

“The Literary Dimensions of Bharata’s Aesthetic Rasa Theory”

By

Dr Surender Singh

Assistant Professor of English

Government College, Birohar (Jhajjar) Haryana

E-mail: dr.s.s.bhogal@gmail.com

Abstract

The doctrine of *Rasa*, a cornerstone of Indian aesthetics, occupies a central place in the tradition of dramatic and poetic theory. Conceived by the sage Bharata and codified in his seminal treatise, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *Rasa* theory stands as a profound contribution of Indian thought to the global discourse on performance and emotion. Bharata’s formulation of the *rasa-sūtra* not only set the foundation for classical Indian dramaturgy but also emerged as the fundamental lens through which literary and artistic works were later interpreted. The essential objective of any dramatic, poetic, or performative art, according to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, is to awaken the latent emotions within the audience and guide them toward a heightened aesthetic and spiritual experience. This paper endeavors to explore the intricate interplay of *Bhāvas* (emotional states) and *Rasas* (sentiments) as conceptualized by Bharata, offering a deeper understanding of the theory’s philosophical, artistic, and psychological dimensions.

Keywords: *Rasa*, *Bhava*, Aesthetics, Indian Drama, Emotional Experience, *Nāṭyaśāstra*

"*Rasa* is the soul of drama; without it, the art becomes void of meaning. (1)

-*Nāṭyaśāstra*

The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the most ancient and authoritative treatise on Indian performing arts, is often referred to as the *Pañcama Veda* or the "Fifth Veda" for its all-encompassing treatment of theatre, music, and dance. Attributed to Bharata Muni and composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE, this encyclopedic text spans 36 chapters and approximately 6000 verses. Rooted in the much older *Gāndharva Veda*, it reflects the philosophical and ritualistic ethos of ancient India while offering a systematic theory of performance.

Among the most seminal contributions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is its formulation of the *Rasa Theory*—a sophisticated framework for understanding emotional experience in art. Chapters six and seven, known respectively as *Rasa-adhyāya* and *Bhāva-adhyāya*, establish the foundational relationship between internal emotional states (*bhāvas*) and their aesthetic culmination (*rasas*). According to Bharata, the purpose of theatrical art is not merely entertainment but emotional transformation: to awaken dormant emotions in the audience and elevate them to an experience of aesthetic pleasure, or *rasa*.

The Meaning and Essence of Rasa

Derived from the Sanskrit root *rasah*, the term *rasa* evokes notions of "essence," "taste," or "flavor." In artistic terms, it denotes the distilled emotional flavor experienced by an audience when witnessing a dramatic or poetic performance. Much like the concentrated essence extracted from a fruit, *rasa* is the concentrated emotional experience elicited through the synergy of performance, character, and context. It is not merely an emotion but a refined aesthetic enjoyment—akin to spiritual bliss (*ānanda*). As Abhinavagupta asserted, "*Rasa is not just felt; it is relished.*" (2)

Bharata asserts that all dramatic enactment revolves around *rasa*—"na hi *rasaḥ* *ḥṛte kiñcit arthāvapattim* *gacchati*"—meaning that without the evocation of *rasa*, artistic expression fails in its purpose. *Rasa* is what transforms the mundane into the magical, the personal into the universal, and the ephemeral into the eternal.

Emotional Architecture: Bhāvas and Their Role

In Bharata's model, *bhāvas* are the building blocks of *rasa*. *Bhāva*, in its literal sense, means "being" or "state of mind." In the context of aesthetics, it refers to emotions or psychological states manifested through dramatic representation. Bharata classifies *bhāvas* into three major types:

1. **Sthāyi-bhāvas (Durable Emotions):** These are the dominant emotional states that serve as the basis for the corresponding *rasas*. For instance, *rati* (love) is the *sthāyi-bhāva* that gives rise to *śṛṅgāra rasa* (the aesthetic of romance). There are eight traditional *sthāyi-bhāvas*: *rati* (love), *hāsa* (laughter), *śoka* (grief), *krodha* (anger), *utsāha* (valor), *bhaya* (fear), *jugupsā* (disgust), and *vismaya* (wonder).
2. **Vyabhicāri or Sāñcārī-bhāvas (Transitory Emotions):** These fleeting, supplementary emotions enrich the primary mood and help build the dramatic arc. Bharata lists thirty-three such states, including *nirveda* (dejection), *glani* (depression), *sanka* (suspicion), *asuya* (jealousy), *mada* (intoxiation), *srama* (weariness), *alasya* (laziness), *dainya* (helplessness), *cinta* (anxiety), *moha* (passion), *smṛiti* (recollection), *dhṛti* (boldness), *vrida* (shame), *capalata* (fickleness), *harsya* (joy), *avega* (agitation), *jadata* (stupor), *garv* (arrogance), *visada* (despair), *autsukya* (inquisitiveness), *nidra* (sleep), *apasmara* (epilepsy), *supta* (dream), *vibodha* (awakening), *amarsa* (intolerance), *avahittham* (concealment), *ugrata* (ferocity), *mati* (knowledge), *vyadhi* (sickness), *unmad* (insanity), *maranam* (death), *trasa* (fright) and *vitarka* (doubt). These serve to modulate and enhance the *sthāyi-bhāva*, culminating in the audience's aesthetic realization of *rasa*.

Sāttvika-bhāvas (Involuntary Responses): These eight *sāttvika-bhāvas* are spontaneous physical reactions that accompany intense emotional states, such as trembling (*vepathu*), tears (*aśru*), speechlessness (*stambha*), sweating (*sveda*), thrill (romance), break in voice, (*svarabheda*), pallor (*vaivarnya*), and pralaya (swoon) Bharata emphasizes their authenticity and expressive power in representing deep emotional truth.

The Mechanics of Rasa Realization: Vibhāva, Anubhāva, and Vyabhicāri-bhāva

Bharata remarked, "The union of vibhāva, anubhāva, and vyabhicāri-bhāva results in the realization of rasa." (2) The *Nāṭyaśāstra* articulates a triadic mechanism through which *rasa* is evoked:

- **Vibhāva (Determinants):** These are the root causes or stimuli that set an emotional state in motion. Vibhāvas are further divided into *ālambana* (the person or object who is the focus of emotion) and *uddīpana* (environmental or contextual enhancers).
- **Anubhāva (Consequents):** These are the expressive outcomes—gestures, speech, or facial expressions—that communicate the emotional state to the audience.
- **Vyabhicāri-bhāvas (Complementary Emotions):** These subtle psychological fluctuations add depth and variation, enhancing the experience of the dominant mood until it culminates in *rasa*.

The *Natyasastra*, however, recognizes that these factors are insufficient for the production of *rasa*. The emphasis is on the fact that the essential element for producing *rasa* is the *sthayibhava*—the dominant emotion, which persists throughout the drama amid the variations of the transitory feelings which come and go. The *Sthayibhava* (permanent mood) or Durable Psychological State is a major emotion which is developed by a number of minor feelings referred to as *Vyabicaribhavas*. It is the overarching emotional tone of the play is known as the *Sthayibhāva*. The *Natyāśāstra* ascribes a kingly position to the *Sthayibhāvas* as they have a large suit i.e. they have a larger sphere of influence that the *bhāvas* which come and go (*VyabhicāriBhāvas*). For example, the *Sthayibhāva* in *Hamlet* is that of *Hamlet's* avenging anger. For example, the *Erotic Rasa* arises from the *Alambhana Vibhava* – presence of the lover & beloved, the *Uddipana Vibhavas* – the atmosphere of the place where the two meet, the call of night-birds; a gentle breeze, the moon, etc.; it gives rise to the *Anubhavas* – how the lover & beloved express themselves to each other (i.e. holding hands, kissing, embracing); it produces involuntary bodily responses (the *Sattvikabhavas*) and may give rise to complementary (or transitory) emotional states – the *Vyabicaribhavas*. (3)

Vibhava, *anubhava* and *bhava* are thus intimately connected with one another. *Vibhava* (determinants or catalysts) means (the conditions and objects) by which an emotion is activated is termed *Vibhava* or *Determinants*. For instance, in *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, the romantic tension between *Shakuntala* and *Dushyanta* is developed through carefully orchestrated *vibhāvas* and *anubhāvas*—looks, gestures, setting, and interactions—resulting in the audience's emotional immersion into *śṛṅgāra rasa*. In *Hamlet* also, the determinants of the emotions within the play are *Hamlet's* mother hasty remarriage to *Claudius*, the brother of her murdered husband and the visit paid to *Hamlet* by the ghost of his murdered father, among others. These factors arouse *Hamlet's* suspicion against his uncle and mother.

Abhinaya: The Art of Conveying Rasa

The performative expression of rasa is achieved through *abhinaya*—the technique of communicating inner states to the audience as Kane observed "Rasa emerges not from the character's tears, but from the viewer's heart." (4) Bharata identifies four types of abhinaya:

1. **Āṅgika** – bodily gestures and postures.
2. **Vācika** – speech and dialogue.
3. **Āhārya** – costume and makeup.
4. **Sāttvika** – internalized emotions.

These collectively function to externalize the emotional landscape of the characters and transmit it to the audience in a universally comprehensible form. *Ghosh rightly asserted, "Without bhāva, rasa cannot be manifested, just as a lamp without oil cannot light."* (5)

Navarasa: The Nine Sentiments

Originally Bharata enumerates eight primary *rasas*, a ninth rasa—*śānta* (tranquility or peace)—was added by later theorists, completing the *navarasa* or "nine aesthetic flavors". Each rasa symbolically mapped to a *sthāyī-bhāva*, a presiding deity, and a symbolic color, signifying its cosmic and metaphysical resonance.

Sthāyī-bhāva	Rasa	Deity	Color
Rati	Śṛṅgāra (Love)	Viṣṇu	Light green
Hāsa	Hāsyā (Laughter)	Pramatha	White
Śoka	Kāruṇya (Compassion)	Yama	Grey
Krodha	Raudra (Fury)	Rudra	Red
Utsāha	Vīra (Heroism)	Indra	Saffron
Bhaya	Bhayaṅka (Terror)	Kālī	Black
Jigūṣā	Bībhatsa (Disgust)	Śiva	Blue
Vismaya	Adbhuta (Wonder)	Brahmā	Yellow

Subsequently, later commentators added **Śānta** (Tranquility), presided by Viṣṇu and represented in white, forming the canonical Navarasa (nine sentiments). (6) *Lidova exceptionally remarked, "Bhāvas are the seeds, rasas are the flowering of emotional realization."* (7)

Bharata Muni very emphatically states in the Rasadhyaya of *Natyashastra* that "no meaningful idea is conveyed if the "Rasa" is not evoked." The very core of the Sanskrit *Natya* theory is the creation of "Rasa". Every dramatic presentation was aimed at evoking in the minds of the audience a particular kind of aesthetic experience, which is described as "Rasa". The concept of "Rasa" is the

most important and significant contribution of the Indian mind to aesthetics. The study of aesthetics deals with the realization of beauty in art, its relish or enjoyment, and the awareness of joy/or Ananda that accompanies an experience of beauty. Rasa has no equivalent in word or concept in any other language or art. The closest explanation can be 'aesthetic relish'. According to Natyashastra, state Sally Banes and Andre Lepeck, *drama is that art which accepts human beings are in different inner states when they arrive as audience, then through the art performed, it provides enjoyment to those wanting pleasure, solace to those in grief, calmness to those who are worried, energy to those who are brave, courage to those who are cowards, eroticism to those who want company, enjoyment to those who are rich, knowledge to those who are uneducated, wisdom to those who are educated.*(8)

Rasa as Transcendental Aesthetic Experience

Rasa transcends mere emotion; it is a transformative experience that purifies and elevates the self. As Jha remarked "In aesthetic experience, the self is transcended and reformed." (9) The spectator (*sahrdaya*—one with a 'sensitive heart') undergoes a process of catharsis, where personal emotions are sublimated into aesthetic joy. This mirrors the spiritual function of Indian art, which is not only to entertain but to edify, harmonize, and enlighten.

Rasa, in this regard, becomes a means of accessing *ānanda* (divine bliss), thereby linking aesthetics with metaphysics. Bharata's insight is echoed in modern performance theory: drama, when experienced deeply, offers healing to the grief-stricken, courage to the fearful, and pleasure to the weary. As Desai concluded, "The mind, refined by *rasa*, becomes receptive to truth and beauty." (10)

Conclusion

Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* remains a timeless manual of aesthetic theory and artistic practice. Its emphasis on *rasa* as the soul of art continues to inform literature, theatre, dance, and even modern cinema. The theory of *rasa-bhāva* is more than an artistic method—it is a lens through which we understand the interplay of emotion, expression, and transcendence. Rasa is the inner essence relished by both the performer and the audience; it is what makes art not only an act of creation but a shared journey into the heart of human experience. Schwartz aptly observed "Art serves not merely to entertain but to transform." (11)

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