

CREATION OF *RASA* OR AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE: THE AIM OF INDIAN ART

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Prof. Raghunath Ghosh is one of the great teachers I ever came in contact with in all my life. He joined the Department in 1980 when I was a student of the Department. He is not only a brilliant scholar and a nice person, but also a great teacher always extending his helping hand to his students. In fact, during his long, chequered career as a teacher, he proved very helpful to all his students and colleagues alike. I feel fortunate to have a great and brilliant teacher like him in the journey of my academic life. I have done my PhD under his supervision and without his invaluable guidance it would not have been possible for me to complete the work.

Aesthetics is the philosophy of the beautiful. The beautiful in all its forms, - graphic or musical, dynamic or static; whether it is divine (or natural) or human creation; from solid architecture and sculpture to the finest nuances of abstract art and poetry, - involves an element of perceptual experience. Everyone is fond of beauty. When we are attracted by the majestic beauty of the snow capped Everest or Kanchenjunga or the sublime beauty of the Taj Mahal; when our mind is pacified by music or fascinated by dance and beautiful paintings, we feel a special kind of delight or *ānanda* which has been characterized as *rasa* or aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience, which reveals the emotional mood in knowledge, is free from all barriers and is often experienced as a pleasurable and desirable experience that gives life its true worth and meaning. This kind of sublime experience is transcendental in nature as it not only takes one beyond the world of senses but also brings in proximity with the ultimate reality (*Brhamānubhuti*). This experience or *ānanda* is not related to our mundane life; it is supernatural or *lokattara*. The ultimate reality (*Brhaman*) is pervaded in the universe as delight or *ānanda*. His delightful entity is omnipotent. He Himself is truly *ānanda* (*Rasasvarupa*). For that very reason it is said in the *Upaniṣad*, “*Raso vai saḥ*” (*Taittiriya Upaniṣad*: 45)

In India, music, dance, painting and drama are considered as divine art. Indian art can be compared with a vast ocean. It has both depth and dimension of an ocean. In what sense is Indian art “Indian”? Does the word “Indian” stand here merely for a geographical boundary, or is there a deeper sense in which it is used? Coomaraswamy maintains: “Indian art is essentially religious. The conscious aim of Indian art is the intimation of Divinity.”¹ To put it a little differently, art, like religion, is a way of looking at life. It has a definite aim, function, and value both for the artist

and the spectators. Thus the western idea of “art for art’s sake” has no place in Indian art. From the Indian perspective, artistic creativity is an intense inward journey to the ultimate reality, - a journey characterized as ‘*sādhana*,’ towards self-realization. Indeed, in the Indian tradition of *Rasa* theory, aesthetic experience or *rasa* is identified with that ‘feeling’ when the self perceives the Self. Linking art to spirituality is a thrust that may well be traced to the Indian tradition in which the key term *rasa*, - that stands for aesthetic experience, - is regarded quite akin to the experience of the ultimate reality (*Brhmānubhuti*).

Scholars of Indian Aesthetics have been basically concerned only with the theories of literary form of art and not with the application of other forms of art. Aesthetic experience or *rasa* is not confined to the literary form of art only, rather it is possible from all forms of art, - visual, literary and performance. Literature and poetics aim to express truth through metaphorical language and arouse the aesthetic pleasure of the reader and evoke certain emotions. Music is the sweet and soothing sound which creates an aesthetic experience in an individual. The sound vibrates nicely and soothes the heart of a man. On account of this his mind moves to a higher, sublime state from the personal sorrows and sufferings. Not only music but all forms of performing arts can produce aesthetic experience. Similarly, when we visualize any form of art whether it is a painting or sculpture or architecture, our heart becomes saturated with aesthetic experience or *rasa*, - “A thing of beauty is a joy forever”. Thus the theory of beauty is not only confined to literary forms of art like poetry, literature and drama but is also applicable to other forms of art like music, dance, painting, architecture and sculpture. In *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, Vol.III, there is beautiful dialogue between Varja and Sage Markandeya as to “what the *citra-sutra*” is? How can one be proficient in the art of painting? asks Vajra. Markandeya replies that unless one is proficient in the art of dance, one cannot be an expert in the art of painting (III.2-2.3). Then Vajra requests him to “explain the method of dance and also to talk about *citra-sutra*”. Markandeya replies that both these arts go hand in hand, both of them are *anukriyā*. Markandeya further adds that one who does not know how to play on a musical instrument, cannot be an expert in dance. Vajra then asks something about musical instruments. Markandeya replies that without knowing vocal music, one cannot be proficient in playing an instrument. This shows that they

regarded that the forms of fine arts were interrelated and any of the arts could not be practised in isolation. This indeed is a very important insight. But nobody seems to have worked out the actual relationship among these arts. In *Nāṭya-Śāstra*, there is a reference to all these arts together and in *nāṭya* practices, they are used. In the sixth *adhyaīya* of *Nāṭya-Śāstra* Bharata gives the following verse:

Rasabhavahyabhinayah dharmivrtti-pravrttayah I
siddhisvarastathatodyam ganam rangasyasamgrahah II

The ancient Indian critical texts had concentrated more on theory. They did not dissociate philosophy from literary criticism. The Vedas are the earliest pieces of recorded literature. As these were considered sacrosanct, the *śūdras* were denied access to them and a fifth *Veda* i.e. *Nāṭya Veda* was created for their enjoyment. It is said that *Brahmā* created the *Nāṭya Veda*, the fifth scripture to save humanity from deterioration of moral values. He created this *Veda* by taking elements from the other four Vedas. He took Speech from the *Rig-Veda*, *Abhinaya* (the entire gamut of speech, body, dress and facial expressions) from the *Yajur-Veda*, music from the *Sama-Veda* and aesthetic experiences or *rasa* from the *Atharva-Veda*. He revealed this *Veda* to sage Bharata. The sage went to Lord *Śiva* to learn and add dance movements to the drama he had created, according to the *Veda*. And thus dance and drama were created. Sage Bharata's *Nāṭya-Śāstra* is the most exhaustive text on theatre art. It is the oldest in the world and is the common basis for the Indian classical tradition of music, dance, drama and iconography.

Indian art evolved with an emphasis on inducing a special spiritual state in the audience. The fundamental basis of Indian culture is firmly rooted in its spirituality which puts emphasis much more on the soul than the body. So from the era of *Upaniṣdas* down to the philosophical fields of discussion, pleasure seeking consciousness of Indian mind has been searching for transcendental happiness. In order to find out a convincing source of this kind of blissful spiritual happiness, Indian philosophy, from time immemorial, has undertaken a long passage of journey from material to immaterial, from mundane to spiritual ending in the realization of the Supreme Being. At the flag end, the philosophers have been able to find out that the Supreme Being is Himself the blissful spirit and the eternal entity.

A beautiful piece of art object can provide us aesthetic delight or *ānanda*, which is not confined to a particular time and space. The aim of all Indian art is to

produce aesthetic experience or *rasa* in the spectator or audience. The theory of aesthetic experience or *rasa* is mainly found in the literary form of art. In ancient India, other forms of art like music, dance, painting etc. were equally appreciated and it is possible to apply such theory to other forms of art also. It is the contention of the *Alamkārikas* that the theory of aesthetic experience or *rasa*, though invented in connection with the literary form of art, can be extended to other forms of art. It has been rightly pointed out by Anandavardhana that an individual, though conversant in respect of word, meaning and their relation, cannot understand literature until and unless his heart is saturated with aesthetic experience or *rasa*. He explains this phenomenon with the help of an example taken from the world of music. He adds that an individual, though expert in the science of music, cannot understand melody and pleasure arising from it if his heart is not saturated with *rasa*.²

The same theory is also applicable to the pictorial form of art. In the phrase of Abhinavagupta, any type of creative art presupposes *rasaveśa* (involvement in aesthetic experience) in an individual for its generation. Various experiences in our life are represented in the art objects like literature, music, picture etc. In order to represent reality one should need a deep concentration which is echoed in the *Bhagavadgītā* – ‘*Na cayuktasya bhāvanā*’.³ This abiding emotion or sentiment must exist in an artist, dramatic characters and spectators in the case of literary art. In case of music there must exist such sentiment among artist, musical presentation and the audience. In case of pictorial form of art there must exist such sentiment among artists, pictorial presentation and the critics. *Rasa*, Indian concept of aesthetic experience, is an essential element of any work of visual, literary or performing art that can only be suggested and cannot be described. Indian art seeks to discover and suggest the idea behind sensuous appearance. In painting, sculpture, literature, music and dance, we have the importance of expression clearly and cleverly revealed and utilized. There is a broad suggestiveness of expression in these fine arts. Literature aims at evoking certain emotions, which are universally present in men and thereby leads them to catharsis. In order to accomplish this purpose, the poet makes use of the unique process of suggestion. Poets do not communicate emotions through ordinary language. They only suggest them through metaphorical language. In dance, different postures represent different thoughts through the path of suggestion.

Different *Mudrās* of a dance, different patches of colour or lines of picture have specific suggestive meaning. Even a particular note creates a particular suggestion in music too. *Rasa* is expressed through suggestion. It reveals a charming sense over and above the described ones. It is like the chime of a bell, whose resonance continues vibrating in the air even after the bell stops. It is like an atmosphere of a powerful fragrance, which pervades the atmosphere entirely with its presence. “It is a kind of contemplative abstraction in which the inwardness of human feelings suffuses the surrounding world of embodied forms.”⁴ The pleasure derived from art is a kind of spiritual joy, transcendental and super sensuous. This is a concept difficult to be proved or disproved by reason because the existence and conception of soul are matters of never ending controversy. If I do not have necessary scientific data to prove the existence of soul, I do not, at the same time, have any unimpeachable evidence to disprove it. Visvanatha has eulogized the transcendental nature of aesthetic experience after considering its true manifestation. To him such a nature of aesthetic pleasure is not a defect, rather it is an ornament (*Alaukikatvametesam bhuṣaṇam nā tu duṣaṇam*).⁵ The factors generating aesthetic pleasure are also taken to be ornamental (*bhuṣaṇam*). In other words, they are efficacious for the manifestation of *Rasa* just like ornaments (*Bhuṣaṇavadupakarakam rasabhirbhavanukulamityārthaḥ*)⁶ are.

Rasa is the supreme delight produced in the mind of the appreciator by a work of art. The word *rasa* is derived from the root *rasaḥ* meaning sap or juice, taste, flavour, relish. The extract of a fruit is referred to as *rasa* which itself is the essence of it, the ultimate flavour of it. The *Rasa* theory originates with Bharata in *Nāṭya-Śāstra*. It was developed by the rhetorician and philosopher Abhinavagupta. Bharata, the first announcer of the theory, gives the most comprehensive analysis of its sources, nature and its categories. Bharata served to compile the meaning of the multifaceted word ‘*rasa*’ in a single sentence. “*Rasyate anena iti rasaḥ (asvadyatva)*” (Bharata, *Nāṭya-Śāstra*, 28). Bharata’s maxim in connection with the theory of *rasa* goes thus, “*vibhāvanubhava vyabhicāri samyogad rasnispatiḥ*”.⁷ That is, *rasa* is accomplished as a result of the conjunction of *vibhava* (stimuli), *anubhava* (after-effects) and *vyabhicāribhāva* (transitory moods). The term *bhāva* means both existence and a mental state and in aesthetic contexts it has been variously translated as feelings,

psychological states and emotions. In the context of the drama, *bhāva* is the emotions represented in the performance. *Rasa* and *bhāva* can be considered as Siamese twins: one without the other would not have a sensitive life. *Rasa* cannot be generated without *bhāva* and vice-versa. If *bhāva* does not promote the relative *rasa* then it is basically fruitless. Thus we can say that both *rasa* and *bhāva* are the most important factors in art. *Rasa* provides with an emotional experience and *bhāva* is the emotional experience. Bharata in his *Nāṭya-Śāstra* mentioned eight *sthāyibhāva* (permanent mood), they are *rati* (love), *hasa* (humour), *śoka* (pathos), *krodha* (anger), *utsāha* (energy), *bhaya* (fear), *jugupsā* (disgust) and *vismaya* (wonder) ⁸ and from these *sthāyibhāva*, *śṛṅgāra* (beauty), *hāsya* (laughter), *karuṇa* (sadness), *raudra* (anger), *vira* (bravery), *bhayānaka* (dangerous), *vibhatsā* (obscene) and *adbhuta* (miraculous) *rasas* are generated respectively. ⁹ A ninth *rasa* was added later by Abhinavagupta; and it is *śānta* (peace or tranquillity). This addition had to undergo a good deal of struggle between sixth and tenth centuries, before it could be accepted by the majority of the *Alaṃkārikas* and the expression *Navarasa* (the nine *rasas*), could come into vogue. These *rasas* comprise the component of aesthetic experience.

Rasa, however, is not a static fact; it is a dynamic process. The artist, it is said, transfers the *rasa* that he experiences and fructifies in his soul to the audience. He shares it with them. He lives the process; he throbs under its integrating unity. He has no life apart from his creative subject. The aim of art is the creation of "*Rasa*" or aesthetic experience. Every presentation of drama, dance, music and painting is aimed at evoking in the minds of the audience or spectator a particular kind of aesthetic experience, which is characterised as *rasa*. Beauty in Indian art is usually equated with *rasa*. It is the essence of experience. The study of aesthetics deals with the realization of beauty in art, its relish or enjoyment, and the awareness of joy that accompanies an experience of beauty. *Rasa* has no equivalent in word or concept in any other language or art of the world hitherto known to us. The closest explanation can be aesthetic experience or aesthetic relish.

Aesthetic theory in India is comprised of a long and complex trajectory beginning with its origins in Vedic times. There is considerable evidence that the roots of Indian aesthetics are embedded in Vedic literature such as the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* from the *Rig Veda*. However, according to Indologists, there was no

systematic treatment of aesthetics until Bharata's *Nāṭya-Śāstra* was composed. As to why this treatise was written, scholars such as Dr. S. S. Barlingay point out that the *Nāṭya-Śāstra* was aiming to present one cogent, coherent theory of art in general and drama in particular.¹⁰

The aim of the *Nāṭya-Śāstra* is centred on a very important philosophical question, that is: 'what is the link between art and aesthetic enjoyment?' The arts mentioned in the treatise include dance, music, drawing, acting, architecture and sketching. However, the *Nāṭya-Śāstra* is not primarily interested in descriptively explaining each of these arts, but rather in giving a detailed analysis of their potential to induce certain states of mind in the audience or spectators.¹¹ Thus, the link between art and these particular states of mind is referred to as *rasa* which is the operative principle of Indian aesthetic theory.

Shyamala Gupta points out that the concept of *rasa* is as old as the earliest Vedic literature; but its application to drama and poetry is a revolutionary discovery ushered in by Bharata.¹² In addition, Bharata mentions two processes relevant to stage-drama: the process of creation on the one hand and the process of appreciation on the other. For Bharata, the stage-drama existed as a type of temporal continuum where the dramatist, the director and the actors create the drama, which is then appreciated by the spectators. It is said that *rasa* should arise at the end of the first process (creation) and the second process (appreciation) should begin with the tasting of *rasa*. Thus, *rasa* is the object of both processes and is manifested in the form of *natya*.¹³

The influence of the theory of *rasa* was not confined to dramaturgy alone even though it was explicated by Bharata in the context of *nāṭya*. It has been observed that aesthetic experience (*rasa*) is the cornerstone in all forms of art visual, literary and performance. Genuine great art cannot be made out of one's cleverness. It is rather a spontaneous emanation from *rasa*-filled heart - "*Rasaveśavaiśādyā-nirmāṇakṣamatva*", i.e., an individual becomes endowed with the power of creativity arising from the expertisation achieved through the heart filled with aesthetic enjoyment. In other words, an individual saturated with the aesthetic pleasure is endowed with the expertisation of creating something original. This *rasa*, which arises from all forms of art, can be appreciated only by the *sahṛdaya* (connoisseur).

When a reader or audience shares the feeling of the hero or heroine, he or she becomes sensitive due to having his or her heart saturated with aesthetic pleasure generated within him through his or her self-involvement (*ekātmata*). This situation being conditioned by *rasa* (*rasaveśa*) enjoins the individual with the power of creativity (*nirmāṇakṣamatva*). This aesthetic pleasure that comes as a result of sharing the pathos of others in a novel or drama, endows him with the power of creativity. On the other hand, pathos arising out of the sad demise of his dear one makes him handicapped instead of conjoining him with the power of creativity, which is called *kārayitri pratibhā*. An individual can enjoy aesthetic pleasure by sharing his own self with the character of the novel or drama as he shares some common feeling existing in the novelist and the character of the novel or the dramatist and dramatic characters. This common experience is possible due to having the same feeling, because they are *sahṛdaya* (literally, having common heart or sensitivity).

The process of appreciation of *rasa* became far more significant than the creation of *rasa*. The real appreciator of an art form is a connoisseur (*sahṛdaya*). A *sahṛdaya* possesses the capability to identify his own feelings with those of the artists. The artist creates a piece of art. *Sahṛdaya* realises it and he recreates those arts in his own self. As fire covers the dry wood, the aesthetic pleasure arising in one's heart engulfs his whole body. This aesthetic pleasure is produced if the object is appreciated by heart (*hṛdayasamvādi*). (“Yo'rtho hṛdayasamvādi tasya bhāvo rasodbhāvaḥ / Śariram vyāpyate tena śuṣkam kāṣṭhamivagninā.”)¹⁴

If the above mentioned view of *sahṛdayatva* is accepted, the aesthetic experience would be regarded as universal. The success of an art-object depends on its universalisation (*sadhāraṇikāraṇa*), which again depends on the concept of *sahṛdayatva*. If each and every reader or audience or spectator has got the same sensitivity or feeling, there is a correspondence regarding the fact that is going on in all the hearts of the audiences or readers or spectators (*Sakala-sahṛdaya-samvāda-salitā*). It may also be called transparency of experience. This phenomenon is otherwise described as ‘one pointed concentration of all the readers, audiences or spectators (*Sarvasāmājikanām ekāghanatā*).¹⁵ Universalisation (*sadhāraṇikāraṇa*) is one of the characteristic features of aesthetic experience or *rasa* that leads a man to the world of creativity. After perceiving the separation of the curlew-couple, Valmiki

became very much moved and out of his grief, he created a *Śloka*. He had intense feeling of pathos in which he had lost himself. Due to this complete loss of personality, he had a sense of joy out of grief. This joyous experience of pathos provided him with the power of creating a *Śloka* spontaneously. Valmiki's grief was not this worldly. If it were so, he would have some sympathy with the birds from which the creation of *Kāvya* would have been impossible. This worldly grief makes a man handicapped. When a poet's vision becomes very deep and clear, he will surely get an inspiration from within and the materials for writing a *Kāvya* (like characterisation, plot etc.) would follow automatically just as water overflows automatically from an over-filled jar. Thus, a poet's genius depends on the absorption of the aesthetic enjoyment and this absorption is endowed with capacity of creating a *Kāvya* spontaneously. When a poet's heart is filled with emotion, it spontaneously emanates itself in metrical form. The same theory is also applicable to other forms of art. This spontaneity is one of the vital characteristics of aesthetic experience or *rasa* from literature and it can be applied to music and dance also. How far the performance of dance and music is artistic can be inferred from their spontaneity along with other factors. If the performance of dance or music is not spontaneous, they may seem to be artificial. As spontaneity comes from within, it belongs to an artist whose heart is absorbed in aesthetic pleasure or *rasa*. If a musician or a dancer is absorbed in such enjoyment within himself, which is usually called mood in ordinary language, he cannot help dancing or singing. At this stage only spontaneity comes. Music and dance forms begin and end in aesthetic experience. This spontaneity comes only when there is no impediment for the realisation of aesthetic experience. This spontaneous emanation of poetry, music and dance from a man, who was otherwise idle before having aesthetic absorption, shows the mystic character of aesthetic pleasure.

The aesthetic enjoyment is mystic and transcendental.¹⁶ From another stand point, aesthetic experience may be considered as mystic. Each and every type of experience must be either determinate (*Savikalpaka*) or indeterminate (*Nirvikalpaka*). Such type of experience is not indeterminate because it gives rise to bliss (*Ānanda*). In the indeterminate stage, one has the feeling of indifference; but in the case of aesthetic experience, there is a feeling of bliss and hence it is not indeterminate. It

cannot be described as determinate either (which is definite and related to name, quality etc.), because the experience, though blissful, is beyond the reach of direct expression. After having enjoyed reading a novel or listening music or seeing a painting or a dance performance, one may have blissful experience that cannot be explained with the help of description (like name, quality etc.) like any ordinary pleasure. So it is not determinate. As the experience does not come under the purview of both the types of knowledge, it is considered as mystic.¹⁷

It has been observed that aesthetic experience or *rasa* is transcendental or *lokattara*. This pleasure is transcendental as because this originates from man's *pratibhā*. The Indian artists make fullest use of the imagination, the faculty that is called *pratibha* without which the ideal form of reality cannot be apprehended. According to Gopinatha Kaviraja, *Pratibhā* literally means a flash of light, which reveals the objects. The light is 'the wisdom characterised by immediacy and freshness'.¹⁸ In fact *pratibhā* is such a wisdom as having capacity to illuminate the objects newly again and again.¹⁹ *Pratibhā* is described as 'suprarational apperception'.²⁰ It bears some similarity with Aurobindo's philosophy. He says, "It comes out from something deep within which calls down the world-vision, the light and power from a level above the normal mind (i.e., over mind)".²¹ In Western Philosophy such type of vision is also accepted where it is described as intuition. Croce says that this intuition is a distinct species differing from intuition-in-general by something more.²² In this world there are many mystic things that cannot be perceived or known by our ordinary sense organs. Nevertheless, there is some faculty in a man that is capable of revealing that unknown or mystic world. This faculty is known as *Pratibhā*.²³

Generally all forms of art arouse aesthetic pleasure, which is the product of *Pratibhājñāna* or intuitive cognition. This can be argued that a connoisseur relishing literature transcends his own personal interest. The same taste of infatuating impersonal disinterested feeling can also be traced in dance, music and painting. It generally happens that man forgets his personal grief for the time being while enjoying beautiful paintings or performance of music or dance. As this pleasure transcends the limitation of personal interest, it is disinterested universal pleasure.²⁴ As such pleasure is mystic in nature, it must be caused by *Pratibhā* or intuition,

which is described by Abhinavagupta as a dwarf image of *Brahman*.²⁵ For this reason *rasa* or aesthetic experience originated from all forms of art relieves man from their mundane grief or sorrow and make them partner of *lokttara ānanda* (transcendental pleasure).

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