

Abhinavagupta

Religious Studies 2100



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ABHINAVAGUPTA

Abhinavagupta was said to be one of the greatest philosopher of his kind in his life time (Dupuche 3). Abhinavagupta was born into a Brahmin family in Srinagar, in the Indian state of Kashmir. His family was renowned for their profound dedication towards God, religion and for their partiality to intellectual pursuits. In other words they were, as a family, devoted to learning and gaining knowledge. He lived from about 950 AD to 1020 AD and accomplished a great deal in his fields of study over those 70 years (Muller-Ortega 45).

Abhinavagupta believed his parents, Narasimhagupta his father and Vimala his mother, when they claimed that he was conceived through their union as Siva and Sakiti, which in turn produced a *yogini*-child meaning the “depository of knowledge” in whom this *yogini*-child had the form of Siva (Dupuche 4).

Abhinavagupta’s name is quite interesting when explained by its Hindu meaning and it is thought that Abhinavagupta was given his name by one of his masters. His name can be summarised as:

“That person is ‘Abhinavagupta’ who remains vigilant in the course of everyday activities; who is present everywhere (abhi), in the objective domain as much as in the subjective domain, and dwells there without limitation. He sings the praise (nu) without ceasing to concentrate on the energies of knowledge and activity. He is protected (gupta) by this praise even though he lives under the presser of temporal affairs.” (Dupuche 4)

In other words, Abhinavagupta was born with knowledge and had the means to share it as a philosopher, teacher, poet, musician, exegete, logician, dramatist and a theologian [to learn more about Abhinavagupta's name, see Dupuche (2003)]. He also believed strongly in the power of language and speech, as a great asset, to spread his immense knowledge (Isayeva 164-165).

When looking into Abhinavagupta's ancestry an important fact comes to light. An ancestor of his named Atrigupta, who was born in Madhyadesa (now most likely Kannauj) India, traveled to Kashmir on the request of a great king named Lalitaditya around the year 740 AD. The importance of this is that Atrigupta's move from Madhyadesa to Kashmir brought Abhinavagupta's family blood line to Kashmir (Dupuche 4).

As a young child Abhinavagupta was pained greatly by the death of his mother, and her death had a great effect on the rest of his life. His first teacher was his father Narasimhagupta. His father began by teaching him Sanskrit grammar so that he could then go on to read, write and teach himself. Abhinavagupta would often travel through Kashmir to visit teachers. Not only did he study under Hindu teachers but also with Buddhist and Jain teachers (Muller-Ortega 45). His love for learning brought him to study any and everything that he could learn under his different teachers, this included: literature, drama and aesthetic theory, traditional texts of dualistic and monistic Saivism, *darsana*, Krama, Trika, and the doctrines and practices of Kaula (Muller-Ortega 45).

Abhinavagupta himself was a great teacher and his students held him on high regards. They saw him as an incarnation of Siva. They would describe him in ways that made him seem

more God like than human (Muller-Ortega 45). He also took great joy in discussing philosophical arguments with his fellow knowledge seekers (Gerow 188).

Eventually, his studies took him out of Kashmir to Jalandhara where he found Sambhunatha who was a tantric master in the Kaula traditions (Muller-Ortega 45). The Kaula tradition is a reformed version of Kula which refers to families or groupings of the yoginis and of the mothers; however the mothers are also considered a group of goddesses. Holistically, Kula refers to the corporeal body, body of power, the cosmic body and the totality of things. The Kaula tradition incorporates the idea of overcoming dualism of impure and pure/divine and human or good/evil and the understanding that ordinary life is the expression of Siva in union with his Sakti (Dupuche 16). Abhinavagupta's knowledge and texts contributed greatly to the traditions of this practice (Muller-Ortega 48).

There are many books with writings by Abhinavagupta that have been translated to English but there are still many of his works that are very complicated and make it difficult to translate; in order to properly translate the rest of his works it would take persons with knowledge in not only all of the six systems of Indian philosophy but also knowledge in Buddhism, Tantra and more (Marjanovic 13).

Abhinavagupta wrought two important texts on the topic of aesthetics, these being the *Dhvanyaloka-locana* and the *Abhinava-bharati* ((Muller-Ortega 47).

Among the most popular of Abhinavagupta's works is the *Gitarthasamgraha*; this additionally goes by the name *Bhagavadagitartha-samgraha*. The English translation of this

Gita text outlines the non-dualistic philosophy of Kashmir Saivism as described by Abhinavagupta; it also explains the nature of the highest reality in Kashmir Saivism.

It details the process of creation, and explains the theory of causation (*karyakaranabhava*), insights into Jnana-karma-sammuccayavada and descriptions on what is occurring in the last moments as a soul is leaving the body and in addition it has some descriptions of the practice of yoga (Marjanovic 14-22).

Abhinavagupta wrote *Tantraloka* (Light on the Tantras) which falls in with tradition of tantric Saivism. It differs from the orthodox Vedic tradition which Abhinavagupta demotes to the lowest position in Siva's hierarchy of revelations to mankind. He suggests that Vaisnavas do not come to know the supreme category due to pollution of impure knowledge (Dupuche ii). The *Tantraloka* is the most voluminous of all the literature written by Abhinavagupta; it comprises of twelve volumes, and includes a commentary by Jayaratha called *Viveka* (Muller-Ortega 47).

Abhinavagupta lived about 70 years and in his lifetime he never married. This is said to be due to his great dedication to his religious practices (Muller-Ortega 45). In order to possess the findings and knowledge of Saivism, Abhinavagupta had to reach the highest state of consciousness. This is characterized by *jnanasakti* (power of knowledge). Once this is reached the knowledge will flow through the individual so they can then share it, teach it, write it etc. (Singh 14). This dedication to finding the knowledge within would have taken an extensive amount of time. Over his life Abhinavagupta wrote many works, thus far twenty-one are available for reading but there are as many as twenty-three other writings that have been lost.

His major period of writing occurred mainly between 990 AD and 1014 AD. It seems that he split his works into separate time periods based on the three topics of texts. The first was the Alankarika period, with all of the texts dealing with aesthetics. The second was the Tantrika period with all of the texts on Tantra, and lastly, was the Philosophical period with all of the texts dealing with philosophy. With this being said it has still been very difficult to date most of his writings, due to them not containing historical information that can be used to date the piece (Muller-Ortega 45). Abhinavagupta was a highly influential thinker in his time and his literature is still significant to this day.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

- Dupuche, John R. (2003) *Abhinavagupta: The Kula Ritual*. Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press.
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Tantric

Yoga

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Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abhinavagupta>

<http://www.ikashmir.net/abhinavagupta/index.html>

http://www.thenewyoga.org/guru_abhinavagupta.htm

<http://www.koausa.org/Glimpses/abhinava.html>

<http://abhinavagupta.net/>

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1261/Abhinavagupta>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tantra>

<http://www.svabhinava.org/HumorPhd/index.php>

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