

## IS THERE AN INDIAN WAY OF READING EMOTIONS?<sup>1</sup>

TRS SHARMA

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**Abstract:** The discourse on emotions, one learns, has mostly not fared well in the conceptual history of the Western philosophers. The problem arises because this discourse has always been made within the rhetoric of rationality, and emotion and reason have been characterised as opposing forces in man. Moreover, in the Western philosophical tradition the primacy of reason over emotions has been the shaping principle of conceptual thinking.

Do emotions happen to us or do we create them? Are they biological drives or can they be cognitive, conative, and ethically responsible? The notion of emotion in short has occupied this ambivalent space, and points to an either/or situation. The debate has gone on for centuries.

Pāṇjalyogāsūtras apart, Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra studies emotions minutely and in a major way, and visualises their nature, their ontology, as being both fluid and steady. Given the context of both verbal and performing arts, Bharata enables us to envisage how emotions get transformed into the status of rasa, and to realise how aesthetics has ultimately returned to the discourse of the body. Now outside the realm of aesthetics, can there be pure emotions untainted by reason that we can experience in ordinary life? None, only blurred edges!

**Keywords:** svabhava, svadharma, nirveda, rasa, arishadvarga, sanchari, vyabhichari, citta prasadanam, physicalism, biological determinism, notion of emotion, physicalist theory

Aren't emotions known to be notorious in messing up one's moral life? Can we ever trust them? Besides, emotions haven't fared well in their conceptual history in the west. Part of the reason is that the discourse on emotion has always been made within the rhetoric of rationality, and emotion and reason have always been characterised as opposing forces in

man. Moreover, the western philosophical tradition has always emphasised the primacy of reason over emotions as the shaping principle of conceptual thinking.

As if to add more substance to the destructive powers of emotions, we have in India what is formulated in Sanskrit as the basic composite concept, the *arishadvarga* (Apte 50). These are the six hardcore, inimical emotions – the negative ‘affects’ if you will – such as *kāma*, *krodha*, *lobha*, *moha*, *mada*, *mātsarya*, translated as desire, anger, greed, infatuation, arrogance and jealousy, which figure in our great epic narratives, causing a great deal of havoc and cataclysmic changes in the lives of heroic men and women. They are paradigmatic and universal, though the way they manifest in psycho-social life is often culture-specific. For the genesis of emotion is often determined by the kind of life-world that a particular culture provides. We need ‘to interpret emotions functionally,’ suggests Owen Lynch, ‘in the sense of what they do, how they are used,’ not what they are (15). The next question that arises is: Do any of these raw emotions occur in its pristine form? It is most unlikely, for each raw emotion gets laced with elements from other emotions – say, anger gets mixed with jealousy, or with greed and when thwarted, explodes!

However, recent cognitive studies suggest a different perspective altogether, and emotions can also act as moral sensors and reinforce one’s ethical values. This looks like a paradoxical situation, then. However, before we arrive at a plausible theory of emotion which is both substantive and heuristic, we may look at some telling examples in poetry and in fictional narratives to see how emotive states emerge, and with what components they coalesce/synergise. We may begin with a couple of specific instances and then work outwards toward a theory.

Now to consciously entertain emotions, even to cultivate fine emotions, may keep us close to our life-world and to reality. But such an act does not enhance one’s will to power, which a regime of reason would ensure. The Enlightenment world-view implicit in such a regimen obliges one to set aside or downgrade one’s experiential structures. No one perhaps was more keenly aware of a disaster implicit in such a philosophic dispensation that prevailed in the post-Enlightenment age in the West than Charles Dickens in his novel *Hard Times* or Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*. True, emotion, as mooted earlier, has not fared well in its conceptual history. It has often been classed with ‘fancy’ or imagination as against utilitarian calculus. With farcical humour and satire, Dickens describes in *Hard Times* the school system designed and modeled by Gradgrind, a character in the novel, on Benthamite education, and its strict rational lines, wherein any show of emotion or imagination would be a heresy. The novelist here chooses to speak ardently in favour of a

life ‘lived freely and richly from the deep instinctive and emotional springs,’ to quote F. R. Leavis (171). Dickens even declares unequivocally that “a nation without fancy, without some romance, never did, never can, never will, hold a great place under the sun” (*Hard Times*, Notes: 171).

Ivan, a character in *The Brothers Karamazov*, tells Alyosha, his brother in the novel, that he has no use for a ‘world view’ of order of the kind which the Enlightenment project would envisage:

I have a longing for life, and I go on living in spite of logic. Though I may not believe in the order of the universe, yet

I love the sticky leaves as they open in spring and the blue sky.

. . It’s not a matter of intellect or logic, it’s loving with one’s inside, with one’s stomach (as quoted by Joel Marks 12).

Ivan’s desire or longing for life is spontaneous, and occurs rather gratuitously like a gift from nature if not from God. It is a desire that ‘passeth understanding’ of any logic. Ivan, the Dostoevskian intellectual, passionate and given to strange and conflicting ideas, skeptical and idealistic at the same time, has already made his choice. As against firmly repudiating the ‘logic’ of the world, its unity or total order, he has preferred the phenomenology of his own experience, which structures the world, and attaches itself to specific things, the ‘sticky leaves . . . and the blue sky.’

The western man’s dilemma, his alienated self, is however already implicit in Ivan’s choice. It is an either/or choice made within the problematic of emotion versus reason. The same problematic can be seen operative in Wordsworth’s famous search for unity and order even though this search is in direct contrast to Ivan’s choice. The poet is obviously in search of a ‘logic’ and invokes ‘a motion and a spirit, that impels/All thinking things, all objects of all thought, /and rolls through all things’ (from ‘Tintern Abbey’) – the unity implicit in them in order to ease the anguish of his alienated self: a self torn asunder by, the various atrocities he had witnessed during the French revolution. However the poet stands apart from the surrounding nature with a modicum of self- definition – hence the feeling of alienation. In epistemic terms, it is the ecology of mind that is lacking – the ‘lack’ of interplay of subject and object, wherein the subject attains its identity only in terms of the object, and where the human and the natural overlap. The alienated self lacks this ‘interplay’ and seeks its self-definition in isolation.

The capital 'I' – the self or ego – on the other hand, constitutes its own history, a wavering history of aggressive conquest or passive submission. And whenever the 'I' asserts and assumes self-definition in opposition to the other nature or world, dilemmas occur. Moral dilemmas occur, especially, when a community, despite sharing a common system of values, finds itself at war with itself. The psychic paradigm of such a dilemma – to shift focus to an earlier age, to a different culture – constitutes the classic dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna in the *Mahabharata* war as depicted in the Gita. Ivan's cross-cultural archetype is Arjuna, a parallel indeed, but Arjuna without a sense of alienation, who nevertheless fails to see any cosmic design like Ivan in the war he is obliged to fight. He sees only specific things, like Ivan again, his own kinsmen ready to kill and be killed. While he is convinced of the just cause of war, he is horrified at the possible consequences of it. He wonders with ambiguous anguish, 'which will be worse, to win this war or to lose it?' (Gita, ch. 2). He develops a sudden revulsion for it, for the horrendous killing involved in war even though he is raised as a warrior. His *svabhāva* (inner nature/impulse) which believes in human values is at war with his *svadharma* (his duty as a warrior), which will not balk at killing his own kinsmen when at war. The complex emotive state that Arjuna undergoes is an aporetic event in the epic. It is a state of *nirveda*, desirelessness, and is described in the Gita in great detail, both as bodily events, *sattvajabhāva*, that is, as sensations such as shaking, quivering of limbs, and heavy breathing, and as a feeling of profound psychic disquiet characterised by confusion, panic, and indecisiveness (Bilimoria 73-77).

In these several examples we witness, corresponding to two different epistemes prevailing in two different cultures, two conceptions of the self: the self standing apart from and in defiance of its culture, and the self at war with itself but from inside its own culture. In other words, it is the self holding on to its separate identity and alienated from the rest of the life-world versus the self as part of nature, part of its socio-political environs but exercising its freedom to reject the culture of war from within.

The logic of both Dickens and Ivan, the character in the novel, operates within a problematic of either/or wherein the notion of emotion was conceived in a dichotomous relation to reason. This dichotomy, established through centuries of traditional thought in the West, was rarely questioned till, say, the twentieth century. To question the validity of this dichotomy is to envisage the conditions of possibility for a new relation between emotion and reason. This is to see them not in opposition, but in juxtaposition. It is to see them with 'blurred edges,' and see them as freely mixing with each other. This is to move into a non-Aristotelian universe wherein the laws of thought are more heterogeneous,

contrarian, recursive. Besides, this is to realise that even concepts come to us not in their formalistic purity but in hybrid forms. What is necessary here is a movement of thought that can reconcile oppositions, differences and resolve them into aspects of a single, comprehensive notion, call it emotion or experience. T. S. Eliot once phrased it thus, to think one's feeling, and feel one's thought (216). This process is what Korzybski calls a balanced 'semantic reaction.'<sup>(15)</sup> These elements fuse in the writer's imagination, as Eliot meant it, but then they can also burst asunder. Hence the aberrations seen in human behaviour, that is, excessive emotionality at times or sovereign rationality draining all human emotion.

Broadly speaking, and in a more generic sense, one may envisage two kinds of emotions: the basic or primary emotions, the universal *arishadvarga* that we referred to in the beginning. Then there are the secondary emotions, the softer and subtler ones, which may remotely be linked to the primary ones: for, when we build our argumentative structures, brick by brick as it were, the mortar that we use is something like emotion. These emotions sneak into our arguments through the kind of rhetoric we use, for rhetoric is the art of persuasion. So all the rhetorical devices that we use – such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, oxymoron, paradox, hyperbole and catachreses – in order to persuade the audience are emotive or emotion-ridden. Therefore one wonders whether one can strictly be rational while speaking about emotions. Sometimes we even get emotionally involved while we build an argument – don't we?

Now let me quickly go through some of the arguments woven around emotions. Emotions, since the time of the Sophists, Plato and Aristotle, have been a subject of inquiry among philosophers, humanists and psychologists in the West. We may, to pursue a critical theory, categorise two kinds of emotion according to their genesis, which subsequently develop into paradigms, identified by Owen Lynch as physicalist and cognitive (Lynch 21). The physicalist theory has dominated the discussion on emotion for quite some time: the theory believed that emotions are something that happens to us. And they follow 'a hydraulic metaphor of forces' from within the body, eventually welling up, and 'the psychic energy' exploding. Emotions are therefore natural, not cultural; they are universal – so the argument ran. Descartes is said to be the most influential originator of this physicalist theory. The Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body is so well-known it needs no further elaboration. Gilbert Ryle's famous phrase, the 'ghost in the machine' (Passmore 446) in a way sums up the Cartesian mind- body dualism.

Consequently, there have been three important shifts in perception in western philosophical thinking which involves a frequent re- inscription of emotion in relation to the human body, cognition and judgment. The common perception, shared by many a philosopher, of emotion as unreliable, ‘blind animal surges,’ like bodily feelings can be traced back to Plato. Plato would reject anything that has to do with the human body, any form of sensuous cognition that imagination is said to cherish. Conversely, this view was countered very early by Aristotle who shared his perceptions with the Stoic philosophers such as Chrysippus that emotions are not just ‘blind surges’ of feeling: rather they are ‘discriminating responses closely connected with beliefs about how things are, and what’s important’(Nussbaum 42). They have a strong social/cultural angle, and that emotions involve both mind and social context.

However, the status of emotion suffered a major reversal with Immanuel Kant, who, following the Cartesian heritage, held, in the light of his postulation of the sovereignty of reason, that emotions are ‘unreliable, animal, and seductive’. They are spontaneous and not trustworthy for moral action. So his moral imperatives could not accommodate anything as ‘fickle’ as emotions (Nussbaum 76).

The third paradigm shift has occurred of late through a detour to Aristotle and the Sophists with extensive studies in cognition, that is, if one were to overlook the effort of poets and novelists who have always assessed the value of emotions in human life. This viewpoint, contrary to the physicalist theory, postulates that emotions are social constructs and envisages that there are cross-cultural differences in the expression of emotions. This is the social constructionist approach. This viewpoint posits emotions as being rational: a cognitively based appraisal of situations, for they are socially negotiable experiences. Post-structuralists even argue that ‘reason requires emotion as a supplement’ (Lynch 10) – and that’s how we build arguments, say, in seminars and colloquies.

So this debate has gone on for centuries: whether emotions happen to us or do we create them? Are they biological drives or can they be cognitive, conative, and ethically responsible? The notion of emotion in short has occupied this ambivalent space, and points to an either / or situation.

However, even though we have learned to believe in the cognitivist theories, the physicalist theory cannot be abrogated so easily, and the cognitive theory cannot wholly replace it. There is a strong biological angle to it, some kind of biological determinism, if you will: the Kantian thought that emotions are ‘unreliable, capricious,’ besides being transitory and

not providing a steady motivation for moral action - this argument gets additional support from what Arthur Koestler states, basing his views on what seems to be hard evidence from the biological sciences. Referring to the unsteady/insidious nature of emotions, Koestler poses the question: 'Is homo sapiens a victim of one of evolution's countless mistakes which have adversely affected the evolution of the brain?' Koestler cites in support of his contention the biologist MacLean's view that 'while our intellectual functions are carried on in the most highly developed part of the brain, our affective behavior continues to be dominated by a relatively crude and primitive system by archaic structures in the brain' (Koestler 11). The consequences are all there for us to see: 'the conspicuous symptoms of mental disorder which appear endemic in our species, and the paranoid split between rational thinking and irrational beliefs.' There is also the glaring contrast between man's ability to conquer nature and his ineptitude in managing his own affairs.

'This pathological phenomenon is uniquely human,' says Koestler (19). There is, as Koestler concludes, a genetic imbalance between what he calls 'an explosive growth of the human neo-cortex and its insufficient control of the archaic brain' (ibid). You have the gaping aporia resulting from this fact of 'schizophysiology' – the mismatch of the two faculties, the neocortex and the hypothalamus (said to be the seat of emotions). This mismatch finds its interpretive register – to shift sites of discourse - in the poetic formulations of T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" in the following lines:

Between the idea  
and the reality  
between the motion  
and the act  
falls the shadow  
*For Thine is the kingdom*

Between the conception  
and the creation  
between the emotion  
and the response  
falls the shadow  
*Life is very long*

Consequently, man is thrown into a congenitally 'aporetic situation' - that is the primordial human condition. So the near impossibility of setting right the biologically wronged system was perhaps intuitively felt by Indian thinkers. How to restore a workable balance in the

psycho- soma, that was the real problematic preoccupying our thinkers. Mind, body and their functional relations came under a specialised study of Yoga. The *astāṅga-yogi* (not the *asana* therapeutics yogis of the present day!) can find access to the hypothalamus – he could consciously stimulate through *prāṇāyāma*, (*pratyāhāra*, *dhāraṇa*) the vagus nerve which is linked to the hypothalamus. That's how he could bring about some kind of equilibrium in his body-mind mechanism. Furthermore, a *Yogasutra* of Patanjali refers to how a person can consciously negotiate emotions in order to attain *citta prasadanam*. Through consciously cultivating friendliness and compassion, the individual can attain the mental state of *citta prasadanam*. This phrase '*cittaprasādanam*' can be translated as 'reflective equilibrium, to use the famous phrase by John Rawls.

Bharata in his *Natyasastra* could visualise the nature of emotions, their ontology as being both fluid and steady. 'Fluid' because they are *sancharibhavas*, meaning transitory, momentary or complementary feelings/states that we all have. The *Natyasastra* distinguishes minutely the *sanchari* or *vyabhichari* and how they need to get to the status of a *sthaiyi* (a state of stability) before they can attain the art status of *Rasa*. *Rasa* itself is a concept metaphor, and its semantic ramification is imbricated with many archives. With no precise meaning as such, the concept ranges from the mystical to the gastronomical. To realise one significant part of it is to see aesthetics as having returned to the discourse of the body for the human emotions on which the *rasa* concept is based belong to the world of the body. The *Natyasastra* begins with *aṅgika*, the body language. The term *vyabhicharibhava*, mentioned above, needs to be redefined because (etymologically speaking) this emotion is wayward, contrary, and even defiant. And so often in the artifacts and in our own consciousness, these agonistic contests occur frequently between the *sanchari* and the *vyabhichari*. Bharata and his theatrical cohorts thought what better locus is there than a theatre before an audience for emotions to be consciously displayed, understood and controlled. Emotions have always interested artists, writers and they are also one step ahead of the philosopher. To cite an instance: both Bharata and later Wittgenstein (to cite a western example) seem to hold the view that both the comic and tragic, hope and despair, as emotions cannot be held together in a single psychic state, but only successively. However, both the comic and tragic emotions are indeed convincingly shown as holding together in an open-ended form such as allegory, as in *Waiting for Godot* for instance, within the same dialogic frame. Besides, Salman Rushdie comes up with his reading experience of Rudyard Kipling: " . . . the early Kipling wrote with a storm inside him," which "creates a mirror storm of contradictory responses in the reader" with the result, an Indian reader will never be able to read (him) calmly. Anger and delight are incompatible emotions, yet these early stories do indeed . . . infuriate and entrance' (74).



This discourse will not be complete unless I refer to the unique phenomenon of *bhakti* (unique because it constitutes one kind of ‘stylisation’ wherein emotions, both *sthayi* and *sanchari bhavas*, get stabilised and cathect a single object, the personal god of the devotee, resulting in intensities of song, gesture wherein a devotee like Allama Prabhu (a Kannada saint poet-philosopher of the 12th century) encounters the divine in its effulgent formlessness, as in the following *vacana* (an utterance):

Looking for your radiant light  
I saw  
it was like the sudden dawn  
of a hundred million suns,  
knots of lightning creepers  
for my wonder.  
O Lord of Caves  
if you are this effulgence (*jyotirlinga*)  
there can be no metaphor  
(tr. Ramanujan, 1973: 168, with changes by author).

This *vacana* inscribes the incandescent delight of the devotee in whom the synergy of the body-mind-spirit is wholly at work. The *vacana* tries to “present the unpresentable” (to use Lyotard’s oxymoronic phrase) (123). The following words of Georg Lukacs capture the dramatic intensity of such an experience: ‘it was a dance on a glowing volcano, a radiantly improbable dream,’ (as cited by Simon Critchley 67). It was utterly improbable, yet it was ineffable, radiant while it lasted!

Consequently, in the emotions of *bhakti* the usual polarity of the sacred and the profane disappears, and what one gets is a continuum which comprises at one end the ‘surreal’ and at the other, the ‘hyper-real.’ *Bhakti* for a saint is both agony and ecstasy – more agony perhaps: two powerful emotions held together in a single moment. It is the aesthetic of the self, the internal theatre, wherein the saint is the chief actor. This is in one sense apodictic theatre in its totality – an internal stage wherein the devotee reconstitutes himself and wherein he hypostatizes, say, a Śiva into a human character – a character with whom the devotee engages in a process of constant apostrophisation. The saint thereby upsets the social structures of feeling based on gender, for he plays both man and woman. Didn’t Saint Basavanna, a contemporary of Allama, declare, ‘Look here, dear fellow:/ I wear these men’s clothes/only for you./ Sometimes I am man/Sometimes I am woman.’ (Ramanujan, 1973: 87). He celebrates androgyny. Isn’t Lord Śiva himself half-woman? This is one kind

of emotion at its best, the self merging in the Other. Or shall we say the self emptying itself in the Other in a state of bhakti, a kind of kenosis – a mystical state of mind.

Well, to conclude is there such a thing as pure emotion? There is for Bharata in a purely aesthetic context when emotion turns into a rasa or for a saint into bhaktirasa. Otherwise for most of us in a pragmatic world, there are no pure emotions, only blurred edges.

## NOTES

1 This essay is partly based on my book *Toward an Alternative Critical Discourse*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000.

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