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The Conception of Rasa as the Highest Form of Aesthetic Experience

A. N. Krishnaveney

Introduction

Philosophy of the beauty is called Aesthetics. Aesthetic experience is the enjoyment of beauty. The word “Aesthetics” in the Indian context means “a science and philosophy of the fine arts”. Fine art is the art, which presents the absolute in sensuous garb and aesthetical relation, with work which gives rise or leads to the experience of the absolute. (Pandey, 1959:1) We may recognize architecture, sculpture painting, music, poetry, and drama to be fine arts. In the early period, Indian aesthetics was primarily concerned with three arts. They are poetry (drama), music and architecture. From the philosophical point of view, these three fine arts are known as *Rasa-Brahma-Vada*, *Nada-Brahma-Vada* and *Vastu-Brahma-Vada* respectively. According to the Indian Aesthetics, poetry is the highest form of arts. The sweetness of the human soul can be expressed in poetry. The poet is said to be a seer. He feels high and deep, and reveals the unknown things. Drama is the highest of all forms of poetry. Poetry (*padya*) and drama (*nāṭaka*) are considered to be the two forms of literary art (*sāhitya*, or *kāvya*).

The term *kāvya* actually denotes the entire art of literary composition, which is also expressed by the term *sāhitya*. The name given to the science of aesthetics is *alankāra sāstra* or *sāhitya sāstra*. Music and poetry are interconnected with drama. Music appeals to the ear and poetry appeals to the mind. Hence, the three phases of arts, music, poetry and drama are more intimate to their appeal to the soul than any other arts.

According to Hinduism, all arts are closely connected with divinity. We find that the *Nāṭya sāstra* (1.1) considered Brahma as the originator of drama, and Mahesvara as the originator of dance. The Lord Nataraja is the cosmic dancer according to Hindu tradition. Similarly Visnu is recognized to be the originator of different forms of action (*Vṛtti*) which drama presents. Hence we may say that the origin of drama is closely connected with the Hindu Trinity, called Brahma, Mahesvara and Visnu. (Pandey, 1959:3-4) The sacredness of the Hindu arts has a very remarkable feature.

Indian philosophy of arts has provided us three important concepts. They are *bhāva*, *Rasa* and *dhvani*. The concept of *rasa* pre-supposes *bhāva*. Hence we may reduce the concepts into two, namely *rasa* and *dhvani*.

Genesis of the Term 'Rasa'

The concept of '*rasa*' can be traced back as far as the *Vedas*. The term *rasa* is used here in its original and literal sense, meaning 'to taste' or 'to relish'. The term '*rasa*' is derived from its Sanskrit root-word '*ras*' meaning 'to taste'. It is admitted that what is relished gives a sense of satisfaction and pleasurable feeling. Therefore, we may say that the experience of *rasa* gives pleasure (*prīti*) and satisfaction (*tripti*).

In the *Rig Veda* we find the term '*Soma Rasa*' which denotes the essence of the soma plant. Here the term '*rasa*' means 'essence'. The *soma rasa* is used in the Vedic sacrificial rites. In *Rig Veda* we find the idea of immortality. *Rg Veda* says that, Gods attained immortality by drinking *soma rasa*.

The term '*rasa*' gives another meaning '*flavour*'. Dr. Ānanda Coomarswami (1956:46) describes aesthetic experience as that tasting of flavor (*rasāsvādāna*) or simply as tasting (*svada*, *āsvāda*). He called the taster as *rasika*; the work of art as *rasavat*.

The *Upanisads* also speak about '*rasa*'. The term *rasa* is used here in the sense of essence. The *Chandogya Upanisad* (1.1:3) explains '*rasa*' as follows:

The essence (*rasa*) of things here is the earth.

The essence of the earth is water.

The essence of water is plants.

The essence of plants is person (*Purusa*)

The essence of a person is speech.

The essence of speech is the Rig ('hymn')

The essence of the Rig is the Saman ('chant')

The essence of the Saman is the Udgitha.

Udgīta or loud singing is the quintessence of all the other essences. According to the *Chandogya Upanisad* the loud singing is the highest essence.

The concept of '*rasa*' and '*ānanda*' are two fundamental ideas in Indian philosophy of beauty. The concept of '*rasa*' is closely connected with the concept of bliss or *ānanda*. The enjoyment of *rasa* bears a close resemblance to the experience of the bliss that comes by realizing Brahman or Atman.

In the *Upanisads* Brahman is the ultimate reality. It is explained as '*sat*' (existence), *cit* (knowledge) and *ānanda* (bliss). The term *ānanda* includes the idea of *rasa* or

delight. 'Brahman is the source of delight or pleasure according to the *Upanisads*. One who realizes Brahman becomes Brahman. The knower of Brahman attains the highest. Brahman as the essence of *ānanda* is explained as '*Brahmano ānanda*'. Without bliss there is no Brahman. 'That (Brahman) is verily the source of joy; one becomes joyful on realizing that source of 'joy' (*raso vai sah rasam hyevayam labdhva anandi bhavati*). (Taittiriya upanisad 11, 7.1) Here the term '*rasa*' is used in the sense of the highest experience of Brahman).

In the *Upanisads* the term '*rasa*' is used in the sense of '*essence*' and also in the sense of '*taste*'.

Advaita Vedanta considers Brahman as *nirvisesa*. It is pure consciousness and full of bliss.

The Visistadvaitic conception of God is the whole of reality and an abode of infinite eternal and auspicious qualities like truth, goodness and beauty. Brahman is considered as the aesthetic absolute by the school of Visistadvaita. The concept of God is known as *Bhuvana sundara*. This signifies that God is beauty and Beauty is God. Beauty of Brahman leads to eternal bliss. P.N.Srinivasacari in his *Philosophy of Beautiful* says "rasa" is not the feeling tone of a sensation or a sentiment, but is an inner spiritual enjoyment. Here we may say that bliss is also an inner spiritual enjoyment. It may be called *rasa*.

Rasa is the fundamental concept in Tamil literature. '*Rasa is the poetic sentiment*'. In our actual life we experience different kinds of *rasas*, such as *soka*, *krodha*, *Utsāha*, *bhaya*, *hāsa* etc. A poet takes this emotion as a theme for his work, and generalizes this emotion in his work. Then in a *kāvya*, the raw material of emotion gets '*ennobled*' the emotion being taken to a higher feeling. The emotion has been objectified and impersonalized, by the poet. When we read a *Kāvya*, in the happiness or sorrow of character we see the reflection of his own sorrow or happiness. These emotions becoming poetic sentiments are well explained in the Tamil tradition. The concept of *rasa* is called *meippadu* in Tamil literature. This *rasa* is the inner emotions as exhibited in our gestures. When a person reads an emotional *kāvya* or poetry, he reveals his inner emotional sentiments. The gulping of the throat, the sweating, the tears – all these are visible signs, the expression of emotions. (Meenaksi Sundaranar 1977:15)

Nāṭya sāstra is the earliest work among the *alamkarasāstra s*. In explaining the constituents of *rasa*, *Bharata* takes the case of *drama*. *Drama* includes other arts, like dance. (*nartana*) and music (*sangīta*). The aim of *drama* is the higher order of delight which is called *rasa*. The *Abhinayas* are the important factors of means of *rasa*. *Abhinaya* is of four kinds. They are *Āṅgika*, *Vācika*, *Sāttvika* and *Aharya*. Acting is called *Āṅgika*. It consists of the movement of the parts of the body. *Vācika* is the appropriate movement of speech-organs, involved in effective recitation. *Sāttvika* is acting, consisting of the action of mind, involved in the various emotive states, which find expression in involuntary physical changes, such as change of colour, tremour (shaking or trembling) horripilation etc. *Aharya*

(dresses and make up) is all the means of presentation other than those belonging to the “psycho-physical constituents of the actors” themselves.

Bharata mentions eight kinds of rasas. They are *srngāra*, *hāsya*, *karuna*, *raudra*, *vīra*, *bhayānakah*, *bibhatsa* and *adbhuta*. The emotional theme of a work (bhava) is primarily responsible for *rasa*. Bharata mentions eight *sthayībhāvas*, which when transformed, give the experience called *rasa* on the basis of the eight particularly *sthayibhavas*.

The *rasa* based on conjugal love (*rati*) is called *srngāra*, the *rasa* based on mirth (*hasa*) is called *hasya*, the experience based compassion or sorrow (*soka*) is called *karuna*, the *rasa* based on anger (*krodha*) is called *raudra*, that which is based on fortitude (*utsaha*) as the basis is called *vira*, the one which has fear (*bhaya*) as the basis is called *bhayanaka*, similarly the *rasa* based on disgust (*juguptsa*) is called *bibhatsa*, and the *rasa* based on wonder (*vismaya*) is called *adbhuta*.

Emotional type of Poetry

First of all we shall deal with the emotional theme of poetry, which is the cause of *rasa*. There are two types of contents of work of art. They are the predominantly emotional (*bhava*), and predominantly situational (*dasa*) theme of poetry. These two types are not exclusive to each other. Both of these themes are involved in every poem, but either of these dominates in poetry. The appeal of the predominantly situational type of poetry is mostly given to the readers’ imagination, but the appeal of the emotional poetry goes deeper than the imagination. The emotional type of poem only gives special delight, which is called *rasa*. The emotional types of poetry moves the readers’ hearts, it creates an echo in his own feeling, so that he reacts with poetry, inwardly laughing in weeping or trembling as in it. (Ramachandran, 1977:52)

We may compare the predominantly emotional type of poem with the *aham* type of poetry of Sangam period. The term of *aham* literally means inner. This type of poem is centered round of dominant emotion, mostly love. This kind of love is transformed as *bhagavad-kama* or divine love. *Alankarikas* called this *bhagavad-kama* as *bhagavad-rati*.

Valmiki the great poet had composed *Ramayana* which is a good example of predominantly emotional poetry in Sanskrit. According to the *rasa* view, the poet’s own feeling is never the theme of poetry. We find this truth in the reference of the episode narrated in the beginning of the *Ramayana*. On a certain day the great poet *Valmiki* had witnessed of fowler killing one of a pair of lovely birds that were disporting themselves, on the branch of a tree. Its composition on seeing it lies dead on the ground. all bathed in blood, and began to cry loud in sorrowful tone. This sorrowful event, he composed *Ramayana* which was full of pathos, and grief (*soka*). *Kalidasas*, *Meghaduta*, *Sakuntala* are also good examples of emotional types of work.

Here we may clarify certain points with regard to the nature of predominantly emotional type of poetry. A poet may choose an emotional theme, but he never gives

expression to his own feelings. Artistic expression is possible only when artist rises above himself. But his personal experience is only the raw material of a work of art; not a theme. An artist generalizes his personal emotion, and created the theme of work. When the personal emotion, either poet's own emotion, or the emotion he has observed anywhere, becomes the theme of art, it belongs to no one in particular. The generalization or idealization of the personal emotion is called *sādhārani karana*.

In our actual life we feel, or experience varieties of emotions. However these emotions are mixed with pleasure and pain, but when these emotions are presented in poetry by the poet, they become fully enjoyable irrespective of pain or pleasure. The reason for this enjoyment is that the emotion treated by the poet is impersonal. Therefore, idealized emotional theme only gives pleasure to the reader or the appreciator.

In the process of appreciation we try to show that the emotional type of poetry cannot be directly communicated. The emotion or feeling can be communicated through situations or circumstances. This situation also should be an idealized situation. Here the predominantly emotional theme is the soul (atman) of poetry. The situation is only body or sarira of the poetry. The real essence of poetry is the emotion (bhava). This emotional type of poetry gives the highest aesthetic experience.

When we processed to discuss the concept of rasa, we may deal with the constituents of rasa. We have to explain how spectator experiences delight or rasa through a drama.

The Constituents of Rasa

The aesthetic delight derived by the inner process from a work of art, of which the emotional type is called rasa. We have already seen that the term "rasa" literally means 'taste' or 'savour' such as sweetness. We may call the emotional type of poetry, the rasa type of poetry.

There are certain objective factors like *Vibhava*, *anubhava*, and *Vyabhicaribhava*. These three factors are constituents of the situation or *dasa*, in which the emotional content of the play, called *sthayibhava* is manifested. They jointly constitute the field or medium through which the *sthayibhava* of the play is presented to the spectator. The concept of rasa is the result from the interaction of the objective and the subjective factors.

Sthayibhava is the subjective factor. The word 'stha' means to abide. It is the permanent emotion. This is the basic emotion in poetry. According to Bharata, the spectators' *sthayibhava* lies dormant in his mind as a part of the tendencies which he has acquired through previous experiences (*Vāsanā*, *samskāra*). When the appropriate stimulus is presented by the drama in the form of its *sthayibhava*, the latent *sthayibhava* of the spectator is called forth, or received. Thus drama depicting such as love, courage or sorrow in a spectator who has had experience of it either in this life or in some past life. (Ramachandran, 1980:43). This revival is called *ubhodhana*. The revival of *sthayibhava* in the impersonal form becomes a source of pure delight. It is called rasa. According to

Bharata, *sthayibhava* is the material cause (*upaadana-karma*) of *rasa* and defines *rasa* as the *sthayibhava* 'transformed' (*Parivratah*) (Ramachandran, 1977:44).

According to Bharata, *Vibhava*, *anubhava* and *vyabhicaribhavas* are the objective factors, which are the causes of transforming the *sthayibhava*. Bharata says, 'The *sthayibhava* transformed by *anubhava*, and *vyabhicaribhava* acquires the name *rasa*'.

Pratibha or the imaginative insight of the spectator similar to the dramatist is also necessary for apprehending what is given in the play. The spectator might apprehend the emotion through the situation. Hence his imagination (*pratibha*) must be of a more penetrative kind than ordinarily required.

The objective factors like *Vibhava*, *anubhava* and *vyabhicaribhavas* are the cause of the transformation of the *sthayibhava* of the spectator into *rasa*. These three factors are said to excite, articulate, and develop the *sthayibhava* of the spectator. These factors in situation is also called *bhavas*, because they cause the emotion to happen (*bhavanyanti*) in the character and in the spectator, but they are responsible for the emotion directly in the character, indirectly the spectator.

The word *Vibhava* stands for the dramatic situation, which is not the cause but only a medium, through which emotion arises in the actor. However emotion in the spectator is due to identification which is the hero. (Pandey, 1952:24) *Vibhava* is different from that, in which emotion arises in actual life; a situation arouses an emotion in an individual. Here the situation directly acts upon the emotion. But in the case of drama, the situation is indirectly connected with the spectator. The situation simply suggests to the spectator the presence of an emotion in the drama. *Vibhava* is of two types; *alambana* and *uddipana*. The *alambana vibhava* is made up of the human element in the situation, i.e., the hero or any other character and his actions. It is the main excitement. The manifestation of emotion depends on the basis of the *alambanavibhava*. *Uddipanavibhava* is made up of the natural element in the situation, i.e., the time and place, or circumstance under which the *alambana* operates. The emotion roused by *alambana vibhava*, makes it more intense.

Anubhava is that by which a feeling (*bhava*) is indicated (*anubhavyate*). All the physical changes, which are consequent to the rise of an emotion and are in actual life, looked upon as the effects of emotion, are called *anubhavas*. These are different from the physical effects of emotion which arise in real life. While *vibhava* is the cause of an emotion, an *anubhava* is an effect, or manifestation, of an emotion. *Anubhavas* articulate the emotions in the play and thereby render the corresponding emotions in the spectator (also clear). (Ramachandran, 1977:47)

Bharata mentions special type of *anubhavas* called *sāttvika-bhāva*. These are eight in number: stupefaction (*stambha*), perpiration (*svēda*), horripilation (*romanca*), changes of voice (*svara bheda*), trembling (*vepathu*), change of color (*vaivarṇaya*), and shedding

tears (*asru*) and fainting (*pralaya*). Here we may distinguish the *anubhavas* from *sattvika bhavas* are involuntary expression in an emotion, while the *anubhavas* are voluntary.

The *vyabhicari bhāva* is also an emotion itself. The term *vyabhicari* means not to abide. It temporarily accompanies a *sthayibhāva*. They are so called, because they come as they were face to face with the spectator in the course of aesthetic experience of various kinds. The *vyabhicari bhāva* brings the different *rasas* as if it were face to face with the spectator. *Vyabhicari bhavas* indicate the strength of the *sthayibhava* in the play. For example, if the basic emotion or *sthayibhava* represented in the drama is conjugal love (*rati*), other emotions such as anxiety (*cintā*) discouragement (*visāda*) etc., appear and disappear according to the situations through which love passes.

Production of Rasa

The end of dramatic presentation, the instruction of the spectator, is realized through *rasa* only. *Rasa* as presented in *drama*, can rise only when situation physical changes, transient emotions, -all are harmoniously united together in due proportion by poetic genius. Thus *rasa* is produced from the interaction of the subjective factors and objective factors. Bharata has expressed the ideas of objective factors as follows.

Vibhāvanubhāva – vyabhicāri – samyōgat

Rasa–nispattih (NS. Prose following VI 33)

This accomplishment of *rasa* results from the conjunction of *Vibhava*, *anubhava* and *vyabhicaribhava*.

Thus Bharata mentions all the factors leading to *rasa* (in the prose VII.183) in *Natyasatra*. He says that it is the *sthayin* which becomes *rasa* through its organization with *vibhavas*. Here we may say something about the spectator. The qualified appreciator is called *sahrdaya*, 'one of similar heart.' The *sahrdaya* is one who has, like the poet himself, an imagination and that takes him beyond the situation and who has an emotional background the poem. The reader's heart is attuned to the situation and gets absorbed in it. The attunement of heart is called *hrdaya-samvāda*. As a result of this attunement, the reader gets absorbed in contemplating the object. This is called *tanmayi bhāvana*, which means 'becoming of the nature of that', such an absorption, or identification, is the means to self-forgetfulness, naturally giving aesthetic delight called *rasa*.

Conclusion

Thus the concept of *rasa* is very significant in human culture. It is the result of an art appreciation. It is simply and purely an aesthetic quality.

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