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"Rasa theory" as a Trans-cultural Aesthetic System

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The word *rasa* in Sanskrit (along with its derivatives in modern languages of India) is a polysemous term. It means essence or juice in the worlds of philosophy and food. Its aesthetic life is first recorded in the Nå†yaßåstra , a work from the first or second century of the Common Era, which starts its account of *nå†ya* or drama "Let me begin with the explanation of *rasa*, because there is no *nå†ya* without *rasa*."[1] It then describes rasa as the distilled version of *bhava* or actual, felt emotion, of which there are eight stable forms:

1. Love (corresponding to the Passionate sentiment or *rasa*)
2. Mirth (corresponding to the Comic)
3. Sorrow (corresponding to the Pathetic)
4. Anger (corresponding to the Furious)
5. Energy (corresponding to the Heroic)
6. Fear (corresponding to the Terrible)
7. Disgust (corresponding to the Odious)
8. Astonishment (corresponding to the Marvelous)

This text, like Aristotle's Poetics includes careful analysis of the specifics of the stage and of actors that directly and indirectly determine the emotional impact of drama. At first hearing. This might bring to mind the director Konstantin Stanislavsky's theory that actors make emotional contact with their characters, coming to feel their emotions. But in fact the Nå†yaßastra is explicit that the enjoyable experience of distilled mood or *rasa* is produced out of the real emotions or *bhavas* and not the reverse.

Later commentators expanded such scholastic analysis, for example categorizing colors and divinities to correspond to particular sentiments. More significant, they addressed the role of the competent spectator, termed *raskika*, one whose heart is prepared to be "churned" to produce the p*rasa*. Thus *rasa* theory anticipates a modern concern with the reception of art. It is not everyone who would allow himself to be charmed by pleasant sorrow. Possible combinations of sentiments were enumerated, for instance in comic relief from the weighty emotions; and some combinations were prohibited, like the Passionate together with the Odious, although it is not clear that this restriction was meticulously followed.

Abhinavagupta, who probably lived in the eleventh century in Kashmir, added a ninth sentiment, the peaceful *rasa*, which could also be understood, not as an additional mood but as the supreme bliss of any aesthetic experience. [2] Later the Peaceful and the

Passionate lent themselves to religious devotion, but the entire apparatus of *rasa* was by no means restricted to any one of South Asia's rich, overlapping religions.

So here we have a theatrical aesthetics fueled by emotion, which is transmuted into diverse pleasurable experiences in the knowledgeable viewer. Given continuities between ancient South Asian drama and modern forms, it is not surprising that *rasa* has been used to understand modern theatre, dance, music, and film. As an art historian I am interested in its applicability to the visual arts. The Indian scholar B.N. Goswamy has made a powerful case in an exhibition that took place in Paris and in San Francisco, which classified a wide range of sculpture and painting by sentiment.[3] Given the possibilities of mixed moods and our less than perfect preparation as *rasikas*, some controversy about classification was inevitable. More surprising was resistance by other scholars of Indian art to the entire enterprise as unwarranted for the visual arts. Yet in fact, one of the most widely cited Sanskrit works on painting enumerates the nine *rasas* and stipulates:

> Pictures in a home should depict Passion, Comedy, and Peace. The rest should not be used in a house. In temples of gods and in the king's palace all the sentiments should be shown, but not in the residential quarters of the ruler.[4]

Moreover, texts usually cited for the iconography of Buddhist sculpture, which in fact prescribe images the devotee should envision in meditation, use the terminology of *rasa*. For example, Måri^{a}c^{a}, the fierce goddess you see here in an 11th century Buddhist sculpture is described thus in a religious text:

> The worshipper should conceive himself as Mår^{a}c^{a} who displays the sentiments (*rasas*) of the Passionate, Heroic, and Comic in one face on the right . In the middle face, the sentiments of Terror, the Odious, and the Furious are displayed. And in the third the sentiments of Pathos, the Marvellous , and Peace appear.[5] (Figure1)

Figure 1 Mår^{a}ch^{a}, 10-11th c, from Birbhum district, West Bengal, now in Gurusaday Museum, Calcutta.

Whether or not all are visible to us imperfect *rasikas* of the twenty-first century, it would seem that the *rasas* are part of the meaning of the divinity embodied in worshipper or sculpture.

Figure 2 Sanchi, Stupa 1, 1st c. BCE, North Gate, bottom crossbar, Vessantara Jåtaka

I first felt the utility of *rasa* thinking about this gateway carved in the first century B.C.E. Relief carvings that begin on the outer face tell the key story of the penultimate incarnation of the Buddha as a generous prince, Vessantara. (Figure 2) He gave away royal possessions and was sent by his father to live in the countryside; on the way he continued to give away to a beggar the chariot in which he was riding. On the reverse of that same cross-bar, we see him and his wife and children living the idyllic forest life. (Figure 3-4) While his wife is gathering fruit, the same persistent beggar comes asking for his children to work as servants; Vessantara of course complies. (Figure 5-6)When his wife returns, aghast, she too is given away. At that point the beggar, convinced that the Vessantara's generosity is unlimited, reveals himself to be the king of the gods, who has merely been testing the prince. Wife, children, and royal possessions are restored. In the end the family returns to the palace, and Vessantara will be reborn as Íakyamuni, who becomes the Buddha. (Figure 7) My Aristotelian background would lead me to expect the turning point to be visually emphasized to indicate a moral climax. Yet it is just another incident in the richly embroidered story. Is this not a tale built around Pathos, played against other moods such as Passion and Heroism? Our hearts are best churned by a series of undifferentiated scenes.

Figure 3 and Figure 4 Sanchi, Stupa 1, 1st c. BCE, North Gate, bottom crossbar, Vessantara Jåtaka

Figure 5 and Figure 6 Sanchi, Stupa 1, 1st c. BCE, North Gate, bottom crossbar, Vessantara Jåtaka

Figure 7 Sanchi, Stupa 1, 1st c. BCE, North Gate, bottom crossbar, Vessantara Jåtaka

This gateway at Sanchi was carved at least a century before the texts cited for *rasa* theory were written, which implies that those authors did not initiate a new aesthetic system but rather articulated and systematized what was in the air. In fact visual evidence (more

readily dated than literary) suggests that the differentiation of the sentiments increased with time. Thus at a single remote site in central India (Nachna) we find a sixth-century image of the god Íiva copied at least two centuries later to maximize the difference between the heads that represent aspects of the divinity. Fury increases from a fanged snarl to a wild shriek, and the brow is more vividly furrowed (as opposed to the charming female form and a basic heroic form of the god). The later image is moving toward the vividly differentiated heads of the Buddhist Mårªcª we saw earlier, which matched a text that explicitly evoked *rasa*. (Figure 8-9)

The case is most readily made for miniature paintings that illustrate texts in which *rasa* plays an explicit role. (Figure 10) You see here a folio from the Rasikapriya or Connoisseur's Delight. The verse at the top, entitled "the Heroic rasa of Lord K®≈ʃa" enumerates the blue god's childhood exploits: vanquishing demons in the forms of a poison nurse-maid, a horse, a serpent, a monster, a stork, and a king. The last line reads, "You lose to no one. Why should you let Kama (the god of Love who shoots him with his flower arrow causing him to fall for the cow-herder women) conquer you. You have become a wimp. Destroy him." Thus the presumptive Heroic sentiment is played against Passion, ultimately suggesting the Comic. It is noteworthy that this17th century picture from Rajasthan was probably painted by the master Sahibdin, a Muslim to judge from his name, who fully realized the ostensibly Hindu subject.

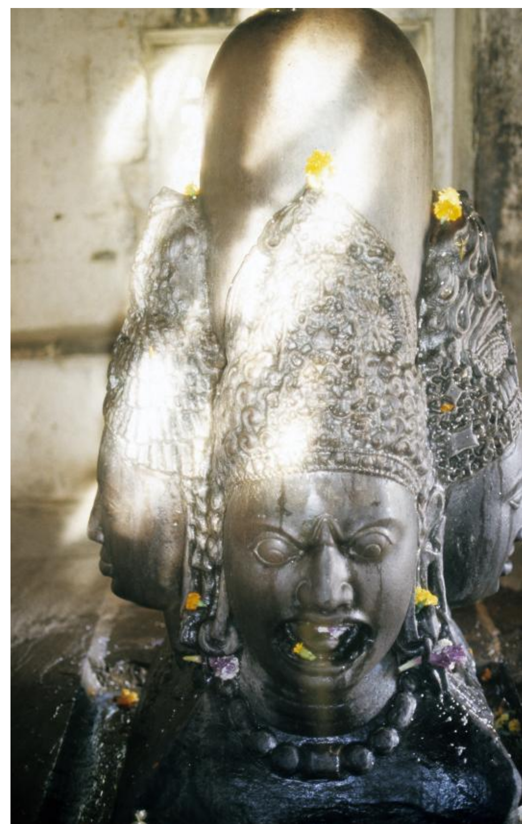

Figure 8 and Figure 9 Left: Nachna, Gupta Linga, ca. 500 CE Right: Nachna, Mahadeva Temple Linga, c. 8th c. CE

Figure 10 K®I≈∫a's Heroic exploits from a Rasikapriya manuscript, attributed to Sahibdin, Mewar, ca. 1630-40, collection of Gursharan and Elvira Siddhu. Seattle.

In short, if the idea that the primary function of the image is to evoke distilled sentiments in the viewer corresponding to real-life emotions serves to explain distinctive emotive features of the arts in South Asia, it has a clear local basis. What of the global? Has this aesthetic theory caught on elsewhere? It might seem that Indonesia would make a possible case. Along with other forms of supposed (if contestable) "Indianization," Sanskrit appears in ancient inscriptions, sometimes surviving in later vernacular vocabulary. Thus in Javanese, we find the term *råsa*, which both the philologist Jan Gonda and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz attribute to a conflation of the *rasa* we have been discussing with *rahasya*, a different Sanskrit root meaning "secret."[6] A careful account of *råsa* as part of meditative practices that began in the Islamic courts of Central Java in the 1930s suggests a general feeling that is part of mystical power.[7] The deep listening of an informed spectator, immersed in the music of Java has been attributed to the Passionate Sentiment by a musicologist.[8] This last might relate to the late phase of the doctrine in India, in which the Peaceful or the Passionate is identified with religious devotion. Yet the overall system of multiple *rasas*, as distilled forms of various emotions, has yet to be documented in Indonesia, so I cannot claim that this aesthetic system of the Nå†yaßåstra was transported to an adjoining region.

I am prepared to argue that *rasa* theory recognizes a distinctive embrace of emotion in the arts that has enabled South Asian imagery to be understood by other cultures where emotion is sometimes regarded with suspicion. Is that not the situation with the Aristotelian system, in which pity and fear are evoked only to be purged, in catharsis? Pathos has fared particularly ill in English literature, as in Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy." In the twentieth century, Northrop Frye called the pathetic "a queer ghoulish emotion."

And yet of course all admirers of Aristotle are clearly not devoid of emotion. We do not live in Jean Luc Goddard's Alphaville, where all feelings including love and compassion were forbidden. Might this not be a major part of the appeal of Bollywood cinema such as Awåra, whose songs were widely popular in the Soviet Union and the Islamic world. The hero of this film, played by the irresistible Raj Kapoor, the son of the kidnapped wife of a judge, ends up killing the criminal who abducted his mother and is put on trial before his own estranged father, the judge who has never seen him before. The judge's condemnation of his own unrecognized son evokes the pathetic sentiment, which may have endeared Awåra to audiences in places where the film's social situation was incomprehensible. One may well ask whether the emotion experienced, even its distilled form as *rasa*, is the same for Indian and Western audiences. That question is best left to philosophers and psychologists. One team of psychologists has addressed just this issue, asserting that

> Western taxonomies of emotion are more similar to the Natyasastra taxonomy for negative than for positive emotions. For example, both Western and Natyasastra lists include anger, fear, sadness, and disgust. However, on the positive side, Western happiness and perhaps surprise do not correspond well with the Natyasastra's amusement , love, heroism, and perhaps peace and wonder.[9]

In any case, I wish to argue that the appeal of the *Rasa* system lies not only in our thirst for emotion but also in its open-endedness. The Nå†yaßåstra does not prescribe " Thou shalt …" or "Thou shalt not …" but asserts, "Without the sentiments there is no drama" and lists eight of them, a list that was later expanded to nine or even ten. And the fact that so many diverse sentiments gives the author or artist many options, especially considering that these may be combined. The film Awåra that I described earlier in terms of pathos has a sub-plot of Love, and even moments of Comedy.

To return to Indonesia, where I found the evidence of *rasa* theory dubious, it is possible to find almost side by side, in a single period image of the terrifying (which may be viewed as humorous today) and an image that embodies peace. (Figure 11,12,13)The sculptors of the East Javanese site Singosari, whether or not they thought in terms of specific Sanskrit terminology, must have felt free to include divergent imagery from afar, using this to correspond to local, indigenous traditions of the appotropaic and of revered ancestor worship. The explicit aesthetic theory of *rasa* seems to me to matter most in that it gives both creators and receivers of art permission to savor emotions of diverse kinds.

Figure 11 and Figure 12 Singosari, East Java, Guardian in situ. 13-14th c.

Figure 13 Singosari, East Java, Prajnåpåramitå (highest Wisdom personified), 13-14th c., now in Museum Pusat, Jakarta

[1] Nß VI, 31. in Adya Rangacharya, The Nå†yaßåatra, English Translation with Critical Notes, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1986.p. 54.
[2] Gnoli, Raneiro, The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta, Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1968 (2nd, revised edition), xli
[3] B.N. Goswamy,Rasa les neuf visages de l'art indien. Paris, Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, 1986. B.N. Goswamy, Essence of Indian Art, San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 1986.
[4] Vi≈nudharmottara Purå∫a, III, 43. Shah, Priyabala Shah tr. Ahmedabad: Krishna Printery 1990, p. 164.
[5] Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, Indian Buddhist Iconography, Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadyay, 1968, p.210 (quoting from the Sådhanamålå).
[6] Gonda, Jan, Sanskrit in Indonesia, New Delhi, Íata-Pi†aka Series vol 99, 1973, p. 256. Geertz, Clifford, The Religion of Java, New York: The Free Press, 1960, p. 239 .
[7] Stange, Paul, "Logic 0f Rasa in Java," Indonesia 38 (1984), pp. 113-134.
[8] Becker, Judith, Gamelan Stories: Tantrism, Islam, and Aesthetics in Central Java, Tempe, Arizona State University, 1993.
[9] Hejmadi, Ahalya, Davidson, Richard J. and Rozin, Paul, "Exploring Hindu Indian Emotion Expressions: Evidence for Accurate Recognition by Americans and Indians," Psychological Science Vol. II, No. 3, May 2000, pp. 183-187. I am indebted for this reference to Laurie Ross, Ph.D. student in South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California at Berkeley.