

Aesthetics of Dramatic Experience in Chapter 6 of the Nāṭyaśāstra

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Dr. Vandana Singh

The Nāṭyaśāstra, attributed to Bharata, is the most comprehensive ancient Indian text on drama, music, and performance. Chapter 6, titled “Rasa-sūtra”, is particularly crucial as it introduces the Rasa Theory (रस सिद्धांत), which forms the foundation of Indian aesthetics in drama, poetry, and performing arts.

The primary aim of drama in Bharata’s view is not just to tell a story but to create an emotional and aesthetic experience for the audience. This experience is explained through the concept of Rasa (aesthetic essence or flavor).

1. The Concept of Rasa (रस सिद्धांत)

The famous dictum from the Nāṭyaśāstra states:

> “Na hi rasād ṛte kaścid arthaḥ pravartate”

(Without Rasa, no meaning can be conveyed in drama.)

This means that the essence of a performance lies in the experience of rasa, which transcends the plot and dialogues and connects with the audience’s emotions.

Bharata explains that Rasa is born from Bhāva (emotions, states of being) and defines their relationship as:

> "Vibhāva, Anubhāva, Vyabhicāribhāva-samyogād rasa-niṣpattiḥ"

(Rasa is produced by the combination of determinants, consequents, and transitory states of emotions.)

2. The Structure of Rasa

(a) The Eight Rasas (Aṣṭa-rasa)

Bharata identifies eight primary emotional experiences in drama:

The eight Rasas (Aṣṭa-Rasa) are:

1. Śṛṅgāra (Erotic, Love)
2. Hāsyā (Comic, Laughter)
3. Raudra (Furious, Anger)
4. Karuṇā (Compassion, Tragic)
5. Bībhatsa (Odious, Disgust)
6. Bhayānaka (Terrifying, Fearful)
7. Vīra (Heroic, Valor)
8. Adbhuta (Marvelous, Wonder)

Later theorists, like Abhinavagupta, added a ninth rasa: Śānta (Peace, Tranquility), making it Navarasa (Nine Rasas).

(b) The Role of Bhāvas (Emotional States)

Rasa is experienced through the Bhāvas (states of being), which are classified as:

1. Sthāyi Bhāva (Stable Emotions) – The dominant, underlying emotion that creates Rasa.

2. Vyabhicāri Bhāva (Transient Emotions) – Temporary, fleeting emotions that support and enrich the main emotion.

3. Sātvik Bhāva (Involuntary Emotional Expressions) – Physical reactions like tears, trembling, and blushing, which enhance emotional authenticity.

Example: If a scene portrays a tragic event, the main rasa would be Karuṇa (compassion), supported by transient emotions like despair, sympathy, or shock. The physical reactions (Sātvik Bhāva) like shedding tears make it more impactful.

3. The Process of Rasa Realization

For the audience to experience rasa, three essential elements must be present:

1. Vibhāva (Determinants) – The factors that cause the emotion.

Example: A romantic scene between lovers under the moonlight.

2. Anubhāva (Consequents) – The visible expressions of emotion.

Example: The characters' facial expressions, gestures, and words conveying love.

3. Vyabhicāribhāva (Transient Emotions) – Supporting emotions that enhance the dominant mood.

Example: Nervousness, longing, or excitement in a romantic scene.

When these elements are harmoniously combined, rasa is evoked in the audience and they experience an emotional transformation rather than merely observing the drama.

4. The Role of the Spectator (Sahrdaya)

The concept of Sahrdaya (सहृदय, “one with a sensitive heart”) is crucial in Nāṭyaśāstra.

A true sahrdaya is an ideal spectator who is emotionally and intellectually attuned to the performance.

Just as an artist creates rasa, the audience must emotionally resonate with it to complete the aesthetic experience.

This emphasizes aesthetic empathy rather than passive viewing.

5. The Aesthetic Experience Beyond Entertainment

Unlike Western dramatic traditions, which focus on plot, character, and conflict resolution, Bharata's theory prioritizes emotional experience.

The purpose of drama is not just to entertain but to educate, elevate, and purify the minds of the spectators through rasa.

This concept influenced Indian classical dance, music, poetry, and even modern cinema.

6. Influence and Legacy of Rasa Theory

The aesthetics of rasa as explained in Chapter 6 of the Nāṭyaśāstra profoundly influenced:

1. Classical Indian Dance (Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, etc.) – Performers use facial expressions (abhinaya) to evoke different rasas.

2. Indian Classical Poetry and Literature – Sanskrit poets like Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, and later Indian poets structured their works around rasa.

3. Indian Cinema and Theater – Bollywood, regional films, and theater still use the Navarasa framework to shape narratives and emotional engagement.

Conclusion

Chapter 6 of the Nāṭyaśāstra provides a deep, philosophical, and psychological understanding of the aesthetics of dramatic experience. The ultimate success of drama lies in making the audience feel the Rasa, transforming them emotionally. This Rasa Theory remains one of India's greatest contributions to world aesthetics and continues to shape performing arts across cultures.