

# Bhāmaha's Theory of Poetic Defects (Kāvya-doṣa) in the Kāvya-lāṅkāra

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**Abstract:** Bhāmaha's Kāvya-lāṅkāra occupies a foundational position in Sanskrit literary criticism as one of the earliest systematic treatises to analyze poetic defects (kāvyadoṣa). This paper examines Bhāmaha's classification of nearly thirty poetic faults, including semantic, phonetic, grammatical, and contextual errors, with attention to their illustrative examples and aesthetic implications. Special focus is placed on defects in simile (upamā), highlighting the poet's concern for clarity, plausibility, and propriety. By situating Bhāmaha's work within the broader trajectory of Sanskrit poetics, including later theorists such as Vāmana, Daṇḍin, and Ānandavardhana, this study demonstrates how the rigorous identification of defects underpins the expressive and aesthetic standards of classical Sanskrit literature.

**Keywords:** Bhāmaha, Kāvya-doṣa, Kāvya-lāṅkāra, Sanskrit poetics, Upamā, Rasa, Aucitya, Literary criticism

## INTRODUCTION

In the tradition of Sanskrit poetics, the discourse on poetic excellence (kāvyaguṇa) is inextricably bound with the discourse on poetic blemishes (kāvyadoṣa). Just as the jewel is recognized not only by its brilliance but also by the absence of flaws, so too poetry is judged by the quality of its expression and the avoidance of defects. After Bharata Muni, who laid the foundation of aesthetic theory through the Nāṭyaśāstra, the next celebrated ālāṅkārika ācārya was Bhāmaha. His treatise, the Kāvya-lāṅkāra, occupies a central position in Sanskrit literary criticism and became an authoritative reference for later theoreticians such as Daṇḍin, Vāmana, Udbhata, and Ānandavardhana. Bhāmaha systematically enumerates and discusses various poetic faults across his text. In the very first chapter of Kāvya-lāṅkāra, he mentions ten defects, while in the fourth chapter he again presents eleven additional faults with detailed explanations. In the fifth chapter, he extends the list further by treating three more defects—pratijñāhīna, hetuhīna, and dṛṣṭāntahīna. His treatment of defects is not merely grammatical but aesthetic: his concern lies with how

a fault disrupts the rasa, aucitya (appropriateness), or communicative clarity of poetry. This article presents a systematic analysis of Bhāmaha's discussion of poetic faults, their nature, and illustrations, with reference to his own text as well as relevant commentaries like the Udyānavṛtti.

## EARLY CLASSIFICATION OF DEFECTS

1. Neyārtha-doṣa: The first fault Bhāmaha notes is Neyārtha. This arises when a sentence fails to yield any immediate, proper meaning, but readers are forced, through convention or grammatical inference, to supply a sense in order to preserve coherence. His example is the expression māyā bhadrā ("Illusion is auspicious"). Since illusion (māyā) by nature cannot be auspicious, the reader must imagine a far-fetched sense. Because the intended meaning is absent, the utterance is faulty.

2. Kliṣṭa-doṣa and Anyārtha-doṣa: Bhāmaha then introduces Kliṣṭa and Anyārtha. A statement is kliṣṭa when the meaning is obscure, forced, or obstructed by an unintended sense. It becomes anyārtha when the intended meaning cannot be apprehended at all. His cited verse—vijahras tasya tāḥ śokam krīḍāyām—illustrates this. The verb vijahraḥ literally means "he sported," but the poet intended "he removed." Because the prefix vi- blocks the sense of "removal," the intended meaning fails. Thus, the expression illustrates anyārtha. Commentators like Tāṭācārya-śiromaṇi further explain that when the intended sense is blocked by an alternative sense, the defect is kliṣṭa. When the intended meaning remains wholly ungrasped, it is anyārtha.

3. Avācaka-doṣa: When meaning is expressed not directly but through a roundabout chain of substitutions, causing delay in comprehension, the fault is Avācaka. For example, in the phrase himāpahāmitradharyāptaṁ vyoma ("the sky is covered with clouds"), the word "cloud" is hidden beneath several layers: himāpaha = fire; its enemy = water; that which bears water = cloud. Thus, in order

to arrive at the intended sense of “cloud,” one has to exert much interpretative effort. Hence such expression is faulty, defective and becomes a case of Avācaka.

4. Ayuktimat-doṣa (irrationality): If inanimate objects or unintelligent creatures are made to act as rational agents—such as bees, birds, or clouds appointed as messengers—the poetry becomes irrational and suffers from ayuktimat. Bhāmaha is here particularly concerned with plausibility and appropriateness.

5. Gūḍha-śabdābhidhāna-doṣa (use of obscure words): The use of obscure or extremely uncommon word-meanings constitutes gūḍha-śabdābhidhāna. His example verse describing Kārttikeya employs a series of rare, cryptic words that make comprehension difficult. Though grammatically valid, such diction obstructs clarity and becomes a fault. As an illustration, Bhāmaha cites the following verse:

“asitar titugadricchit svaḥ kṣitām patiradvīḍṛk |  
amistih śivradṛgadrṣṭaidviṣo jeyīyīṣṭa vaḥ ||”

The meaning is: “May Kārttikeya—the lord of the celestial beings, son of the dark-hued (Śiva), the cleaver of mountains, and endowed with more than two eyes—destroy your enemies with the fierce vision of his bright eyes.” In this example, various words are employed in uncommon and obscure senses. Therefore, this is identified as the defect Gūḍha-śabdābhidhāna. Thus, the apprehension of the intended meaning of the sentence becomes extremely difficult.

6. Śrutiduṣṭa and Aślīla (defilement of sound): When a word or group of words produces an obscene or vulgar secondary meaning, the defect is śrutiduṣṭa. Bhāmaha recognizes this as a blemish of sound, while Vāmana later calls it aślīla (obscenity), which is considered to be of the same nature as the Śrutiduṣṭa fault mentioned by Bhāmaha.

7. Arthaduṣṭa (defilement of meaning): Parallel to śrutiduṣṭa, Bhāmaha identifies arthaduṣṭa, when the words used in a sentence, besides conveying the intended meaning, suggest an indecent sense. His quoted verse—containing terms like hasta, stabdha, bibara, patana, and unnati—demonstrates how unintended obscene connotations may arise. As an example of this, Bhāmaha has quoted the following verse:

"Hattameva pravṛttasya stabdhasya bibaraiṣiṇaḥ |

Patanaṃ jāyate'vaśyaṃ kṛcchreṇa punarunnatiḥ ||"

“The fall of one who is violent in assault, arrogant, and given to finding faults is inevitable; and his rise again is extremely difficult”—this is the intended meaning of the verse. But since the words hastam, stabdha, bibara, patana and unnati also denote obscene secondary meanings, an indecent sense arises from the sentence. Hence, the fault of Arthaduṣṭa is found here.

8. Kalpanāduṣṭa (defilement by association): When the juxtaposition of otherwise harmless words generates a reprehensible sense, the result is kalpanāduṣṭa. For instance, Bhāmaha states that in the expression sa śauryābharaṇaḥ (“he is adorned with valour”), though the words śaurya (valour) and ābharaṇa (ornament) are not indecent by themselves, their proximity in the sentence evokes the obscene word yābha, thereby producing an objectionable sense. For this reason, such usage becomes faulty.

9. Śrutikaṣṭa (defilement of harsh sound): Excessive accumulation of harsh consonants produces śrutikaṣṭa, an auditory blemish. The example verse overloaded with “kṣ” clusters makes pronunciation painful, illustrating this fault. By way of example, he cites the following verse:

"Nyakṣeṇakṣayitaḥ pakṣaḥ kṣatriyāṇāṃ kṣaṇād iti"

Because of the excessive accumulation of hard consonants, the pronunciation of the passage is difficult and painful to the ear. For these reasons, the fault of Śrutikaṣṭa is evident here.

Defects of Meaning and Structure:

10. Apadārtha (Apārtha): In the fourth chapter, Bhāmaha expands his taxonomy. Apadārtha arises when an expression fails to produce any unified meaning. His example ḍāri māni daśapūjāḥ ṣaḍ consists of words meaningful in isolation but incoherent in combination. In his explanation, Bhāmaha states that when the meaning of a word or a sentence is “apeta”—that is, lost or absent—then the defect of Apārtha (meaninglessness) arises. As an example, he cites the expressions "ḍāri māni daśapūjāḥ ṣaḍ". Each of these words, when taken separately, carries a distinct meaning, yet when combined, they fail to convey a coherent sense. Thus, the entire utterance does not generate a complete and unified meaning. Since the significance of such an expression cannot be

determined, the defect of Apadārtha becomes manifest here.

11. Vyārtha: When parts of a sentence contradict each other, the defect is vyārtha. When the meaning of one part of a sentence contradicts the meaning of another part, the whole sentence fails to produce a consistent sense. Such a sentence is said to be afflicted with the defect of Vyārtha. For illustration, Bhāmaha quotes the following verse:

"Sakhi mānaṁ priye dhehi laghutām asya mā gamaḥ |

Bhartuḥ chhandānuvartinyaḥ premaṁ yānti na hi striyaḥ ||"

In the first half of this verse, the advice given is: "O dear friend, do not diminish your pride towards your husband." Yet in the second half, the instruction is: "A wife who follows the will of her husband is never deprived of his love." Since the meanings of these two parts are mutually contradictory, they fail to yield a consistent understanding. Therefore, the defect of Vyārtha is found here.

12. Eka-artha: When the words within a sentence express the same, undifferentiated meaning, the defect of Eka-artha arises. As an example, cites the verse:

"Tām utkamana-saṅnūnaṁ karoti dhvanir ambhasām |

Saudheṣu ghana-muktānām praṇālī-mukha-pātinām ||"

In this verse, it is said that the mere sound of falling rainwater is enough to stir restlessness in the heart of a noble woman. The intended sense is already fully conveyed in the first half of the verse. The additional descriptive phrase in the latter half "the rain-drops falling from the mouths of the water-spouts of lofty mansions"—does not contribute any new or necessary meaning. The use of this descriptive portion, therefore, results in redundancy of sense, and the defect of Eka-artha becomes evident.

13. Saśaṁśaya: When a general attribute creates uncertainty about the subject, the defect is saśaṁśaya (ambiguity). In the verse where bhūbhṛt can mean either "king" or "mountain," the adjectives apply equally to both, leaving interpretation

doubtful. As an illustration, Bhāmaha has cited the following verse:

"Bālabanto durārohā ratnavantaḥ phalāmbitāḥ |

Viṣamā bhūbhūtas tebhyo bhayam āṇḍapramādinām ||"

Here the word "bhūbhūtaḥ" denotes both "king" and "mountain." The adjectives employed are equally applicable to either of these two subjects. Thus, it is impossible to determine which specific meaning of bhūbhṛt is intended here. Since no definite meaning can be firmly grasped and the expression remains doubtful, the fault known as Saśaṁśaya-doṣa (defect of ambiguity) arises.

14. Apakrama: The term Apakrama means "absence of the intended order." If the sequence of the earlier part of a sentence is not maintained in its latter part, the composition becomes tainted with the fault of Apakrama. In this regard, has cited the following verse:

"Vidhānau kirīṭendu-śyāmābhra-himasa-cchavī |

Rathāṅga-śūle bibhrānau pātāṁ vaḥ śambhuśārjīnau ||"

Here, in the adjectives such as "kirīṭendu" and the like, a certain order has been established. But in the noun phrase "śambhuśārjīnau", that order is violated, resulting in a distortion of meaning. Had the order been preserved with an expression like "śārṣiśaṅkarau" instead of "śambhuśārjīnau", the meaning would have been consistent. Because the intended sequence was not maintained, the verse is afflicted with the fault of Apakrama. If the sequence of order set up in one part of a verse is violated later, the result is apakrama. Bhāmaha's example shows how established adjectival order is broken, disrupting consistency.

15. Śabda-hīna (defect of improper word-usage): The use of non-grammatical or unsanctioned words constitutes śabda-hīna. When a word or expression is employed that has not been sanctioned by authoritative grammarians and lexicographers, such usage is considered faulty. Words not validated by the tradition of the disciples of trustworthy preceptors are regarded as improper, and their employment brings about the fault of Śabda-hīna. For example, Bhāmaha quotes the following verse:

"Sphurat-taḍid-dhūl-ayino vitatāstog-arīyaśaḥ |

Tejas tirayataḥ sauram̐ ghanān paśya divo'bhitaḥ ||”

In this verse, the use of the genitive case in “divaḥ” is grammatically unsound, for when joined with “abhitaḥ”, the word should properly take the accusative case. The word “tirayataḥ” too is grammatically incorrect. Since the composition employs words that are opposed to the injunctions of grammar, the verse is tainted with the defect of Śabda-hīna.

16. Yatibhrasṭa (violation of pause): If the pause (yati) prescribed by prosody is misplaced, the verse is tainted with yatibhrasṭa. Bhāmaha’s cited Prantharāvṛtta verse splits a word wrongly, breaking aesthetic rhythm. By way of illustration, Bhāmaha cited the following verse:

"vidyutvastastamālāsitavapuṣa ime vāri-bāhā dhvananti"

This verse, composed in Prantharāvṛtta, becomes defective because the pause is prescribed after the seventh syllable. As a result, the first syllable of the word asita gets separated, causing an undesirable break within the word, and thus the verse suffers from the blemish of Yatibhrasṭa.

17. Vṛttabheda (metrical irregularity): When metrical rules regarding light (laghu) and heavy (guru) syllables are violated, or when syllable count is irregular, the result is vṛttabheda. To explain this fault through examples, Bhāmaha described two kinds of metrical violations:

"bhramati bhramara-mālā kāṇṇṣa-gudāmau |  
virahitaḥ ramaṅko ha-hasyadya gandham ||"

Here, the verse being composed in Mālinī metre is faulty because, in the first pāda, the third syllable is not light but heavy, and in the second pāda there is a deficiency of syllables. Hence, the metrical structure is broken, and the verse becomes blemished with the fault of Vṛttabheda.

18. Visandhi (absence of euphonic combination): Failure to apply euphonic combination (sandhi) when expected results in visandhi. Although grammatically permissible, repeated absence of sandhi produces harshness and disrupts poetic sweetness. He cited the following verse as an example:

"kānte indu-śīroratne ādadhāne udamśunī |  
pātām vaḥ śambhu-śarvāṇe"

In the first pāda of this verse, no sandhi is made between kānte and indu. In the second pāda also, although the absence of sandhi between ādadhāne and udamśunī is grammatically permissible, the consecutive omission of euphonic combinations makes the composition harsh to the ear and devoid of sweetness. Thus, the verse is afflicted with the fault of Visandhi.

19. Deśa-kāla-kula-loka-nyāya-āgama-viruddha:- This composite category includes faults contradictory to place (deśa), time (kāla), custom or family (kula), worldly experience (loka), śāstra (nyāya), or revelation (āgama). Examples include attributing sandalwood trees to the Himalayas, describing mango blossoms in the rainy season, or violating rules of music, polity, or dharma.

20. Pratiñāhīna (the lack of a proposition): -In the fifth chapter, Bhāmaha treats vows or resolutions (pratiñā). A resolution inappropriate to dharma, artha, kāma, or krodha, or one not upheld, becomes pratiñāhīna. A resolution that does not rest upon one of these four aims, or that is inappropriate and unworthy of being maintained, is to be censured. Bhāmaha declares that both an improper resolution and the failure to uphold a resolution are faults that come under the category of pratiñā-hīna doṣa. By way of illustration, he (Bhāmaha) has said that in the Vana-parvan of the Mahābhārata, Duryodhana’s vow of undertaking a fast unto death (prāyopaveśa) and his subsequent violation of that vow are opposed to dharma. For this reason, it is considered a faulty resolution (duṣṭa-pratiñā). His example is Duryodhana’s broken vow of fasting in the Mahābhārata.

21. Hetuhīna (defective reasoning): -Reasoning in poetry must, like philosophical reasoning, follow the marks of inference (trairūpya). Faulty reasoning may arise from ignorance (ajñāna), doubt (saṁśaya), or perversion (viparyaya). Bhāmaha illustrates each with examples involving Śiva, aquatic creatures, and the cakora bird.

22. Drṣṭāntahīna: -An upamāna (example) must clearly establish similarity. Where the example alone is cited without implying the reason and probandum, it is defective. Though Bhāmaha does not present explicit faulty examples, his insistence on “suddha drṣṭānta” clarifies his position.

23–26. Viruddhapada, Asārtha, Bahupūraṇa, Ākula:  
- Bhāmaha discusses four further defects:

viruddhapada (contradictory expression), asvartha (meaningless expression), bahupūraṇa (redundancy), and ākula (confused arrangement). He observes that when a poet, without adequate stock of appropriate ideas, indulges in lengthy compositions, his work becomes tainted with these defects. In this connection, he provides an example:

"elātakkola-nāga-sphuṭa-bakula-latā-candana-spandanātyo

muktākrapura-cakrāgaru-kama-silāsthāsaka-vyāptatīraḥ |

śāṅkha-vrātākulohanta-stimimakara-kulākīrṇa-vīcīpratāno

datre yasyām-burāśiḥ śāsi-kumuda-sudhākīrṇa-suddhāṃ su-kīrtim ||"

From Bhāmaha's statements and the cited example, it is evident that when the intended meaning (vivakṣita-artha) is obscured by excess or confusion, poetic defect arises. The use of words that convey a contradictory meaning is called viruddha-pada (oppositional word) defect, and any meaning that is not pleasing or suitable is termed asartha (unmeaning) defect. When a word presents a meaning that has no relevance to the subject being described, it merely embellishes the poetic body without contributing to its essence; such presentation of meaning is known as bahu-purana (superfluous) defect. Bhāmaha does not explicitly define ākula (confusing) defect, but it seems that it arises where there is an excessive use of compound words (samāsa) — that is, when the compounded meanings overwhelm or distress the listener's understanding, it is called ākula defect.

Defects in Simile (Upamā): -Beyond general faults, Bhāmaha devotes detailed attention to defects in simile, showing his sensitivity to ornamentation. He identifies seven faults, including:

Hīnatā: inferiority of the upameya to the upamā.

Asambhava: impossibility of the object of comparison.

Liṅga-bheda and Vacana-bheda: mismatch in gender or number.

His examples show how an ill-conceived simile undermines poetic beauty by distorting proportionality, plausibility, or grammatical concord.

## CRITICAL EVALUATION

Bhāmaha's catalog of poetic defects demonstrates his concern for linguistic precision, logical coherence, and aesthetic propriety. His emphasis on clarity (spastatā), avoidance of obscenity, and respect for loka, deśa, kāla, and śāstra reflect a broad vision where poetry is accountable to both art and social-cultural norms. At the same time, some critics argue that his method is at times rigid. Later theoreticians such as Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta shifted attention from defects to the deeper principle of dhvani (suggestion) and rasa (aesthetic relish). Yet, Bhāmaha's insistence on avoiding flaws prepared the ground for such developments by safeguarding the expressive medium.

## CONCLUSION

Bhāmaha's Kāvyaṅkāra is not only one of the earliest systematic treatises on poetics but also a comprehensive manual on the aesthetics of correctness. By identifying, defining, and illustrating a wide range of defects—semantic, phonetic, grammatical, and contextual—he provides poets and critics alike with tools to evaluate the soundness of literary expression. His classification of nearly thirty distinct doṣas testifies to the rigor of Sanskrit poetics in balancing creativity with discipline. Though later theorists emphasized the positive dimensions of poetic power, Bhāmaha's discussion of faults continues to be indispensable in understanding the structure, discipline, and cultural ethos of classical Sanskrit literature.

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