

# Rasa: Indian Aesthetic Theory Revisited

## Abstract

Music and poetry, which are the essentials of Drama, form a multidimensional phenomenon which cuts across many levels of human experience. A correct understanding of Indian Aesthetics and the theory of *rasa* enables us to keep all these dimensions and levels simultaneously in view. In this essay the different theories of *Rasa* and *Dhvani* have been analysed, heavily borrowing from various critics in order to develop an understanding in the minds of the readers. The concepts of *rasa* and *dhvani* are rooted in Indian linguistics and embedded in language.

**Keywords:** *Rasa*, *Dvani*, Bharata's *Natyasastra*, Avinavagupta, Anandavardhana

## Introduction

Music and poetry, which are the essentials of Drama, form a multidimensional phenomenon which cuts across many levels of human experience. A correct understanding of Indian Aesthetics and the theory of *rasa* enables us to keep all these dimensions and levels simultaneously in view towards a psychological fulfilment. In this essay the different theories of *Rasa* and *Dhvani* have been analysed, heavily borrowing from various critics in order to develop an understanding in the minds of the readers. The concepts of *rasa* and *dhvani* are rooted in Indian linguistics, embedded in language and contribute to the richness of aesthetic experience. *Rasa* theory has been formulated by Bharata Muni and later explicated and enriched by Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta. It constitutes the central tradition in Indian Aesthetics. Melopoeia, the essential of poetry and drama, is multidimensional and a proper cognition of various classes of emotion is approximated with the help of the theory of *rasa*.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of this essay is to analyse the different theories of *Rasa* and *Dhvani*, heavily borrowing from various critics in order to develop an understanding of cognitive experience of poetry in the minds of the readers. Poetry is a conglomeration of emotions which are both, dominant and transient. They are different in nature and function and contemporary western poetics is unable to do proper justice to the evocativeness of poetic emotions

## Review of Literature

Related literature has been reviewed for the purpose of writing this essay, especially, the works of Thampi, Rustomji, Timothy P. Lightiser, Bharat Gupt in this area. Bharat Gupt in his book *Dramatic Concepts: Greek and Indian* has noted that *Natya Sastra* was in existence around 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE by the time Valmiki wrote the *Ramayana*. This is a period much before Aristotle wrote his *Poetics* in 355-335 BCE. He has compared Greek aesthetics and thrown light on Indian Aesthetics, somewhat dealing with the *rasa* theory. Thampi, a noted researcher on the subject, lucidly explains the concept of *Rasa*. He quotes from Dewey, Bharata's *Natyasastra* and many others. John Dewey has said: "We [in Western Aesthetics] have no word in the English language that unambiguously includes what is signified by the two words 'artistic' and 'aesthetic.' Since 'artistic' refers primarily to the act of production of art and 'aesthetic' to that of perception and enjoyment of the same, the absence of a term designating the two processes taken together is unfortunate." *Rasa* meant water, cow's milk, mercury, soma-juice, etc. Gradually, flavour, taste and tasting were associated with the word. In the Upanisadic age, the age of intellectual sophistication, *rasa* became the essence, the essence of everything, the essence of the universe itself.

This essay has gone a little beyond the scope of the writings of the writers mentioned in showing that since poetic experience is not tangible and measurable as artistic expression alone, theories of Western Aesthetic which that are used as tools to analyze poetry and drama in



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contemporary times are inadequate. With changing times cognitive psychology has recognized emotions to have become more complex demanding multidimensional approach towards understanding. Therefore, a fresh analysis of the *rasa* theory is pertinent in context.

## Rasa theory

In dramaturgy and in poetics the word acquired the special meaning of that unique experience we have when we read a poem or witness a play. Indian aesthetic thinking is primarily audience- or reader-oriented and the centre of much discussion is the response of the readers. But we should bear in mind that the word *rasa* denotes, apart from the reader's aesthetic experience, the creative experience of the poet and the essence of the totality of the qualities which make a poem what it is. Attempts to define beauty in terms of Western aesthetics have not been adequate and have not yielded convincing results because by its very nature beauty, according to the Western theorists, yields only to a circular definition. The intimate relation of the subject and the object is ignored. The Indian theorists did not fall into the trap of futile discussion of the subjectivity or objectivity of beauty partly because their term *rasa* is an inclusive one. Bharata has employed the metaphor of seed - tree - fruit to synthesize all the elements in the poetic process. Poetry is a process which begins with the experience of the poet, that the poet conceives as a seed, and with the poet's struggle to give it a name and sensory meaning. This embodiment of the poet's experience in words, in its turn, evokes in the mind of the competent reader an experience similar to that of the poet. Thus the term *rasa* emphasizes the continuity of the poetic act from the birth of the experience in the poet through its objectification in the body of a poem to the final shape in the reader's enjoyment.

Rushtomji, for his part has concentrated on the *Dhvani/Rasa* theorists and has shed invaluable light on the *Rasa* theory of Sanskrit/ Indian Aesthetics. According to the *dhvani/ rasa* school of poetics which has dominated Sanskrit criticism since the ninth century A.D., the soul of poetry is *rasa*, a sentiment or the essence of an emotion, and this is communicated through *dhvani*, suggestion or nuance. The theory of *dhvani* and *rasa* was not fully developed until the tenth century A.D., even though *rasa* is discussed at some length in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (third century A.D.) with reference to drama. As the *dhvani* theorists themselves openly acknowledged, their theory is rooted in Indian theories of linguistics and how language works. Existing linguistic theories were used and extended in an attempt to discover the special ways in which words function in poetry. Empson's reasons for a thorough analysis of poetry would be applauded by Sanskrit critics. He believed that poetry cannot be closely analysed, only the seminal sense, the main form and rhythm and richness of its associated meanings can be realised. The interest in analyzing poetic language is not a recent phenomenon in the West. Atkins in his *English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase* discusses the

views on language held by certain medieval scholars. Much of the medieval study of Biblical language involved the theory of allegorical interpretation of the Bible. When Bede writes that this process of interpretation is like "stripping off the bark of the letter to find a deeper and more sacred meaning in the pith of spiritual sense," we arrive at an important aim of Sanskrit criticism, says Rustomji. The different meanings of a given word, sacred or otherwise, and the ways in which these meanings are used by poets interested the *dhvani/rasa* critics.

The suggestive power of language which imparts certain meanings and nuances to words and which is not found in dictionaries or ordinary non-poetic language is called *dhvani*, nuance or resonance. This suggestive sense cannot be learned merely from language as denoting something; it can only be recognized by an audience trained to look for and appreciate such meanings. Abhinavagupta writes that the aesthetic experience occurs by virtue of the squeezing out of the poetical word. People aesthetically sensitive read and taste over and over the same poem. In contradiction to practical means of perception, that, their task being accomplished are no more of any use and must then be abandoned, a poem, indeed, does not lose its value after it has been comprehended. The words, in poetry, must therefore have an additional power, that of suggestion. Thus, the transition from the conventional meaning to the poetic one is unnoticeable. Rustomji believes that aesthetic cognition is not in fact, the same as the forms of perception proper to a didactic work.

According to Anandavardhana there are two kinds of ideas in poetry: literal and implied. The implied or suggested sense lies deeper than the literal meaning of a poem. It is of three kinds: an idea or subject matter of the poem, *vastudhvani*; a figure of speech, *alamkara dhvani*; or the taste or essence of an emotion, *rasadhvani*. The most important element of a poem is the suggested one and the highest type of poetry is that in which *dhvani* occupies a prominent position. Therefore, verses such as the following [quoted in Rustomji] are examples of excellent *kāvya*s:

1. The god of love angry at the transgression of his command,  
Orders the traveller sent back to his mistress  
With limbs constricted in a crystal cage  
Made by the broad bright stream of water  
Pouring from his umbrella. (Ingalls)
2. Thou shalt know her, my second life,  
By the scantness of her speech,  
Like a lonely chakravaki-bird, while I,  
Her mate, am afar;  
As these days pass heavy with intense longing,  
I imagine the hapless girl  
Changed in form, as a lotus blighted by the cold season. (Edgerton)
3. The forest filled with fragrance  
Of the pollens of Jasmine bloom,  
The scent of *Ketaka* wafted  
By the breath of Ananga's friend,

The spring breeze,  
Touching everyone, torments here.  
(Ayengar)

The first verse implies a man trying to escape from his mistress, imprisoned in an umbrella by the monsoons and is forced to return; the second passage suggests the young wife's longing and grief, rather than bluntly stating it, and the third passage from the *Raasa Lila* of Radha and Krishna from the Geetagovindam expresses the torment experienced by Radha as her friends tell her of Krishna's frolic with other women. Even spring breeze, the fragrance of Jasmine and *Ketaka* which sooth everyone else torment her. These stanzas of high poetic expression depend on the power of suggestion for their realization in the mind of the reader.

It leads us to question as to exactly what was suggested in poetry. The *dhvani* theorists believed, great poetry depended mainly on the suggestive powers of language, and not the ornamental ones. It was realized that both ideas and emotions play an important part in poetry and are bodied forth by ornamental discourse. It was felt that didactic and moral ideas are not the real concern of poetry and poetry is not composed to cater to that singularly. Ideas and speculative thoughts are the soul of didactic works either in the form of metrical verses or non-metrical prose. Therefore, according to many Sanskrit poets, emotions constitute the soul of poetry. Yet, emotions themselves are inexpressible. For example, "Draupadi was angry," the naming of the emotion merely states it but does not provide scope for the savouring of that emotion. The reader does not partake any of the emotion itself. The best way a poet can communicate an emotion is not by naming it, but by suggesting it. This theory whereby the vital part of a poem is suggested emotion is called the *rasa theory*. *Rasa* is not something a poet creates. It is something which the poet suggests. *Rasa*, often translated as "sentiment," really means the taste, flavour, or the very essence of any given thing, such as, emotions. That is, a poet expresses or describes the causes and effects of an emotion, and using the power of suggestion which is inherent in words he evokes in his audience a taste and flavour, the *rasa*, of the emotion rather than the particularized emotion itself.

*Rasa*, as a concept, was mentioned for the first time in Bharata's *Natyasāstra*. It is interesting to see that even Bharata thinks that the *gunas*, alias the "literary virtues," and the *dosas*, alias the "faults," and the *alamkāras*, the "embellishments", exist "only to arouse *rasa*". This he considers 'the main function of drama'. But again it is apparent from the *Nātyasāstra* itself that this theory may be older than Bharata. Although the theory of *rasa* was first put forward as pertaining to dramaturgy, many critics came to use it for the wider field of poetry. It was Anandavardhana and his great commentator Abhinavagupta, who dealt with *rasa* and its communication through suggestion systematically. As K.K. Raja points out, there is no conflict between the theories of *dhvani* and *rasa*. *Dhvani* deals with the method of creation and *rasa*

with the final effect of the production. Abhinavagupta himself comments on *rasa* as it appears in poetry: . . . *rasa* applies to (non-dramatic) poetry as well, where in place of realism and convention that apply to we do not feel the same emotions. We do not become violent nor do we weep and roll in the mud. What we do experience is the suggestion of the emotion, the generalized essence of emotions called anger and grief.

The 6th and 7th chapters of the *Natyasastra*, known as the *Rasadyaya* and *Bhavaadyaya* respectively, together bring out the concept of the *Bhava-Rasa* theory of Bharata, and have hence become the bedrock for all deliberations on aesthetics, including the most brilliant contribution of Abhinavaguptacharya, whose Abhinavabharati remains till date the best commentary on the *Natyasastra*. "*Bhava*" is derived from the root 'bhu'-bhavati, that is, 'to become', 'to come into existence'. Bharata qualifies *Bhava*, saying 'bhavayanti iti bhava', that is, a thing or mental state that brings its awareness or makes one conscious of it, which pervades like a particular odour. Bharata, in the *Natyasastra*, classifies the *Rasa* under eight categories (*ashtarasa*) and gives the corresponding *Bhava* which gives rise to the *rasa*. These are known as *Sthayi Bhava* or pervading stable emotion [The emotions are related to typical and universal situations and generate definable patterns of action. They are called *sthayibhava*, permanent emotions, because they always remain embedded in human organism and character]. They are *rati* (love), *hasya* (mirth), *shoka* (grief), *krodha* (anger), *utsaha* (heroism), *bhaya* (fear), *jugupsa* (disgust), and *vismaya* (wonder). The corresponding eight *Rasas* resultant from the *Sthayibhavas* are *sringara* (amorous), *hasya* (humorous), *karuna* (pathetic), *raudra* (furious), *vira* (valorous), *bhayanaka* (horrific), *bibhatsa* (repugnant), and *adbhuta* (wondrous).

There are three types of *Bhava*, namely, *Sthayi* (eight types), *Vyabhichari* (thirty three), and *Satvika* (eight), totalling to forty-nine. The *Satvika bhava* are the physical manifestation of intense emotion. They are *sthamba* (petrification), *sveda* (perspiration), *romancha* (horripilation), *svarabheda* (voice change), *vepathu* (trembling), *vaivarnya* (facial colour change), *asru* (weeping), and *pralaya* (fainting). *Vibhava* is the reason or cause (*karana*), the main stimulation being termed as *alambana vibhava* (the determinant), and the external factors that are additional causes termed as *uddipana vibhava* (excitant). *Anubhava* is the consequent physical reaction through action, word and facial expression that follows (*anu*), as the impact of the *vibhava*. The thirty-three *vyabhichari bhava* (also referred to as *sanchari bhava* in some editions), are transitory, fleeting emotions based on psychological states of the mind. Several such emotions follow one after the other, one replacing the other, strengthening the *sthayi bhava* at each stage, till finally the *sthayibhava* is established and there is '*Rasanubhava*'. "Just as in music a procession of notes in certain combinations reveals a characteristic melodic whole or raga,

similarly it seems that the representation of bhavas reveals rasa as an aesthetic whole" (Pande). In the play *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, Kalidasa uses King Dushyanta's coming to the hermitage to pay homage to the sage, as the *alambana vibhava*. The girls' conversations, the bee, their attire, the flower garden and such others become the *uddipana vibhava* the excitant factor. On Dushyanta's entry, fleeting emotions like confusion, wonder, fear, curiosity, coy bashfulness etc., seem to fill the minds of all the characters present. The blossoming of love between Shakuntala and Dushyanta is gradually established through the reactions of both to the conversation of the sakhis with the King. If the '*patra*' [candidate] enacting as Shakuntala is able to show the *Satvika bhava* of horripilation (*romancha*) or *vepathu* (trembling) out of the new experience of love which is strange to an inmate of the Hermitage and Dushyanta is able to portray *sthambha* (petrification) on seeing her beauty and *romancha* on knowing her lineage, then the *rati sthayi bhava* gets established in the mind of the people who experience the *sringara rasa* in the *kavya*.

## Conclusion

According to Bharata *Bhava* and *Rasa* are dependent on each other for realization. The performer or producer, be it an actor, dancer, singer, instrumentalist, or stage craftsman, should be conscious of the *sthayi bhava* and the *rasa* as they strive to establish. This will help them realize their '*siddhi*' (accomplishment) through '*Rasotpatti*' (emanation of *Rasa*). *Rasa* is a unique union of the two opposites, tension and tranquillity which is at times beyond tangible reality. The content of a poem, which is man's social experience replete with contradictions, evokes reverberations of feelings in the reader's heart. But the feelings and emotions do not rise and subside randomly; their movements are strictly controlled and disciplined by the objective structure and texture, which is the form of the poem. Just as the poem achieves an inseparable integration of content and form, poetic experience unites the tension born out of conflicting emotions. In conclusion we may say that the understanding and savouring of poetry is enriched by the keys offered by the *rasa* theory. Western poetics have offered many tools towards the understanding of poetry but none equal the comprehensive and nuanced understanding that *rasa* theory aids through its cognitive and practical application. *Rasa* theory will help towards formulating a comprehensive theory of appreciation of poetry, since certain elemental emotions which are expressible in art form are through subtler subsidiary emotions thereof.

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