

Indian Intermedial Poetics: the Sanskrit Rasa-Dhvani Theory

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Abstract. *Rasa*, *Dhvani* and *Rasa-Dhvani* are the major critical terms in Sanskrit poetics that developed during the post-Vedic classical period. *Rasa* (lit. juice) is used by a sage named Bharata (c. 4th C. B.C. – 1st C. A.D.) to denote the aesthetic experience of a theatrical audience. But Anandavardhana (9th C. A.D.) and Abhinavagupta (10th C. A.D.) intermedialize this experience by extending it to a reader of poetry. They argue that *rasa* is also generated by a linguistic potency called *dhvani*. Some critics like Bhoja (11th C. A.D.) also proposed generation of *rasa* by pictorial art, and further, some modern critics propose to trace *dhvani* property in non-verbal arts such as dance and music pleading thereby that these non-verbal arts also generate *rasa*. The present essay examines these arguments and concludes that generation of *rasa* is confined to only the audio-visual and verbal arts such as the theatre and poetry, and, *dhvani* as a specific linguistic potency, is strictly confined to the verbal arts. Its intermedialization is a contradiction in terms.

Keywords: *Rasa*, *Dhvani*, *Rasa-Dhvani*, post-Vedic texts, Sanskrit poetics.

INTRODUCTION

Rasa as a critical term is used first by a mythical sage named Bharata (4th C. B.C. – 1st C. A.D.) in his treatise on dramaturgy titled *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The term connotes a specific kind of pleasure that one experiences in perceiving a dramatic performance. Bharata borrows this term from a Vedic text titled *Taittirīyopaniṣad* (II.7) where the nature of ultimate Reality (*Brahman*) is explained in terms of gustatory delight (*ānanda*). The text reads: “That (Brahman) is certainly *Rasa* (literally, both “juice” and the act of tasting this juice); he who attains (tastes) it is delightful (*ānandē*).” In this way, ontology is explained in terms of non-linguistic (*yato vācā nivartante*) phenomenological epistemology.

The use of the word *rasa* in the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* Vedic text originates in a sacrificial ritual where the juice of a creeper named *soma* was offered to the Vedic gods. *Soma* is the Vedic name for the moon-god, famous for bestowing mental strength, lustre, happiness, and *soma rasa* is therefore considered an elixir (*amṛta*) that bestows immortality. The ancient Indian

dramaturgist and musicologist Bharata Mini uses the term in his theoretical treatise *Natya Shastra* (composed between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st-century CE), referring to the delight experienced by the audience during a dramatic performance. This occurs by means of the unification of emotion (*bhāva*), as it is manifested in the action (*anubhāva*) of a character within necessary environment(s) (*vibhāva*). *Rasa* is, thus, the self-manifestation of an emotion in the action (both physical [*anubhāva*] and mental [*vyabhicārībhāva*]) of a character(s). In its experiential form, *rasa* is a phenomenological phenomenon, not a material object, and music and dance are its necessary corollaries, involving visual, auditory and verbal signs: dramatic dialogue, music (both vocal and instrumental) dance and the action of the actors. Thus, the core of Bharata's theory is the manifestation of an emotion (*bhāva*) by means of an audio-visual performance, relished as *rasa* by the audience. Bharata therefore states that *bhāva* and *rasa* are interdependent, they manifest each other; *rasa* is nothing but an emotion *relished* by the audience – *āsvādyā*: (VI, prose after 31 and 34-37) the tasted emotion. *Rasa* is not produced on the stage by the performance of the actors, but in the (perceptual) experience of the audience; not again any kind of audience, but only a properly qualified *sahādaya* (like-hearted/sensitive) audience, as stated by Abhinavagupta (c. 950 – 1020 CE), the celebrated commentator on Bharata's treatise.

MANIFESTATION OF EMOTIONS ON STAGE

According to Abhinavagupta, the manifestation of emotion on the stage (*abhinaya*) is constituted by three factors: (1) *vibhāva*, which externalizes permanent emotions (*sthāyē*) enacted by the actors and the scenic elements; (2) the physical gestures and postures (*anubhāva*) that express emotions, and (3) the drifting feelings or moods (*vyabhicārē/saiicārē bhāvas*) associated with permanent emotions, as expressed by the facial movements. Permanent emotions and mental states are love, laughter, sorrow, anger, heroism, fear, distress and wonder, and appear externally in accordance with their relevant stimulants as eight *rasas* respectively – *Śringāra*, *Karuṇā*, *Hāsyā*, *Raudra*, *Vīra*, *Bhayānaka*, *Vēbhatsa* and *Utsāha*. In these manifestations there might be several *rasas* at a time, though with a leading or dominating one as the plot and situations of a play demand.

Different commentators offer their different views on the process of generation of *rasa*. The major issue is the identity of the emotion that is

manifested as *rasa*: is it the emotion of the characters of the play, of the actors, or of the audience? Drawing upon his predecessor Bhaṅgā Nāyaka, Abhinavagupta explains that it belongs to none of these three. Although assigned to the characters of the plays and performed by different actors at different times, the emotions are general in their forms, and it is because of their generality (*sādhāraṇya*) that they escape any individual attachment, so that they can affect different audiences (see Gnoli, 1968: 62-72).

I have argued earlier (2003) that *rasa* experience could not be equated with aesthetic experience in general (contra Gnoli, 1968: 72), although there are some similarities with Aristotelian *catharsis*. *Rasa* leads virtually to a view that it is essentially an experience of pure consciousness, thereby justifying Bharata's borrowing the term from the Upanisadic texts and applying it, metaphorically, to the theatrical experience. Abhinavagupta explains this experience by distinguishing it from other forms of cognition (Gnoli, 1968: 82) so that the semantic dimension of *rasa* has two levels – ontological and epistemological – *rasa* as the unmanifest reality that manifests itself (*sukāta*) and its experience as an extraordinary, non-sensory cognition, is metaphorised in explaining both the ontology and epistemology of theatre (*nāṭyam*).

Although written in verse, Bharata emphasizes the importance of narrative (VII: introduction) or the verbal description of the events, characters and their emotions, as they occur in the two great epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. Most of the Sanskrit plays draw their plots upon these narratives, although some plays are also based on the popular legends and events of history.

In the opening passage of chapter VII, Bharata uses the term *bhāva* in two senses: mental states that exist internally (*bhū*), and as externalization or perceptual manifestation of the meanings of verbal narratives by the four constituents of action/stage performance – physical, verbal (speeches/dialogues), facial movements and costume. Thus, according to Bharata, it is the enactment of the dialogue that generates *rasa*, not its referential meaning. It is further clear that although Bharata uses the word *bhāva* in two different senses, that use is only apparent. Virtually they are correlated. When the internal *bhāva* is transformed into the external *bhāva* (perceptual form of the audiovisual kind) *rasa* is generated.

The denial of *rasa* to poetry was challenged by Kashmirian metaphysical philosopher Ānandavardhana (9th century CE) who forwarded an

intermedial theory of *rasa* by demonstrating that poetry also generates it. The linguistic potency that manifests the unmanifest in poetry is termed *vyaijanā*, and the manifest semantic entity (or meaning) is called *dhvani* (literally “sound”). By saying so, Ānandavardhana rejects the rhetorical theory of poetry forwarded by the realist logicians of the Nyāya School and the Vedic exegetes of the *Mīmāṃsā* School. According to them there are two semantic levels – literal or denotational (*abhidhā*) and indicative or figurative (*lakṣaṇā*). The grammarians of the Paninian school also agreed with these two schools in taking account of these two levels of meaning. The figurative use of language is necessary when the denotational level fails to express the desired meaning.

But in addition to these two levels of linguistic potency, Ānandavardhana suggested a third one: revelation (*vyaijanā*). He said that when denotation and indication fail to express the desired meaning this *vyaijanā* potency operates anchoring on either of the other two semantic levels. He asserted that this tertiary semantic potency manifests what remains unmanifest in the first two linguistic functions. For him, *rasa* is the *dhvani* expression that manifests the unmanifest in poetry. *Dhvani* itself is *rasa* (delight) and he who relishes this meaning (*dhvani/ rasa*) also becomes delightful (*ānandē*). In the case of poetry, it is the same as its tasting by the reader.

Ānandavardhana formulated his *dhvani* theory by a thorough analysis of its doctrinal foundations and its different categories as based on the denotational and indicative functions of language (*abhidhā-mūlā* and *lakṣaṇā – mūlā* classifications of *dhvani*). Keeping the technical perspectives aside (to avoid the length of this chapter while asking the readers for consulting the bibliography attached to it) a brief focus is shed on the three major categories of the denotational *dhvani-Vastu* (objects and events), *alākāra* (images and tropes) and *rasa* (emotions). Ānandavardhana observes that *rasa* is not related to any figure, it is only the effect of *dhvani* (*DhvaA.II*). Thus, experience of an image or figure may be due to all the three cognitive processes – perception, inference and analogy. It also involves recognition implying the function of memory.

Returning to Abhinavagupta, the epistemological implications of theory is that all our cognitive experiences are stimulated by emotions, and end in emotional responses, and that amidst all our emotions, love is the central one. Thus, whereas the *rasa* experience due to the theoretical performance is transmediated to the experience of poetic expression of

dhvani by the Sanskrit poetics, this transmediation is not possible in the experience of other arts such as painting (or the pictorial arts in general). Therefore, the experience of *rasa* confined to the audio-visual and verbal arts cannot be interpreted as aesthetic experience in general. Even not all the varieties of poetic expressions generate *rasa* excepting the *dhvani* expressions. Narrative literature in general is unable to generate *rasa* as the theatre does.

CONCLUSIONS

Ānandavardhana's purport was not to extend *dhvani* beyond its semantic function to include the semiotic functions of music and dance, which are cited only as examples for immediacy in comprehensions of two kinds of (verbal) meanings.

Treatises on painting and sculpture during the early medieval period discerned six limbs of the visual arts of three categories – three dimensional sculptures (*citra*), half-sculptures (*citrārdha*) and pictures (*citrasama*): formal distinctions (*rūpabheda*), appropriate measurements (*pramāṇi*), similitude (*Sādācya*), proper disposition of colours (*vañikābhāga*), application of emotions (*bhāvas*) and grace (*lāvaṇya*). But no critic has ever accepted the view that visual arts generate *rasa* that is attributed only to theatrical performance and to the *dhvani* expression in poetry.

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