



Rasa, The Indian Aesthetic Theory: An Overview

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Abstract

Rasa is an essence of every work of art like dance, music and Literature that can only be suggested and not articulated. It is a type of thoughtful abstraction in which the world of physical forms is permeated by the interiority of the human feelings. However, the word may seem magical at first but it is not so in actual because to experience rasa one does not need any magical spell but has to be sensitive enough to connect with the emotions of the work. It is the concept of emotions, connections and feelings. This research paper aims to explore the meaning, history and scope of rasa theory in present scenario.

Keywords Aesthetic, Emotion, Feeling, Indian, Literature, Rasa

1. Introduction

The custom of Indian aesthetics is the most established and vastest of any, with works radiating from the far north in Kashmir to the profound south in Tamil Nadu. As of now Indian aesthetic theories have crossed the areas and have become helpful to practically all researchers and scholars of different fields and especially in the field of Literature.

Natya Shastra, a first-millennium BCE Sanskrit Literature on the arts that is credited to Bharata Muni, contains a chapter (Chapter 6) devoted to the rasa concept. The works of Kashmiri Shaivite philosopher Abhinavagupta (about 1000 CE), illustrating the endurance of a long-standing aesthetic tradition in ancient India, provide its most thorough exposition in theatre, music, and other performing arts. The primary goal of performance art, according to the Rasa theory of the Natya Shastra, is to take spectators into a different, perpendicular reality filled with wonder and delight where they are able to experience the core of their own perception and reflect on religious and ethical concerns.

Rasa is thoroughly discussed by Bharata in his Natyashastra. He also talks about Rasanispatti and Rasasvada, which refer to the creation of Rasa and the process of appreciation, respectively. According to Bharata, rasa is produced by the sthayibhava of vibhava, anubhava, and vyabhicharibhava. It is the anation of rasa process. The experience of tasting rasa is the other procedure. The created rasa, also known as "siddhi," is tasted. Some believe that ananda is what arises through rasasvada. In actuality, rasa is made at the conclusion of the rasanispatti process. Bharata discusses the drsti of rasa, sthayibhavas, and bhavas in the eighth chapter of the Natyashastra. These drsti have relationships with actors. Music is used in the play in stage production techniques. The spectator is not listening to music. According to Bharata, rasas are where svaras are attained. Bharata also notes that various rasas might elicit siddhi, indicating that rasa is distinct from siddhi.

In Indian Aesthetic theory, the Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica define *rasa* which in Sanskrit means *essence, taste, or flavour*, literally *sap* or *juice*, as :

The Indian concept of aesthetic flavour is an essential element of any work of visual, literary, or performing art that can only be suggested, not described. It is a kind of contemplative abstraction in which the inwardness of human feelings suffuses the surrounding world of embodied forms.

(Encyclopaedia Britannica 1)

Rasa theory essentially looks at different emotions, as well as the rationale of their evocation in a thoughtful reader, or how they are portrayed, proposed and communicated through a work. The central target of a poet is to depict feelings and auxiliary sentiments which oversee the activities of a person. *Rasa*, therefore, means poetic pleasure i.e. an aesthetic experience after reading any text or poem. The theory of Rasa can be explained in one sutra as given by Bharata, as he says, “*vibhava anubhava-vyabhichari-samyogad rasanisapattihi*” (Natyashastra Ch 6). It means that because of the merging of *vibhava*, *anubhava*, and *vyabhichari*, *rasa* is created. Here *sthayibhavas* are the permanent emotions or feelings, *vyabhicharibhavas* are the transitory (fleeting) emotions, *vibhavas* are the excitant or stimulating determinants and *anubhavas* are the consequent or ensuing response.

According to Bharata, nine *sthayibhavas* further gives rise to the *rasas*. These are *rati* (love), *hasa* (laughter), *soka* (grief), *krodha* (anger), *utsaha* (enthusiasm), *bhaya* (fear), *jugupsa* (disgust), *vismaya* (astonishment), *nirveda* (indifference/renunciation). The respective *rasas* evoked by *stayibhavas* are *sringara* (erotic), *hasya* (comic), *karuna* (compassionate), *raudra* (wrathful), *vir* (heroic), *bhayanaka* (terrifying), *bibhatsa* (odious), *adbhuta* (marvellous), *shanta* (tranquil). The various genres of English Literature contain all of these *rasas*. While appreciating Literature or any work of art, one can obtain an enormous level of pleasure from these *rasas*.

2. Literature Review

After reviewing the literature it was found that Comparative Literature is in vogue and writers and researchers have vividly taken up to study the works from different World Literature and have compared them using different critical theories. Indian aesthetic theories have significantly gained a place among western theories as well. The review of Literature has helped in creating a focused outlook toward further research work. Furthermore, the research gap in the reviewed Literature motivated me to take this research and explore intense information on rasa theory.

3. Objective

The purpose of this research is to offer a fresh perspective to literary experts. Literature and literary criticism are two sides of the same coin. This research is a reminder to the literary world that how Rasa theory that studies human sentiments is a prevalent humanistic approach in the field of literary criticism. Centuries have passed but the essence of rasa has not faded. In modern times different fields have been borrowing the concept of rasa to analyze different perspectives within their field. So in Literature, its spark should be kept preserved for future readers.

4. Research Methodology

The research methodology adopted for the research includes close reading, and interpreting the primary source chosen for study. An extensive reading technique is used to collect the data from different sources. The data collection process will involve interpretation and analysis.

5. Meaning of Aesthetic

The term *aesthetics* comes from the Greek word *aisthetikos* which means *perception*. It is a branch of philosophy that deals with *beauty* and *taste*. Aesthetics studies the philosophy of the beauty, and arts. The first scholar to use the term 'aesthetics' in Europe was Baumgarten in 1735. He explains aesthetics as a delightful activity of thought process. In the field of Literature, work is said to be *aesthetic* if it stimulates the senses of the reader and provides pleasure. Indian aesthetics has given an enormous scope of human experiences, ideas,

enduring qualities, convictions, and joys. The custom of Indian aesthetics is the most established and vastest of any, with works radiating from the far north in Kashmir to the profound south in Tamil Nadu. As of now Indian aesthetic theories have crossed the areas and have become helpful to practically all researchers and scholars of different fields and especially in the field of Literature.

6. Meaning of Rasa

The word 'rasa' has different definition according to different subjects and languages. However the word's etymology is that it appears in the ancient Vedic Literature with different meanings and contexts. It denotes a "liquid", "an extract" and "flavor" in the Rigveda. Rasa in Atharvaveda refers to both "taste" and "the sap of grain". In Upanishads it means "essence, self-luminous consciousness, quintessence". The connotations of rasa in post Vedic Literature are "extract, essence, juice or tasty liquid". It is a term used in Indian arts to define the aesthetic flavour of any written, musical, or visual work that elicits an emotion or feeling in the audience or reader that cannot be put into words. It refers to the writer's intentional use of emotional flavours and essence that a "sensitive spectator" or sahridaya, can appreciate and relate to the work with without being detached.

7. Origin of Rasa Theory

Rasa Theory was originated by the ancient Indian sage Bharata Muni and is a part of his renowned work *Natyashastra*, a Sanskrit treatise on performing arts. The complete version of *Natyashastra* was said to have been written between 200 BCE to 200 CE. It consists of 36 Chapters that comprises 6000 shlokas. The 6th chapter of *Natyashastra* deals with 'Rasa' whereas the 7th chapter is about 'Bhavas'. The text continues to evolve in the modern day in form of multiple manuscripts, each with a different chapter title and content. However, the most thorough exposition of Rasa Theory in drama, music and dance is found in the works of Abhinavagupta. To amuse the audience is the desired effect of performing arts according to the Rasa Theory. However, its primary purpose should be to transport the audience into a different, parallel reality of happiness where they can experience the core of their own mind and think about mystical and ethical issues.

8. Scope of Rasa Theory

The Rasa Theory in Indian Aesthetics has a profound and enduring impact on a number of disciplines including Literature, performing arts, and cultural studies. The following aspects highlights the scope and influence of the Rasa Theory:

1. **Emotional Experience:** Rasa theory helps to explore and comprehend the emotional experiences elicited by artistic expressions. It identifies a range of emotions, known as rasas, including love (sringara), humor (hasya), compassion (karuna), anger (raudra), heroism (vir), fear (bhayanaka), disgust (bibhatsa), and wonder (adbhuta).
2. **Artistic Creation:** Rasa theory provides guidelines for creators to evoke specific emotions in their audience through their work. Artists use various techniques such as language, rhythm, melody, gesture, and form to convey these emotions effectively.
3. **Audience Response:** The theory emphasizes the role of the audience in the artistic experience. It suggests that the audience participates actively in the creation of rasa by empathizing with the characters or situations portrayed in the artwork.
4. **Philosophical Underpinnings:** Rasa theory is deeply rooted in Indian philosophical traditions, particularly in the concept of aesthetic enjoyment (rasavada) and the idea of transcending the mundane through artistic experience.
5. **Application in different Art Forms:** While rasa theory originated in the context of Sanskrit Literature and classical Indian dance and theatre, its principles have been applied to various art forms worldwide. It has influenced not only Indian classical arts but also contemporary Literature, theatre, film, and even aspects of psychology and neuroscience.
6. **Interdisciplinary Relevance:** Rasa theory has implications beyond the arts and aesthetics. Scholars have explored its connections with psychology, cognitive science, and philosophy of mind, examining how artistic experiences shape human emotions, cognition, and consciousness.

Overall, the scope of rasa theory is expansive, encompassing both theoretical exploration and practical application in the creation and appreciation of art across cultures and disciplines.

9. Evolution of Rasa Theory

Rasa theory has evolved over centuries, undergoing changes and adaptations in response to cultural shifts, philosophical developments, and the exploration of new artistic forms. Here are some key aspects of its evolution:

1. **Ancient Origins:** Rasa theory finds its roots in ancient Indian texts such as the *Natyashastra* attributed to Bharata Muni (around 2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE). Initially, it focused on the performing arts, particularly classical dance and theatre, outlining principles for actors, playwrights, and musicians to evoke emotions in the audience.
2. **Development of Rasas:** The original *Natyashastra* described eight primary rasas, or emotional flavours. Over time, scholars expanded the list to include additional rasas, sometimes numbering nine or even twelve. Each rasa was associated with specific emotional states and aesthetics.
3. **Philosophical Interpretations:** Rasa theory became intertwined with various philosophical schools in India, including Vedanta, Buddhism, and Tantra. Philosophers such as Abhinav Gupta (10th – 11th Century CE) and Rupa Goswami (15th – 16th Century CE) provided deep philosophical interpretations of rasa theory, linking aesthetic experience with spiritual transformation and the quest for self-realization.
4. **Regional Variations:** As Indian culture diversified across different regions, rasa theory underwent regional adaptations. For example, in South India, scholars like Matanga and Sarangadeva contributed to the development of Carnatic music theory, incorporating rasa principles into musical composition and performance.
5. **Influence on Literature and Fine Arts:** Rasa theory extended its influence beyond performing arts to Literature, painting, sculpture, and architecture. It provided a framework for understanding and appreciating various forms of artistic expression, guiding artists in conveying emotions and evoking aesthetic pleasure.
6. **Modern Interpretations:** In the modern era, scholars and artists have revisited rasa theory in light of contemporary aesthetics and global cultural exchanges. They have explored its relevance to Western art

forms, contemporary Literature, theatre, and cinema, adapting its principles to new contexts and creative practices.

7. Interdisciplinary Connections: Rasa theory has also intersected with other disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, and cognitive science. Researchers have investigated how artistic experiences influence human emotions, cognition, and brain activity, drawing parallels between rasa theory and contemporary theories of emotion and perception.

Rasa theory thereby, has evolved from its ancient roots into a dynamic framework that continues to inspire, artists, scholars, and thinkers across disciplines, reflecting the enduring relevance of aesthetic experience in human culture and consciousness.

10. Conclusion

Initially 'beauty' was the concept of the west and was confined in the writings starting from Plato. However, Indian aesthetics was first explored internationally when the importance of oriental studies came to light in more recent years. Many western artists and critics concluded that Western art could learn a lot from Eastern practices as a result of finding significant insights into oriental aesthetics that apply to art and aesthetic experience everywhere. From the earliest beginnings of 'Bharata' and 'Bhamah' up until the modern day, numerous books have been composed in Sanskrit to illuminate the reader on the characteristics and scope of poetry as well as on the essence of poetic pleasure. Sanskrit literature is known for its abundance of writings of a philosophical and speculative nature. The development of rasa theory is considered the pinnacle of Sanskrit poetics, and the rasa school is unquestionably the most influential among those who study the essence of poetry. Similar to this, the *dhvani*-theory of Sanskrit poetry is well known and prominent in many ways.

In a nutshell, *rasa* is that sensation of contentment experienced after a person has generalized himself to include all the circumstances and emotions of an actor. The rasa generalization allows a poet to experience poetry with the same degree of pleasure as a real actor did during their original acting. This rasa transports the poet's enjoyment to the same context, drive, and setting in which only those sentiments are experienced for the first time by the aesthetic enthusiast.

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