

THE POETICS OF RASA: EMOTION, EXPERIENCE, AND THE MAKING OF AESTHETIC DELIGHT

SHIVANGI

Assistant Professor of English, Kumari Vidyavati Anand DAV College for Women, Karnal

The theory of *Rasa* has been widely discussed, and there is a lot of critical material on the topic. Still, it is important to understand that *Rasa* is not something fixed or concrete. Instead, it is a process that involves a constant search for reality. While this reality only becomes clear at certain moments, these brief insights often encourage us to keep seeking understanding. Even with many commentaries and studies already available (*Indian Aesthetics* 123), there are still many aspects of *Rasa* worth exploring. There also seems to be a sense of unease whether *Rasa* is present or absent. With respect, I would like to share my thoughts on our rich aesthetic tradition.

Indian thought is more concerned with inner experience and the flavour of emotion. It treats art as a psychological journey where the self dissolves — as against the Aristotelian approach, which treats art as a moral narrative where actions lead to recognition and resolution.

Rasa is the essential quality present in all forms of art, including dance, music, and literature. It cannot be precisely defined; instead, it is an abstract experience that enables artistic expressions to evoke deep emotions in the audience. Although *Rasa* may appear mystical, it does not rely on magic. Rather, it emerges when one is receptive to the emotional nuances within the art. Ultimately, *Rasa* represents the profound connection between art and human feelings.

Indian aesthetics is among the most established and expansive traditions worldwide, influencing regions from Kashmir to Tamil Nadu. Its theories have shaped scholarship across disciplines, especially literature. Early hints of *rasa* theory appear in Vedic ritual Brahmana texts, where ritual emotions like joy, fear, awe and serenity are linked to gods and sacrifices. Bharata gives the first systematic theory around 200 AD. He connects *rasa* to *bhava*. *Rasa* emerges when a spectator experiences a distilled form of emotion created by *vibhava*, *anubhava* and *vyabhichari bhava*. This becomes the foundation of Indian aesthetics. Works like Nandikesvara's *Bharata Bhasya* and other early writers between 500 AD and 900 AD expand technical details. The emphasis stays on performance arts: drama, dance, and music.

The *Natya Shastra* is a seminal Sanskrit text on the arts, attributed to Bharata Muni and dating back to the first millennium BCE. It contains a dedicated chapter (Chapter 6) on the concept of *Rasa*, which is essential to understanding Indian aesthetics. The works of the Kashmiri Shaivite philosopher Abhinavagupta, who lived around 1000 CE, provide a comprehensive analysis of this long-standing aesthetic tradition in theatre, music, and other performing arts.

According to the *Rasa* theory outlined in the *Natya Shastra*, the primary aim of performance art is to transport spectators into an alternate reality filled with wonder and delight. In this space, they can engage with their own perceptions and reflect on religious and ethical themes.

The term *Rasa* has various interpretations. Some believe it relates to taste, suggesting that just as we can enjoy flavours in food, we can also experience aesthetic tastes. However, viewing *Rasa* solely as taste does not capture its essence, as this enjoyment is often fleeting. If we consider *Rasa* to be a taste linked to intellectual understanding—a product of pure knowledge—this too may lack permanence and

fulfilment, since it does not involve a deep communion or empathy between the perceiver and the perceived. Therefore, we might say that *Rasa* represents the taste of the Atma, or soul. However, it is important to note that there are no specific *Rasas* that truly resonate with *Yogis*, and even the rare experiences they may encounter often fail to provide satisfaction or completeness (*Indian Aesthetics* 124).

Dr. Leena B. Cheriyan, in her UGC Minor Research Project, argues that, according to Indian aestheticians, the reader's response to a text is not merely a hedonistic self-indulgence. Instead, it is an affective state that is influenced by cognition and contemplation, specifically in the context of experiencing literature. This emotional experience is described as aesthetic emotion, or *rasa*. In the Indian context, *rasa*, or aesthetic pleasure, serves as the foundation of all literature and art forms.

Indian aestheticians view *rasa* as the aesthetic expression within a literary composition. They perceive aesthetic experience as a kind of transcendental joy that is distinct from other experiences derived from real life. This experience is not tied to personal emotions; rather, it embodies a universal emotion. Nagendra defines aesthetic experience as a “complex experience pleasant in essence, in which the intellectual and emotional elements are blended in subtle harmony.”

The Indian *rasa* theory can provide a coherent framework for critical theory that is universal across all genres and languages. It has the potential to incorporate and transcend Western methods, positioning itself as a viable universal theory. The Indian approach to aesthetic appreciation avoids many of the pitfalls that the Western approach encounters. Notably, it does not allow social, ethical, or other external factors to influence its evaluation of aesthetic experience. Instead, the assessment is conducted almost exclusively on aesthetic or literary grounds. In this context, *rasa*, or aesthetic pleasure, represents the emotional quality that distinguishes a work of art from the emotions experienced in real life. K. Krishnamoorthy is of the view that:

Rasas does not imply the emotions actually lived by the poet. They refer only to a disinterested contemplation of emotional states, which have a universal appeal. The exclusion of irrelevant and personal emotions helps the readers to achieve a pure aesthetic state in a sort of sentimental reverie. The contemplative attitude of the poet is thus non-utilitarian, non-volitional, non-emotional and even non-analytical. (223)

Rasa is not identical with the occidental aesthetics. Aesthetics to the occident refers to the study of the problems of good and bad, and beauty in literature, but to the orient it is the study of beauty, fundamentally pleasant, aesthetic experience. Baldick in Dictionary of Literary Terms defines aesthetics as the “philosophical investigation into the nature of beauty and the perception of beauty, especially in the arts; the theory of art or artistic taste” (5).

According to Bharatha, this aesthetic pleasant experience is *rasa* realization. *Rasa* deals with the emotions aroused in readers. Aesthetic experience is the *alaukika* (supra-mundane) experience. It is similar with the Kant's concept of pure aesthetic experience i.e. disinterested contemplation of the art and literature which provides pleasure. According to Ganpati Chandra Gupta, the feeling of *rasa* does not occur from external world but a permanent sentiment of a person's sensitive heart aroused by clever means of *vibhavadi* of a play transforms itself into *rasa* (141). The experience of *rasa* is also disinterested to the mundane, worldly or personal feelings of desiring something to fulfill the needs of the real life. As reflected by Priyadarshi Patnaik, “Any deep aesthetic experience involves a forgetting of both ordinary time and space; one loses oneself in the experience. [...] one is steeped in that unique heightened state of aesthetic enjoyment” (52).

In the context of Indian literature, the influence of literary works is determined not only by the

poets themselves but also by the receptive audience, referred to as Sahrdayas. Literature originates from the artist's intuitive insight and achieves its true manifestation through the sympathetic engagement of the readers. As noted by S. Kunjunni Raja, "This intuitive insight, present in both the artist and the connoisseur, is integral, instantaneous, and blissful" (95). The aesthetic experience for the Sahrdaya, or sensitive reader, serves as a sympathetic reflection of the insights expressed by the creative artist.

Delving into the intricacies of human psychology, Indian aestheticians, led by Bharata, have identified eight fundamental emotions, known as sthayibhavas. Additionally, there are several other emotions that possess sustaining power, although they generally remain dormant in human consciousness. The primary emotion is complemented by these ephemeral feelings, referred to as transient emotions, or sancharibhavas and vyabharibhavas.

In the *Natyasastra*, Bharata asserts that rasa, or aesthetic experience, arises from the interaction of vibhavas, anubhavas, and vyabharibhavas, which correspond to determinants, consequences, and transient states, respectively. Determinants are further divided into two categories. The primary determinant, alambana vibhava, refers to the agents or causes of emotion, such as the hero and heroine. The secondary, or excitant, determinants, known as uddipana vibhavas, encompass the setting and background elements.

Dr. Leena B. Cheriyan states that Ancient India was renowned for its rich cultural heritage, and it is the moral duty of the nation to share this legacy with the world. The significance of cultural interdependence is eloquently expressed by S. Radhakrishnan: "Our system of thought must act and react on world progress. Stagnant systems, like pools, foster undesirable growths, while flowing rivers continuously refresh themselves from fresh springs of inspiration." The theory of *rasa*, articulated by Bharathamuni, remains a foundational concept in the exploration of emotions in art and literature. Contemporary advancements in psychology and physiology further highlight the relevance of this theory. Bharata conveyed his insights with notable clarity and vigour. The true strength of this theory lies in its flexibility; it serves as an open text that does not impose rigid conclusions, but rather invites readers to explore countless possibilities and encourages fresh interpretations.

In conclusion, we can assert that *Rasa* supercedes its individual components. Colonial scholars treated *rasa* as aesthetics similar to Aristotle. However, Indian scholars reframed it as a unique psychological theory of emotion. *Rasa* theory became central to Indian classical arts, film studies, performance theory, and comparative aesthetics.

WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

- Cheriyan, Leena B. "The Psychological and Physiological Relevance of Bharathamuni's Theory of Rasa: A Study on the Basis of Colorgenics." *UGC (XII Plan) Minor Research Project*.
- Gupta, Ganapati Chandra. *Rasa-Siddhantaka Punarvivechana*. Lokabharati Prakashan, 2011.
- Kunjunniraja. S. "Artists-Art Critics and Sahrdayas" *The Literary Criterion*, Vol. 225, no. 111, 1993, pp. 95-96.
- Misra, Vidya Niwas. *Foundations of Indian Aesthetics*. Repro India Ltd, Mumbai, 2008.
- Patnaik, Priyadarshi. *Rasa in Aesthetics: An Application of Rasa Theory to Modern Western Literature*. D K Printworld, 2013.
- Krishnamoorthy, K. *Studies in Indian Aesthetics and Criticism*. D. V. K. Murthy, 1979.
- Radhakrishnan. S. *The Principal Upanishads*. OUP, 1989
- Shukla, Ramlakhana. *Sadharanikarana: Eka Sastriya Adhyayana*. Sahitya Sadan, 1967.