

Rasa Theory

The word *rasa* within the Hindu context, specifically for certain devotional *bhakti* traditions, has come to refer to the ultimate experience of a transcendent and perfect love. This love engages pure emotions in any one of several eternal relationships with divinity, of greater or lesser levels of intensity of blissful intimacy that occur within the divine realm of *līlā* within which the acts or play of god take place. The complexity of the word can be accounted for by viewing its meanings that have traversed a wide spectrum of applications. The word's meanings have been associated with a botanical substance, a sensory experience, an ontological significance, an aesthetic delight, a transcending otherworldly experience, and ultimately a theological vision within *bhakti*. The religious meaning and significance of *rasa* and the development of a theory of an ultimate aesthetic principle called *rasa*, from the earliest usage in secular dramaturgy beginning around the 4th century CE up to its culmination in the *bhakti* tradition, especially of the Caitanya school of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in the 16th century CE, is reviewed here.

The Sanskrit word *rasa* first appears in the hymns of the Vedas. Its original meaning has to do with the botanical arena, its denotative meaning as simply the “sap” or “juice” from a plant, and by way of extension, the way in which sap or juice conduces to “taste,” a strong connotative sense of the word. These original meanings are usually associated with objects of this world. In the famed *Bhagavagītā*, we find the word occurring in five instances, carrying this meaning of human “taste” (2.59 [2x]; 7.8; 15.13; 17.10). However, there is one instance among these in which the divinity of Kṛṣṇa identifies himself as *rasa*: “I am the taste (*rasa*) in water,” (*BhG.* 7.8). The divinity's assertion “I am *rasa*” in the *Bhagavadgītā* imbues the term with greater theological significance and, again, anticipates later developments of the self (*ātman*) in relation to Kṛṣṇa who is eventually seen as the embodiment of all *rasa*.

From “sap” or “juice,” the meaning of the word *rasa* extended to the best or most essential part of anything. Thus one can observe how this broad definition takes the word further into its theological application as it is applied in the Upaniṣads. Though the word appears many times in several of the earliest Upaniṣads, the specific instance within which the word appears in the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* had taken on significance for later *bhakti* schools. The passage reads:

Because truly that existence is auspiciously formed,
rasa truly is that existence;
for once one here reaches that *rasa*,
this person becomes completely blissful. (*TaiU.* 2.7.1)

In this instance, the word *rasa* takes on a strong ontological dimension. The word's meaning as “essence” as applied to botanicals in the Vedas is now applied to existence itself. Moreover, the state of blissfulness attained from having known or grasped this essence or *rasa* of existence has important soteriological implications.

This shift of meaning for the word from a more worldly referent in the Vedas to a more transcendent ontological referent in the Upaniṣads anticipated, perhaps even inspired, later *bhakti* theologians and theorists of *rasa* to engage the word theologically. Such a shift can be characterized as a move from the realm of the ordinary (*laukika*) arena of taste in this world and even beyond the extraordinary (*alaukika*) arena of the aesthetic that is yet still of this world, extending the extraordinary to the furthest reaches of the otherworldly realm of spiritual transcendence that also engages the extraordinary power of the aesthetic. Now let us

turn to the Indian schools of dramaturgy and poetics in order to see how elements there have contributed to the religious understanding of *rasa* (see also drama).

The earliest-known developed theory of *rasa* as an aesthetic concept is found in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, attributed to Bharatamuni, a Sanskrit dramaturgical text which probably attained its final form between the 4th and 6th centuries CE (although likely a composite text with many contributors; on the date and authorship of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, see Gerow, 1977, 227, 245; Haberman, 2003, xxxvi). The term is used there to describe the cumulative aesthetic effect of a dramatic performance. The text lists eight *rasas*:

1. *śṛṅgāra*, “romance” or “passion”;
2. *hāsyā*, “comedy”;
3. *karuṇā*, “compassion”;
4. *raudra*, “fury”;
5. *vīra*, “heroism”;
6. *bhayānaka*, “horror”;
7. *bībhatsā*, “revulsion”; and
8. *adbhuta*, “amazement.”

Although these *rasas* are each connected with a particular emotion (*bhāva*), they were not in themselves emotions, exactly. Rather, *Nāṭyaśāstra* describes *rasa* as an aesthetic taste experienced by the audience after witnessing the portrayal of emotional components on the stage.

These components of emotion were categorized into four different types:

1. *sthāyibhāvas*, “foundational emotions”;
2. *vyabhicāribhāvas*, “transient emotions”;
3. *anubhāvas*, “emotional reactions”; and
4. *vibhāvas*, “catalysts of emotion.”

The *sthāyibhāvas* are eight in number, each one giving rise to one of the eight *rasas*. They are, respectively:

1. *rati*, “love”;
2. *hāsa*, “jest”;
3. *śoka*, “sorrow”;
4. *krodha*, “anger”;
5. *utsāha*, “willpower”;
6. *bhaya*, “fear”;
7. *jugupsā*, “disgust”; and
8. *vismaya*, “astonishment.”

That these emotional states are foundational means that they are capable of being sustained over the course of an entire play. As E. Gerow notes, “The dominant emotion [*sthāyibhāva*] is of course lost irretrievably if for a moment the sequence of events fails, is incoherent or confused, or if it does not reflect the *sthāyibhāva* itself at all times” (Dimock *et al.*, 1974, 134).

By contrast, the 33 *vyabhicāribhāvas* listed in *Nāṭyaśāstra* manifest only temporarily, shifting with the course of the plot’s development. For example, in a love story, a heroine’s initial

bashfulness may demonstrate her love for the hero, while later her jealousy may demonstrate the same love.

The *anubhāvas* essentially represent the emotion-driven behavior enacted on stage. It includes both volitional actions such as raising the eyebrows or gesturing with the hand as well as comparably involuntary bodily states such as perspiring or developing goosebumps. The actors were supposed to be able to display these latter as well on demand. A set list of eight such involuntary states is given in *Nāṭyaśāstra* under the name of *sāttvikabhāvas*: being stunned, perspiring, developing goosebumps, having one's voice altered, shivering, changing color (e.g. become pale or red), crying, and fainting. These eight and the term used for them are not clearly distinguished from other *anubhāvas* in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, although later writers treated them as a separate category.

Finally, the *vibhāvas* include all of the various components of the drama whereby the appropriate emotions are evoked. This includes the setting as represented by stage props, the events of the play, as well as the characters portrayed.

In explaining how “the *sthāyibhāvas* attain the status of *rasa*,” *Nāṭyaśāstra* offers what has become perhaps the most foundational statement about *rasa*: “By arranging the *vibhāvas*, *anubhāvas*, and *vyabhicāribhāvas* in proper combination, *rasa* arises” (*NāṭŚā.* 6.32). Later theorists utilized the ambiguity of this statement to develop theories of how *rasa* is experienced by a religious practitioner. However, in the dramaturgical context of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, this statement may best be read as explaining that in order for the audience to enjoy *rasa* while observing the play's portrayal of the *sthāyibhāva*, all the various components of the play, from the props and costumes to the actor's ability to cry or laugh in just the right manner, must work together harmoniously.

As the theory of *rasa* developed after *Nāṭyaśāstra*, many components of the theory became subject to varying interpretations. Some of these centered around apparent ambiguities in *Nāṭyaśāstra* itself, while others were based on some theorists' willingness to depart from its presentation. Debates about two components of the theory played an especially important role in the development of its religious applications. The first is the distinction of *rasa* from ordinary emotion, along with the implications this has for the question of who can experience *rasa*. The second is the issue of how many *rasas* there are and the identity of those *rasas*.

While *Nāṭyaśāstra* does specify that it is the audience that experiences *rasa*, the text does not explicitly deny the ability of others – the playwright, the actors, or the characters themselves – to experience *rasa*. Further, while *Nāṭyaśāstra* does clearly distinguish between *rasas* and *bhāvas* (ordinary emotions), some of the language it uses is ambiguous and could be read as implying that one's experience of ordinary emotion could be heightened into *rasa*. However, Abhinavagupta, a 10th–11th century Kashmir Śaiva and the author of one of the most influential commentaries on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *Abhinavabhāratī*, does very clearly and explicitly deny that anyone other than the audience can experience *rasa*, a claim that has generally been viewed as the orthodox position, at least up to the late medieval period.

His doing so goes hand in hand with a repeated emphasis on the *alaukika* (extraordinary) nature of *rasa*. Most traditional texts on *rasa* do claim *rasa* to be *alaukika*, and the seeds of this claim can be found in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, but the term itself is quite ambiguous. It derives from the word *loka* which is often translated simply as “world.” Thus, *laukika* could be taken to mean “worldly” with its opposite, *alaukika*, meaning “otherworldly.” And in some of the most religiously focused discussions of *rasa*, it does have something like this sense. However,

as *loka* can also mean “populace,” *alaukika* can be taken in the simpler sense of “not in the manner of common people,” or more simply, “extraordinary” or “special.” For example, in Sanskrit commentarial literature, glosses that simply paraphrase a complex word are considered *laukika*, while those that cite technical grammatical rules to explain the word formation are *alaukika*.

For Abhinavagupta, *rasa* is *alaukika* in the sense that the experience of *rasa*, as distinct from ordinary emotional experiences, requires of the audience a process of abstracting and generalizing emotional experience (*sādharaṇīkaraṇa*). A sympathetic audience member (*sahṛdaya*) must be able to identify with the characters in the portrayal of emotion on the stage or in the poem. However, since the concrete details of his or her own emotional experiences are distinct from those of the characters represented, the identification can only take place on the level of the abstract essence of the emotion. This process of abstraction parallels the process of trying to understand the identity of one’s own self with the absolute, *brahman*, in Abhinavagupta’s Kashmir Śaivism as well as in other philosophical traditions in India espousing ultimate oneness. Abhinavagupta does make clear distinctions between the audience’s experience of *rasa* and the religious practitioner’s enlightened experience of *brahman*; the former is temporary while the latter is not. Nevertheless, both are of the nature of bliss and the former could be seen as helping to lead to the latter.

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