

Ques: Critically examine Anandavardhana’s concept of *dhvani* as the “ātman” (soul) of poetry.

Ans. Anandavardhana’s formulation of **dhvani** as the *ātman* (soul) of poetry in *Dhvanyāloka* marks a decisive turning point in Sanskrit poetics. By declaring suggestion (*vyañjanā*) to be the essential principle of poetic expression, Anandavardhana shifts critical attention from the external embellishments of poetry to its inner aesthetic life. His argument is not merely classificatory but ontological: without *dhvani*, poetry ceases to be poetry in the highest sense.

Before Anandavardhana, major theoreticians such as Bhamaha and Dandin had emphasized *alāṅkāra* (figures of speech) as the defining feature of *kāvya*, while Vamana foregrounded *rīti* (style) as its essence. These schools treated poetry largely as a crafted arrangement of linguistic ornaments or stylistic excellences. Anandavardhana does not deny the value of ornament or style, but he argues that they remain peripheral unless animated by suggestion. Ornament is comparable to bodily decoration; *dhvani* is the animating consciousness. Thus, the metaphor of *ātman* is deliberate: just as the body without soul is inert, poetic language without suggestion lacks aesthetic vitality.

Anandavardhana’s theory rests on a nuanced understanding of linguistic meaning. He distinguishes three levels: *abhidhā* (denotation), *lakṣaṇā* (secondary indication), and *vyañjanā* (suggestion). While the first two operate in ordinary discourse, poetry activates a third semantic power whereby a meaning is intuited but not explicitly stated. This suggested meaning (*vyaṅgya*) emerges organically from the interplay of words, context, tone, and cultural resonance. It is not an arbitrary addition but a subtle unfolding. In this lies the originality of Anandavardhana: he identifies a semantic process that transcends literal expression and gives poetry its distinctive aesthetic effect.

His classification of *dhvani* into **Vastu-dhvani** (suggestion of an idea), **Alāṅkāra-dhvani** (suggestion of a figure), and **Rasa-dhvani** (suggestion of aesthetic emotion) further refines the theory. Among these, *Rasa-dhvani* occupies the highest place. Drawing upon the *rasa* doctrine of Bharata Muni in the *Natyashastra*, Anandavardhana argues that the supreme function of poetry is to evoke aesthetic relish (*rasa*), and this evocation occurs most powerfully through suggestion rather than explicit description. When emotion is directly stated, it remains psychological; when

suggested, it becomes aesthetic and universalized. Thus, dhvani is not merely a linguistic device but the medium through which rasa is realized.

Critically considered, the strength of Anandavardhana's position lies in its experiential orientation. He redefines poetry not as a technical artifact but as an aesthetic event that unfolds within the consciousness of the sensitive reader (*sahr̥daya*). The meaning of a poem is not exhausted by its literal content; it resonates beyond it. This emphasis anticipates later reader-centered theories and even modern notions of textual indeterminacy. Poetry becomes a dynamic field of evocation rather than a static repository of ornaments.

However, certain criticisms may be raised. First, by elevating dhvani to the status of *ātman*, Anandavardhana risks subordinating other legitimate dimensions of poetic art—meter, imagery, narrative structure—to a single principle. Later critics debated whether all great poetry necessarily depends on suggestion. Second, the theory presupposes a cultivated *sahr̥daya* capable of apprehending subtle resonance; without such responsiveness, dhvani may remain unrealized. Thus, the universality of the theory depends upon shared aesthetic competence.

The later elaboration of dhvani by Abhinavagupta in his *Locana* commentary further deepened its philosophical implications, linking aesthetic suggestion with metaphysical consciousness. This development reveals both the generative richness of Anandavardhana's insight and its openness to reinterpretation.

In conclusion, Anandavardhana's identification of dhvani as the soul of poetry constitutes a paradigmatic shift in Indian literary theory. By foregrounding suggestion as the inner principle that animates poetic language and enables the realization of rasa, he moves beyond formalism toward an aesthetic phenomenology of literary experience. Even if one questions the exclusivity of his claim, the conceptual depth and explanatory power of dhvani secure its central place in the history of poetics.