

RADHAKAMAL MUKERJEE

## “Rasas” as Springs of Art in Indian Aesthetics

### THEORY AND ART OF RASA

INDIAN ART has obviously a religious intention and a metaphysical aim. At the same time it is not an adjunct of religion and metaphysics, but belongs in the traditional scheme of knowledge to the realm of Dance, Dramaturgy (*Nāṭyaśāstra*), and Poetics (*Alamkāraśāstra*), revealing and communicating the major moods and emotions of man (*rasas*). According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (dramaturgy) of Bharata (c. second century B.C. to second century A.D.), “*rasa* (literally, flavor, relish) is the seed and fruit of the arts.” The arts generate and consolidate moods, sentiments, and emotions (*rasa*), freed from the fluctuations of fleeting desires and impulses, focus and diffuse these in the minds and hearts of the people.

Sylvain Levi, commenting on the Indian theater, observes: “Indian genius produced a new art, the symbol and summary of which is the word *rasa*, and which can be condensed in one brief formula: the poet (the sculptor or the painter) does not express, but he suggests.” That suggestion is the soul of artistic interpretation is emphasized by the classical Indian theory of *Dhvani* expounded by Ānandavardhana. European art, rooted in the definition and perfection of finite forms and appearances, depicts and clarifies external phenomena. Indian art, together with Indian myth and legend, by which it is constantly inspired

and replenished, suggests rather than depicts inner visions and experiences. The quality by which we judge the visions and performances of the Indian artist is *rasa* which in Indian poetics is characterized as *aloukika* or that which does not belong to this world. Abstract, universal, and enduring sentiments and emotions, whatever be their nature, which the artist distils and which leads to impersonal delight akin to the supreme bliss obtained in contemplation of the Absolute, constitute *rasa*. The Indian artist through his elevated yoga meditation, that engenders complete detachment and universality of self, and subdues the fluctuations of passing desires and emotions, evokes his own abstract or universal moods and sentiments or *rasas*. His handiwork, properly imbued with these, effectively communicates these to the beholder or devotee. According to the Alamkāra Rāghava: “Aesthetic beauty cannot exist unless the heart of the man of good taste is moved to impersonal delight by the fascination of the expression of *rasa*.” What holds good of poetry, drama, dance, and histrionic art holds good also of painting and sculpture. Jayadeva, author of the *Candrāloka*, makes this absolutely clear in the following words, “The enjoyable *rasa* or the aesthetic experience in poetry, drama and any other art-work has to pass through the successive stage of *bībhāva*, etc., and then only can it become the enduring sentiment” (*sthāyī-bhava*) (D. S. Sukla’s translation).

The consolidation and evocation of *rasa*, then, represent the function of all the fine arts. This is the central conception in India since Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* first expounded the doctrine of *rasa* with its eight categories, viz., Love or Happiness, Gaiety or Humor, Compassion, Fury, Valor, Awesomeness, Loathesomeness, and Wonder. From the third or fourth century onwards Silence or Tranquillity was not only added as the ninth category but considered as the supreme *rasa*. The *Viṣṇudharmottara* and the *Aparāñjita-pracchha* (c. third to fourth century A.D.) expound nine *rasas*, while the *Samrāṅgana-sūtradhara* (c. eleventh century A.D.) treats eleven *rasas* expressed in images and paintings.

The eight ultimate and generic categories of *rasas*, according to Bharata, emerge from the following "basic states of consciousness" (*sthāyī-bhāva*) in order, viz., love, merriment, grief, anger, effort, fear, repulsion, and surprise. The "transient feelings" (*vyābhāchāri-bhāva*) are thirty-three, viz., despondency, langour, apprehension, envy, etc. What is significant in the classic Indian treatment of aesthetics is the process of impersonalization or universalization which dissociates the natural or mundane emotion from the particular character and specific situation so that it is relished simply as abstract, aesthetic sentiment in the supra-mundane (*aloukika*) plane. In other words, in drama, acting, painting, sculpture, and music, we do not experience fleeting, shifting, and accidental states of mind, true of particular persons and situations, but abiding sentiments that transcend persons, times, and places, and invest the mind of "a person of attuned heart" (*sa-hrdaya*) with serenity (*viśrānti*). Artistic presentation overcomes the restlessness of passion (*rajas*) and the inertia of ignorance or darkness (*tamas*) and introduces the silence and beatitude of the pure mind (*sāttva*). "Aesthetic experience," according to Bhaṭṭa-Nāyaka, "is the experience of the universalized aesthetic object by the universalized subject in the state of perfect bliss (*ānanda*), due to the predominance of *sāttva*." That is why aesthetic enjoyment is considered

akin to the supreme bliss of Brahman-apprehension. Indian thought stresses the fruitful interchange between the aesthetic and spiritual moods and apprehension.

#### DERIVATION OF RASAS FROM GUNAS

The nine *rasas* of Indian fine arts have their ultimate derivation from the three different basic primary attributes (*guṇas*) that according to Indian thought enter into the making of the human personality, *sāttva* or purity, i.e., universality and impersonality whose expressions are silence (*śānta*) and compassion (*karuna*); *rajas*, i.e., dynamic creativity whose expressions are love (*srīgāra*), valor (*vīra*), and laughter (*hāsyā*); and *tamas* or ignorance, unbalance, and inertia, whose expressions are wonder (*adbhūta*), fury (*raudra*), loathesomeness (*bībhāsa*), and awesomeness (*bhayaṅkara*). Just as "the Supreme Being as Creator (Brahmā) lives and moves in *sattvaguna*, Being as Preserver (Viṣṇu) in *rajas*, Being as Destroyer (Rudra) in *tamas*, and Being (Parameśvara) Himself in *nirguna*," so, according to Bharata, Viṣṇu embodies himself in *srīgāra*, i.e., youth, love, and happiness; Pramathas in *hāsyā*, i.e., merriment; Yama in *karuna*, i.e., pathos or compassion; Śiva in *raudra*, i.e., fury; Kāla in *bhayaṅkara*, i.e., awesomeness; Indra in *vīra*, i.e., valor; and the unconditioned, unmanifest Brahman (Parameśvara) in *adbhūta*, i.e., wonder. We have another passage in the *Sukranīti* that classifies the images according to their *guṇas* and *rasas*. "An image seated in the meditative posture of a yogi is *sāttvika*, an image seated on a vehicle (*vāhana*) decked with ornaments and holding weapons or showing gestures of assurance and benediction is *rājasika*; while the image in wrath and excitement in the pose of fighting and destroying the demons (*asuras*) is *tāmasika*." Each *rasa* is derived from one or the other of the three essential *guṇas* and is a stable, generic or impersonal feeling or imaginative mood based on the artist's vision of a certain fundamental aspect of Life, Universe, and Reality.

RASAS AND GLANCES

The *Samarāṅganasūtradhara* in one of its basic *slokas* refers to *bhāva-vyakti* or delineation of moods and sentiments as the aim of painting and then proceeds to an elaborate classification of eleven *rasas* (stable emotions) and eighteen *rasa-dṛṣṭis* (glances) on which the former depends. "The images are invested with animation (*saḥjīva*) by the interplay of hand-gestures and glances, the very basis of dramatics and aesthetics both integrated together (*sarvābhīnayaadarśanāt*). The representation of *rasas* and *rasadrṣṭis* is the essence of both the arts of drama (*āṅgika*) and painting (*çitra*)."

The vast array of figures in the great Ajantā paintings express the basic *rasas* abstractly and reflectively rendered. The dominant *rasas* are here aloofness and transcendence from the world, sorrow, compassion, anger, love, and wonder. The specific or idiomatic features of expression are entirely dominated by the generic and universal moods or sentiments that obtain bold, perspicuous, enthralling revelations. The masterpieces of representation of the generic *rasas* at Ajantā are the profound grief of the father of the youth Syāma killed by mistake by the king of Banaras, the devotions of Rāhula and Yaśodharā before the Buddha, the *ṣṛṅgāra* of Irandatī in love with Purnaka, the supplication of the beggar Brāhmin before Prince Visvanatara, the remorse of Cula Subhadra for causing the death of her elephant spouse, and above all the serenity and compassion of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva. Everywhere the delineation of stable and universal moods and sentiments and of the appropriate expressions of glances and hand gestures is perfect in the frescoes that have been rightly called the artistic treasure house of Asia.

In the *Mānasollasa* (c. twelfth century A.D.) Someśvara refers to the *bhāvacitras* or what may be called lyrical paintings that express the nine abstract sentiments, moods, or *rasas*. Each *rasa* must be depicted in its appropriately expressive color. According to both the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Śilparatna*

the colors of images in painting are light green for love, white for merriment, grey for compassion, red for fury, light orange for heroic energy, black for terror, yellow for wonder, and blue for repulsion. Such is the color expressionism in classical Indian painting. This scheme seems to have been generally adopted in Ajantā, Bāgh, and elsewhere. The Buddhist paintings on palm-leaf, the paper manuscripts of Eastern India, Nepal, and Tibet belonging to the Pālā and Senā periods, as well as Nepalese and Tibetan scroll paintings are its best illustrations.

RASAS AND COLORS

Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* sums up the theory of image-making thus: "All is futile, the recital of formulae, the counting of beads, austerities and devotions unless one has gained the knowledge of the colour scheme; the true significance of lettering, the hue and the attribute of image." The *Sādhanamāla* which prescribes the iconography and formulas of meditation of Buddhist Tāntrikism lays down that the color of the deity should be varied according to the aim of worship; white or yellow for pure meditation; yellow for protection; yellow, green, or red for the purpose of conversion; and blue for striking terror or destroying the enemy. The Mahāyāna Buddhist goddess Tārā who symbolizes enlightenment is white, and green when she is contemplative, benign, and pacific; red, yellow, and blue when she is violent, fierce, and destructive. The blue Tārā, wild and ferocious in her world-shattering activity, has been assimilated into Hindu Tāntrikism and her name Mahācina Tārā may indicate her probable genesis. Mahāśrī Tārā is painted green, and framed behind by green foliage, while Lokanātha is painted silvery white in the MS. of the "*Astasahasrika Prajñāpāramitā*," attributed to the latter part of the eleventh century (Collection, Asiatic Society, Calcutta). The Buddha's mother is bright yellow in the same MS. The color scheme in Indian art and worship varies according to the *rasa* dominant in the psychic make-up of the image.

ABSTRACTION AND  
SYMBOLISM VERSUS  
REALISM AND NATURALISM

The criterion of all good painting, according to the *Viṣṇudharmottara*, is that it should be expressive or saturated with the appropriate *rasa*. The *Samarāṅganasūtra* while giving an exposition of eleven *rasas* relates eighteen appropriate glances (*rasadr̥ṣṭis*) to the major *rasas* for evoking these in painting. It also stresses that all sentient creatures should be delineated in painting as manifesting these *rasas*, and not merely gods, men, and *asuras*. Not merely gestures, postures, hand-inflections, and movements, but also proper glances are categorized as contributory to the elicitation of the various *rasas* and *bhāvas* (*bhāva-vyakti*). What holds good of painting is true also of sculpture, dance, and histrionic art. It is in this text that the arousal of *rasas* through *rasadr̥ṣṭis* (glances) in the visual arts received the greatest emphasis. The basic theory that the aim of Indian sculpture and painting is the transformation and consolidation of the transitory desires and emotions (*vyābhichārī* or *sanchārībhāva*) into the nine or eleven major permanent or universal moods and sentiments (*rasas*) underlies their abstract, metaphysical, and cosmic character. Indian art, moulding and transforming as it does imagination or feeling into enduring or abstract sentiment, flavor, or joy, is perennial and universal from the viewpoint of its inspirational drives. Bharata also differentiated between *lokadharmī* (realistic and organic) and *nāṭyadharmī* (abstract and ideographic) mode of treatment and stressed that the latter should be preferred. Thus Indian art early developed a predilection for abstraction and symbolism as against realism and naturalism in the enkindling of *rasas*.

CLASSIFICATION OF IMAGES  
ACCORDING TO THE NINE  
RASAS

It is now clear that in the Indian theory of aesthetics art springs from the appreciation and maturation of *rasa* in the mind of

the artist, its fruition lies in the diffusion of *rasa* in the minds of people. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Viṣṇu is mentioned as the god of love; Pramathas of merriment; Rudra, of fury; Yama, of compassion; Śiva, of fury; Kāla, of terror; Indra, of heroic energy; and Brahman, of wonder. Such is Bharata's classification of the deities of the nine *rasas*. The various *mūrtis* in Indian art may be classified according to the nine *rasas*, the study of which constitutes the foundation of Indian aesthetics. The Supreme Being himself is *Rasa*. "Having realized Him as *Rasa* the soul becomes full of bliss," says the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. These nine *rasas* ("tastes" or "flavors" or moods), and the corresponding lasting attitudes and sentiments (*sthāyī-bhāva*), are rendered not only by dramatic performances on the stage but also by *mūrtis* in the temples. Of all the *rasas* that the images of Indian sculpture or painting distil the predominant one is silence or tranquillity (*śānta*). The image fulfills its role as a medium of *dhyāna* as silence is established; then neither the image nor the devotee exists but there is an all-filling oneness in worldless and imageless *samādhi*. In the table, I give a rough classification of *mūrtis* according to the nine *rasas*.

THE QUEST OF UNITY IN ART

According to Abhinavagupta, the nine basic *rasas* and aesthetic attitudes underlie man's fulfillment of the four-fold values of life (*puruṣārtha*): love and gaiety are contributory to the goal of sex (*kāma*); compassion and fury to the goal of occupation and wealth (*artha*); heroic valor, loathsomeness, and wonder to the goal of righteousness (*dharma*); and silence or tranquillity to the goal of freedom from bondage (*mokṣa*). A distinctive feature of Indian civilization, connected with its metaphysical and aesthetic rather than its religious and theological character, is represented by its search for the total reality through modes of feeling and experience (*rasas*), both serene and awesome, charming and repellent. The art of no other culture in the world has shown such courage and sincerity, expressing the entire gamut of nine *rasas* or moods and

CLASSIFICATION OF *Mūrtis* ACCORDING TO THE NINE *Rasas*

A Moods and Emotions (Rasas)	B Attitudes and Sentiments (Sthāyi-bhāva)	C Images (Mūrti)	D Posture (Āsana)	E Expressional Glances* (Rasadr̥ṣṭi)	
				1 Nāṭyaśāstra	2 Samarāṅg- nasūtra
1. Silence or tranquility (Śānta)	Equanimity (Sama)	Brahmā, Śiva, Viṣṇu, the Buddha, Tirthamkara, Ūma, Saraśvatī, Prajñāpāramitā, and Tārā.	Seated cross-legged (Vajraparyāṅka)	Not specified.	Sthirā Yoginī
2. Love (Sṛṅgāra, Prema)	Attraction (Rati)	Viṣṇu-Lakṣmī, Śiva-Pārvatī, Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā, and all Tāntrika Yaba-Yum figures.	Seated with leg pendent (Lalita, Ardhaparyāṅka)	Kānta	
3. Joy, gaiety, or humor (Hāsya)	Merriment (Lasya)	The dancing figures of Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Kṛṣṇa, Devī, Sarasvatī, Surāsundarī, Asparā, and Nāyikā.	Dance (Nāṭya)	Hāsya	Vikaśitā
4. Compassion or Pathos (Karunā)	Sorrow (Śoka)	The Buddha, Bodhisattva, Hara-Parvatī, Annapūrnā, Tārā, Khadirāvani, and Lokanātha.	Seated (Bhadra)	Karunā	Dīna
5. Fury or Violence (Raudra)	Anger (Krodha)	Rudra, Kālī, Candī, Cāmundā, and Aparājitā.	Standing (Āliḍha)	Raudra	
6. Courageous Valor (Vīra)	Resolution (Utsāha)	Ādi-Varāha, Vāmana, Narasimha, Gajāsura-Sambhāra, Durgā Mahiṣamardinī, and Mārici.	Standing (Āliḍha)	Vīra	
7. Awesomeness (Bhayānaka)	Fear (Bhaya)	Mahākāla, Heruka, Bhrukuti, Yamāmtaka, Vighnāntaka, Tārā, Kurukulla, and Chhinna-mastā.	Standing with one leg bent, (Pratyāliḍha)		
8. Loathsomeness (Bibhatsa)	Disgust (Jugupsa)	Hayagriva, Parnaśavarī, Śitalā, and Vajracarccikā.	Standing with one leg bent (Pratyāliḍha)	Bibhatsa	Kuncita
9. Wonder (Adbhūta)	Bewilderment (Bismaya)	Bhairava, Gaṇeśa, and Trailokyavijaya.	Dance (Ardhaparyāṅka, Tāṇḍava).	Adbhūta	Jihmā

\* The list of glances is given differently in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *Abhinayadarpana*, the *Mirror of Gestures*, and the *Samarāṅganāsūtra*.

emotions. Rage, fury, terror, bewilderment, and despair are embodied in Indian *mūrtis* grandly, majestically, and powerfully in a transcendent and cosmic setting. These amply demonstrate that Indian art aims at the revelation of metaphysical truth and sublimity rather than sensuous delight and beauty, and realism, rather than idealism. The expression of the totality of *rasas* in art is, no doubt, an index of the freedom, sensitiveness, and boldness of the human adventure in India. Image-making, ritual, and contemplation are linked with the realization of the values of life in their entirety, each image (*mūrti*) of meditation and worship focusing on one or other dominant mood and emotion or stable attitude. Sometimes the image, however, blends several emotional states of mind and aesthetic qualities. For both Indian metaphysics and religion stress the ambivalence of antinomic categories, moods, and values in the dialectical march of the human soul, whose enlightenment is understood and realized as a transcendence of the various pairs of opposites. The deities of Tāntrikism often combine simultaneously both compassionate and terrific, auspicious and wrathful, charming and repellent aspects and moods. It is through meditation that the devotee rises to the transcendent reality that dissolves all pairs of antinomic truths, values, and sentiments (*rasas*). The entire Indian science of gestures that defines the positions and movements of the head, neck, eyes, hands, and fingers, as mirroring specific moods and sentiments (*rasas*), is taken over from the dance to *mūrti* for the cultivation and apprehension of *rasa* defined as *aloukika* or that which does not belong to the mundane world. All the fine arts in India seek the maturation and stabilization of *rasas*. Indian art achieves this goal that belongs, indeed, to

the metaphysical sphere through recapturing the rhythms of nature and the cosmos and the tremulous movements, gestures, and glances of the human body in classical dance. All *mūrtis* or images in Indian art—men, women, angels, and gods—dance. Thus do the artist and devotee alike enter into the cosmic plan of life and realize the Absolute or the Supreme Spirit (*Paramātman*) as transcendent (*aloukika*) and universal (*sādhāraṇa*) *rasa* in which the incompatible aesthetic qualities and sentiments (*rasa*) of the charming and the grim, the auspicious and the awesome, the serene and the heroic may be perfectly juxtaposed. Such is the Indian mode of revelation of the metaphysical reality by art that simulates the aim and function of dance.

India is in an endless quest of unity in every field. In the pursuit of Beauty her art realizes the same transcendent unity through the harmony of opposite and conflicting aesthetic moods and emotions (*rasas*) that her metaphysics and religion in the pursuit of Truth and Sublimity respectively achieve through the reconciliation of antinomic, dialectical principles and values of life, thought, and experience. Indian art throws open the vistas of direct vision of the non-dual, transcendent reality (*aparokṣa-anubhūti*), inducing a profound joy and exaltation of the soul (*camatkāra*). Jagannātha, in his well-known treatise on Indian aesthetics, the *Rasagaṅgādhāra*, defines this unique and universal feeling of exaltation as the emotional correlate of all art-creation and appreciation. To integrate the mind, personality, and society, and saturate them with a thrill of exaltation, harmony, and rhythm (*chhandomāyā*) is the function of all true art.

*Lucknow University*