

Sanskrutha Bharathi, New Jersey & Sangam Festival- Princeton, New Jersey hosted a seminar and performance - commemorating the 1000th year of the Kashmirian genius Acharya Abhinavagupta on Saturday, April 8th 2017.

The program opened with a brief prayer followed by a paper presentation by Bharatanatyam exponent and scholar Bala Devi Chandrashekar on Sri Abhinavagupta's commentary on Bharata muni's treatise "Natya shastra". The presentation stressed the immense value of understanding Abhinava Gupta's commentary "Abhinava Bharathi" to comprehend Natya Sastra.

The Key takeaways from Bala Devi's presentation - Abhinava Gupta's two major works on aesthetics are - Dhvanyaloka -locana and Abhinava Bharati, they point towards his quest into the nature of aesthetic experience. In both these works Abhinava Gupta suggests that aesthetic experience is something beyond worldly experience, and has used the word 'Alaukika' to distinguish the former feeling from the mundane latter ones. He subscribes to the theory of Rasa Dhvani and thus entered the ongoing aesthetic debate on nature of aesthetic pleasure. Bharatha in Natyashastra, his pioneering work on Indian dramatics, mentions eight rasas and says rasa is produced when 'Vibhaava', Anubhava and Vyabhichari bhava come together. According to Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic experience is the manifestation of the self. It is similar to the spiritual experience as one transcends the limitations of one's limited self because of the process of universalisation taking place during the aesthetic contemplation of characters depicted in the work of art. Abhinavagupta maintains that this rasa is the supreme good of all literature. Abhinavagupta extended the eight rasas categorized by Bharata, by adding one more to the list, the Shanta rasa. Abhinava considered Shantha rasa as peace and tranquility. It is one attribute that permeates all and in to which everything else moves to reside- hridayavishranthi leading to the concept of Navarasa, the nine-rasas. Here Bala quoted from the upanishad "Raso vai sah Rasagihyevayam labdhvanandi bhavathi" Rasa is that (ultimate reality) the one who obtains it gains bliss. Acharya tried to understand the way people respond to a work of art or a play. He called it Rasadhvani, according to which the spectator is central to the appreciation of a play. Abhinavagupta insists nrita and natya are the same.

Bala also highlighted the units of the 108 karanas and performed few of the Karanas. She dwelt on the icon of Lord Nataraja- the Ananda thandava icon as a representation of the 24th karana Bhujangatrasitam. She briefly touched on aspects of Angaharas - as sequence of dance movements of high aesthetic value and gave interesting references that the 11th Karana - Kati chinnam is used in all the 32 Angaharas, Mandalas- the Bhu and akasa mandalas, being the leg movements used in fighting scenes, Pindibhanda - group formation and Rechakas-ornamentation in dance. To highlight Abhinavagupta's " Shanta Rasa", Bala performed a javali from one of her works "Tripura - the Divine Feminine" . The "Kesadhi Padha Javali" in ragamalika brought out the shringara aspect of Goddess Tripura Amba. Goddess was portrayed as the Ocean of beauty protecting the Universe with just by her side long glances depicting the nava rasa through "shantha and shringara rasa" as "Kameshwara prana nadi".

Following the tenets of Natya shastra and Acharya's comment on sahrudaya, she performed from her latest production "Karna- Destiny's Child" - the most climactic parts of Karna's life in the Kurukshetra War. The dramatic showdown between the two fiercest warriors Karna and Arjuna. When Karna is finally defeated and close to death, he remains alive due to all the dharma he had performed throughout his life. Krishna intervenes and asks for the fruits of this dharma to be given away and Karna complies. Bala brought out every element of the bhava for each character in numerable subplots with varied characters and episodes. One could experience the rasa - the ultimate emotional experience created in the heart of the onlooker.

This was followed by Sri. Subramanian Natarajan Mahodaya enacting a brief skit on the relevance of Acharya's teachings for contemporary living. The Topic was Acharya Abhinavagupta : Sarvam Shivamayam. This brief Samskritam skit presented by the volunteers of Samskritabharati, New Jersey was intended to impress upon the audience the core principle enlivened by Acharya Abhinavagupta that our consciousness and whatever shines in our consciousness is Shiva. He challenged us to raise above the perceived limitations and discover the infinite in our self. In the play, a young and curious boy makes a dream encounter with the Acharya. Taking the cue from his mother's narration of Acharya's works, the boy elicits Acharya's responses towards recognizing Shiva in day-to-day

encounters. The responses to these queries are given on the basis of Acharya's teachings from Isvarapratyabhijnnavimarsini and paramArthasAra.

Ganesh Kalyanaraman Mahodaya gave an informative power point presentation of Acharya Abhinavagupta's contributions to spirituality as an original thinker and a radical philosopher. He briefly highlighted all the Devotional Works of the Acharya: Paramarthacara – Discussion on the Supreme Reality, Bodhapancadasika – Fifteen Verses on Consciousness, Anubhavanivedana – Tribute of the Inner Experience Anuttarastika – Eight Verses on Anuttara Bhairava-stava – Hymn to Bhairava Paramarthadvadasika – Twelve Verses on the Supreme Reality Mahopadesa-vimsatika – Twenty Verses on the Great Teaching Sivasaktyavinabhava-stotra – Hymn on the Inseparability of Shiva and Shakti"paramarthasaraa - Essence of the supreme reality. He concluded that Acharya Abhinavagupta's contribution inspires us in many ways. Thirst for learning, Emphasis on practice to assimilate knowledge and Sharing of knowledge.

Chandrasekhar Raman Mahodaya presented a paper on comparative study of Abhinavagupta's gitarthasangraham and ShankarabhaShyam Bhagavadgita's significance as a mokṣagrantha, Abhinavagupta's commentary on Bhagavadgita is brief but scholarly, Influenced by Kashmiri Saiva tradition – one of the important philosophical schools that is ignored today. Interpretation close to Sankara's commentary, Some extraordinary interpretations in his commentary reveal the brilliance of Abhinavaguptacharya.

Students of SPNAPA Academy, Princeton, New Jersey performed compositions in sanskrit - Sri vignarajam bhaje in gambiranattai composed by Sri. Oothukadu venkatakavi and Muthuswami dikshitar's kriti - Kanchadalayadakshi. The students also performed a pure Nrita item in amrithavarshini ragam and concluded the performance with a thillana in cannada ragam interlaced with the virutham of Abhinavagupta- "yethkinchil lasyamethena Devi thushyathi nithyasahaYathkinchilthandavam thena somaha sanucharaha Shivaha".

Madhav Sapre Mahodaya presented a brief overview of Samskritabharati and its ongoing services to the communities in New Jersey. The program was informative, educative and well attended with many students of Sanskrit, Dance and music.

The seminar cum performance was a scholarly initiative giving a thorough understanding of the Great Acharya's contributions to aesthetics and spirituality. The seminar brought out clearly that Acharya Abhinavagupta was brilliantly erudite, vastly learned in all aspects of his tradition and in those of others and is encyclopedic in reference.