

Bharat Muni: The Theory of 'Rasa'*

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Natyashastra is an ancient Indian discourse on theatre with details about performing arts, theatrical techniques, dance and music. It is believed to have been written during the period between 200 BC and 200 AD in classical India and is attributed to the Sage Bharata. The work is an elaborate treatise on dramatic criticism and acting ever written in any language and is regarded as the oldest surviving text on stagecraft in the world. Bharata in his Natyashastra discusses components or constituent elements of every aspect of stagecraft and their effects on human mind whilst covering areas like music, stage-design, make up, dance and virtually every aspect of drama. With its theoretical approach and wider scope, the Natyashastra has added a remarkable dimension to the growth and development of Indian classical music, classical dance, drama and art. As regards drama or 'Natya', Bharata provides extensive description about the genres of drama, plot structure, Characters and their types and doctrine of bhava and rasa.

The significant contribution of this historic work is the theory of 'Rasa' which can be understood as a dynamic experience between the artist (the creator), the artistic expression (the work of art), and those who receive it (the audience). The artist experiences an emotion and is so overwhelmed by it that he seeks a medium with which to express those feelings. The spectator or the audience viewing the artists' work receives this emotion through the artist's medium and thus experience the same emotion felt by the creator. The extent to which the viewer experiences the emotion felt by the creator, depends on both the creator's sensibility in presenting the work and the viewers' cultural training to receive it. According to Bharata, "Rasa is so called because it is capable of being tasted (asvadate)." A particular state of mind gives rise to an aesthetic relish which emerges from the combination of various emotional factors. According to him, "Just as well-disposed persons while eating food, cooked with many kinds of spices, enjoy (asvadayanti) the tastes, and attain pleasure and satisfaction, so the cultured people taste the dominant states (Sthayibhavas) as they observe them being represented by an expression of the various states with words, gestures and temperament and derive pleasure and satisfaction."

Rasa signifies aesthetic pleasure or the thrill of joy invariably accompanying a skilful enactment of a play, rendered highly appealing through excellent poetry, music and action." Finally, in the work of Bharat Muni, the word 'rasa' came to connote highest taste or divine experience accompanied with a sense of supreme delight. It was intended to equate the pleasure of poetry or other forms of art with divine bliss.

As to the number of Rasa, Bharata acknowledges only eight kinds- "astau natya rasah smrtah." According to him, there are eight fundamental feelings or mental states referred to as

Sthayibhavas which can be experienced by human beings. These are: Delight (Rati), Laughter (Hasya), sorrow (Soka), Anger (Krodha), Heroism (Utsaha), Fear (Bhaya), Disgust (Jugupsa), and wonder (Vismaya). Corresponding to these mental states are eight Rasas: the Erotic (srngara), the Comic (Hasya) the Pathetic (Karuna), the Furious (Raudra), the Heroic (Vira), the Terrible (Bhayanaka), the Odious (Bibhatasa), and the Marvelous (Adbhuta). These Rasas arise out of four basic or original ones. Thus, the Comic arises from the Erotic, the Pathetic from the Terrible, the Sublime from the Heroic and the Horrible from the Odious. Bharata also assigns colours and presiding deities to these Rasas- the erotic is light green, the comic white, the pathetic ash-coloured, the terrible red, the heroic light-orange, the horrible black, the odious blue and finally, the sublime is yellow. Vishnu is the God of the 'Erotic', Pramathas (the Ganas of the Mahadeva) of the 'Comic', Rudra of the 'Terrible', Yama of the 'Pathetic', Siva of the 'Odious', Kaladeva of the 'Horrible', Indra of the 'Heroic', and the 'Brahman' is the presiding deity of the 'Sublime'.

A ninth rasa- shanta or shantam (peace) suggested by perpetual white colour with Vishnu as the presiding deity- was added by later authors. This addition resulted in a great deal of debates amongst the Sanskrit scholars between the sixth and the tenth centuries. It was first accepted by the Alankarikas, and the expression Navarasa (the nine rasas) came into vogue. In addition to the nine Rasas, two more rasas have been added later with no clear specification about the presiding deities and the colours.

The most significant thing about the Rasa is that its realisation ensues from the union of three interrelated elements – Vibhava, Anubhava and Vyabhicharibhava and also the permanent mood called Sthayibhava.

Vibhava (determinants) is the means by which an emotion is evoked. There are two kinds of Vibhava: the Alambhana Vibhava and the Uddipana Vibhava. The first relates to the person or the object in respect of whom the emotion is experienced and whose appearance is directly responsible for the evocation of the emotion, while the second refers to the situation in the environment in which that person or object is placed and which is instrumental in intensifying the emotional experience.

Anubhavas (consequence) is the outward manifestations brought forth as a result of the Vibhavas. These are divisible into Vachika- those which can be expressed by words (Vach - speech) and the Angika which are expressed by bodily expressions. In Indian drama, for example, the Anubhavas communicate to the audience the emotions being felt by the characters on the stage.

There are also "involuntary emotions" known as Sattvikabhavas: Stambha (paralysis), Sveta (sweating), Romancha (hair standing on end), Svarabheta (changes in one's tone of voice),

Vepathu (trembling), Vaivarnya (changes in the colour of one's face), Asru (becoming tearful) and Pralaya (fainting).

The Sthayibhava (permanent mood) is a major emotion which is developed by a number of minor feelings referred to as Vyabicharibhavas which are thirty three in numbers.

Bharata's Rasa theory has been seminal in the sense it influenced Bhattanayaka's concept of Sadharanikaran, the concept of Sahridayata and the Dhvani concept. It is also the unifying principle of the beginning, the middle and the end of the entire Indian poetics. It provides a 'synaesthesia' of art, philosophy and psychology in formulating a proper critical-cum-aesthetic perspective.

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(* The above 'write-up' is based on "Lesson" for M.A. English, Nalanda Open University Patna, prepared by me). Avoid copying word-by-word)

Glossary of critical terms

1. Aesthetics :the philosophy of fine arts which seems to mean a theory of the 'beautiful' in general, whether in art or in nature
2. Anubhavas : Gestures
3. Rasa:the aesthetic experience, which constitutes the quintessence of every performing art.
4. Rasika :A scholar or connoisseur of art is sometimes referred to as a rasika.
5. Sadharanikaran: The process of generalization or transcendence
6. Samajika : Spectators
7. Sthayi bhava: Basic mental state
8. Vibhava :Dramatic situations
9. Vyabhicharis: Transitory emotions

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