

# ABHINAGUPTA'S THEORY OF RASA IN THE CONTEXT OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AS COMMUNION OF FEELINGS

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## Abstract :

The focus of this paper is to contextualise and expound upon the emotional responses to the works of art like poetry, and to the genesis of aesthetic delight thereof referred to as *Rasa* by Abhinavagupta. I have also endeavoured to correlate the explanation of *rasa* with the concept of disinterestedness, as initiated by Kant and the notion of sympathy as propagated by Hume in the western tradition. The pivotal point of the paper is that in Abhinavagupta's explication of *sādhāranikarāna*, one could trace a semblance to the present day psycho-analysis of an aesthetic delight which is purged off any selfish interest and any ulterior motive. *Rasa* theory, as advocated by Abhinavagupta primarily focussed upon a thorough investigation of emotions and communication of feelings of the artist and empathising beholder(s), i.e., through the ontogenesis of aesthetic experience articulated as the *rasananda*. Abhinavagupta argues against 'personalising or individualising' the emotions, and has strongly advocated a commune of feelings in his theory of *sādhāranikarāna*. This is the reason that *rasa* as an experience can be identified with *Brahmānanda* or a spiritual delight. He vehemently argued that these emotions are definitely not the emotions of an actor or a poet himself for the simple reason that he is acting like someone else or writing about a character, and not really passing his lived life through the emotions that he manifests.

**Key words:** *Rasa*, Aesthetic-delight, Spirituality, art, drama, poetry, bliss, disinterestedness empathy, aesthetic-experience

## I. INTRODUCTION

I have largely drawn from Hiriyana's Art Experience<sup>1</sup> and have also echoed the position taken up by Dr. Kailash Pati Mishra in his work, Aesthetic Philosophy of Abhinavagupta.<sup>2</sup> I have also referred briefly to 'Abhinavagupta's Integral View of Aesthetic concepts' by Dr. K.Krishnamoorthy as explicated in an on-line article by him, and cited here: : <http://www.svabhinava.org/abhinava/krishnamoorthyk/krishnamoorthyaesthetics.pdf><sup>3</sup>. Besides these works, my comprehension about Abhinavagupta's *rasa* theory is primarily due to my late teacher, Dr. Shyamala Gupta whose book, Art, Beauty and Creativity<sup>4</sup> is a seminal work on various approaches to Aesthetics, both within the classical Indian and western theories. I have, in the present paper, also alluded to the concept of empathy and disinterestedness as understood in the modern and contemporary theories of Western Aesthetics. For this purpose, I have cited interpretations of these concepts as made in Mary Warnock's Imagination and Time<sup>5</sup>.

According to K.P.Mishra, Dr.Krishnamoorthy and Dr. Shyamala Gupta's works, Abhinavagupta, a Kashmiri Pandit, an erudite scholar was born in Ad 960, and has been credited with around fifty books to his credit out of which two books Abhinavabharati and Dhvanyaloka -*Lochana* are important for his contribution in Aesthetics. The scholars that I have alluded to have reiterated that Abhinavagupta re-interpreted Bharata's *Natyashastra* in the light of his own views on the subject and made a critical evaluation of the works of the poets and theorists prior to him, including Bhatta Nayaka and Anandavardhana<sup>6</sup>. Abhinavagupta established, by revising the contemporary theories of his time about the aesthetic delight called *rasa*. According to Abhinavagupta, '*rasa* or aesthetic delight cannot merely follow merely from the *bhāvanukirtinam* or an imitation of others' emotions. The theory that Abhinavagupta formulated was the theory of *Sādhāranikarāna* according to which, imitations may entertain but cannot evoke *rasa* or aesthetic enjoyment. Emotions, according to Abhinavagupta, are subtle and imperceptible.'<sup>7</sup>

According to Abhinavagupta, it is an empathic spectator/reader, i.e. a person with *sahr̥dya* that experiences the delight due to her/his ability to relate to the emotion in the work of art these emotions should not be associated with

any particular person but should be understood as emotions belonging to the general mass of humanity. Abhinavagupta asserts with authority that this kind of identification with a generalised concept of human emotions or with a web of feelings in general, and hence cannot be therefore merely called an imitation. He clarified his assertions via the theory of the experience of *rasa* itself, and I have referred to this feature as the ontogenesis of the *rasa* theory. My paper revolves around three conclusions that I have drawn from my reading of the aforementioned texts.

i) *Rasa*, according to Abhinavagupta is an affective understanding/ communication between the artist and the beholder based on sympathy and communion of feelings. Abhinavagupta has discussed *rasa* in the context of both the drama and the poetry.

ii) I have recurrently emphasised referred to those sections from the mentioned texts which establish the connection between the artist and the beholder not at the level of particular personal experience but rather between art and experience of it via the emotional plane.

iii) The meaning of harmony that I have analysed, in this context, has been its various referents like- a concord, a synonym, a similar idea, an integration, a commune, a balance, a unity, a correspondence, a coming together and a simultaneous experience. All these epithets have been used, analysed and conceptualised by the two thinkers being considered here in their exposition of the classical Indian tradition of art and Aesthetics. I have endeavoured to understand the process of a harmonious blend, especially in relation to art activity and aesthetic experience, as a unity of percept and concept.

iv) Hiriyanna, similarly, by reiterating Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa* has compared the aesthetic experience as drawn from works of art like poetry and drama to be synonymous with the spiritual experience. Abhinavagupta, a tenth century scholar referred to aesthetic delight as *rasa* and called it a kin or a *sahodra* of Brahman. Brahman, in Indian Philosophical tradition is the cognate of the spiritual principle of the truth, oneness, Knowledge and bliss. In Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa*, the experience of aesthetic delight by the recipient, which is comparable to *Brahmananda* as an untainted joy, gets the centre stage. Abhinavagupta had elucidated this theory in defining *rasa* in terms of *sadharanikana* or generalisation of emotions. He, in turn, had historically, improvised the theory of *rasa* initiated by Bharatmuni, the author of *Natyashastra*, the iconic book on dramaturgy written in 2nd century AD. His theory gave a significant place to forming a commune between emotions and intellect, and the methodology that he used is comparable, again anachronistically though, to the concepts of disinterestedness as suggested by Immanuel Kant, and of empathy as suggested in the contemporary theories of Psychology and Philosophy of Mind. Hiriyanna, in his work, has reworded Abhinavagupta's theory and has highlighted on that aspect of Indian Philosophical meaning of spiritual bliss. This bliss implies a unity or a communion between the psychological self and the impersonalised notion of the self which culminates into an impersonalised yet a sublime sense of bliss. Hiriyanna, has thus explicated and contextualised the theory of *rasa* as an example of the resultant effect of a harmonious balance formed between an individual instance of emotional response to a work of art like poetry or drama and to an empathic relationship with this work due to a disinterested comprehension of a sublime bliss.

## II. ABHINAVGUPTA'S THEORY OF *SADHARNIKARANA*

In Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa*, the experience of aesthetic delight by the recipient, which is comparable to *Brahmananda* as an untainted joy, gets the centre stage. Abhinavagupta contextualised the primary theory of *rasa*, as originally put forth by Bharat Muni, according to which 'rasa is an emotional to what is emoted by the actors through their skills of acting and the dramatic techniques of *vibhāvas*, *anubhāvas*, *vyābhichārabhavas* etc. To enunciate this, he simultaneously expounded 'the nature of aesthetic object as comprising of *vibhāva*, *anubhāva* and *sañcāri*, and identified it with the *jñānarūpa*. *Bhava* implies the meaning of art as suggested by sound, movement etc., *vibhava* means an aesthetic reconstruction or idealization, and *vyabhichara* refers to the effect that culminates on a responsive soul as a mental and bodily resonance- bodily resonance is *anubhava* and mental one is the *vyabhichāra*.'<sup>8</sup> Bharat Muni is credited with raising the level of *rasa* from its previous avatar bearing the physical connotation of taste or gustatory skill to the spiritual and aesthetical level. From the point of view of the aesthetic theory, the sixth chapter is the most important one since it is in this chapter that Bharata makes a statement about the *rasa* and *bhāva*, the topics which have been exploited by his immediate commentators and even later thinkers on Indian aesthetics. The next chapter talks about the different *bhāvas* like *vibhavas*, *anubhavas*, *yabhichāribhāvas* and *sthāyibhāvas*, followed by the different types of *abhinayas* like *angika*, *sattvika* and *āharya* with full explanation of the same. There are 37 chapters of *Natyashastra* and they proceed to explain a number of factors which are relevant for staging a drama. These factors include the description on *vrttis* and *pravrittis*, the *dharmis* such as *nātya-dharmi* and *loka-dharmi*, the kind of language to be used by different characters for different character and even the metaphors used in the poetic language in the context of the drama. Drama is basically a *kāvya*, i.e., a kind of literary composition and in its literary

form is *nataka*. Only when it is staged and presented along with dance, music and abhinaya, it becomes *natya*, which has been designated as *dr̥śya-kāvya* by the poeticians.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of *rasa* has been prevalent since the times of Vedas and was used to refer to honey, milk and Soma (nectar). Ayurveda used this term to refer to chemical substance, and at the later period *rasa* was denoted as the biological phenomenon of procreating semen. The word *rasa*, in the Indian philosophical tradition came to be associated with the sense of taste, and hence the word relish became associated with it. In the later phase of the Indian philosophical tradition, during the Upanishadic phase, the phrase *raso vai sah* describing the eternal nature of Brahman equated the *rasa* with an experience of spiritual bliss.<sup>10</sup>

It is this last equation; i.e., the theory of *rasa* as a synonym of an emotional response, that was taken up, first of all by Bharata muni in *Nāṭyashāstra* to describe an art experience, especially in the context of drama, and it was later revived and commented upon by Abhinavagupta as an aesthetic experience or an aesthetic delight in response to both the drama and the poetry. Nevertheless, Abhinavagupta did make a pointed explication of the difference between the spiritual ānanda and *rasa* as an experience like the spiritual delight.

The influence of the theory of *rasa* was not confined to dramaturgy alone even though it was initiated by Bharata in the context of *nāṭya* or drama, but the entire thrust of discussion of this theory was shifted to poetry, since it was discovered that poetry was a very powerful source of *rasa* too.

Nevertheless, the poetry as an art capable of producing *rasa* had to be evolved. In the case of drama, the visual effect of acting and the communication through dialogue, i.e., the *angika*, *vāchika* and *abhinaya* makes it easy for the character to express the emotions and evoke the *rasas*. One human being can act like another human being by feigning the emotional situation and give a very close semblance of a person in love or fear or anger provided he or she has got the acting skill or *siddhi*. “But in the case of poetry, there is no one to give such audio-visual effects to the wide range of emotions, and all that we have for a concrete material are certain visual or auditory signs which we call ‘words’ and ‘letters’.”<sup>11</sup> Any person lacking a formal understanding of a linguistic context may not be able to derive aesthetic joy or *rasa*. Referring to this evolution of poetry as a source of *rasa* in the Classical Indian period, Professor S.K. Dey in his seminal work, *History of Sanskrit Poetics* explained that ‘the older literature of poetics emphasized on the external or the decorativeness of language (*Alaṅkāras*) and did not elicit any aesthetic response. It was only in the later poetry, in the *dhvani* tradition that the meaning of the poetry, especially in relation to emotions became the focal theme. The emotional theme became identified with the soul of the poetry, and hence, the role of *rasa* in relation to poetry became paramount. These *dhvani* scholars understood poetry as a verbal complex, profoundly emotive. Hence they explained poetry on the basis of *dhvani-siddhanta* and *rasa-siddhanta*. *Dhvani* has three aspects, *abhidha* which consists in the literal meaning of the expression, *lakṣana* which consists in the external characteristic of the expression which are indicative of something deeper, and *vyānjana* which includes what is suggested by the expression.’<sup>12</sup>

Though it is Bharata who is credited with having originated the *rasa* theory, it was Abhinavagupta developed it into a systematic poetic principle. Anandavardhana was the chief exponent of the *Dhvani* theory, but Abhinavagupta had made significant contributions to it.

The pivotal point of Abhinavagupta’s contention was that *rasa* does not follow a mere imitation of emotions but is felt by a competent *sāhārdika*. *Dhvani* theorists like Shankuka, and Bhatta Lollatta and Dandin the Sanskrit poet-commentators had explicated Bharata’s theory of *rasa* in terms of ‘*nishpatti* and *utpatti*’ respectively.<sup>13</sup> His grounds for rejection/revision of these earlier theories are based upon his own focus upon the felt emotions and feelings of the spectator’s emotional response to a work of art, especially the poetry and drama. Hence, as Hiriyanna argues, “even though the theory of *rasa* applies equally to all the fine arts, it has been particularly well developed in relation to poetry.”<sup>14</sup> The point that is raised is about *rasa* in terms of an emotional experience is- is the response to the emotion of the artist enacting on the stage, or of the poet articulated in a poem? Do these artist persons (the actors or the poet/narrator) imitate someone or some being’s emotions and thereby the spectator responds to them? Or, is the emotional/feeling response a result of some kind of a union or an identity of felt emotions not belonging to any one person or narrator in particular but belong to the realm of emotions in general? ‘Aacharya Shankuka, a commentator on Bharata’s *rasa* theory and Abhinavagupta’s predecessor Abhinavagupta questions, how can we be sure that they are the exact emotions of the character being represented? In order to know that the actor Y imitates the emotions of X, both must be present or available for observation. But X is after all an artistic creation, or a referent of some historical person, and nobody has ever seen him expressing his sorrow or joy. Y also expresses the feelings of sorrow and joy, but it is not possible to declare that X expressed these emotions exactly in the same manner. Abhinavagupta vehemently argued that these emotions are definitely not the emotions of the actor himself for the simple reason that he is acting like someone else and not really passing his lived life through the emotions that he has manifested through an act. The



vibhavas, which are supposed to establish an identity between the emotions of the character and the actor through artificial measures, certainly express emotions, but not of any particular person's.<sup>15</sup>

Abhinavagupta, as is clear from the foregoing, was in fact, arguing against personalising or individualising the emotions. In an uncanny resemblance with the theories of modern Psychology or the Philosophy of Mind, which seemingly echo the Aesthetic -Psychology.

As stated by Abhinavagupta's predecessors, *rasa* is the relish and delight which belongs to the mind of the spectator or reader. 'Abhinavagupta fully agrees with this but accentuates his position by explaining the why and how the spectator or reader identifies his emotional state with the *sthayibhavas* or the permanent web of emotions and feelings suggested in the drama suggested in the drama and poetry. 'The *vibhavas*, *anubhavas* and *vyabhicaribhavas* refer to the *sthayibhavas* in drama; the *guna*, *alamkara* and *dhvani* play the same role in poetry. 'But what has not been explained by Bhattanayaka and other scholars preceding Abhinavagupta is the fact that the spectator or reader also has the same emotions existing in the latent form in his mind. These latent *bhavas* or emotions are called *vāsanā* by Abhinavagupta, and he attributes them to human minds as impressions which are caused by previous experiences or even previous birth. In the absence of these latent impressions of emotions, the spectator or reader would never feel the identity between the emotions suggested in drama and poetry and experience these emotions as his own and relish them.'<sup>16</sup> However, since these emotions are generalised, through a creative process, the spectator instead of getting personally involved in them, enjoys them in a disinterested way (and, in my understanding, this disinterest can be identified with empathy or reasonable sympathy). This concurrence between his own emotions and the generalised emotions entitles him to be called a *rasika* that is someone who can appreciate these emotional experiences and a *sahradaya* that is someone who can empathise with the characters. This is Abhinavagupta's thesis of *sādhāranikarāna* being akin to a commune of feelings/ empathy. This particular aspect of *rasa* has been explained quite lucidly by Hiriyanna who, in turn, has reiterated Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa*.

### III. EMPATHY AND IMPERSONALITY

The point that I am stuck with, and which has been expounded in detail by Hiriyanna in Art Experience, (as noted in the beginning of my paper) and has been pointed in Dr. Krishnamoorthy's paper (as noted in the introductory part of this paper), is that both the poet and the reader do not base either the creative expression or the understanding of it on personal phases of emotional experience.

Hiriyanna refers to the *rasa* theory as narrated in the beginning of the Ramayana about the birth of Sanskrit classical poetry, describing how the rishi got emotionally disturbed on seeing an evil fowler killing a bird couple.<sup>17</sup> The poetic utterance would commonly be viewed as the expression of the sage's sorrow at the sight he witnessed; but Hiriyanna, who has quite dextrously followed Abhinavagupta, states that it cannot really be so. It is hardly natural, he argues, for one that is tormented by grief to play the poet. The sage was not preoccupied with his own immediate reaction to what he saw, but with something else, viz., the objective scene itself. He was less concerned with his own feeling than with what has stirred them, and the song gave expression to the poignancy of the latter.

Hiriyanna reiterates that the poet's own feeling and emotions cannot be communicated according to the *rasa* theory, presented as the *sādhāranikarāna* theory by Abhinavagupta.<sup>18</sup> All that the poet can do is to awaken in him an emotion similar to the one he is depicting. 'The poet is intent, not upon influencing the reader in this or that way, but upon giving expression, as best he can, to his unique experience. It is this expression, that is primary, and the kindling up or waking to life of the emotion in the mind of the reader is more in the nature of its consequence than the result of any set purpose behind it.' It is clear that Hiriyanna has noted the point of empathy in Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa*, and accordingly highlighted on the non- subjective or an impartial or a unified connection of the art with the delightful experience of the beholder.

Elaborating the connection between the art and experience of it through a link that binds emotions, but not two individual agencies in particular, Hiriyanna clarifying Abhinavagupta's view argues that the reader carries forward this impartial assessment and an ensuing relish thereof from the poet's expression. If the reader is competent, that is, if he is sufficiently sensitive and sympathetic, he succeeds in capturing for himself the experience which it embodies. 'The mind of the responsive reader first becomes attuned to the emotional situation portrayed (*hrdaya-samvada*), through one or more of the knowing touches which every good poem is sure to contain; is then absorbed in its portrayal (*tanmayibhavana*), and this absorption, in the deeper sense already explained, results in the aesthetic rapture of *Rasa* (*rasanubhava*). The reader, in addition to possessing a general artistic aptitude is specially qualified. These qualifications are compendiously indicated by saying that he should be a *sa-hrdaya*, which implies one of a similar heart, and may be taken to signify a person whose insight into the nature of poetry is, in point of depth, next only to that of the poet.'<sup>19</sup> In the absence of adequate equipment, he may lose sight of the *Rasa* aspect and get absorbed in the

objective details portrayed by the poet which also, as we said, have a poetic quality of their own but not potent enough to generate *rasa*.

Reiterating Abhinavagupta's views, Hiriyanna's asserts that 'this unique feat of *rasanubhuti* can be achieved only through the poetry dominated by the emotional content else, the reader would mistake the body for its soul i.e. the style and syntax of poetry would be confounded with the emotions.'<sup>20</sup>

In my understanding, Hiriyanna's arguments clearly specify the existence of a unique space that is occupied by a conventionally non-cognitive yet a powerful communion of feelings having been generated by a non-subjective/impersonal emotional connect between the artist and the recipient. He argues that it is not the emotional situation, as it actually was, that is represented in the art. That, in fact, according to his view, would by no means constitute art. 'It is the situation as it is in the poet's vision, or as it has been transfigured by his sensitive nature and imaginative power. In other words, the situation is idealised or, as I infer, is imaginatively reconstructed. Absorption in such a situation, for the reason already set forth, means transcending the tensions of ordinary life, and thereby attaining a unique form of experience. It is when the poet is fully under the spell of such experience that he spontaneously expresses himself in the form of poetry. Now, as an emotion is a phase of our own being and not a mere presentation, this mood cannot be contemplated, but can only be lived through; and it is this inner process of experiencing that is the ultimate meaning. Hence, there is a disinterested contemplation of the lived feelings that gives rise to the joy of is altogether divorced from reference to personal interests, of one's own or that of others. This Universal nature of Sympathy makes cultured/ competent reader experience the same feelings as described in a poetic situation and hence results in a relish of the pleasure of higher nature.

Dr. Krishnamoorthy, like Hiriyanna, suggests that in this integrated view, *rasa* alone contributes to the meaning of the poem (*kāvyaārtha*). The creative use of *śabda* or *dhvanana-vyāpāra* indicates the genius of the poet (*kavi-pratibhā*) on the one hand and the sensitive imagination of the reader (*pratipattr-pratibhā*) on the other, which can go beyond the referential meanings of a poem, and as well as the personal contexts of both the poet and the reader's psychical states. Dr. Krishnamoorthy suggests pointedly to the "mutual merging (of individualities) through (a shared) commonality of the work of art. (*sādhāraṇānyonyānupraveśa*)."<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It would be pertinent to sum up the position of Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa* as explicated by the scholars in consideration. Central to this view are the universalization of feelings and thereby a commune of feelings. These bypass the parochial context of emotions which are fleeting by nature and thereby impermanent. The terms used in the paper are empathy and community of feelings. Also, these transcend the boundaries of a personal context since these are initiated by an imaginative reconstruction, the words used in this paper are idealized and impersonality or universality. Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa* remarkably stood out since the emotions should not be associated with any 'particular person' but should be understood as emotions belonging to the 'general mass of humanity. Elaborating the connection between the art and experience of it through a link that binds emotions, but not two individual agencies in particular, Abhinavagupta establishes against the popular theory at that time that this kind of identification with a generalised concept of a human interaction at the level of emotions and feelings cannot be called an imitation under any circumstances. It has to be expounded in terms of a felt experience of an 'unparalleled delight comparable to spiritual one and yet, not an intellectual cognition in the conventional sense.

**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

I have used bold font in the text to mark my emphasis and my inferences. While citing, I have clearly identified the page numbers from the references used. Most of the citations are paraphrased and hence put in colons. The direct quotations have been put in inverted commas. The online citation has been put in hyperlink mode/

- [i] Hiryanna, M. Art Experience. 1997. IGNCA, Manohar: New Delhi.
- [2] Krishnamoorthy, <http://www.svabhinava.org/abhinava/krishnamoorthy/krishnamoorthyaesthetics.pdf>
- [3] Mishra, Kailash Pati. Aesthetic Philosophy of Abhinavagupta. 2006. Kala Prakashan: Varanasi
- [4] Gupta, Shyamala Art, Beauty and Creativity- Indian and Western Aesthetics. 1999. D.K. Printworld: New Delhi
- [5] Warnock, Mary. Imagination and Time. 1994. Blackwell: Oxford and Cambridge
- [6] 1. Gupta, Shyamala. 44-47 also, 2. Mishra, K.P. 84-87
- [7] Gupta, Shyamala. 44-47
- [8] Mishra, K.P. 82
- [9] Gupta, Shyamala. 24-26
- [10] Gupta Shyamala. 23-24
- [11] Gupta Shyamala. 32
- [12] Gupta Shyamala. 59-60
- [13] Mishra, K.P. 'Refutation of dualistic theories of Rasa'.82-104 (these points have been reiterated, a couple of times, across this chapter.
- [14] Hiryanna, M. 33
- [15] Gupta, Shyamala. 54
- [16] Mishra, K.P. 77-78
- [17] Hiryanna, M. 38
- [18] Hiryanna, M. 44-45
- [19] Hiryanna, M. 45-46
- [20] Hiryanna, M. 38
- [21] Krishnamoorthy, <http://www.svabhinava.org/abhinava/krishnamoorthy/krishnamoorthyaesthetics.pdf> (p6-7)