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The Natyasastra and Indian Cinema: A Study of the Rasa Theory as a Cornerstone for Indian Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

Bharata Muni(200B.C), the Indian performance theorist and philosopher, is credited with the formulation of the ultimate text of performing arts as well the *rasa* theory and is aptly celebrated as the father of Indian performative arts. Bharata(trans.1995) in Natyasastra has strongly argued that the ultimate sensation depends upon the emotion felt by the audience (as guided by the actors performance). Bharata believes that the relevant representation of the durable psychological states acts a stimulus in evoking in the spectator a verisimilitude of other psychological states that is then known as a Sentiment or *Rasa*. The role of the eight *rasas* is quite central to Indian cinema and its structure. It not only works to drive the plot and accentuate the behaviour of the characters, its function is deeply engraved in the basic storyline. Taking up the example of Bollywood, in this paper I would try to argue that every aspect Indian cinema comprising the performance of the actors, the technique of acting, the music, *sangeet*, background score and even the emotions produced by the audience, is based on *Rasa* and the aesthetic principles of *Natyasastra*.

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1. Introduction

In Rasaethetics, Schechner(2001) has stated, that “rasa is a cumulative result of vibhava (stimulus), anubhava(involuntary action) and vyabhichari bhava(voluntary reaction) . For example, just when various condiments and sauces and herbs and other materials are mixed, a taste is experienced. So is it with the different bhavas (emotions), the sthayi bhava (permanent emotions expressed inside) becomes a rasa”. (p. 29)

Rasa, according to the Indian aesthetics, is an essence of performative art. It is not only felt by the actors/ performers but is also conveyed by them to the sensitive spectators, who after enjoying the various emotions expressed by the actors through their words, expressions and gestures feel the pleasure.

India cinema, since its conception, has relied on natyasastra for its skeletal structure in terms of both its theme and structure. Its domestic themes that circle around love and overpowering grief , the stereotypical roles of the chivalric hero and pristine heroines, the larger than life backgrounds, exquisite make up and costumes and innumerable musical and dance sequences bear testimony to the aesthetic principles of this ancient text. Unlike Euro-American cinema, based on Konstantin Stanislavsky's acting methods, that emphasizes on 'becoming' the character, Indian cinema is completely based on conveying the emotion to spectator and experiencing the 'spectacle'.

2. Background to ‘The Natyasastra’

Bharata Muni(200B.C), the Indian performance theorist and philosopher, is credited with the formulation of the ultimate text of performing arts as well the *rasa* theory and is celebrated as the father of Indian performative arts. Bharata’s

Natyasastra strongly argues that the ultimate sensation depends upon the emotion felt by the audience (as guided by the actors performance). According to the *Natyasastra*, durable psychological states are eight that aid one in experiencing that singular spiritual freedom. Though the actor on stage and the character played by the actor dictate the emotion but it is the cultivated spectator, who has to witness the action and experience the emotion produced on stage. Bharata believes that the relevant representation of the durable psychological states acts a stimulus in evoking in the spectator a verisimilitude of other psychological states that is then known as a Sentiment. The Sentiment, or *Rasa*, being a vicarious experience, does not affect him in any other way, bringing in its wake a spiritual freedom and pure joy, which purifies the soul. It is on a very similar consideration that Aristotle spoke of catharsis in connection to witnessing a drama of tragic contents which are not very dissimilar to the pathetic, the odious and the terrible sentiments.

The Psychological states, Durable as well as Complimentary, relate primarily to the characters in the play, the hero or the heroine, as Bharata Muni asserts. Speaking of how one experiences the exalted state of *Rasa*, Bharata takes up the example of the Pathetic Sentiment. He believes it grows from an affliction like separation from dear ones, unrequited love, loss of fame, wealth. someones death, captivity or a similar misfortune, i.e the Determinants(vibhavas). But for a complete appreciation, the spectator must witness those reproduced on the stage, the effects of all the *vibhavas* or Determinants upon the actors should be made manifest through acting and as a natural consequence of the *vibhavas* or the Determinants, the characters concerned



would shed tears, lament, change their gait, posture, show drooping of their limbs, leading to the *anubhavas* or the Consequents. But another vehicle of the Sentiments are the Complementary Psychological States (*vyabhichari bhavas*) and are so called because they come along with the Durable Psychological States and strengthen the latter. In case of the Pathetic Sentiment, which arises from not having the desired union with the beloved or from being separated, there occur the following Complementary Psychological States: indifference, languor, delusion, dejection, sadness, illness etc? Even though they are transitory and disappear, they are catalyst to experiencing the *rasa*. As an addition to the eight *Rasa*, Abhinav Gupta added a ninth *rasa*, the *shanta rasa*, or bliss. The ninth *rasa*, philosophers argue is not a new *rasa* as one achieves this emotion when the other eight *rasa* join together giving the audience a sense of supreme fulfilment. In rasaesthetics Schechner(2001) has written that, “ a perfect performance, should one occur, would not transmit or express shanta *rasa* but allow shanta *rasa* to be experienced simultaneously and absolutely by the performers and partakers”. (p. 32)

3. Indian Cinema and the Rasa Theory

Indian cinema is completely based on experiencing each *rasa*. Every aspect of the performance in cinema must be in synchronisation and performance must display to perfection every *rasa*. In Indian cinema, the actors, or the *Rasic* performers portray their emotions even more than the actual characters they are playing thus conveying well the emotion to the audience, which is the main aim of performative art according to the *Natyasastra*. The role of the eight *rasas* is quite central to Indian cinema and its structure. It not only works to drive the plot and accentuate the behaviour of the

characters; its function is deeply engraved in the basic storyline. The *rasas* have a dominant role to play in creating the characters in a film. *Shringara* signifies beauty, love and faithfulness or devotion and is always a strong trait of the lead female character, the pure and innocent heroine. *Veer rasa*, which highlights vigour, strength, courage as well as pride defines the proud, chivalric hero. Bollywood film is highly dependent on all the nine *rasas*. They are significant in a number of ways. The *rasa* help create the stereotypical roles and exaggerated facial expressions and mannerisms. Quite regularly will the handsome and courageous hero adopt arms when crossed, show resolute indifference when confronted with lesser characters, such as the conniving mother-in-law complete with complaints, shrill tone and wailing. The fluttering eyelashes of the innocent maiden are just as contrived and just as important a part of the *shringara rasa*.

Taking up the example of Bollywood, one can argue that performance in Indian cinema is very *Natyasastra* oriented, unlike the modern Euro American cinema based on the methods of Konstantin Stanislavsky. This difference lies in every aspect of Indian cinema, in the performance of the actors, the technique of acting, the music, *sangeet*, background score and even emotions produced by the audience, the difference, in a word is, *Rasa*. Russian Stanislavsky created this methodology which later got developed into the basic code for modern theatre. This methodology differs from Indian cinema in its belief that the actor should completely inhabit the spirit of the character to be played. Stanislavsky argues in favour of this idea of ‘becoming’ the character. An actor could perform only when he becomes the character completely. He argued against the process of enactment



as theorised by Bharata in *Natyasastra*. *Natyasastra* believes that the conveyance of the emotion is important and hence gives value to the Spectacle. According to *natyasastra*, the enactment process has four steps. First is the experience of the poet, then the creation of the text, i.e., reconstruction of the experience of the poet. The actor then tries to enact the effect of the experience on the poet, in the last stage the audience recreates the experience that the actor portrays. But Stanislavsky believes that the actor must not transpose his understanding and interpretation of the character to his performance for there is always a possibility that the depiction of emotion might change from its original form and conception. Stanislavsky believes that an actor should aim at becoming a living breathing embodiment of the character than just trying to convey an emotion, for a character is more important than the actor in the bigger picture of the story. Performances inspired and influenced by Stanislavsky, as Matthews(2009) has stated, “rely on the development of a character through the actor’s embodiment of the character and allowing the emotion created by the story to flow inside out”. (P. 38)

This is precisely what differentiates between the Euro American cinema and the Indian cinema. Indian cinema relies mainly on the *Rasa* and the idea of *the Spectacle*. The performance of the actors is but a medium to channelize the emotion from the movie to the audience. A comparison between some aspects of the movies *Slumdog millionaire*, *Rang De Basanti* and *Coolie* reveals well the difference between the two theories and also the dependence of Indian cinema on the *Rasa* theory. In *Slumdog Millionaire*, the British actor portraying the character of Jamal Malik strictly adheres to the method of

Stanislavsky and becomes one with the character that the movie demands rather than becoming an embodiment of the *rasa*. When compared to movies like *Coolie*, this performance stands out as being completely *Anti-Rasic*. The actor is a dull eyed, lost, slack jawed, pale, out of place twenty five year old throughout the movie, maintaining the unchanging personality even when he is tortured by the police or is losing his beloved ill-fatedly, never utilising the scope of expressing the emotion that would quite obviously burst out of the actor to reach the audience in traditional *desi* Indian cinema.

Acting or *Abhinaya*, according to the *Natyasastra*, involves not only action but a myriad of other activities. Explaining *Abhinaya*, Bharata(trans. 1995), speaks of four kinds of acting: *Angika abhinaya*, *vachik abhinaya*, *aharya abhinaya* and *sattiyika abhinaya*. The communication through body movements, which involves the movements of major limbs like head, chest, hands and feet as well as expression through facial features like eyes, nose, lips, cheeks, chin etc. and conveys meaning through glances, gestures, gaits is *angika abhinaya*. The communication by speech is called *vachik abhinaya*. This aids the audience to experience *rasa* through the power of language. In this, the vowels, consonants and their places of origin in the mouth, pitch, tone, intonation, modes of address vary in order to create the spectacle. *Natyasastra* gives a lot of importance to *aaharya abhinaya*. It involves discussing the importance of heavy make up, dresses that complement the role and decorating the actor's hair and body with ornaments, jewellery and garlands. *Aaharya abhinaya* is this very extraneous representation done by means of costumes, make up, ornaments, stage decorations and props. Representation of internal mood and



temperament of the character through acting is called *Sattvika Abhinaya*. In *Natyasastra*, Bharata (trans. 1951) wrote that it is the highest quality of *abhinaya* expressing the inner feelings of the character by subtle facial expressions, like the movements of lips, nose, trembling of body, sighs, heavy breaths, turning the face red, rolling down the tears etc. Not only this, Bharata(trans. 1951), in *Natyasastra*, also talks about how the external environment like the time of the day and climatic conditions too can be enacted on stage to give the audience a complete pleasure of experiencing the *rasa*. He describes how to represent the phenomena like sunrise, sunset, different times of the day, rains can be enacted which calls *Chitrabhinaya*. Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, quite evidently makes use of all this technique to convey, melodramatically, the emotion to the audience; quite contrary to the Euro American cinema where the main target to be achieved is becoming the character, as per Stanislavsky method.

Indian cinema, which is strictly *Rasic* in nature, opens up the possibility of an actor playing a wider range of roles of any age or nature. In *Coolie* (A movie by Raj and Desai 1983) Amitabh Bachchan, then nearly forty, plays the role of a twenty year old porter because the emphasis here is not the actor embodying perfectly the character but on right and perfect conveyance of emotion. Dev Patel in *Slumdog Millionaire* becomes the character but misses by a huge margin the transmission of emotion required in such a tale of morbidity, hopelessness and the last triumph that the movie is. That is where the primary reason of the failure of the character of Jamal Malik lies, it treads into the territory of *rasa* or the Indian cinema yet fails to understand or achieve a *rasic*

perfection, hence failing to uphold the essence and spirit of Indian cinema, the *rasa* theory.

Indian cinema, chiefly, creates *rasic* performance. Hogan(2003) wrote, "The most common primary *rasas* in Indian cinema are the romantic and the sorrowful/pathetic".(P.40) He believes that the most elemental and essential human emotions are love and sorrow and hence the most displayed *rasa* are the *Karuna rasa* and the *Shringara rasa*, which makes Indian cinema circle around Melodrama and romance. Even though Indian cinema emphasises on *Shringara* and *karuna rasa*, it rarely has movies that display just one core emotion. It also encompasses (generally) *hasya rasa* and *adbhuta rasa* alongside, aiding the primary *rasa*. Not only melodramatic but didactic filmmakers are also largely dependent upon the *rasa*. Hogan(2003) has written, "didactic works in India are no less inclined to use *rasa* aesthetics than are the works of simple entertainment. Indeed didactic works rely overtly on the empathetic characters of *rasa*. The creation, sustaining and enhancement of the empathetic feeling is almost invariably central to the works that set out to cultivate a commitment to social ethics on the part of a reader or viewer."(P.41) The *rasa* theory emphasises solely on conveying an emotion to the audience and hence uses *karuna rasa* as the most prevalent *rasa* in order to arouse empathy.

Indian cinema, for decades, uses characters coloured in broad strokes who exhibit strong emotions because according to the *Natyasastra* formula, a perfect *rasic* performance requires a perfect conveyance of emotion rather than a perfection in characterisation. The film *Rang de Basanti* (2006) is probably the best example that depicts strong reliance on the *rasa* theory.



The movie, focusing on the Indian freedom struggle, corruption of the politicians, the rebellion against the colonisers, deaths, is complete with typical Bollywood Dance sequences, music and background score. The film quite evidently has *Veer rasa*(vigour/energy), *Hasya Rasa*(laughter), *adbhuta*(wonder and amazement) in the first half of the film. Later, the tone changes to a darker shade with the *karuna rasa*, *bhayankar* and *vibhatsa rasa* dominating the atmosphere. The change is quite perceptible, enough to make the audience squirm in their seats. The characters change from being fun loving and young to hard minded resolute revolutionaries fighting for a cause against prevalent corruption. This movie, one can argue, is a didactic film, as it comes under Hogan's definition of a didactic work, being a piece of art, as Matthew(2009) has stated, that through engendering of empathy causes the audience to change their perception or increase their knowledge about certain events."(P.40) Even in this movie, as the movie wants to make a social impact and consequently bring about revolutionary changes, then it too relies on the depiction of the *rasa* to arouse that empathy in the audience leading to the birth of rebellious emotions that will further their social progressiveness. Schechner(2001) in *Rasaesthetics* writes that "rasa is flavour, taste, the sensation one gets when food is perceived, bought within reach, touched, taken into mouth, chewed, mixed, savoured and swallowed."(P.29) Following the same sutra, Indian cinema too gives the audience enough time to savour and experience the emotion conveyed by the film through its plot, subplots and multi-layered events for a running time of about three to four hours. To the spectator, then, Indian cinema is but a feast where the various *rasa* portrayed by the film is displayed, one course arrives after

the other and in the form of the final dessert, *Shanta rasa* is served, as the performance transcends into a pure display of emotion. Hence, the formulaic pattern, that Indian cinema adopts, is to prolong the display of *rasa* for the audience to help them achieve the pure singular emotion that the Sentiment imparts.

Bollywood, in its contrivance to give the audience the pleasure of the spectacle, relies on the formulaic use of dance and music. Indian aesthetics always believed that the emotional response in the audience is always crucial to art and hence the predominance of the *rasa* theory. Indian cinema borrows the idea of music from the *Natyasastra*. A lot of importance is given to music in *Natyasastra*, wherein about nine chapters have been dedicated to music. Bharata(trans. 1995) in *Natyasastra*, in the chapter on vocal and instrumental music, describes *svara* (a musical note) and its use in expressing particular aesthetic sense i.e. *Rasa*.

According to Bharata's(trans. 1995) *Natyasastra*, music is created through 4 kinds of instruments. Stringed instruments are called *Tata*. Wind blown instruments are called *Sushira*. Percussion instruments are called *Avanaddha* and Cymbals are called *Ghana*. The stringed instruments like *veena* are of different types. He also emphasises on the effect created by each aiding to the achievement of the sentiment. The third group is cymbals, like *manjira* and *zanza*. They supply rhythm, i.e. *taal*. *Taal* is derived from *tala*, i.e. stability. *Taal* is the foundation necessary for music. It is indicated by clapping of hands also. Bharata (trans. 1995) describing, various *taals*, has emphasized how vocal and instrumental music and dance should accompany each other to help the audience experience pleasure that will lead to them experiencing



the singular spiritual freedom, *rasa*. The fourth group is of wind-blown instruments like flute. These instruments are hollow and have holes to control the air flow. The flute is the major instrument while conch, *tundakini* are the subordinate ones. The shahnai too comes under this category. Flute has deep rooted importance in Indian culture. The magic created by Krishna through the enchanting magic of his flute is but an evidence of Bharata's argument how music helps to get the *rasas* across.

Bollywood borrows from *Natyasastra* the *sutra* of both dance and music. Bollywood uses music to create songs, background score and dance, all of which are equally essential in getting the sentiment across to its audience. Songs give emotional valence to otherwise ambiguous scenes. The music aids the audience to get a better grip of the actions happening in the movie. The actor may be walking about his home happily, blissfully unaware that a bomb set to blow up soon is going to kill him, but the audience may be made aware of it by an ominous music that foretells the disaster making them grasp their seats in fear and anticipation. Also music is required because once the audience begins to grasp the relevant emotion, mood congruent processing enhances the effect. Music in the form of proper background score aids the emotional experience to reach a higher level. The flute sequence in *Sholay* is not merely an isolated piece of music but rather its significance is woven into the structure and plot of the movie. It is not merely the background score but it helps build the atmosphere of terror of the villain creating ominous silences in anticipation of evil.

Indian cinema has a number of dance performances as well, portraying mostly the *sringara rasa*. Bharata (trans. 1995) in *Natyasastra* has stated, "It is said dance is

occasioned by no specific need; it has come into use simply because it creates beauty. As dance is loved naturally by almost all people, it is eulogised as being auspicious. It is the source of amusement on many occasions. Siva too was pleased to say, "perform dance in connection with singing songs". (P.51) Dance, in Bollywood, according to the formula of the *Natyasastra*, gives pleasure to the audience and does it through the use of heavy costumes, make up, props, jewellery expressive body movement and graceful expressions.

Screenwriting in Indian cinema too is completely on the codes given by the *Natyasastra*. The purpose of performative art, as *Natyasastra* argues, is the Spectacle. The purpose of Indian cinema too, as it is quite evident, is to engage, entertain, enlighten, disturb, occasionally challenge but finally satisfy the spectator. *Natyasastra* often gives the analogy of a satisfying meal that has a myriad of spices and ingredients perfectly and expertly mixed. In films too, this very essence of life can be captured and presented to the spectator. Indian cinema does try to create this very 'organic mix' by fusing *rasa* theory with every form of the screenplay. The legendary filmmaker, Satyjit Ray, believed that to create spectacle the screenwriting should be done strictly along the lines of the *rasa* theory. In his famous cinematic translation of Bibhutibhushan's novel *Pather Panchali*, he follows the *rasa* theory as defined by the A K Ramanujam, "in each man's history there are feelings (bhavas) of all sorts, and the poeticians single out eight of these: love, mirth, grief, energy, terror, disgust, anger, and wonder. Each of these is, in the poetic context, transmuted into a corresponding mood (*rasa*). They carry with them all the physical phases of their expression, their



allied feelings, their dominants and their consequents in emotional behaviour. Each mood has a characteristic set of these, and it is on this fact that the whole analysis of dramatic performance is based”(as cited in Cooper, 2000. P.3)

Not only on feeling, but Satyajit Ray’s doctrine rests predominantly on conveying and channelling it in an artistic way to the spectators. Satyajit Ray understood well this imbrication of *rasa*. His awareness of this very *sutra* is evident in all his films. He has written “Experience tells us that the subtlest of emotional states affects a person’s speech and behaviour and such revealing speech and behaviour is at the very heart of cinema’s eloquence.”(as cited in Cooper, 2000, P.4)

4. Conclusion

It can be concluded by saying that Indian cinema is completely based on Performance aesthetics. The depiction of *rasa* and channeling it to the audience is the quintessential aspect of Indian theatre and cinema. *Rasa* theory is the very essence of what makes Bollywood unique and eternal and it constitutes but the very structure and backbone of Indian cinema.

About the Author

Alisha Ibkar is a postgraduate in Literature from the Centre for English Studies, School Of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, currently pursuing her PhD in Bengal Folk Theatre from A.M.U, Aligarh. Her specific areas of interest are postcolonial literature and Indian philosophy. Her research interest lies in the genre of Indian English Literature, specifically, the study of language and how it functions in postcolonial texts. She also has a steadfast fondness for Slam poetry of Sarah Kay and Phil Kaye. She also works as an Editor of *Literophile*, a student initiated literary journal to promote research in culture studies.

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