

AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY – AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Indian rhetoricians, dramatists and poets have in the course of the last two thousand years drafted theories of aesthetics and literature. The paper briefly examines, re-considers and enumerates some of the principal ideas that highlight the understanding of emotional transformation and aesthetic pleasure. The essential considerations in the Alamkara and the Dhvani schools, and those of rhetoricians who followed Abhinavagupta in the tenth century, figure in this narrative along with the variations that the bhakti school effected in the discourse.

Keywords: artistic experience, artistic creation, vyabhicharibhavas, theories of Suggestion, aesthetic sensibility, aesthetic sensibility

Indian epics have a long history of representing intense emotions in an unparalleled mode. This representation is often carried out with a fine understanding of the consciousness that informs emotions. The *Ramayana*, one of India's most celebrated epics has been subjected to diverse readings because of the complexity of emotions as well as the excellence of poetic craftsmanship. Valmiki, who authored the pioneering epic poem in Sanskrit, narrates the story of the protagonist Sita, daughter of Janaka and wife to Rama, the Prince of Ayodhya. The tale moves through tides of highs and lows in terms of circumstance, sentiment and expression. The *Ramayana* plays upon the emotions of its characters but dwells steadily only on two marked emotions – pity and grief – from the beginning to end, thereby opening up new ways of understanding affect in literature.

Anandavardhana, the distinguished 9th century aesthetician, wrote a verse on the composition of the *Ramayana* which draws our attention to the essence of the epic. He writes in *Dhvanyaloka* that Valmiki had been inspired into writing his magnum opus at the sight of a hunter killing a *crowncha* bird with his arrows. They were male and female birds and when one of them was killed by the hunter, the other bird lamented over their

separation. The sorrow of that bird moved the poet and he became grief-stricken. The depth of emotion behind this incident inspired him to compose the epic narrating the story of the separation of Rama and Sita who lived in the age of the *Thretha* ¹ *Yuga*. Anandavardhana is of the view that artistic creation results from deep emotion. Valmiki's poetic outpouring born out of deep sorrow enabled Indian aestheticians to understand the nature of poetic inspiration. Anandavardhana's doctrine of *dhvani*, plays down the denotative sense of the word and raises to dominance the power of suggestion. The role of *dhvani* contributes to the audience's entire outlook on the dynamics of emotions in the *Ramayana*.

It is believed that when an artist experiences an emotion, it results in an artistic creation which suits his/her will, taste or any other affective factor. This problematizes our understanding of artistic creativity. The emotive experience" that which is viewed or witnessed by the artist"- becomes causative of artistic creation. The major emotions or *rasas*, classified into nine by Indian aestheticians are *Sringara* (Love), *Vira* (Valour), *Hasya* (Humour), *Raudra* (Anger), *Bhayanaka* (Fear), *Karuna* (Compassion or Sadness), *Adbhutam* (Delight or Wonder), *Bheebhatsam* (Disgust) and *Santa* (Peace or Calm). The word *rasa* means aesthetic relish or enjoyment. In the beginning, every feeling or emotion is experienced at the level of the human. When that human experience is transmuted to an artistic experience, it becomes transpersonal and moves beyond the limits of time, place and the particular individual concerned. In this transformation of an emotive experience to an artistic experience, the creative self of the artist gets erased from the picture. When it thus moves from the particular to the universal, it provides matter for aesthetic enjoyment to competent readers, spectators, audience or *sahrudaya* or *rasika* (the one who enjoys). *Sahrudaya* or *rasika* is a person who is endowed with the necessary faculties to cross over the obstacles he/she may encounter during the course of aesthetic appreciation. In the past centuries, poets, dramatists and other artists composed thousands of works depicting the stories of epics from different perspectives, in various media. Such secondary creations inspired still others to imagine the story of Sita and Rama in multitudinous ways in poetry, drama, music, dance and so on. In *Ramayana*, Sita and Rama experienced a deep sorrow occasioned by separation. Valmiki narrates their story in a touching manner. The artistic experience that is universal and eternal, nullifies the distance of the original characters of Sita and Rama, to a contemporary or future audience.

Sage Bharata in his masterly work *Natyasastra*, brought forth the theory of *rasa* which is the pivotal concept of aesthetic enjoyment in India. This was laid down in the famous aphorism "*vibhava anubhava vyabhichari samyogad rasa nishpathih*" which means

that *Vibhava* (the cause), *anubhava* (expression), *vyabhicharibhava* (the transient or changing emotions), in combination with one another, evokes *rasa*. Each of the terms of this aphorism was interpreted and re-interpreted, annotated and re-annotated by various scholars in later times. Anandavardhana brought forth an extended concept of *rasa-dhvani* in *Dhvanyaloka* elaborating the idea of *rasa*. He explained the concept of *rasa* and argued that suggestive meaning (*dhvani*) is of the highest importance and value. Arriving at the suggestive meaning is determined by the imaginative capacity and refinement of the person involved. For a word, there can be three levels meaning:

- 1) *Vachya* (surface level meaning);
- 2) *Lakshya* (intended meaning); and
- 3) *Vyangya* (suggestive meaning). The experience of *rasa* effectively culminates in *rasa-dhvani*, where the suggestive meaning evokes several resonances. In certain contexts, the first and the second levels of meaning disappear and the suggestive meaning gains greater importance. Artistic enjoyment is derived from the comprehension and appreciation of this third level of meaning.

According to Sage Bharata and his followers, any kind of artistic creation should lead to the aesthetic experience of *rasa*. That leads to another question: in whom does the *rasa* exist or act – is it in the original writer or in an imitator or in the reader/spectator? Though it is not easy to answer, we can say that the emotion at the personal level cannot be an artistic, transpersonal experience, and hence an object of enjoyment. Only when a human experience is elevated and transformed into an artistic experience, does it become an object that is capable of inducing aesthetic experience. Another issue that props up in this context is this: which *rasaanubhava* or emotive experience is important and which is unimportant? Some experiences are transitory and some others are permanent. The temporary emotions will come and go according to the situation and personal temperament. Permanent emotions are more enduring and effective. The temporary emotions are called *vybhichari bhavas*, and the enduring ones are termed *sthayi bhavas*. The temporary emotions complement the permanent emotions. Permanent emotions, eight in number according to Bharata, were later enhanced to nine. Temporary emotions are thirty-three in number. The thirty-three temporary emotions will complement the nine *sthayibhavas* or permanent emotions. In a literary work, for example, in a drama, there will generally be one permanent emotion which is expressed throughout the play and the temporary emotions will support the expression of the main emotion. All the four types of acting (*vachya* or oral, *angika* or gestural, *aharya* or through dress and appearance, and *sattvika*, that which is related to personal expression) will be suited to the permanent emotion or *sthayibhava*. For generating *sthayibhava* two factors (*vibhavas*) are necessary:

1) *alambana vibhava* (the cause) and 2) *uddipana vibhava* (factors which heighten the cause).

The 33 *vyabhichari bhavas* are as follows:

1) *Nirvedham* (Calmness or state of being withdrawn)

2) *Glaani* (Sadness)

3) *Shanka* (Doubt)

4) *Asuya* (Jealousy)

5) *Madam* (Mad Urge)

6) *Shramam* (Tiredness due to work)

7) *Alasyam* (Exhaustion)

8) *Dainyam* (Helplessness)

9) *Chintha* (Thought)

10) *Moham* (Desire)

11) *Smrthi* (Remembrance)

12) *Drithi* (Courage)

13) *Vrida* (Shyness)

14) *Chapalatha* (Unsteadiness)

15) *Harsham* (Joy)

16) *Avegam* (Enthusiasm)

17) *Jadatha* (Inactivity)

- 18) *Garvam* (Ego)
- 19) *Vishadam* (Depression)
- 20) *Outsukyam* (Inquisitiveness)
- 21) *Nidra* (Sleep)
- 22) *Apasmaram* (Fitness)
- 23) *Suptham* (Sleep)
- 24) *Vibhodham* (Alertness)
- 25) *Amarsham* (Dislike)
- 26) *Avahitham* (Hiding)
- 27) *Ugratha* (Fearfulness)
- 28) *Mati* (Intelligence)
- 29) *Vyadhi* (Disease)
- 30) *Unmadam* (Madness)
- 31) *Maranam* (Death)
- 32) *Trasam* (Shivering)
- 33) *Vitarka* (Hesitation or Doubt)

Among the later theoreticians, the great author Bhoja, an emperor who lived and ruled the kingdom of Dhar around 1000 AD, brought forth a new concept beyond *Natyasastra* and other works on rhetoric. In his work *Sringaraprakasha*, he put forth the idea that love (*Sringara*) is the basic *rasa*. The *Sthayibhava* (permanent emotion) is not capable of producing *rasa* whereas, *bhavas* are generated from *rasa*. Thus various *bhavas* are produced. He lists 49 *bhavas* produced from *rasa* as follows.

He lists 49 *bhavas* produced from *rasa* as follows.

1. *Rati* (Love or erotic Love)
2. *Harsha* (Joy)
3. *Romancha* (Horripilation)
4. *Dhriti* (Courage)
5. *Garva* (Ego)
6. *Nasa* (Destruction)
7. *Mada* (Mad Urge)
8. *Utkantha* (Anxiety)
9. *Chintha* (Thought)
10. *Smriti* (Remembrance)
11. *Mati* (Intelligence)
12. *Vitarka* (Hesitation))
13. *Utsaha* (Enthusiasm)
14. *Krodha* (Anger)
15. *Amarsha* (Dislike)
16. *Asuya* (Jealousy)
17. *Irshya* (Angry attitude)
18. *Ugrata* (Fearfulness)
19. *Jugupsa* (Aversion)
20. *Vismaya* (Wonder)
21. *Ninda* (Disrespect)
22. *Supta* (Sleepy nature)
23. *Prabodha* (Alertness)

24. *Chapalata* (Unsteadiness)
25. *Alasya* (Exhaustion)
26. *Bhaya* (Fear)
27. *Sanka* (Doubt)
28. *Thrasa* (Wavering)
29. *Vepathu* (Trembling)
30. *Vreeda* (shyness)
31. *Avahittha* (Hiding)
32. *Stambha* (Unfettered)
33. *Glani* (Sadness)
34. *Sveda* (Sweating)
35. *Vyadhi* (Illness)
36. *Unmada* (Madness)
37. *Srama* (Tiredness due to work)
38. *Soka* (Sorrow)
39. *Vishada* (Depression)
40. *Vaivarnya* (Paleness)
41. *Dainya* (Helplessness)
42. *Swarabheda* (Speechlessness)
43. *Avega* (Enthusiasm)
44. *Asrumoksha* (Tearfulness)
45. *Moha* (Desire)
46. *Pralaya* (Unconsciousness)
47. *Jadya* (Inactivity)

48. *Nirveda* (Disinterested, calmness)

49. *Sama* (Peacefulness)

Some of these *bhavas* originate from Rati (Bodily Love) and according to Bhoja, Sringara is the basic and fundamental bhava. It will generate *rasa* and the *rasa* will generate some of the emotive states among the 49 *bhavas*. It is termed the *ahankara-abhimana Sringara*. The word *ahankara* means the feeling of individuality, that is ego, and *abhimana* means self-esteem. According to Bhoja the aesthetic element –aesthetic sweetness – the Sringara *rasa*, is generated from self-esteem and the sense of ego. From this concept of *rasa*, many other *rasas* can be derived at or generated. Out of the 49 *bhavas* listed, any may culminate in an aesthetic experience or be cultivated as an aesthetic experience. For the feeling of Rati (Love) there should be a basic cause, *Ratyalanbana vibhava*. Similarly for all *rasas*, there should be a definite cause and any may develop as a *rasa*, like *anuraga* (Love of youth) or another corresponding *rasa*. The *Sringara rasa* which Bhoja considered as the only basic *rasa* (aesthetic sweetness) is related to the four basic human purposes in life according to Indian thought, namely the *Purusharthas* – *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama*, and *Moksha*. *Dharma* is the sense of duty, *artha* is the pursuit of wealth, *kama* is desire and lust, and *moksha*, liberation from human bondage. In *Sringaraprakasha*, he writes that the Sringara between man and woman or any human being is nourished by the *Purusharthas* since they are the foundation of philosophical rootedness in man.

Many Indian aestheticians are of the opinion that only a person who is a *sahrudaya* or *rasika* can enjoy *rasa* or have an aesthetic experience. As far as Bhoja is concerned, the mind of a *sahrudaya* is not the only primary seat of *rasa*. He proposes the principle of *ahankara* (sense of ego) which underlie all feelings through which characters may imbibe various moods: the poet portrays them, the actor enacts them, and the *rasika* (viewer) is enabled to feel and enjoy them; the seat or aesthetic pleasure is the soul of a cultured person.

Not all persons are real *sahrudayas* or *rasikas* – they cannot enjoy the artistic experience or they may not be equipped for aesthetic enjoyment. Everybody cannot have the *rasa* of *ahankara* (the sense of ego) which helps aesthetic enjoyment or to experience *Sringara* or any other *rasa*. A person's genius at birth, knowledge acquired

from life, contact with persons like teachers and self-training help a person to become a *sahrudaya* or *rasika*.

Anandavardhana, a major aesthetician in the post-Bharata period, put forward the theory of suggestion (*dhvani*). According to him, the suggestive meaning of a word is the most important. There are three levels of meaning for a word: the sense gained when a word is heard – *vachyārtha*; the intended meaning or *lakshyārtha*; and the special meaning which is perceived by each reader, audience or spectator which is the *vyangyārtha* (the suggested sense). We can relate the experience of *rasa* to the suggestive sense of a word or an artistic object. That meaning may be purely personal as well. The works of the great writer Kalidasain Sanskrit are cited by the aesthetician Anandvardhana to prove the presence and importance of suggestive meaning.

Abhinavagupta, the unique interpreter of the theory of *Suggestion of Anandvardhana* pointed out seven impediments which may obstruct aesthetic enjoyment. They are: ill equipment of a person to imbibe the *rasa* (*Yogyathaviraham*); the influence of a particular place and time (*desakalavisheshasam*); indisposition caused by one's own mental state – joy or sorrow (*Nija Sukha Dukhaadi Vivasaibhava*); lack of clarity (*Asphutetva*); ignorance concerning important and unimportant emotions (*Apradhanata*); uncertainty about the feeling (*rasa* or any object) conveyed (*Samsaya Yogam*); and the limitation of imagination related to the perception (ignorance about the story or character whether historic or newly generated) (*Sambhavanaviraham*). When all these obstacles are surpassed or removed, only then may the viewer have aesthetic pleasure in full measure. According to Bhoja, the real enjoyment of an aesthetic pleasure is as *premam* – i.e. ultimate aesthetic enjoyment. This aesthetic pleasure is related to *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*. *Dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha* are human goals or purposes in life, as suggested by the great sages of ancient time. Aesthetic enjoyment or the concept of *rasa* is close to the philosophy of *Samkhya* or theory of causation. The one who enjoys, the *sahrudaya* or *rasika*, gains aesthetic pleasure from an artistic creation through a suitable medium such as literature, music, dance, action etc. Sage Bharata in the famous aphorism of *rasa sutra*, indicated that the blend of *vibhava* (the cause), *anubhava* (expression) and *vyabhicharibhava* (the unsteady or changing emotions) with *sattvikabhavas*, generates *rasa* as aesthetic enjoyment. For the generation of this aesthetic pleasure, all factors should mutually complement each other. Aesthetic enjoyment is related to the soul of a person though the causes are worldly objects. The poet who has an experience of an emotion (*anubhavana*), tries to convey his emotional enjoyment through his favourite medium – word, music, dance, painting or sculpture. The *anubhava* is

thus transmitted to the preceptor or the *sahrudaya* for *anukarana* (to imitate). At this stage, the reader of the literary work or perceiving artist (either a dancer or musician or actor or a *rasika*) also have *anubhava* or aesthetic pleasure and as a mediator he/she transmits the feeling or emotion he/she enjoys to a third person. This is the third stage and it is *anuvarthana* where an artist of this century imbibes the emotions expressed by the master poet in some early period, and conveys this to the contemporary *rasika* or viewer.

For example, the love of Sakuntala or Dushyanta which was depicted by the poet Kalidasa thousand or more years ago, becomes an object of aesthetic enjoyment for a *rasika* or artist who lives in the 21st. century or future times. Any poet, musician, dancer, actor or any other artist can imbibe the emotion which was an artistic object of enjoyment. In ancient times, it was a personal object and for the poet it became an object of aesthetic experience. It is so for the viewer or *rasika* of any future period. The aesthetic sensibility and artistic form can be influenced by time and place. The content will be the same but the expression may differ. The value of aesthetic pleasure is at the highest level and hence it is the paramount experience (*Sringara*). According to Indian aesthetics a theory of *rasa* and *rasa dhvani*, aesthetic suggestion or suggestive sweetness, is the supreme level of aesthetic experience one can have from all artistic media.

The infusion of the *bhakti* element into Indian rhetorical discourse inspired by Anandavardhana's writing, effected a dynamic tangent to the understanding of *rasa*. Unlike all previous theoreticians, he lent supervalence to *santa rasa* founding the emotion behind the *rasa* as the *parasamvit* or the prime universal consciousness. He argued that the *bhava* behind the *santa rasa* was the output of pure consciousness within the Self which he referred to as *atman*. This critical linking of consciousness via the *atman* to aesthetics within literary output was integral to the later validation of the role of *santa rasa*. Abhinavagupta draw on this and writes in *Locana* that true aesthetic enjoyment or *bhoga* can be equated to the joy of eternal bliss- the state of Brahman (2.4) and since the *santa rasa* was nurtured out of the *parama-purushartha* or the highest goals, it ought to be considered the most significant of all *rasas*, for this *rasa* alone would lead down the path to liberation (3.26).

To sum up, given below are some salient points about Indian aesthetic sensibility, as portrayed down the centuries in all fine arts including literature.

1. Sage Bharata, the pioneering author of the science of *Natya*, was the one who brought out the philosophy of aesthetic sensibility and artistic enjoyment. His aphorism,

the well-known ‘rasa sutra’ (“vibhava anubhava vyabhichari samyogad rasanishapathih”), was analysed by many later-day aestheticians who gave various interpretations to each of the words in the aphorism. Anandavardhana shed new light on the theory of *rasa* with his concept of *Dhvani* or suggestive meaning in relation to any literary or artistic presentation. A refined mind’s sublime state of perception is the mental condition conducive to aesthetic enjoyment. Bhoja, the author of *Sringaraprakasha*, defines the state of enjoyment as something that fits any human emotion; the enjoyment is *sringara rasa* or *ahankara-abhimana-Sringara* which is closely allied with not merely his external, peripheral or even worldly self but also to the soul of the man, his spiritual and mental existence.

2. Aesthetic experience or the aesthetic sweetness, be it at the level of the original poet/artist, or at the level of an artist of a later period who imitates, and the one who perceives (*rasika*) it in any time and place, is an experience of a higher order. The artistic or aesthetic experience that the artistic creation affords determines its aesthetic value. According to Indian theoreticians, the aesthetic experience is sublime and close to a spiritual experience (*Brahmanandaaswadasama*) and unworldly (*alaukikaanubhava*). The artist, the poet and *rasikas* of all time and place are expected to gain the *rasanubhava*, which is a transcendent experience arising from artistic creation. The essential purpose of artistic creation is fulfilled successfully when an artist and a *rasika* or viewer reaches the same point of aesthetic enjoyment.

3. To God Almighty the greatest of all artists, the entire universe is a theatre, in which He stages his plays from time to time. The human artist also creates for universal appreciation, so that a well-equipped *rasika* or viewer can have a transcendent aesthetic experience, *Brahmanada sahodaranubhava*. In aesthetic experience, a kind of transformation of human emotions from a worldly plane to the level of the soul happens. According to Bhoja, it happens because of the ‘I’ consciousness, and he termed it *ahankara – abhimana – sringaraanubhava*. A true artist has such an experience and the artist conveys the experience to a qualified viewer. The aesthetic sensibility of the artist, poet, and *rasika* or viewer represents the apotheosis of all artistic activity. It results from the search for the ultimate truth and a unique pleasure in human life that is beyond worldliness or *alaukika*.

NOTES

^{1.} The Hindu mythology lays down that there are four ages or periods of time. They are the ‘Krita Yuga’ or ‘Satya Yuga’ (the fourth age); ‘Treta Yuga’ (the age of three parts);

‘Dwapara Yuga’ (the age of two parts); and ‘Kali Yuga’ (the age of conflict); the four together constituting a ‘Maha Yuga’ or Great Age.

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