

## THE UNIVERSAL ASPECT OF THE RASA CONCEPT

RASA is a well known category of Indian aesthetics, which by now has become the main category applicable to all the spheres of Indian art. Once formulated by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (IV-VI c.) the *rasa* concept reached its golden age at the end of the tenth century. At that time Abhinavagupta, the greatest representative of Kasmir's Vedanta school, originally elaborated it and fixed epistemological and synthetic terms of the doctrine in his treatise *Abhinava-bhāratī* (X c.). As the main aim for all arts the *rasa* concept was stated by one of the most famous scholars in poetry and philosophy, Anandavardhana (IX c.); as a separate theory in music it was developed by Sarangadeva in *Sangīta-ratnākara* (XIII c.). With the global process of cultural integration many scholars began to discuss the question of the *rasa* concept: whether it is culturally determined (Eliot Deutch, James R. Brandon, Farley Richmond), or has universal features as well (Edwin Gerow, M. Christopher Byrski, V. Raghavan, Shanta Gandhi and others). Some Indologists put into question the very possibility for westerners to conceive Indian drama or music properly. They ask why it lacks the element of entertainment, intellectual argumentation, incitement in social action, didactic instruction which it has in the West, especially in a field of modern art and theatre (Harold S. Powers). Or, maybe, *rasa* is an alternative to Western aesthetic feeling? The question, which shows a benevolent attitude regarding integration of civilisations, I would set this way: "Is there any equivalent in the West?" My answer would be as follows: "Yes, there is such an equivalent from the times of Plato and Aristotle." However, in the West we never had an aesthetic theory developed so fully, consistently and integrally as the *rasa* theory. We can find some similarities between *rasa* and *ethos* doctrines, to point out the mythological period, but there are many differences as well. The Ancient Greeks were laying the greatest emphasis on the ethical aspect of music (drama). The best aesthetic treatises were written during the classical period down to fourth century B. C. Afterwards the teaching gradually lost its importance, though it gave birth to the new emotional theories like *Affektenlehre* in West Europe (eighteenth century). *Mimesis* of Aristotle reminds us of the doctrine of Śrīsaṅkuka, who said that *rasa* is "a state of knowing" based on imitation, an effect of fiction produced on the scene. That point of view was opposed by Indian scholiasts Tauta, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta in particular as well as by the founder of "psychological distance" in aesthetics and arts E. Ballough, J. P. Richter and others in the West almost ten centuries later. Many analogies to Sanskrit poetics we can find in the works of Wordsworth, Novalis and other romantics.<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century the *rasa* theory, still enjoying its traditional continuity, is akin to the emotive theory of poetic language put forward by I. A. Richards and his followers in the Anglo-American "New Criticism". Also, it can be compared with the other emotive theories developed by S. Langer, M. Dufrenn, J. Kohen, T. C. Pollok, C. L. Stevenson, W. K. Brown, E. M. Tillyard, etc.

1. According to scholiast P. A. Grincer; v. his monograph *The Main Categories of Classical Indian Poetics*. Moscow, 1987, p. 189-190. (Original in Russian)

The purpose of this article is to indicate some universal aspects of the *rasa* theory using references to the art of music. Indian aesthetic musical thought is a very important level in evolution of cultural thinking of humanity, and this fact for the westerners becomes more and more evident. Born from the Vedic rituals, drama, later becoming a part of the Indian classical music, the *rasa* concept through Byzantine, Persian and Greek cultures had reached the Middle West and made a great impact on the arts of Renaissance ages. The fact reminds us once more that Eastern culture indirectly acts on the culture of the Occident. The latter does not hang in a vacuum. Even more, by their most noble and beautiful manifestations those cultures are inseparable. It is easy to conceive why the *rasa* theory is too hard to be understood in the Western art world today, why it is considered strange, dry and even impossible aesthetic formulae. The tip of Western criticism is spearheaded at the search of something "original", "new" or "individual". Perhaps this is the only criterion today. The most important thing for an art connoisseur is to point out if a piece of art is unique. It holds for the musical criticism as well. On the contrary, the *rasa* conception gives to any "incomparable uniqueness", a softly speaking, secondary role.

Alexander G. Baumgarten ascribed sensual knowledge to the lower level of gnosiology, and the theory of fine arts, which are subordinated to this sphere, are considered to be only a preparing stage on the way to the higher level of knowledge—the perfect clearness of pure thinking. Since then there prevails the attitude, that intellectual and emotional perception are opposites and their unity is impossible, because the higher knowledge, i. e. the pretersensual one, acts with the help of an abstract notion and is the subject of logic. The *rasa* concept, however, is based on the unity of these opposites. It belongs to aesthetics, but also to philosophy and religion, actually joining symbolical, conceptual and intuitive thinking. First of all, this is a category assigned to describe *the state of consciousness*: in this case it describes it as *a quintessence of aesthetic experience*. That is why to experience *rasa* does not necessarily mean to be immersed in the feelings and to remain on the level of the sensual perception. Every *rasa* has its emotional and intellectual side: it is not a simple feeling, but a spiritual state (*citta-vṛtti*). So, when we are speaking about emotional influence of the work of art, the concept of *rasa* touches in fact all the layers of the human psyche. Abhinavagupta was the first to reject the simplified concept of the *rasa* as hyperbolised feeling. According to him, the poetry is correlate with life, but not the copy, and *rasa* accordingly—aesthetic correlate to the spiritual state with its special emotions, but not the sense as such. Langer thinks similarly and bases her opinion on musical examples. According to her, perception of music is a spiritual process, a process of knowledge, since it reveals not the symptoms of feelings, but their universal structure. The aesthetic thinking is straight and intuitive (against the opinion of Bergson and Croce, who isolated them from the intellectual perception). The concept of Langer is akin to that of Sanskrit theorists from the point of view that it studies not the feeling as such, but the structure of it, its universal model. "What the art expresses is not the real feeling, but its idea..."<sup>2</sup> This idea with respect to *rasa* is nothing but experience,

2. Langer, S. *Feeling and form. A theory of art developed from philosophy in a new key*. London, 1953.

abstracted from the defined content, which could be described as a pure experience of beauty on a transcendental level. (In that sense *rasa* itself is pure, bright coloured sensual consciousness.) For Richards and Ogden experience of art is the harmonised whole complex of differently directed emotions. For them the beautiful is an object, which simply raises emotional gratification. But the theory of *rasa* does not speak about disinterested harmony of different trends of emotion. It speaks rather of their purification and universalization of the one main emotion. Here lies the essential difference of both musical languages. The harmony, basic structural principle of European musical aesthetic experience, has reached its apogee in instrumental music (primarily in chamber music). Indians, on the contrary, didn't develop plenty of new genres, but tried to perfect existing ones and to convey the main musical idea as good, exact and universal as possible—an idea, the basis of which is melody. For example, the axis of *rāga* is *śadaja* (an approximate equivalent of tonic), and all the other tones through structural means (at a first place *alamkāra*, embellishments) makes variable relations (transitional states) for the only purpose—to blend with it (to reach the basic state). Richards, Ogden and their followers believed that to be the result of emotional influence, but the Indian theorists thought of it as only a mechanism. In order to conceive the essence of *rasa* better, we need that mechanism to analyse in detail.

*Rasa* literally means “sap”, “juice”, “essence”, also “taste” and “aroma”. The aesthetic experience is described as an experience of taste (*rasāsvādāna*), or simply tasting (*svāda*, *āsvāda*); the one who tastes is called *rasika*, and the work of art *rasavat*. In *Rasasūtra* Bharata formulated the basic statement of how *bhāva* becomes *rasa*, or an ordinary, common emotion transforms itself into purely aesthetic feeling: *vibhāva-anubhāva-vyabhicārī-samyogād-rasa-nispattiḥ*. In other words, the elements or dimensions of everyday experience (*samskara* or *vasana*), during aesthetic experience constructing elements of emotional content of the work of art (*vibhāva*), causes corresponding consequences (*anubhāva*), i. e., by sight, sound or motion expressed alterations of feeling, which reflects an emotional state. Emotional states are basic, or constant (*sthāyibhāvas*) and transitional (*vyabhicāribhāvas*). Thus *bhāvas* are conscious emotional states and through them the recipient, or *rasika*, experiences *rasa*. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra* Bharata mentions 8 basic *bhāvas* and 49 transitional ones. Each of these must be subordinate to one of the main *bhāvas*, their combination must be in line with it and not break the canon of proportions; otherwise “transitional state suppresses *rasa*”, and the work of art, instead of being exciting, becomes sentimental and tedious.<sup>3</sup> The same principle suits the music as well: in order to bring delight, to open the heart of a listener and to rouse sublimated emotions, experienced as *rasa*, the piece of music must conform to all the canons of composing and interpretation of classical music. In that respect the conception

3. Thus *sthāyibhāvas* become *rasas*: *rati* (love), *śṛṅgāra* (erotic), *hāsa* (laughter, cheerfulness), *hāsyā* (comic, humorous), *śoka* (grief), *karuṇa* (compassion), *krodha* (anger), *raudra* (terror), *utsāha* (vigour, zeal), *vīra* (heroic), *bhaya* (fear), *bhayānaka* (dread), *jugupsā* (shrinking), *bībhatsa* (disgust), *vismaya* (bewilderment), *adbhuta* (wonder). For more about *rasa* and *bhāvas* by Bharata v. *Nāṭyaśāstra*, English Translation with Critical Notes by Rangacharya. New Delhi, 1996, chapters VI-VII (pp. 53-77).

of *raga* as the main form of classical Indian music is reminiscent of the Western classical musical principle of "Golden Section" and learning about proportions. (Even in the twentieth century Bartok and Debussy made conscious use of it. The "Golden Section" or "Divine Proportion" is expressed in mathematical ratio  $\phi$  (phi) or 1:1.618+.)

*(To be concluded)*

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## THE UNIVERSAL ASPECT OF THE RASA CONCEPT

(Continued from the issue of March 2002)

ABHINAVAGUPTA investigated the relation between concrete structure (form) and *rasa* awareness and came to the quite radical conclusion that no determinate relation is possible; for the *rasa* is more real and more persistent than any of its so-called causes.<sup>4</sup> It does not depend on these conditions, because it can't be found in an actor, poet or spectator. *Rasa* exists in a transcendental (*alaukika*) dimension and is not determined by time or space, or the subject who experiences it. These *laukika* and *alaukika* categories, describing what belongs to "secular" and "sacral" dimensions respectively (*loka*, or "the world", is etymological equivalent of Latin *locus*) are being used in the context of music; so also are terms *svargya*, *asvargya* and *mārga*, *deśī*. These terms were perfectly explained by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy in his treatise *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*: "The ensemble of music (*saṃgītam*) is of two kinds, highway (*mārga*) and local (*deśī*): that which was followed after by Shiva (*druhinena*) and practised (*prayuktam*) by Bharata is called highway and bestows liberation (*vimukti-dam*); but that which serves for worldly entertainment (*lokānurañjakam*) in accordance with custom (*deśasthayāritiā*) is called 'local' ..."<sup>5</sup> Further, referring to *Śukranītisāra* (IV. 4. 73-76) he says: "We find that whereas the making of images of deities in 'conducive to the world of heavenly light', or 'heavenward leading' (*svargya*), the making of likenesses of men, with however much skill, is 'non-conducive to the world of heavenly light' (*asvargya*)."<sup>6</sup> (One of the most important components of the *rāga* concept is its deity (*devatā*), an expression of *rasa* embodied in a form of sound (*nāda-maya-rūpa*). Thus *mārga* and *deśī* are sacral and secular spheres of music, similar to the Medieval European *musica humana* and *musica profana*. Siegmund Levarie and Ernst Levy, in their work *Musical Morphology: a Discourse and a Dictionary*<sup>7</sup> call such pure instrumental music *musica musicans*. They define it as "music determined by immanent laws of musical structure and by the grammar of musical language", as opposed to *musica musicata*, which serves "the unfolding of the passions".<sup>8</sup> However, the laws discussed here are natural laws of harmony in a wide sense, and the grammar is euphony of elements of musical language (melody, rhythm and harmony) which fill up the tonal and compositional framework. Let us come back to the statement of Abhinavagupta. It says that an aesthetic experience (*rasa*) doesn't directly depend upon structural elements of the work of art. It "must depend" on something else, then. Research of Western musical history shows that there have always been scholars who shared

4. Gerow, E. *Rasa as a Category of Literary Criticism in Sanskrit Drama in Performance*. Performing Arts Series, gen. ed., Farley P. Richmond, Volume 2. New Delhi, 1993, p. 235.

5. Coomaraswamy A. K. *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art: The Nature of "Folklore" and "Popular Art"*. New Delhi, 1994, p. 130.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

7. Levarie S., Levy E. *Musical Morphology: a Discourse and a Dictionary*. Kent State University Press, 1983.

8. The example is taken from Godwin, Joscelyn. *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth*. Rochester, Vermont, 1995, p. 97.

the same view. Could it be related to the inspiration? Can we say that the level of inspiration is possibly of the greatest importance? For example, Canadian professor of musicology Joscelyn Godwin points out, that there are 3 levels of musical inspiration. The highest is the "avatic" level that has a historical function in addition to, or even surpassing, its intrinsic value. The works of such composers serve, in their own domain, like the visions of meditating saints, which become the icons of religion. They become objects of contemplation for every subsequent composer, Godwin says. He mentions some of them: the Greek innovator Timotheus, contemporary of Plato; St. Gregory the Great, to whom all of Gregorian chant was at one time attributed; Ziryab (eighth-ninth century), court lutenist in Baghdad and Cordoba; magister Perotinus of Notre-Dame (c. 1200), creator of the first polyphony in four parts. To the second level belong composers who can be called recreators after a revealed pattern, Masters of their art. The inspiration to them comes from the memory: here the reconstruction of musical archetypes (*citta-vrtti*) plays the most important role. To the second level could be ascribed all the greatest composers, who write sacral, *alaukika* music, or *musica humana*. In their utterances we can find many references to preternatural reality, which surpasses time, space and themselves as subjects: "This knowledge will be a perpetual *éblouissement*, an eternal music of colours, an eternal colour of musics. In Thy Music, we will SEE Music. In Thy Light, we will HEAR Light" (Olivier Messiaen, 1908-1993). There can be quoted a series of confessions of such composers like Johan Sebastian Bach, Johannes Brahms, Richard Wagner, Alexander Skryabin, Claude Debussy or John Cage (no matter of which century), confirming the transcendental level of aesthetic consciousness, which manifests itself through intuition and inspiration. According to Godwin the third degree of inspiration is not strictly speaking inspiration at all, because the creativity proceeds only from the creator's own *ego*, from the models he sees around him in the world, and from his subconscious mind.<sup>9</sup> This is a sphere of profane music.

Talking about the structure of musical language, it is absolutely evident that we cannot compare straightforwardly harmonic (tonal or atonal) thinking, characteristic of Western musical tradition, with domination of melodic origin in classical musical traditions of the East, in this case Indian. But here we can find some interesting parallels, too. The analytical system of Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935) obeys a correct intuition in looking for quasi-melodic outlines behind classical pieces, although it can never explain why a certain second subject of Mozart is such a perfect companion to its first subject; neither can any intellectual analysis, for the relationship is not an intellectual one. Maybe this method is precise so much as helps to reveal relativity of melodic and harmonic music as in a field of aesthetic experience. According to Godwin, anyone can construct harmonic progressions or tonal schemes in classical style, but without the gift of melody they will be lifeless images. What attracts us in Schubert or Beethoven is not the harmonic or tonal system. It is rather the "endless melody", because in fact the whole sequence of phrases and themes is successful as much as it makes the sequence of harmonised melodies.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 676-78.

Everybody knows that it is possible to teach students many secrets of harmony and counterpoint, but to teach how to write melody none can; that is why it is said that it is a gift from God. The purpose of *rāga*, the main form of Indian classical music composition, is treated from a similar point of view. "That which charms is *rāga*". The word "*rāga*" is obtained by adding the suffix "*ghan*" (which indicates "doing") to the root "*rañj*", "to please". "A *rāga*," the sages say, "is a particular arrangement of sounds in which notes and melodic movements appear like ornaments to enchant the mind." (*Saṅgīta Darpaṇa*, 2-1)<sup>10</sup> It is not a simple rendition of the scale of several chosen tones from the 22 *śrutīs*: its main purpose is to stir the emotions. The famous "endless melody" of Wagner was influenced by the philosophy of the East, and the composer tried to embody that philosophical insight in his impressive operas. There are many composers who derived, directly or indirectly, their inspiration from the Indian classical music, and especially composers of the twentieth century (Pierre Boulez, George Enescu, John Cage, Phillip Glass and others).<sup>11</sup> But perhaps it is correct to assert that what they "derive" is not the transference of foreign musical grammar. Bringing in some elements of musical language or use of the timbre of an instrument gives mostly exotic colouring and remains on the experimental level. Even more, there hardly was the effort "to think the Oriental way". Hardly was there "the meeting of minds on the universal aesthetic level", which enables one to catch and conceive the very core of the music, i. e. its essence—*rasa*.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, in order to be able to conceive *rasa* both intelligence and proper mood

10. The examples are taken from Daniélou, A. *The Rāgas of Northern Indian Music*. London, 1968, p. 91.

11. Today many American composers think that in order to become a composer, one must necessarily learn about Indian classical music. They are of the opinion that it is not worth beginning the studies of composition unless the student goes to India to know the main principles of Indian music, take lessons of singing or learn to play some classical instruments.

12. Generally speaking, until XVII c. the West had the same oral tradition and monody. The criteria of aesthetics didn't much differ from the so called Eastern countries (the relativity of allocation into "East" and "West" by contemporary scholars of comparative studies is more and more recognised). I would assert that specific difference of mentality lies in the shifting of criteria of values. Indians always cared about the result of music, its effect (*rasa*). Meanwhile for Europeans, who have become too pragmatic during the last few centuries, the most interesting thing seems to be the very process of "making music", and structural elements have risen in importance, though they must play only a subsidiary role. Indian philosophical and aesthetic thought for centuries tried to keep the common basis. It does not change fundamental principles, does not lose contact with essential origins from which it rises, and does not turn into peripheral matters. The Indians' was always a search for uniting criteria (e.g., Advaita Vedānta, Integral Vedānta, the *rasa* concept, etc.). The identical relation between art and philosophy exists in the Western culture as well. But Western philosophers began to dismantle the Being into separate parts and the whole of it to base on one or another part. Such "rolling" of the Existence as if it would be a toy in the hands of the child could be called a children's game; only it had very serious consequences. It led to the present chaos and crisis in reality. The conflict of opposite rudiments, stress, eternal revolutionism, indulging in suffering and destruction, the negation of the truths just found a while ago and permanent innovation became the main stimuli for creativity. In the field of music composers experimented in the same way with the separate elements of musical language, sometimes hyperbolising them for fun. In a sense (from the point of view of *gnosis*) Indian classical music was developing vertically, European horizontally. Lord Yehudi Menuhin has said in his book *Unfinished Journey* that Indians have kept all the possible modes, rhythmic formulae and permutations of the sound. "Melodically and rhythmically Indian music long ago achieved a complex sophistication which only in the twentieth century, with the work of Bartok and Stravinsky, has Western music adumbrated," he said and added that "even arcane rules of dodecaphonic composition had been anticipated and surpassed." The sonoristic technique reminds us of the *svara* concept. The same could be said, without "taking a donkey's hind leg off", about the enormous orchestras and choruses that gave birth to the minimalism, which reached its peak in John Cage's creative thought and finally led to the silence.

are necessary. Ānandavardhana and other theoreticians used the term *sahṛdaya*, or “one of similar heart”. According to Abhinavagupta, *sahṛdayas* are “those people who are capable of identifying with the subject matter, as the mirror of their hearts has been polished through constant repetition and study of poetry, and who sympathetically respond in their own hearts.”<sup>13</sup> (At this point Richards and Ogden emphasise uniting emotional experience and use such concepts as “empathy” and “balance”.) Abhinavagupta studied the factors which help or prevent the process of perception. In this respect the universal aspect is of crucial importance. The first condition for conceiving the *rasa* is universalisation of an aesthetic object (the impersonal nature of *rasa* having no ethical ground). The second one is the universalisation of an aesthetic subject (of the spectator, listener or reader) (the “psychical distance” of E. Ballough). What happens then is that “one’s heart becomes a spotless mirror, for all of one’s normal preoccupations (*samsārika-bhāva*) have been completely forgotten, and [one] is lost in aesthetic rapture, listening to the fine singing and music.”<sup>14</sup> As soon as the deimpersonalised consciousness of the spectator meets an universalised emotional content of the artwork, identification of the subject and object takes place (*tanmayī-bhāva*). Abhinavagupta considers it as the third necessary condition of *rasa* experience. Such an identification is possible because in the consciousness of the recipient as well as of the creator lies latent the same spiritual archetypes, which, according to the doctrine of reincarnation, do not disappear, but become universal models, or subconscious complexes, or impressions (*vāsanā*). Thus *rasa* first reaches the poet (composer) and his creation, then becomes an intermediary, conveying the *rasa* to the reader (listener), *rasika*. From this point of view, even a Westerner can experience *rasa* listening to the music of Bach or any other classical music, Gerow says. In my opinion to the list we can add classical music of any other culture, because the highest aesthetic experience does not have in itself any specific subjective features.

In the deepest sense of the word, *rasa* is “the bliss of one’s own consciousness” (Abhinava), it is the fullness and bliss of it (*svasamvid-ānanda*). The highest purpose of *rasa* is the reintegration and transformation of consciousness. The experience in itself becomes the knowledge of the self, which gives the delight. The latter is expressed by various *rasas* and manifests as opening (*vikāsa*), widening (*vistāra*) or ceasing (*drutī*) of consciousness (Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka). However, consciousness, as every other form of the matter, consisting of three *gunas* (*tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*) takes a *sattwic* quality. Thus the ninth *sthāyibhāva*, *tattvajñāna* (knowledge of the truth) turns into *śāntajñāna* (knowledge of silence). The *śānta* or silence was added by Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka and later Abhinavagupta argued for it, not only as the ninth *rasa*, but also as the main one, because it integrates the aesthetic experience of the other eight *rasas*. Indeed, “*śānta rasa* is to be known as that which arises from a desire to secure the liberation of the Self, which leads to a knowledge of the Truth, and is connected with the property of highest happiness.”<sup>15</sup> So the artwork

13. *The Dhvanyālokalocana of Abhinavagupta—The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with Locana of Abhinavagupta*. Ed. by J. Pāthak. Varanasi, 1965, pp. 39-40.

14. Masson, J. L. & Patwardhan, M. V. *Śāntarasa and Abhinavagupta’s Philosophy of Aesthetics*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969, p. 33.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 131.



in the fullness of its experience as *śānta rasa* leads to the liberation of the self (*mokṣa*), the most important among the four (the other three are *kāma*, *artha* and *dharma*) aims of life. The ideal of *mokṣa* suggests an attitude, that any work of art which does not serve this aim is not worthy of listening to or seeing. In our age of postmodernism, especially in the West, such an attitude seems to be paradoxical and even uncomfortable. But we can't take that as a similar ideal, the goal of the high art is a thing of the past: it is a frequent quest of a composer or an artist even today. Even more, *rasa* in the widest sense can't be considered to be exceptionally an "Indian" phenomenon. Hardly the emotional nature of an Indian differs from that of an Englishman or a Lithuanian; otherwise we would have the curious "racial aesthetic theory".

Summarising what has been said we can draw the conclusion that *rasa*, as an experience of plenitude, with a sense of unity, and immediate awareness, by its very nature is a universal aesthetic concept. The theory of *rasa* is one of the most powerful and integral modern living aesthetic theories, and it can be very helpful reintegrating and expanding the dimensions of Western aesthetics of the twenty-first century.

(Concluded)

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by

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