"Rasas" as Springs of Art in Indian Aesthetics

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THEORY AND ART OF RASA

INDIAN ART has obviously a religious intention and a metaphysical aim. At the same time it is not an adjunct of religion and metaphysics, but belongs in the traditional scheme of knowledge to the realm of Dance, Dramaturgy (Nātyaśāstra), and Poetics (Alamkāraśāstra), revealing and communicating the major moods and emotions of man (rasas). According to the Nātyaśāstra (dramaturgy) of Bharata (c. second century B.C. to second century A.D.), “rasa (literally, flavor, relish) is the seed and fruit of the arts.” The arts generate and consolidate moods, sentiments, and emotions (rasa), freed from the fluctuations of fleeting desires and impulses, focus and diffuse these in the minds and hearts of the people.

Sylvain Levi, commenting on the Indian theater, observes: “Indian genius produced a new art, the symbol and summary of which is the word rasa, and which can be condensed in one brief formula: the poet (the sculptor or the painter) does not express, but he suggests.” That suggestion is the soul of artistic interpretation is emphasized by the classical Indian theory of Dhvani expounded by Anandavardhana. European art, rooted in the definition and perfection of finite forms and appearances, depicts and clarifies external phenomena. Indian art, together with Indian myth and legend, by which it is constantly inspired and replenished, suggests rather than depicts inner visions and experiences. The quality by which we judge the visions and performances of the Indian artist is rasa which in Indian poetics is characterized as aloukika or that which does not belong to this world. Abstract, universal, and enduring sentiments and emotions, whatever be their nature, which the artist distils and which leads to impersonal delight akin to the supreme bliss obtained in contemplation of the Absolute, constitute rasa. The Indian artist through his elevated yoga meditation, that engenders complete detachment and universality of self, and subdues the fluctuations of passing desires and emotions, evokes his own abstract or universal moods and sentiments or rasas. His handiwork, properly imbued with these, effectively communicates these to the beholder or devotee. According to the Alamkāra Rāghava: “Aesthetic beauty cannot exist unless the heart of the man of good taste is moved to impersonal delight by the fascination of the expression of rasa.” What holds good of poetry, drama, dance, and histrionic art holds good also of painting and sculpture. Jayadeva, author of the Candrāloka, makes this absolutely clear in the following words, “The enjoyable rasa or the aesthetic experience in poetry, drama and any other art-work has to pass through the successive stage of bibhāva, etc., and then only can it become the enduring sentiment” (sthāyī-bhava) (D. S. Sukla’s translation).
The consolidation and evocation of rasa, then, represent the function of all the fine arts. This is the central conception in India since Bharata's *Natyashastra* first expounded the doctrine of rasa with its eight categories, viz., Love or Happiness, Gaiety or Humor, Compassion, Fury, Valor, Awesomeness, Loathesomeness, and Wonder. From the third or fourth century onwards Silence or Tranquillity was not only added as the ninth category but considered as the supreme rasa. The *Vishuddharnottara* and the *Aparajita-pracchha* (c. third to fourth century A.D.) expound nine rasas, while the *Samrāṅgana-sūtradhara* (c. eleventh-century A.D.) treats eleven rasas expressed in images and paintings.

The eight ultimate and generic categories of rasas, according to Bharata, emerge from the following “basic states of consciousness” (sthāyī-bhāva) in order, viz., Love, merriment, grief, anger, effort, fear, repulsion, and surprise. The “transient feelings” (vyābhichāri-bhāva) are thirty-three, viz., despondency, langour, apprehension, envy, etc. What is significant in the classic Indian treatment of aesthetics is the process of impersonalization or universalization which dissociates the natural or mundane emotion from the particular character and specific situation so that it is relished simply as abstract, aesthetic sentiment in the supramundane (aloukika) plane. In other words, in drama, acting, painting, sculpture, and music, we do not experience fleeting, shifting, and accidental states of mind, true of particular persons and situations, but abiding sentiments that transcend persons, times, and places, and invest the mind of “a person of attuned heart” (sa-hṛdaya) with serenity (viśrānti). Artistic presentation overcomes the restlessness of passion (rajas) and the inertia of ignorance or darkness (tamas) and introduces the silence and beatitude of the pure mind (sattva). “Aesthetic experience,” according to Bhaṭṭa-Nāyaka, “is the experience of the universalized aesthetic object by the universalized subject in the state of perfect bliss (ananda), due to the predominance of sattva.” That is why aesthetic enjoyment is considered akin to the supreme bliss of Brahman-apprehension. Indian thought stresses the fruitful interchange between the aesthetic and spiritual moods and apprehension.

**DERIVATION OF RASAS FROM GUNAS**

The nine rasas of Indian fine arts have their ultimate derivation from the three different basic primary attributes (guṇas) that according to Indian thought enter into the making of the human personality, sattva or purity, i.e., universality and impersonality whose expressions are silence (śānta) and compassion (karuna); rajas, i.e., dynamic creativity whose expressions are love (sṛṅgāra), valor (vīra), and laughter (hāsya); and tamas or ignorance, unbalance, and inertia, whose expressions are wonder (adbhuta), fury (raudra), loathesomeness (bibhatsa), and awesomeness (bhayankara). Just as “the Supreme Being as Creator (Brahma) lives and moves in sattvagun, Being as Preserver (Viṣṇu) in rajas, Being as Destroyer (Rudra) in tamas, and Being (Paramāśvara) Himself in nirguṇa,” so, according to Bharata, Viṣṇu embodies himself in sṛṅgāra, i.e., youth, love, and happiness; Pramathas in hāsya, i.e., merriment; Yama in karuna, i.e., pathos or compassion; Śiva in raudra, i.e., fury; Kāla in bhayankara, i.e., awesomeness; Indra in vīra, i.e., valor; and the unconditioned, unmanifest Brahman (Paramāśvara) in adbhista, i.e., wonder. We have another passage in the *Śukranīti* that classifies the images according to their guṇas and rasas. “An image seated in the meditative posture of a yogi is sattvika, an image seated on a vehicle (vāhana) decked with ornaments and holding weapons or showing gestures of assurance and benediction is rājasika; while the image in wrath and excitement in the pose of fighting and destroying the demons (asuras) is tāmāsika.” Each rasa is derived from one or the other of the three essential guṇas and is a stable, generic or impersonal feeling or imaginative mood based on the artist’s vision of a certain fundamental aspect of Life, Universe, and Reality.
The Samaraṅgasūtradhara in one of its basic slokas refers to bhāva-vyakti or delineation of moods and sentiments as the aim of painting and then proceeds to an elaborate classification of eleven rasas (stable emotions) and eighteen rasa-dṛṣṭis (glances) on which the former depends. "The images are invested with animation (sajiva) by the interplay of hand-gestures and glances, the very basis of dramatics and aesthetics both integrated together (sarvābhinayadarśanāt)." The representation of rasas and rasadrśtis is the essence of both the arts of drama (āngika) and painting (citra)."

The vast array of figures in the great Ajantā paintings express the basic rasas abstractly and reflectively rendered. The dominant rasas are here aloofness and transcendence from the world, sorrow, compassion, anger, love, and wonder. The specific or idiomatic features of expression are entirely dominated by the generic and universal moods or sentiments that obtain bold, perspicuous, enthralling revelations. The masterpieces of representation of the generic rasas at Ajantā are the profound grief of the father of the youth Śrīma killed by mistake by the king of Banaras, the devotions of Rāhula and Yaśodhārā before the Buddha, the śrīgāra of Irandati in love with Purnaka, the supplication of the beggar Brāhmin before Prince Visvanatara, the remorse of Cula Subhadra for causing the death of her elephant spouse, and above all the serenity and compassion of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva. Everywhere the delineation of stable and universal moods and sentiments and of the appropriate expressions of glances and hand gestures is perfect in the frescoes that have been rightly called the artistic treasure house of Asia.

In the Mānasollāsa (c. twelfth century A.D.) Someśvara refers to the bhāvacitras or what may be called lyrical paintings that express the nine abstract sentiments, moods, or rasas. Each rasa must be depicted in its appropriately expressive color. According to both the Nāṭyaśāstra and the Śitparatna the colors of images in painting are light green for love, white for merriment, grey for compassion, red for fury, light orange for heroic energy, black for terror, yellow for wonder, and blue for repulsion. Such is the color expressionism in classical Indian painting. This scheme seems to have been generally adopted in Ajantā, Bāgh, and elsewhere. The Buddhist paintings on palmleaf, the paper manuscripts of Eastern India, Nepal, and Tibet belonging to the Pāla and Ṣena periods, as well as Nepalese and Tibetan scroll paintings are its best illustrations.

Bharata’s Nāṭyaśāstra sums up the theory of image-making thus: "All is futile, the recital of formulae, the counting of beads, austerities and devotions unless one has gained the knowledge of the colour scheme; the true significance of lettering, the hue and the attribute of image." The Śādhana-māla which prescribes the iconography and formulas of meditation of Buddhist Tāntrikaism lays down that the color of the deity should be varied according to the aim of worship; white or yellow for pure meditation; yellow for protection; yellow, green, or red for the purpose of conversion; and blue for striking terror or destroying the enemy. The Mahāyāna Buddhist goddess Tārā who symbolizes enlightenment is white, and green when she is contemplative, benign, and pacific; red, yellow, and blue when she is violent, fierce, and destructive. The blue Tārā, wild and ferocious in her world-shattering activity, has been assimilated into Hindu Tāntrikism and her name Mahācīna Tārā may indicate her probable genesis. Mahāśri Tārā is painted green, and framed behind by green foliage, while Lokanātha is painted silvery white in the MS. of the "Astorahasrika Prajñāpāramitā," attributed to the latter part of the eleventh century (Collection, Asiatic Society, Calcutta). The Buddha’s mother is bright yellow in the same MS. The color scheme in Indian art and worship varies according to the rasa dominant in the psychic make-up of the image.
ABSTRACTION AND
SYMBOLISM VERSUS
REALISM AND NATURALISM

The criterion of all good painting, according to the Visuddhimagottaran, is that it should be expressive or saturated with the appropriate rasa. The Samadarṣaṇastra while giving an exposition of eleven rasas relates eighteen appropriate glances (rasadṛṅās) to the major rasas for evoking these in painting. It also stresses that all sentient creatures should be delineated in painting as manifesting these rasas, and not merely gods, men, and asuras. Not merely gestures, postures, hand-inflections, and movements, but also proper glances are categorized as contributory to the elicitation of the various rasas and bhūvas (bhūva-vyakti). What holds good of painting is true also of sculpture, dance, and histrionic art. It is in this text that the arousal of rasas through rasadṛṅās (glances) in the visual arts received the greatest emphasis. The basic theory that the aim of Indian sculpture and painting is the transformation and consolidation of the transitory desires and emotions (vyābhyūchā or sanchārvabhūva) into the nine or eleven major permanent or universal moods and sentiments (rasas) underlies their abstract, metaphysical, and cosmic character. Indian art, moulding and transforming as it does imagination or feeling into enduring or abstract sentiment, flavor, or joy, is perennial and universal from the viewpoint of its inspirational drives. Bharata also differentiated between lokadharmā (realistic and organic) and nātyadharmā (abstract and ideographic) mode of treatment and stressed that the latter should be preferred. Thus Indian art early developed a predilection for abstraction and symbolism as against realism and naturalism in the enkindling of rasas.

CLASSIFICATION OF IMAGES
ACCORDING TO THE NINE
RASAS

It is now clear that in the Indian theory of aesthetics art springs from the appreciation and maturation of rasa in the mind of the artist, its fruition lies in the diffusion of rasa in the minds of people. In the Nāṭyaśāstra, Viṣṇu is mentioned as the god of love; Pramathas of merriment; Rudra, of fury; Yama, of compassion; Śiva, of fury; Kāla, of terror; Indra, of heroic energy; and Brahman, of wonder. Such is Bharata's classification of the deities of the nine rasas. The various mūrtis in Indian art may be classified according to the nine rasas, the study of which constitutes the foundation of Indian aesthetics. The Supreme Being himself is Rasa. “Having realized Him as Rasa the soul becomes full of bliss,” says the Taittirīya Upaniṣad. These nine rasas (“tastes” or “flavors” or moods), and the corresponding lasting attitudes and sentiments (sthyā-bhūva), are rendered not only by dramatic performances on the stage but also by mūrtis in the temples. Of all the rasas that the images of Indian sculpture or painting distil the predominant one is silence or tranquillity (śānta). The image fulfills its role as a medium of dhyāna as silence is established; then neither the image nor the devotee exists but there is an all-filling oneness in worldless and imageless samādhi. In the table, I give a rough classification of mūrtis according to the nine rasas.

THE QUEST OF UNITY IN ART

According to Abhinavagupta, the nine basic rasas and aesthetic attitudes underlie man's fulfillment of the four-fold values of life (puruṣārtha): love and gaiety are contributory to the goal of sex (kāma); compassion and fury to the goal of occupation and wealth (artha); heroic valor, loathsome, and wonder to the goal of righteousness (dharma); and silence or tranquillity to the goal of freedom from bondage (mokṣa). A distinctive feature of Indian civilization, connected with its metaphysical and aesthetic rather than its religious and theological character, is represented by its search for the total reality through modes of feeling and experience (rasas), both serene and awesome, charming and repellent. The art of no other culture in the world has shown such courage and sincerity, expressing the entire gamut of nine rasas or moods and
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**Classification of Mūrtis According to the Nine Rasas**

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<td>Moods and Emotions (Rasas)</td>
<td>Attitudes and Sentiments (Sthāyi-bhāva)</td>
<td>Images (Mūrti)</td>
<td>Posture (Āsana)</td>
<td>Expressional Glances* (Rasadhviti)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Silence or tranquility (Śanta)</td>
<td>Equanimity (Sama)</td>
<td>Brahmā, Śiva, Viṣṇu, the Buddha, Tirthankara, Uma, Sarasvatī, Prajñāpāramitā, and Tārā.</td>
<td>Seated cross-legged (Vajraparyaṇa)</td>
<td>Not specified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Love (Srṅgāra, Prema)</td>
<td>Attraction (Rati)</td>
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<td>Seated with leg pendant (La-lita, Ardhaparyaṇa)</td>
<td>Kānta</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Joy, gaiety, or humor (Hāsya)</td>
<td>Merriment (Lasya)</td>
<td>The dancing figures of Śiva, Ganeśa, Kṛṣṇa, Devī, Sarasvatī, Surāsundarī, Asparā, and Nāyikā.</td>
<td>Dance (Nāṭya)</td>
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<td>Fear (Bhaya)</td>
<td>Mahākāla, Heruka, Bhurukuti, Yamāntaka, Vighnāntaka, Tārā, Kurukulla, and Chhinnamastā.</td>
<td>Standing with one leg bent, (Pratyālidhā)</td>
<td>Bibhatsa</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Loathsomeness (Bibhatsa)</td>
<td>Diagust (Jugupsa)</td>
<td>Hayagriva, Parnaśavartī, Śītalā, and Vajracarccikā.</td>
<td>Standing with one leg bent (Pratyālidhā)</td>
<td>Kuncita</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The list of glances is given differently in the Nāṭyaśāstra, the Abhinayadarpana, the Mirror of Gestures, and the Samarakāpanasūtra.
emotions. Rage, fury, terror, bewilderment, and despair are embodied in Indian mārtis grandly, majestically, and powerfully in a transcendent and cosmic setting. These amply demonstrate that Indian art aims at the revelation of metaphysical truth and sublimity rather than sensuous delight and beauty, and realism, rather than idealism. The expression of the totality of rasas in art is, no doubt, an index of the freedom, sensitiveness, and boldness of the human adventure in India. Image-making, ritual, and contemplation are linked with the realization of the values of life in their entirety, each image (mārti) of meditation and worship focusing on one or other dominant mood and emotion or stable attitude. Sometimes the image, however, blends several emotional states of mind and aesthetic qualities. For both Indian metaphysics and religion stress the ambivalence of antinomic categories, moods, and values in the dialectical march of the human soul, whose enlightenment is understood and realized as a transcendence of the various pairs of opposites. The deities of Tāṇtrikism often combine simultaneously both compassionate and terrific, auspicious and wrathful, charming and repellent aspects and moods. It is through meditation that the devotee rises to the transcendent reality that dissolves all pairs of antinomic truths, values, and sentiments (rasas). The entire Indian science of gestures that defines the positions and movements of the head, neck, eyes, hands, and fingers, as mirroring specific moods and sentiments (rasas), is taken over from the dance to mārti for the cultivation and apprehension of rasa defined as aloukika or that which does not belong to the mundane world. All the fine arts in India seek the maturation and stabilization of rasas. Indian art achieves this goal that belongs, indeed, to the metaphysical sphere through recapturing the rhythms of nature and the cosmos and the tremulous movements, gestures, and glances of the human body in classical dance. All mārtis or images in Indian art—men, women, angels, and gods—dance. Thus do the artist and devotee alike enter into the cosmic plan of life and realize the Absolute or the Supreme Spirit (Paramātman) as transcendent (aloukika) and universal (sādhāraṇa) rasa in which the incompatible aesthetic qualities and sentiments (rasa) of the charming and the grim, the auspicious and the awesome, the serene and the heroic may be perfectly juxtaposed. Such is the Indian mode of revelation of the metaphysical reality by art that simulates the aim and function of dance.

India is in an endless quest of unity in every field. In the pursuit of Beauty her art realizes the same transcendent unity through the harmony of opposite and conflicting aesthetic moods and emotions (rasas) that her metaphysics and religion in the pursuit of Truth and Sublimity respectively achieve through the reconciliation of antinomic, dialectical principles and values of life, thought, and experience. Indian art throws open the vistas of direct vision of the non-dual, transcendent reality (aparokṣa-anubhūti), inducing a profound joy and exaltation of the soul (camatkāra). Jagaññātha, in his well-known treatise on Indian aesthetics, the Rasagarīghāḍhāra, defines this unique and universal feeling of exaltation as the emotional correlate of all art-creation and appreciation. To integrate the mind, personality, and society, and saturate them with a thrill of exaltation, harmony, and rhythm (chhandomāyā) is the function of all true art.

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