive recipient), intuits the emotion and experiences it aesthetically. Here, suggestion produces an inward resonance that transcends the literal narrative. This resonance is dhvani. Without it, poetry would remain a decorative arrangement of words.

Critically examined, Anandavardhana's position is both powerful and open to debate. Its strength lies in shifting the focus of literary theory from external technique to internal experience. He recognizes that the essence of poetry lies not in what is overtly said but in what is evoked. His insight anticipates modern aesthetic theories that privilege ambiguity, symbolism, and reader participation. By foregrounding suggestion, he explains why some seemingly simple verses produce profound impact while technically ornate compositions fail to endure.

However, one may question whether all poetry must necessarily depend on dhvani to be effective. Certain forms of didactic or satirical poetry may rely more on direct expression than subtle suggestion. Moreover, by elevating dhvani to the exclusive status of poetic soul, Anandavardhana risks minimizing the integral role of structure, rhythm, and imagery. Yet even these elements, in his framework, ultimately serve the function of suggestion. They are not rejected but subsumed under a deeper principle.

The philosophical depth of this argument was later elaborated by Abhinavagupta in his *Locana* commentary, where dhvani becomes intimately connected with aesthetic consciousness and transcendental experience. This development underscores the far-reaching implications of Anandavardhana's claim.

In conclusion, the assertion that "poetry without dhvani is mere ornate speech" reflects Anandavardhana's radical redefinition of poetic essence. By identifying suggestion as the animating principle that transforms language into aesthetic revelation, he moves beyond formalism toward a theory centered on experience and resonance. Even if one tempers his exclusivity, the conceptual brilliance of dhvani secures its enduring place as the cornerstone of classical Indian poetics.