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The Embodied Epistemology of *Rasa*: Recentering Interoception and Sensory Cognition in Classical Indian Aesthetic Theory

By

Courtney Kain

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Preceptor: Dr. Victoria Gross

Abstract

This thesis argues that *rasa* theory, an Indian classical aesthetic framework describing both the distilled emotional "flavors" experienced by an audience and the performative process by which they are evoked, offers a robust and underrecognized model of embodied cognition. Through a combination of autoethnographic reflection, fieldwork with practitioners of *kūṭiyāṭṭam*—a Sanskrit theatre tradition in Kerala, India dating back to the 10th Century CE, textual analysis of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *The Dhvanyaloka of Anandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, foundational Sanskritic texts on dramaturgy and aesthetic philosophy, and interdisciplinary engagement with cognitive science, I examine *rasa* not as a metaphor for mood or emotion, but as a structured epistemological process. The project traces how performance traditions across India cultivate *rasa* through embodied discipline, somatic resonance, and aesthetic transmission, and demonstrates how these practices align with and often exceed contemporary theories of intersubjectivity, entrainment, and affective cognition. *Rasa* emerges as a method that insists on the centrality of bodymind processes in the construction of shared knowledge. By returning to the visceral moment of *rasa*, as both object and event, this thesis claims aesthetic experience as a legitimate and rigorous site of knowing.

1. Introduction

I first encountered *rasa* theory not in a classroom, but at an Indian buffet. While half-watching a film on the TV above, a song came on: *Tujhe Dekha Toh Yeh Jaana Sanam*, and I froze. As the melody swelled across the restaurant, my body reacted and my mind caught on fire. A sharp jolt of adrenaline shot through my chest, followed by a slow, electric bloom that spread through my arms and up the back of my neck. Goosebumps rose without warning. My pupils dilated. Yet even in the rush of sensation, there was a recognition that this was not accidental. Years of training as an artist, filmmaker, and psychology student attuned me to the precision of emotional craft: the poetry of the lyrics, the choreography of glances and close-up shots, the spark of the *jodi* (good match) between Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol and the microexpressions that transcended language. This wasn't chaos; it was orchestration. I knew, instinctively, that I was being guided through an emotional architecture so deliberate it could almost be mapped, even as the experience, unfolding in my body, remained utterly organic.

The physical language of my body told me that there was something deeper at work here. I sat, transfixed, for the next 90 minutes, long after the restaurant had closed. The owner, amused but kind, scribbled the title onto a scrap of paper: *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*. I went home, rewatched it, and fell down a rabbit hole of Bollywood soundtracks and emotional awakenings. What began as a fleeting obsession became a sensory initiation into something I didn't yet have words for, until I met *rasa*.

That moment was deeply cinematic—deliberately crafted, precisely timed, emotionally choreographed. But what startled me was how physical it felt. My body responded before my mind could catch up. But my mind, trained by years of studying mirror neurons, peak experiences, cognitive psychology and film, raced to track what was happening. I recognized, at least in part, that this was no accident: the glances, the expressions, the swelling of music and emotion were deliberately crafted to stir something within me. Yet the full shape of the experience escaped articulation, remaining visceral and intuitive until much later.

Long before I encountered Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the foundational Sanskrit treatise on performance and aesthetics, traditionally dated between 200 BCE and 200 CE, I had independently arrived at insights consistent with his codification: that emotion, sensation, and cognition are not isolated faculties, but dimensions of a catalyzed organic experience. In that moment, I didn't just feel the art; I recognized its intelligence through my body. This recognition was not a product of detached conscious analysis, but a somatic realization: an immediate, bodily understanding that the aesthetic experience had been meticulously orchestrated: the swelling of the music, the choreography of glances, the pacing of edits, the precise expressivity of the actors, captured so intentionally through close-up shots of their faces, all calibrated to guide the viewer's emotional response. My body wasn't reacting at random; it was responding to a deliberately constructed sensory sequence that closely parallels the structure Bharata lays out. Compared to certain mainstream Hollywood films, where performances often prioritize glossy, visual "perfection" at the expense of visceral emotional nuance, this was something else entirely.

What I lacked in theoretical vocabulary, I compensated for in sensory intuition, not just as a *rasika* (a perceptive audience member who experiences the emotional "flavors" of performance with full bodily and cognitive engagement), but as someone beginning to glimpse the logic behind the experience itself. I recognized, through my own body, the kind of sensory-cognitive integration that Bharata later formalized through dramatic performance. What Bharata codified in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* wasn't merely that performance can move people; it was the recognition that emotion itself could be systematized through embodied cues and structured experience. With remarkable precision, he mapped the mechanisms of aesthetic response in a way that anticipates psychology, anthropology, neurophysiology, and cognitive science. He wasn't just a theorist, he was an artist-observer, a philosopher of the body, and a builder of aesthetic epistemology.

The moment of somatic recognition is central to the argument I develop in this thesis. Drawing on an embodied phenomenological approach within cultural anthropology, I examine how *rasa* operates not merely as a conceptual framework, but as a lived, sensory-cognitive experience. Through interdisciplinary insights from aesthetic theory, cognitive science, and South Asian aesthetics, I seek to explore how *rasa* emerges at the intersection of sensation, emotion, and meaning.

2. *Rasa*'s Origins and Embodied Insight

2.1 Embodied Origins and Poetic Emergence

This phenomenon, where emotion, sensation, and meaning collapse into a single living experience, raises a deeper question: what is the nature of aesthetic emotion? Is *rasa*, as described in Indian aesthetic theory, fundamentally an embodied process?

According to the *Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, composed roughly between 500 BCE and 100 BCE by the sage-poet Valmiki and foundational to South Asian literary culture, the first Sanskrit *śloka*, and by extension the first instance of formal Indian poetry, arose from an act of raw, embodied grief.[1] Valmiki, upon witnessing the killing of a mating *krauñca* bird (Saurus crane) by a hunter, was overcome by grief so visceral that he spontaneously uttered a metered verse in lamentation. This moment, recorded in the *Bāla Kāṇḍa*, reveals a foundational insight: that art does not emerge from detached contemplation, but from the somatic metabolization of emotional experience into aesthetic form, what the text literalizes in the transformation of *śoka* (grief) into *śloka* (verse).[2]

Niels Hammer reads the crane episode in the *Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa* not simply as a poetic origin myth, but as a foundational instance of aesthetic empathy; a moment that illustrates *rasa*'s basis in affective consciousness and somatic resonance.[3]

In Sanskrit aesthetic theory, this affective dynamic is later codified as *karuṇarasa*; the aesthetic savoring of grief. Drawing on neuroscience and affect theory,

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[1] Valmiki, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India, Volume I: Bālakāṇḍa*, trans. Robert P. Goldman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).
[2] Ibid. 17.
[3] Niels Hammer, "Why Sārus Cranes Epitomize Karuṇarasa in the Rāmāyaṇa," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 19, no. 2 (March 11, 2009): 187–21.

Hammer argues that *karuṇarasa* emerges not from narrative alone, but from the spectator's embodied recognition of another's suffering, what he links to shared evolutionary structures of emotional perception across species. For Hammer, this scene does not metaphorize grief; it enacts the transformation of affect into aesthetic experience, offering an early model of *rasa* as a simultaneously universalizing and biologically grounded process.

What Hammer identifies in narrative and neurobiology, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* formalizes through performance logic: a transformation that moves from embodied emotional contagion, to somatic encoding, to aesthetic relishment. Grief holds a special place in both aesthetic theory and cognitive science because it simultaneously overwhelms the body, destabilizes cognitive structures, and demands symbolic reorganization.[4] It is not a passive feeling, but an active reworking of relational, bodily, and interpretive systems, making it a privileged site for the emergence of aesthetic experience.

Anandavardhana (c. 820 – 890 CE), a Kashmiri literary critic and court poet who wrote the *Dhvanyāloka* (Theory on Suggestion), deliberately employs a mirror analogy to define *sahṛdaya* as "those capable of identifying with the subject matter, '(because) the mirror of their hearts has been polished.'"[5] Likewise, neuroscientists have chosen the term mirror neurons to describe the structures and functions by which observing another being's suffering activates neural circuits associated with experiencing that suffering

[4] Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza* (2003); Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Eugen Wassiliwizky et al., "The Emotional Power of Poetry," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 12, no. 8 (2017): 1229–1240.
[5] Ānandavardhana. *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*. trans. and ed. by Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey M. Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1990), 70.

oneself [6]. In this model, emotional and physical states are transmitted through observation and sensorial experiencing, not merely cognition. Thus, contemporary neuroscience supports the insight encoded in the Valmiki origin myth: that profound emotional states are processed first in the body, and that symbolic articulation arises from somatic necessity.

Antonio Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis further supports this view, showing that bodily sensations, such as tightened chest, accelerated heartbeat, and tearful eyes, constitute pre-cognitive emotional markers that guide perception and meaning-making.[7] In the moment of grief, the body does not wait for thought; it organizes experience through feeling.

High-intensity emotional states often precipitate spontaneous symbolic articulation: speech, gesture, art. Valmiki's utterance of the first *śloka* can thus be understood not as deliberate composition, but as an embodied necessity: the transformation of felt grief into aesthetic form through immediate symbolic creation. This transformation is often cross-modal: the felt intensity of grief may spontaneously manifest through synesthetic blending of sensory modalities, producing metaphorical language that fuses bodily sensation with sound, rhythm, and imagery.[8]

In the case of Valmiki, the unbearable immediacy of grief did not simply linger as a personal sorrow; it catalyzed the spontaneous composition of the first *śloka,* an act that, according to tradition, marks the very birth of Sanskrit poetry itself. Through this

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[6] Giacomo Rizzolatti and Laila Craighero, "The Mirror-Neuron System," *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 27 (2004): 169–192.
[7] Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza* (2003); Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
[8] Eugen Wassiliwizky et al., "The Emotional Power of Poetry," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 12, no. 8 (2017): 1229–1240.

moment, raw somatic resonance was transformed into structured aesthetic experience, inaugurating the deep connection between embodied emotion and artistic creation.

Yet this moment was not merely the origin of a literary form: it models a deeper aesthetic process. The trajectory from sensory contagion to somatic encoding to metaphorical transformation narrativizes the genesis of *karuṇarasa*, wherein private grief becomes a shared, savored emotional experience that anticipates the logic later formalized as *rasa*.

2.2 Taste and Metaphor: The Cross-Modal Logic of *Rasa*

Defining *rasa* is deceptively simple and profoundly complex. While *rasa* is often translated as 'flavor', 'essence', 'aesthetic emotion', or 'aesthetic relishment," these terms vary in nuance. Of these, "flavor" and "aesthetic relishment," as discussed by V.K. Chari and rooted in Bharata's own descriptions, preserve *rasa*'s sensory and processorial dimensions. In contrast, the phrase 'aesthetic emotion' tends to imply a fixed emotional state experienced by a spectator, treating *rasa* as a static object. *Rasa*, however, can also be understood as an ongoing, generative process; an active participation in the unfolding, savoring, and transformation of emotion.[9] This process is deeply embodied, shared communally, and capable of producing profound insight, making *rasa* irreducible to mere sentiment or discrete affective states.

Understanding the sensory assumptions underlying this metaphor is crucial to appreciating how *rasa* operates as an embodied experience. While gustatory taste

[9] V. K. Chari, *Sanskrit Criticism: A Study of the Major Literary Theories* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1980) 10-12; Bharata, Nātyaśāstra, trans. Manomohan Ghosh (Calcutta: The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1950).

involves direct chemical interaction with the body, and sound or sight operate through mediated sensory capture, Indian aesthetic theory does not treat these senses as detached informational channels. Rather, it conceptualizes all perception as embodied and participatory. For example, *darśan*, the sacred act of seeing the deity, is understood not as passive observation but as a tactile encounter, where vision functions analogously to touch.[10] This model anticipates what contemporary cognitive science and phenomenology now affirm: perception is not disembodied data processing but a full-bodied sensory engagement with the world. In this light, *rasa*'s use of gustatory metaphor is not a poetic flourish, but a faithful reflection of a deeper epistemology, one that recognizes all aesthetic experience as a form of embodied savoring.The Sanskrit root itself (*ras),* meaning "to taste", immediately positions *rasa* as something both sensual and interpretive. However, many modern readings, particularly those influenced by Western literary or psychological frameworks, treat this as a poetic metaphor rather than a literal phenomenological clue.

Chari distinguishes two critical dimensions of *rasa*: immersive aesthetic relishment and classification of discrete emotional moods.[11] This dual framework not only clarifies *rasa*'s conceptual richness in Sanskrit criticism, but also opens up a productive analogy with the language of taste: just as taste involves the general act of savoring as well as the specific differentiation of individual flavors, so too does *rasa* encompass both a universal aesthetic engagement and the nuanced differentiation of emotional experiences. This framework also shapes how Chari engages with later interpretations of *rasa*, particularly Abhinavagupta's.

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[10] Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
[11] Chari, *Sanskrit Criticism,* 9-10.

Abhinavagupta (c. 950–1020 CE) was a Kashmiri aesthetician, philosopher, theologian, poet, musician and dramatist whose comprehensive commentaries and expansions on classical *rasa* theory profoundly shaped its understanding in later centuries. His *Abhinavabhāratī* emphasizes *rasa* as a transformative, embodied experience that transcends individual subjectivity, positioning it as a universal mode of aesthetic and spiritual knowledge.

V.K. Chari critiques Abhinavagupta for veering toward an overly metaphysical interpretation of *rasa*, particularly in linking aesthetic contemplation to transcendental self-awareness. One could suggest, however, that this movement is not metaphysical at all.

Rather, it follows natural pathways of perception and embodiment. As Chari notes in his discussion of *rasa-kavya*, "the poem arouses certain feelings in the reader because it is itself the concrete objectification of those feelings".[12] This concrete objectification is essential for understanding the gestalt structure of *rasa* experience: the aesthetic object does not merely symbolize emotion; it materializes emotion, allowing the reader/viewer/listener to directly encounter a shaped, living metaphor through sensory and cognitive integration.

This encounter, where metaphor becomes a literal, sensory event, suggests deeper cognitive mechanisms at work. Theories of embodied metaphor and even synesthesia hint at how sensory and emotional processes blur together to create meaning.[13]

While a full exploration lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the process of *rasa* production mirrors, in striking ways, the embodied stages of

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[12] Chari, *Sanskrit Criticism,* 12.
[13] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By.;* Ramachandran and Hubbard, *Synaesthesia.*

gustatory perception. In Bharata's framework, *rasa* arises not from arbitrary sensation, but through contextualized sensory and narrative stimuli (*vibhāvas*) that catalyze emotional response, layering bodily, emotional, and cognitive engagement into an integrated aesthetic experience. Both taste and *rasa* involve a progression from material contact to emotional and associative integration.

To make this progression more legible, the following chart illustrates key parallels between the gustatory and aesthetic processes described in Bharata's framework:

Table 1. Parallel Stages of Taste and *Rasa* Experience

Phase	**Taste (Gustatory Experience)**	**Aesthetic *Rasa* Experience**	**Sanskrit Aesthetic Correspondence**
Stimulus	Flavorful ingredients in the dish: salt, mango, chili, tamarind, etc	Sensory and narrative stimuli (characters, actions, sounds, environments, etc)	*Vibhāvas* (stimuli)
Contact	Molecules interact with tongue receptors	Immediate sensory-emotional response to the art (startle, tears, laughter)	*Sattvikabhāvas* (involuntary responses)
Categorization	Taste recognized as sweet, sour, bitter, salty, umami	Recognition of emotional flavor: love, horror, wonder, etc.	*Sthāyibhāva* (permanent emotion)
Deep Response	Associative emotions, memories, atmosphere emerge (comfort, nostalgia, disgust)	Full emotional immersion and aesthetic savoring: (*rasa* realization)	*Vyabhicāribhāvas* (transitory states) supporting *sthāyibhāva*

While the gustatory parallels help illuminate the embodied foundation of *rasa*, they do not fully explain how aesthetic emotion is built and sustained. To understand *rasa'*s layered emergence, we must examine Bharata's articulation of its emotional catalysts and structures.

At the foundation are the *vibhāvas* (contextualized sensory and narrative stimuli that catalyze emotional resonance). *Vibhāvas* include the characters, settings, costumes, actions, and situations that, when framed through performance, awaken emotional engagement in the spectator. These stimuli trigger a dynamic network of intended emotional responses, structured through three interlocking categories:

1. The six *sāttvika bhāvas* (involuntary physical reactions): *stambha* (paralysis), *pralaya* (fainting), *romāñca* (horripilation), *veda* (sweating), *vaivarṇya* (change of color), *vepathu* (trembling), *aśru* (weeping), and *vaisvarya* (change of voice).
2. The nine *sthāyibhāvas* ('durable' emotional states): *rati* (love/erotic delight), *hāsya* (laughter/joy), *karuṇa* (compassion/grief), *raudra* (anger), *vīra* (heroic/magnanimous), *bhayānaka* (fear), *bībhatsa* (disgust), *adbhuta* (wonder), and *śānta* (peace/tranquility).[14]
3. The thirty three *vyabhicāribhāva* or *sañcāribhāva* (transitory states) including but not limited to: *śrama* (weariness), *autsukya* (impatience), *mada* (intoxication), *īrṣyā* (jealousy), *alasatā* (idleness), and *viṣāda* (despair) which dynamically interact with *sthāyibhāvas* to generate *rasa* in performance.[15]

Just as the experience of flavor emerges from the careful interplay of diverse ingredients, some stable, some fleeting, some sharp, some subtle, so too does *rasa* arise

[14] *Śānta* was later added by Ānandavardhana and remains somewhat controversial, as it is absent from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. See Ānandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka*, 16.
[15] Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapters 6 and 7 go into great detail about what is entailed in each of these states.

through the layering, modulation, and deep savoring of these emotional textures.

Bharata provides numerous descriptions of these states in extensive detail. For example, he details that the comic sentiment (*hāsya*) is grounded in the dominant emotion of laughter, arising from causes such as unseemly dress, absurd speech, clumsy movement, or impropriety. It is expressed through physical markers, lip and cheek movement, widened or contracted eyes, changes in facial color, and accompanied by transient states like indolence or envy. Bharata classifies *hāsya* by both its object (self-directed or directed at others) and the social status of the performer, yielding six types: the slight smile (*smita*) and smile (*hasita*) for the superior type; gentle laughter (*vihasita*) and laughter of ridicule (*upahasita*) for the middling type; and vulgar laughter (*apahasita*) and excessive laughter (*atihasita*) for the inferior type, each with precise descriptions of facial expression, bodily movement, and appropriateness to occasion.[16]

Building on this bodily recognition, Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* offers a theoretical articulation of the same phenomenon. As Kathleen Higgins summarizes, Bharata describes sensitive spectators (*sumanas*) as savoring emotions much like savoring food: the emotional flavors crafted through *bhāvas* are consumed and enjoyed through an intricate layering of sensation, cognition, and aesthetic attunement. Just as gourmets appreciate the blending of multiple ingredients and spices, spectators relish the aesthetic realization of primary emotions presented through performance.[17] This metaphor is not ornamental; it reveals how *rasa* emerges through a dynamic, sensory-cognitive process that mirrors gustatory experience. Bharata's account is strikingly literal: *rasa* is not

[16]Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 8.
[17] Kathleen Marie Higgins, "An Alchemy of Emotion: Rasa and Aesthetic Breakthroughs," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 1 (2007): 43–54.

merely compared to taste, it is structured through the logic of gustatory experience itself.

Yet not every spectator automatically realizes *rasa*. Bharata describes the *rasika* not merely as a spectator, but as a sensitive taster of emotion: as someone whose perceptual, emotional, and cognitive faculties are finely attuned to savor the aesthetic experience in its fullest depth. Building on the concept of *rasa* as an organic, sensory process: a dynamic integration of material stimulus (*vibhāvas*), involuntary response (*sāttvika bhāvas*), and conscious emotional recognition (*sthāyi bhāvas*), culminating in the savoring of aesthetic flavor.

Bharata's *rasa* theory emerges from a remarkably detailed attentiveness to bodily sensation, emotional expression, and shared affective response. He constructs a method for analyzing performance as a relational process, from both the performer's body and the audience's perception. This system, an early model of embodied cognition, is built on what might be called *reflexive intuition*: an embodied awareness cultivated through observation, repetition, and lived attention. It is not instinct, it is not abstract, and it is not guesswork. It is the kind of intuitive knowledge that emerges from sustained bodily practice, one that reads sensation as information.

Furthermore, Bharata describes the ideal *rasika* not as an elitist connoisseur, but as a sensitive participant (*sahṛdaya*) capable of emotional and aesthetic savoring, and likens the primed spectator to dry wood, fully prepared to become engulfed with the flame of *rasa*.[18] Certain traits may make a spectator more receptive to *rasa*: emotional sensitivity, openness to feeling, imaginative engagement, empathetic

[18] Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 7, 120.

resonance, focused attention, and a degree of emotional refinement. Familiarity with dramatic conventions, such as knowledge of poetry, music, or performance structures, may enhance the experience, but is not a prerequisite. What matters most is the *rasika*'s capacity to surrender into the aesthetic flow: to allow bodily sensation, emotional nuance, and cognitive savoring to unfold into an integrated experience. In this sense, *rasa* remains accessible to any spectator whose perceptual and emotional faculties are attuned, regardless of education, social standing, or technical expertise. In fact, Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* explicitly takes an egalitarian view of audience reception, recognizing that spectators differ widely in taste, temperament, and life experience. The text explicitly notes that young people may prefer depictions of love, the learned enjoy references to philosophy, the wealth-seekers delight in material themes, and common folk respond to comic sentiment or visual spectacle. Rather than privileging one form of appreciation over another, Bharata models drama as serving multiple levels of engagement, from superficial enjoyment to profound aesthetic resonance. Later critics, by contrast, often elevated the judgments of the educated or culturally refined, implicitly ranking certain spectators, and certain forms of pleasure, above others. Bharata's approach asserts that even the "average" audience contributes decisively to the success of performance, emphasizing that aesthetic value is co-constructed rather than dictated from above.[19]

This sensitivity manifests not only in cultivated appreciation, such as the "Vah!" exclamation and appreciative hand gestures and head bobbles of Indian classical music

[19] Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 49-50.

audiences, but also in more universal, visceral reactions: the startled leap during a horror film, the laughter that ripples through a theater, the tears that rise during a poignant story. In each case, the spectator's bodymind does not merely observe; it responds, absorbs, and savors the layered emotional textures offered through performance.

2.3 Misreadings and Reductions: From Mood to Metaphor

However, a majority of modern interpretations of *rasa* theory, particularly those influenced by Western literary and psychological frameworks, risk misreading this embodied openness as a marker of formal education or elite refinement. In doing so, they flatten Bharata's intricate model of emotional, sensory, and cognitive resonance into a passive aesthetic sentiment or mood, obscuring the fundamentally organic, participatory process he describes. Yet the evolution of *rasa* theory did not remain confined to Bharata's original embodied model. Later thinkers, such as Abhinavagupta, expanded *rasa* into new philosophical territories, a move that has provoked both admiration and critique.

While V. K. Chari's twofold framework clarifies much of *rasa*'s conceptual richness, he critiques later interpretations, particularly Abhinavagupta's, for over-abstracting *rasa* into metaphysical contemplation.[20] In his *Locana* (The Eye/Sight) commentary on Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka*, Abhinavagupta emphasizes the transcendental realization of aesthetic experience, suggesting that *rasa* ultimately culminates in a non-dual awareness of the self.[21] While this interpretation risks severing

[20] Chari, *Sanskrit Criticism,* 10.
[21] Ānandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka,* 116-118.

rasa from its sensory-emotional roots, I argue that such deepening need not be seen as a departure from embodiment. Rather, reflective awareness can intensify the embodied savoring process Bharata originally described, revealing *rasa* as an integrated emotional-cognitive realization rather than a purely metaphysical abstraction. *Rasa* is not a flight from the body into spirit; it is an intensification of sensory-cognitive integration.

Contemporary research in cognitive science increasingly recognizes that cognition is not confined to abstract mental processes, but is fundamentally grounded in sensory, emotional, and bodily experience. Scholars such as Damasio, Lakoff and Gallese, and Ramachandran and Hubbard, have demonstrated that sensation and emotion are integral to the construction of meaning, not peripheral to it.[22] In this light, Bharata's *rasa* theory can be understood as an early, sophisticated articulation of embodied cognition, mapping the inseparable progression from sensory contact to emotional savoring to cognitive realization.

In recent decades, scholars across disciplines have sought to reinterpret *rasa* theory through contemporary frameworks, ranging from literary studies to cognitive science. Despite increasingly sophisticated models of embodied cognition, many modern interpretations of *rasa* continue to flatten it into classifications of mood, sentiment, or emotional scripts. Some cognitive science approaches, such as Patrick Hogan's reinterpretation of *rasa* and *dhvani* (implied meaning or suggestion) in terms of prototype activation and default emotional assumptions, attempt to explain aesthetic experience

[22] Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*; Vittorio Gallese and George Lakoff, "The Brain's Concepts: The Role of the Sensory-Motor System in Conceptual Knowledge," *Cognitive Neuropsychology* 22, no. 3–4 (2005): 455–479; Vilayanur S. Ramachandran and Edward M. Hubbard, "Synaesthesia? A Window Into Perception, Thought and Language," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8, no. 12 (December 1, 2001): 3–34.

through familiar cognitive mechanisms.[2324] While this framework highlights the psychological complexity of *rasa*, it risks obscuring the dynamic, participatory savoring that Bharata and Abhinavagupta emphasize. *Rasa*, in its classical formulation, is not merely the activation of a familiar emotional template but a transformative, embodied realization, a temporary dissolution of ego-bound awareness through aesthetic emotion. To understand *rasa* fully requires attending to its sensory, emotional, and cognitive integration, not reducing it to a scripted emotional reaction.

Other scholars, such as Arindam Chakrabarti, attempt to reclaim *rasa*'s materiality by emphasizing the Sanskrit term's wide semantic range: fluid, sap, taste, essence, alchemical agent, and even poison.[25] Each of these connotations frames *rasa* not as a disembodied idea but as a dynamic, transformative substance, living, volatile, metabolized through the bodymind.[26] Chakrabarti thus gestures toward a reading of *rasa* that is fundamentally somatic, although he stops short of fully identifying *rasa* as a theory of embodied cognition.

Kathleen Higgins similarly acknowledges the gustatory resonance of *rasa*, noting

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[23] Patrick Colm Hogan, "Toward a Cognitive Science of Poetics: Ānandavardhana, Abhinavagupta, and the Theory of Literature," *College Literature* 23, no. 1 (1996): 164–78.

[24] While commonly translated as 'suggestion,' *dhvani* might be more accurately understood as aesthetic resonance: an affective reverberation that enables *rasa* to emerge not through explicit meaning but through atmospheres of sense. See Ānandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka*; Edwin Gerow, "Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics. By Sheldon Pollock," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 137, no. 1 (June 9, 2017).

[25] Higgins, "An Alchemy of Emotion", 45; *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, directed by Aditya Chopra (Mumbai: Yash Raj Films, 1995), Hindi film. The lyrics of the song *Ruk Ja O Dil Deewane* include the line: /*Ladki hai ya hai jaadu; khushboo hai ya nashaa*/ (Is she a girl or magic; is she a fragrance or intoxication?), highlighting the destabilizing, almost synesthetic effect of the beloved, described in terms reminiscent of *rasa*, on the physical, emotional, and cognitive states of the lover. He is overcome by *dard-e-dil*, the heartache of love, a storm of sensation and affect. Notably, *nashā* is often translated in subtitles as "poison," though it more accurately connotes "intoxication," euphoria, or a trance-like altered state, suggesting the beloved's power to overwhelm perception rather than to solely cause harm. This semantic ambiguity mirrors the multivalent Sanskrit term *rasa*, which, as Arindam Chakrabarti notes, can mean taste, sap, essence, alchemical agent, or even poison, underscoring its material and affective potency.

[26] Higgins, "An Alchemy of Emotion", 45.

its parallels with the Western aesthetic concept of "taste."[27] Yet even Higgins ultimately frames *rasa* as a poetic resemblance to taste, rather than fully embracing its literal sensory-cognitive complexity.

This flattening is particularly visible in attempts to systematize *rasa* through psychological frameworks, such as Watave's definition of *rasa* as "the pleasant and total emotional response of a sympathetic reader" to the expression of intense emotions, a framing he himself discards in favor of a sterile notion of mere "response."[28] Such codifications fracture Bharata's integrated model of sensory stimulation, emotional contagion, cognitive recognition, and aesthetic savoring into isolated, disjointed components, undermining the holistic, embodied nature of *rasa* experience.

This tendency to separate sensory and emotional domains remains even in more recent discussions. Adrian McNeil, in his exploration of musical metaphors, *Hindustani Musicians Make Great Cooks*, compiles numerous examples of how Hindustani musicians describe their work through gustatory metaphors, yet he ultimately hedges these insights, treating them as culturally interesting but scientifically unverifiable.[29] Although McNeil acknowledges that *rasa* ranges from emotional to physical experiences, describing it as "an aesthetic experience which… ranges from purely emotional sensation, viz., sentiment, pleasure, enjoyment, to a physical one, viz., taste or flavor"[30], he retains a subtle division between sensory and emotional realms. This bifurcation misunderstands the fundamental structure of *rasa*: the sensory and the

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[27] Ibid.
[28] K. N. Watave and K. N. Watawe, "The Psychology of the Rasa-Theory," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 23, no. 1/4 (1942): 669–677.
[29] Adrian McNeil. 2004. "Hindustani Musicians Make Great Cooks." *Asian Music* 35 (2): 69.
[30] ibid, 73.

emotional are not separate domains but continuous aspects of a single embodied process. Yet even within McNeil's documentation, the gustatory metaphors employed by Hindustani musicians themselves vividly reflect an embodied understanding of aesthetic experience.

The gustatory metaphors are not mere comparison. They serve as crucial epistemological tools, rather than merely colorful analogies, evidence that *rasa* was always understood as an embodied phenomenon. Food provides a framework for *rasa* not because it is poetically pleasing, but because it models the exact sensory-cognitive layering that *rasa* theory describes.

McNeil's examples illustrate this vividly: in *Raag Madhuvanti*, musicians describe the *purvang* as *chatpata* (tangy) and the *uttarang* as "smooth and sweet," likening their proportion to a samosa with chutney; a combination instantly, holistically understood, bypassing the need for technical terminology. These metaphors function not merely as poetic comparisons, but as integral parts of a literal, synesthetic, embodied process in which bodily sensations are mapped directly onto emotional and cognitive experience. When Ashok Roy advises a student to imagine the taste of *karela* (bitter gourd) while navigating the microtonal contours of *Raag Puriya Dhanashri*, he is not invoking metaphor as a detached cognitive comparison, but triggering a cross-sensory alignment: the sharp bitterness of *karela* becomes an embodied guide to the emotive quality of the *rāga*. Such examples reveal that metaphor, rather than being a purely abstract or linguistic device, operates as a physiological and sensory-cognitive process*;* a form of embodied metaphor and cross-modal perception recognized in contemporary cognitive science.

Cross-modal perception, now well established within cognitive science, refers to the brain's natural ability to integrate information from different sensory channels; taste, sound, sight, emotion, into unified experiences.[31] Embodied metaphor emerges from this sensory integration: bodily experiences become scaffolds for understanding abstract emotional or conceptual states.[32] Theories of embodied emotion similarly emphasize that bodily feelings provide the primary scaffolding for cognitive and emotional meaning.[33] This cross-sensory integration forms the foundation of aesthetic savoring.

These modern attempts reveal the embodied richness of *rasa* but are incomplete in that they do not directly address *rasa* at all. But the tools to understand *rasa* as a cognitive-aesthetic process have been with us all along, in the classical commentaries themselves.

Abhinavagupta did not merely summarize Bharata; he transformed *rasa* into a philosophy of self-realization through aesthetic savoring. In his *Locana* commentary on Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka*, he presents *rasa* not as fleeting emotion, but as a mode of embodied insight.

Central to Abhinavagupta's interpretation is the idea that the experience of *rasa* culminates in a heightened mode of consciousness. When a *sahṛdaya* (sensitive participant) fully engages with a performance, they are not merely feeling discrete emotions; they are momentarily released from the usual constraints of ego-bound

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[31] Gemma A. Calvert, Charles Spence, and Barry E. Stein, eds., *The Handbook of Multisensory Processes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).; Barry E. Stein and M. Alex Meredith, *The Merging of the Senses* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).
[32] Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
[33] Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*.

perception. The emotions crafted on stage, love, grief, wonder, are not apprehended as personal possessions but as universalized experiences through a process known as *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*, allowing the spectator to transcend the ordinary self.

For Abhinavagupta, this transcendence is not an abandonment of the body, but a deepening of embodied awareness: a savoring that leads to a temporary but profound recognition of experience itself as a universal flow, free from egoic clinging yet saturated with sensory-emotional resonance, imbued with a sense of astonished wonder. This flash of awareness is called *camatkāra*. Related to the Hindi word *camatkār,* meaning miracle, it is a sudden, embodied astonishment that arises not from supernatural rupture, but from a felt coherence so vivid it reorganizes perception and reveals the body as the site of magic itself, creating the real, overwhelming clarity that comes when sensation, emotion, and meaning briefly lock into place.[34]

Camatkāra and *dhvani* are ubiquitously defined throughout translations in the abstract with terms such as, "suggestion," "flash of insight," "aesthetic delight." But these words carry a kind of affective voltage which cannot be fully encompassed by the abstract: *dhvani* is vibration, resonance, and sound of voice or musical instrument.[35] *Camatkāra* (astonishment or wonder) occurs through *parisphurati*- the root of which (*sphur*) denotes throbbing, quivering, and tremors.[36] These are not passive metaphors; they gesture toward the immediacy of embodied experience, not detached reflection. The *Dhvanyaloka* and *rasa* were

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[34] Interestingly, *chamatkar* is also described as an onomatopoeic word used to describe the automatic reaction to eating 'something snappy' providing another gustatory metaphor for the *rasa* experience, See Raniero Gnoli, *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta*, (1970) 5.
[35] Vaman Shivaram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, rev. and enl. ed. (Poona: Prasad Prakashan, 1957–1959), 781.
[36] Ibid. 697, 1730-1731.

not so named because sound and taste are loosely representative of the sudden realization and the savoring, but rather because the process of hearing and tasting share similar sensorial pathways from the *vibhāvas* (material stimuli) through the means of the *sāttvika bhāvas* (involuntary responses), to the conscious emotional recognition (*sthāyi bhāvas*).

Audience members often report a variety of physical sensations such as aesthetic chills, shock waves, vibrating, and expansion, as well as widening eyes and stunned facial expressions.[37] Bharata provides us with a *sloka*: The state proceeding (*bhava*) from the (*vibhava*) which is congenial to the heart is the source of the (*rasa*) and it pervades the body just as fire spreads over the dry wood.[38] To interpret terms like *camatkāra*, *dhvani,* and *rasāsvāda* without attending to their sensory force is to miss the point that these are the means through which aesthetic appreciation is made manifest.

While the term *rasāsvāda* is not found in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the philosophical stance it names, a theory of embodied knowing through affect, can be traced directly to his system.[39] Bharata's model of *rasa* is already epistemological: it describes the emergence of structured feeling that makes sense not despite the body, but through it. *Rasa* was never merely a mood; it was always a form of physiological insight.

2.4 Resonance, Persistence, and Spinozan Cognition

[37] This may include utterances of surprise and delight such as "vah!" so commonly heard during moments of excellence in a performance. During fieldwork with *kūṭiyāṭṭam* performers, I noticed their fondest comic imitation of American audiences: the emphatic "wow!" no doubt honed by hearing it constantly from their observers.
[38] Bharata*, Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 7, 120.
[39] Chari, *Sanskrit Criticism,* 9.

Some popular psychological models echo this epistemic reading of *rasa*. Abhinavagupta's model of aesthetic experience closely parallels what thinkers like Maslow and Csikszentmihalyi describe as "peak experience" or "flow state" respectively, moments of heightened awareness produced by intense emotional and sensory engagement.[40] In all cases, the dissolution of ego boundaries culminates transcendence through immersion, a fully embodied state of clarity and presence.[41]

Virosh Singh Baghel refers to this transformation as *aesthetic subjectivation*, suggesting that a new subject briefly emerges through aesthetic absorption, a framing that appears to bracket the bodily dimensions of the experience.[42] Having experienced *rasa*, I do not recognize the moment as one in which the self disappears or is replaced. Rather, it feels like the same self, but differently modulated: less defended, more porous, more attuned. It is not a rupture in identity but an amplification of aesthetic receptivity and interconnectedness. To describe this as a new self is to miss the subtlety of the experience: its continuity, its resonance, its rootedness in a bodymind that is not annihilated, but briefly illuminated. Aesthetic experience, in this view, does not produce a different self; it renders the social and cognitive walls that construct identity permeable through intentional manipulation of the senses, revealing a mode of selfhood grounded in presence rather than narrative.

Historically, many aesthetic theories, particularly within Western traditions, have framed emotion and bodily sensation as forces to be controlled, transcended, or

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[40] Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964); Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).
[41] To frame such comparisons as anachronistic is to misunderstand the universality of embodied experience. The dissolution of ego in aesthetic immersion isn't culturally exclusive, it is something that, with few exceptions, almost anyone with a healthy nervous system can experience.
[42] Virosh Singh Baghel, "Theorising the Idea of Aesthetic Self in Abhinavagupta," *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities* 4, no. 4 (2024): 26–29.

purified. Aristotle's theory of catharsis, for example, suggests that the function of tragedy is to evoke pity and fear in order to purge these disruptive emotions, restoring rational balance to the soul. While catharsis acknowledges the power of emotional engagement, it ultimately treats emotion as something to be *cleansed* rather than *savored*; a necessary disturbance, but not a mode of insight.

In contrast, Bharata's *rasa* theory, and its philosophical deepening by Abhinavagupta, offers a radically different model. Rather than seeing emotion as something to be purged, Bharata frames aesthetic experience as the structured savoring of emotional and sensory textures. Sensation, emotion, and cognition are not obstacles to aesthetic realization; they are its essential ingredients. The spectator does not overcome bodily feeling to reach understanding, but savors bodily feeling as a mode of understanding.

This perspective resonates with phenomenological theories of perception, especially those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he challenges the Cartesian model of detached cognition, proposing instead that perception is an embodied, active engagement with the world.[43] The body is not a passive container for the mind, but a living ground of meaning. We do not "think" the world from a distance; we inhabit it through sensation and affect.

Bharata's *rasa* theory anticipates this insight with striking clarity. Aesthetic meaning does not arise despite the body's sensations, nor does it require their purification. It arises *through* them: through the dynamic interplay of sensory stimulus

[43] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012).

(*vibhāva*), involuntary physiological response (*sāttvika bhāva*), dominant emotional mood (*sthāyi bhāva*), and transitory emotional shading (*vyabhicāri bhāva*). *Rasa* emerges as an embodied savoring of emotional textures, a convergence of sensation, emotional resonance, and cognitive realization into a unified act of perception.

Philosophical traditions derived from Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes have often treated emotion as suspect, separate from the body and subordinate to reason. Bharata and Abhinavagupta articulate an aesthetic cognition that is fundamentally non-dualistic: a mode of knowing that arises not through transcendence of the body, but through its full and skillful engagement. In contrast to frameworks that seek to master or suppress emotion, *rasa* theory cultivates it as something to be structured, transmitted, and understood, emerging not from conceptual abstraction, but through taste, rhythm, gesture, and breath.

While Bharata's aesthetic theory and Abhinavagupta's philosophical elaborations offer a vision of embodied emotional cognition centuries ahead of their time, they are not without broader philosophical kin. Outside the South Asian tradition, Baruch Spinoza emerges as a striking parallel. Writing in 17th-century Europe, Spinoza rejected the Cartesian split between mind and body, insisting that thought and feeling are not separate substances but two aspects of the same lived reality. In Spinoza's model, the body is not a mechanical vessel for a rational soul; it is itself an expressive, striving entity (*conatus*) whose emotional states (*affectus*) are integral to its power of understanding and persistence.

For Spinoza, *conatus*, the striving of each being to persist in its own being, is the foundation of all activity, emotion, and thought.[36] Emotional states are not irrational

distractions but structured expressions of the body's ongoing efforts to organize itself, to survive, and to thrive. Knowledge itself emerges through the refinement of these affects: as emotions are understood, clarified, and integrated, they become what Spinoza calls "adequate ideas": cognitive structures that reflect a deeper, more coherent understanding of both the self and the world.[44]

This vision resonates profoundly with the structure of *rasa*. *Rasa* is not the raw discharge of emotional energy, nor the passive reception of artistic forms, nor the becoming of another self. It is the embodied savoring of emotional textures as they are shaped, layered, and organized into meaning. In Bharata's theory, the chaotic intensity of *sāttvika* and *vyabhicāri bhāvas* is stabilized and deepened by the *sthāyi bhāva*, producing an experience that is not just emotional, but epistemic, communal, and purposeful.

Significantly, neither Bharata nor Spinoza required experimental neuroscience to intuit this embodied structure of knowing, constructing their philosophies from the bottom up through rigorous attention to lived experience, both recognized that sensation, emotion, and cognition are not sequential stages or opposing forces, but interwoven dimensions of human being. While the exact mechanisms through which these processes operate exceed the scope of this project, it is clear that they occur and can be apprehended through disciplined, lived experience.

Contemporary neuroscience offers one lens on these phenomena, but the epistemic richness of *rasa* and embodied cognition lies precisely in the ways these traditions recognized and cultivated them long before such scientific frameworks

[44] Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), *Ethics III*, 6.

existed.[45] Antonio Damasio's research in *Looking for Spinoza* reveals that emotion, the body's felt engagement with the world, is not peripheral to reason but its very condition. His clinical work demonstrates that when emotional feeling is disrupted, coherent cognition collapses: without the body's affective grounding, the mind loses its ability to navigate meaningfully. Damasio's findings do not simply validate Bharata's and Spinoza's models; they belatedly recognize what was long visible to those willing to take the body's intelligence seriously. In this light, *rasa* stands not only as an aesthetic achievement but as a radical epistemology: a living demonstration that knowing arises through the organization, savoring, and refinement of embodied emotional textures. The *rasika*, like the Spinozist sage, does not retreat from the body to think; they think because they have entered the body's knowing.

3. *Rasa* and the limits of Rational Aesthetic Theory

3.1 From Detachment to Disembodiment: Critiquing Kant and Spinoza

While *Rasa* theory offers a deeply embodied, culturally attuned, and affectively saturated model of aesthetic experience; aesthetic frameworks which derive from the Platonic and Cartesian dualistic split of the body and soul begin from the opposite premise: that the feeling body is inferior and must be bracketed, and that universality emerges through detachment. Through this approach, the origin of philosophical thought begins necessarily through abstract ideation. *Rasa* theory, in stark contrast, is grounded in the systematic observation and articulation

[45] Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 150.; Gallese and Lakoff, "The Brain's Concepts: The Role of the Sensory-Motor System in Conceptual Knowledge."

of organically unfolding processes that begin in the senses and culminate in an experience of infinite truth. Rather than starting from abstract detachment, it traces aesthetic experience as a dynamic, embodied journey toward universal insight.

To understand what *rasa* enables, and what it resists, it is necessary to examine the limits of these frameworks. In particular, Immanuel Kant and Baruch Spinoza, two influential thinkers on beauty, emotion, and cognition, offer contrasting but instructive models. Each articulates a vision of emotional knowledge, but both ultimately fall just short of the embodied, participatory, and performative depth that *rasa* theory offers.

Kant's aesthetic theories, across both his early *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* and the later *Critique of Judgment*, offer a vision of beauty that is explicitly disembodied, hierarchical, and gendered. For instance, in *Observations*, Kant repeatedly codes emotional sensitivity, charm, and sensory pleasure as feminine, declaring that "the man is sublime, the woman beautiful," and warning that emotional refinement in women must avoid "laborious learning or painful pondering" lest it diminish their grace.[46]

Pleasure rooted in sensory attraction or contextual meaning is coded as "agreeable": private, impure, and unsophisticated in that it lacks, for him, the crucial element of reason. "Pure", Kant's category of the sublime, is marked by both joy and melancholic awe and seriousness, reserved for masculine moral strength and rational self-awareness. This hierarchy and codification of aesthetic experience stands in opposition to *rasa* theory, which treats the full spectrum of emotions; grief, wonder,

[46] *Immanuel Kant, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 76-87.

love, terror; not only as equivalently valuable aesthetic states, but powerful pathways to embodied knowledge.[47] Abhinavagupta emphasizes that aesthetic pleasure uniquely combines vividness and joy, unlike mundane personal pleasures or "dry" spiritual pleasures, which provide only one of these qualities, respectively.[48]

While both Kant and Abhinavagupta speak of "detachment" in aesthetic experience, they mean profoundly different things. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant constructs a systematic aesthetic framework but maintains that pure aesthetic judgment must be "disinterested", requiring the subject to transcend desire and bodily investment to the realm of the purely cognitive. He insists that aesthetic judgment is only pure when it is purified of interest, utility, or emotional attachment in order to claim universal validity.[49] This leads to an aesthetic ideal that is abstract, universal, and necessarily minimizes the role of the body and physical sensation to an unexplored catalyst for higher cognitive pleasure.

Like Kant, Abhinavagupta's conceptualization of *rasa* theory describes a kind of detachment: not the exclusion of sensation and emotion, but the suspension of personal ownership over it. The *sahṛdaya* does not transcend affect, they *savor* it. *Rasa* is not felt as "my" grief, love, or wonder, but as a distilled, universalized emotion, but it remains deeply embodied and affectively saturated, yet freed from egoic clinging. Where Kant's disinterestedness denies the body in pursuit of rational purity, *rasa* theory achieves clarity through embodied resonance, emotional attunement, and shared savoring.

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[47] *Srngärarasa* (erotic love) is a notable exception, often granted greater significance because of the rich and diverse range of emotions it encompasses. See: Anandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka*, 18.
[48] Saurabh Todariya, Shankar Rajaraman, and Sangeetha Menon, "Aesthetic Delight and Beauty: A Comparison of Kant's Aesthetics and Abhinavagupta's Theory of *Rasa*," *Journal of Dharma Studies* 5, no. 1 (April 2022): 1–12.
[49] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 45-50.

Kant's brief and dismissive view of embodiment stands in stark opposition to *rasa* theory, where the spectator's bodily responses: goosebumps, laughter, tears, rhythmic entrainment (the body's unconscious synchronization with external rhythms such as music, movement, or breath), are not obstacles to aesthetic understanding, but its *very condition*. Where Kant's universality depends on abstraction from the body, *rasa* affirms that aesthetic experience is somatic, culturally embedded, and no less capable of reaching shared emotional truths. Rather than demanding distance, *rasa* insists that knowing arises through proximity, resonance, and the cultivation of embodied understanding.

Spinoza's *Ethics* offers a model of affective transformation that, while often framed as rationalist, shares a deep structural resonance with *rasa* theory. His final vision, *amor dei intellectualis* (the intellectual love of God), describes a joy that arises not from possession, moral triumph, or sensory delight, but from the clear, ego-transcending recognition of all things as expressions of one divine, immanent substance.[50] This joy is disinterested (in social trappings), universal, and emotionally saturated, bearing a striking resemblance to Abhinavagupta's account of *rasa* realization: a state in which emotion is universalized, ego boundaries dissolve, and aesthetic awareness becomes glimpse into infinity.[51]

Yet Spinoza never develops a theory of aesthetic experience itself. He does not describe the arts, performance, or sensory cultivation as meaningful pathways to this state. For all his brilliance, he offers no analog to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, no

[50] Spinoza, *Ethics*, V, Props. 32-36.
[51] Ānandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka*, 118.

dramaturgical map through which the body, breath, or senses might be trained trained to sharpen feeling into knowing. His joy remains cerebral, reached through geometric clarity and rigorous logic, never through song, movement, or metaphor. This absence marks the limit of his otherwise radical affect theory.

3.2 Toward Participation: *Rasa* as Embodied Epistemology

Bharata and Ananda do not merely describe the outcome of embodied joy, they build the machinery for its cultivation. *Rasa* is not only a state or an object; it is a process, and that process includes the body as both tool and terrain. Interpreting *rasa* as an embodied, co-produced process, destabilizes the subject-object divide that underpins much of Western aesthetic theory. Where many frameworks define aesthetic response as disinterested contemplation (as in Kant) or symbolic interpretation, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* tradition, especially as elaborated by Abhinavagupta, offers a view of aesthetic experience as participatory and affective through mechanisms such as *tanmayībhāvana* (the aesthetic identification with a character's emotional state). The *rasika* does not remain distant or observational, but becomes somatically attuned to the unfolding affective field.

According to the Dhvanyaloka, *rasa* emerges when the artist is able to present the *bhava* in a manner that heightens the universal qualities of emotional experience and allows them to be received.[52] The audience, upon being struck by

[52] Ānandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka*, 36.

these emotions, enter a state of aesthetic absorption that can culminate in bliss, (*ānanda*) described as 'expansion, melting, and radiance', a deeply psychosomatic event wherein emotional recognition becomes corporeally lived through somatic intensification.[53]

This structure of affective mirroring closely resembles what contemporary neuroscience describes as embodied simulation. Mirror neuron research shows that observing emotional expression or physical movement activates the same neural circuits as performing it oneself.[54] In this sense, the Dhvanyaloka's account of the internal mirroring of emotion by the *rasika* is not merely a metaphysical theory and not just a poetic metaphor, but an early articulation of affective cognition. The *rasika* does not interpret emotion from a distance; they somatically simulate it as part of a shared aesthetic field.

While this section focuses on live performance, the affective logic of *rasa* is not confined to the stage. *Rasa* operates across a range of aesthetic forms, including poetry and visual art, where emotional resonance is shaped variously through timing, form, and embodied perception. The same dynamics of intercorporeal recognition and affective absorption apply wherever the spectator's body becomes a site of emotional cognition and shared aesthetic experience.

Although Ananda's account is often read as metaphysical or mystical, reframing *rasa* as a bodily and intersubjective process does not diminish its intensity, it makes its effects legible in lived, material terms. In this embodied

[53] Ibid. 221-222.
[54] Rizzolatti and Craighero, "Mirror-Neuron System".

framework, *rasa* does not reside in the performer or the audience alone, but in the affective circuit formed between them.

Performance becomes a site of intercorporeal resonance, where trained movements, facial expressions, vocal modulations, and rhythmic patterns trigger mirror responses in the observer's nervous system, what contemporary cognitive science describes as embodied simulation or affective entrainment.[55] These models of intercorporeal resonance support a non-metaphorical reading of *rasa* as distributed, embodied cognition. The audience's aesthetic absorption is thus not just an act of interpretation but of somatic participation. They feel *rasa* not metaphorically, but in the body through breath, skin, musculature, and viscera. This materially grounded reading reaffirms Abhinavagupta's emphasis on *rasa* as a transformative state of awareness while anchoring it in contemporary, secular language of embodied cognition, without resorting to reductive explanations or dismissing its affective power as woo.

4. The Performance Pedagogy of Rasa

4.1 Preparing the Bodymind

The cultivation of *rasa* in classical Indian performance is not a spontaneous act of inspiration, it is the result of a precise, culturally refined, and intergenerationally transmitted

[55] Gallese, "Embodied Simulation,", David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11, no. 5 (2007): 197–203.; Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999).

system of training that operates on the body, the breath, and the nervous system. This section introduces the concept of what I call *vernacular neuroscience* to describe these systems of embodied knowledge.[56] These systems do not rely on instrumentation or formal scientific models, yet they reflect a deeply empirical, practice-based understanding of how affect is cultivated, transmitted, and shared through the body.[57]

Practices such as early morning training, the use of semi-squat postures, prolonged muscle isolation, and the disciplined control of facial expression are not ritualistic residues; they are deliberate interventions into the body's affective and expressive capacities. They reflect a vernacular understanding of proprioception, arousal modulation, attention, and expressive legibility; insights that closely parallel recent findings in affective neuroscience, embodied cognition, and performance psychology.

For example, brain research on dancers has shown that dancers exhibit superior integration of local proprioceptive signals compared to non-dancers and rely more heavily on proprioceptive input even when both proprioceptive and visual information about hand position are available.[58] The enhanced proprioceptive integration indicates that dancers develop a heightened bodily awareness and internal sensing ability, allowing them to precisely control and adapt their movements. This supports the idea that their training reshapes how the brain processes sensory information, enabling

[56] By *vernacular neuroscience*, I mean traditional, practice-based knowledge systems that understand and shape cognitive and affective states through embodied methods. These systems may not use scientific language or instruments, but they reflect deep experiential insight into attention, emotion, interoception, and physiological learning.

[57] A. D. Craig, "How Do You Feel? Interoception: The Sense of the Physiological Condition of the Body," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 3, no. 8 (2002): 655–66.; Wolf E. Mehling et al., "The Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (MAIA)," *PLOS ONE* 7, no. 11 (2012); Peter Payne, Peter A. Levine, and Mardi A. Crane-Godreau, "Somatic Experiencing: Using Interoception and Proprioception as Core Elements of Trauma Therapy," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015): 93.

[58] Corinne Jola, Beatriz Davis, and Peter Haggard, "Proprioceptive Integration and Body Representation: Insights into Dancers' Expertise," *Experimental Brain Research* 213, no. 2–3 (2011): 257–65.

refined motor control and expressive subtlety, key to their artistic and affective performance.

In what follows, I examine how training in time, posture, expression, and muscle precision enables the body to become an instrument for *rasa*. This section traces how *rasa* is not merely performed but physically constructed through structures of embodied time, repetition, and interoceptive refinement.

Across South Indian performance traditions, rigorous training often begins in the pre-dawn hours, usually between 3:00 AM to 5:30 AM. Practitioners describe this time as one in which the body is most receptive, the mind most quiet, and distractions minimal.[59] This temporal discipline is not arbitrary. It reflects a long-standing, intergenerational understanding of how the body's rhythms align with aesthetic learning.

While no contemporary studies have directly examined the effects of this specific training time, related findings can be extrapolated. Early morning states are marked by transitions from theta to alpha brainwave activity, ideal for emotional memory, associative integration, and creativity.[60] Cortisol levels are rising but not yet peaking, placing the body in a state of calm alertness, a sweet spot for focused, receptive learning.[61] These neurophysiological conditions likely make the early morning a powerful window for embodied encoding not just of movement, but of emotional tone, rhythm, and affective nuance.

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[59] Darbar Arts Culture and Heritage Trust, "Why Your Favourite Musicians Wake Up at 3 AM for Riyaz," *Darbar*, September 30, 2022.
[60] J. H. Gruzelier et al., "Immediate Effects of Alpha/Theta and Sensory-Motor Rhythm Feedback on Music Performance," *International Journal of Psychophysiology* 93, no. 1 (March 26, 2014): 96–104.
[61] Sharon Chan and Miguel Debono, "Replication of Cortisol Circadian Rhythm: New Advances in Hydrocortisone Replacement Therapy," *Therapeutic Advances in Endocrinology and Metabolism* 1, no. 3 (2010): 131.

For performers, beginning training in this liminal space before dawn conditions not only the muscles but the entire perceptual apparatus to attune to subtlety. The repetition of gestures, expressions, and rhythms in this state lays down a scaffold for the deeper realization of *rasa* over time. Performance becomes not a product of sudden insight, but of temporal alignment: the careful synchronization of inner states with aesthetic form. In this sense, early-morning training is not simply disciplinary, it is *chronobiological calibration* for *rasa*.[62]

The semi-squat posture, widely used across classical Indian dance traditions, including *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, *kathakali*, and *bharatanatyam*, is foundational to aesthetic expression. Known as *araimandi* in Bharatanatyam, and by other regional names, this posture provides physical stability for the control of upper-body movements, particularly in the face, eyes, and hands. But it also anchors breath, facilitates diaphragmatic regulation, and creates an energetic container for affective modulation.[63] Neuroscientifically, it is speculated that this posture increases proprioceptive engagement and enhances inhibitory control, placing the body in a state of low-arousal alertness ideal for expressive precision.[64] The posture thus supports not only the outward structure of performance, but also the *affective legibility*, the emotional clarity that allows *rasa* to be felt, not just seen.

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[62] I use *chronobiological calibration* to refer to the intentional alignment of training practices with the body's natural physiological rhythms, especially in ways that optimize attention, receptivity, and affective attunement over time.
[63] Phillip B. Zarrilli, *Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play* (London: Routledge, 2000), 92-93.
[64] Sloka Iyengar et al., "Reflections on Bharatanatyam and Neuroscience: A Dance Studies Perspective," *International Review of Social Research* 11, no. 1 (2021): 294.

4.2 Expressive Technique and Affective Precision

This cultivated physical control is not limited to movement or gesture. It extends into sound. In traditions where *rasa* must be transmitted not only through expression but through rhythm, bodily precision becomes tonal precision. These rhythms are not merely received, but are crafted with extraordinary sensitivity.

One performer I encountered, Kalanilayam Rajan[65] exemplified just how refined this control can become: an *eḍakka* drummer whose bodily tuning and tonal precision revealed the depth of somatic awareness required to cultivate *rasa* through rhythm. The *eḍakka* itself is a particularly affective instrument. Worn by a strap over one shoulder, its tonal range and expressive capacity emerge from striking the drum for rhythm while the pitch is modulated by squeezing tensioned laces making it capable of producing melodies like a stringed instrument. This dual nature lends it an unusually rich capacity for shaping the emotional contour of a performance, making it especially potent in the embodied communication of *rasa*.

During fieldwork, I observed his performances as the primary *eḍakka* drummer as unusually captivating. Despite playing the same compositions as his peers, his sound felt fuller, more enveloping, more alive. Unlike other, newer drummers who sometimes switched out during long performances due to fatigue, Rajan's presence was unmistakable: even without looking, one could hear the difference in tonal clarity, resonance, and emotional depth. His pitch modulation was more confident and expressive, producing a sound that felt fuller and more alive, lending the performance an

[65] Naming Kalanilayam Rajan at all disrupts the caste-coded invisibility often imposed on drummers in performance discourse; to mention only the renowned Margi Madhu Chakyar by name would obscure the deeply collaborative and embodied nature of *rasa* transmission.

enveloping affective atmosphere. This mastery was not flashy showmanship but a deep somatic attunement.

Crucially, Kalanilayam Rajan hailed from a traditional drumming caste and village; drumming was his life's calling, he even ran away from school to drum, much to his parents' dismay. In contrast, the other drummers present were Chakyar, a Brahmin caste traditionally associated with temple-based *kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance. They had come to learn drumming secondary to their familial art of *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, not through hereditary apprenticeship but through later training, often while pursuing other livelihoods alongside their work as performers. While caste-based distinctions have loosened considerably in recent decades, for example, the Kerala Kalamandalam has been teaching *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, *eḍakka*, and *mizhavu* to students of all castes since the 1950s and 60s and performers from Nepathya like Kalaniylayam Rajan had trained in other roles outside of their primary), the immersive *gurukul* mode of training, in which students study and live full time with their teachers, continues to have a crucial impact on shaping aesthetic sensibilities and technical mastery, a continuity visible not only in this drummer's work but across the wider community of *kūṭiyāṭṭam* performers and in other Indian artists whose training has been shaped by similar immersive pedagogies.

When I inquired about Kalanilayam Rajan's training regimen, he explained that he deliberately avoided exercises like push-ups or weightlifting, as such activities would interfere with the delicate fine motor control in his arms, essential for the nuanced tonal modulations his playing demands. This was not superstition, it was a form of *neuromuscular curation* in service of *rasa*.[66] His body was not merely a tool for producing rhythm; it was itself an affective

[66] By *neuromuscular curation*, I refer to the intentional shaping, preservation, or restriction of bodily capacities in order to support fine motor control, expressive nuance, and affective resonance.

instrument, maintained with the same care and intentionality as any other expressive medium. He exemplified how *rasa* transmission depends not only on technical mastery, but on the conscious calibration of internal states, a form of embodied intelligence that makes emotional resonance possible in the first place.

Among the most demanding aspects of training in traditions like *kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *kathakali* is the cultivation of *rasa* through facial expression, a practice known as *navarasa sādhana*. Each *rasa* must be learned in the muscle, not merely symbolically, but through precise and repeated physical encoding. Practitioners of *kūṭiyāṭṭam* practice their facial expressions very intensively, especially the *netrabhinaya* (eye movements).[67] This practice illustrates phenomena similar to those described in Paul Ekman's research on microexpressions, which describes emotional states as being encoded in involuntary facial movements often lasting only 1/25 to 1/5 of a second.[68] These expressions are typically registered below conscious awareness, yet structure much of our affective understanding of others.

Ekman's findings, derived in part through slowed video analysis, revealed a level of perceptual nuance that seemed inaccessible to the naked eye. But performers in *kathakali* and *kūṭiyāṭṭam* had already developed an entire aesthetic language out of this fleeting data, in real time, without instruments, and through rigorous embodied training alone.

But while Ekman's work cataloged these gestures in order to detect hidden

[67] Myself and several other observers attempted to replicate these expressions, but it quickly became clear that mastering the isolation and nuanced control of facial muscles, such as the orbicularis oculi, essential for portraying *sṛṅgārarasa*, is an exceptionally demanding skill requiring sustained, disciplined practice.
[68] Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, Unmasking the Face: A Guide to Recognizing Emotions from Facial Expressions, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 151.

emotion using slowed down video primarily in contexts like security screening and interrogation, South Asian performance traditions go far beyond recognition. They transform this ephemeral affective language into a full-blown aesthetic system. *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* does not just acknowledge microexpressions. Performers exaggerate, slow, and stylize them, rendering what is typically subliminal into deliberate, affectively potent art. A fleeting microexpression becomes a five-second sequence; a raised eyebrow, normally imperceptible, becomes a rhythmic signal, trained through years of repetition and control.

Even this comparison to a five-second expression is conservative. In practice, a single *rasa* may unfold over the course of several minutes. Performers often repeat, elaborate, and subtly modulate the expression, using micro-variations in the eyes, eyebrows, lips, and breath to draw out emotional nuance with surgical precision. These repetitions are not redundant; they are refinements, designed to lead the spectator beyond recognition into *resonance*.[69] The audience does not simply witness grief, wonder, or desire, they encounter the texture of their own emotional capacity, externalized and made legible on another's face. The result is not mere affective identification, but gasps of recognition, laughter of surprise, or stunned silence as chills run up the spine and goosebumps form along the arms: evidence of *rasa*'s arrival as a shared, embodied realization. The *Natyashastra* goes into incredible detail about how specific characters and situations should be portrayed through four means of representation: costume and makeup (*aharya*), gesture (*angika*), speech (*vacika*), and

[69] Widely recognized among scholars and practitioners, this improvisational repetition is also found in many South Asian classical music and dance performances, enabling practitioners to show off their expertise, increase the emotional depth of the *raga* or story, and delight the audience, making them very similar in function to the performances mentioned here.

emotional expression (*sattvika*), in order to convey the appropriate *rasa*.[70] For instance, Bharata devotes entire chapters to the precision of performance: thirty-six distinct types of glances, sixty-seven varieties of hand gestures, and subtle variations in gait calibrated to a character's social role, state of mind, personality, physical condition, and physical setting.[71] Likewise, the *Dhvanyāloka* emphasizes that such finely tuned expression resonates only when the performer's affective sincerity meets the perceptive capacities of the sensitive audience member, creating a shared aesthetic experience.[72]

While Bharata frames the relationship between *rasa* and *rasika* as one of fire and dry wood; another reading explains the relationship thusly, "The sense is that if a clean cloth is put into water, it will quickly absorb the water, whereas if the cloth is greasy the water will not easily be absorbed."[73] Whether due to limited aesthetic training, neurological variation, or individual taste, classical *rasa* theorists recognize that receptivity to *rasa* varies across viewers, and even across art forms, with drama consistently identified as the most effective medium.[74]

These principles, that the temporal unfolding and precision of emotional expression both shape and rely on audience perception, finds echoes in contemporary research. A recent study found that slowing the presentation of emotional expressions significantly improves recognition among viewers with autism.[75] However, these findings reflect principles already embedded in classical performance traditions, which long

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[70] Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 6.
[71] Ibid. Chapters 7-13.
[72] Ānandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka*, 70, 260.
[73] Ibid. 260.
[74] Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 6.; Ānandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka*, Chapter 3.
[75] Melanie B. Harms, Geraldine Dawson, and Thomas L. Mottron, "The Recognition of Facial Emotion in Autism: A Review of Behavioral and Neuroimaging Studies," *Neuropsychology Review* 20, no. 3 (2010): 290–322.

recognized that carefully paced and modulated expression is essential for evoking *rasa*. While contemporary research could further elucidate the underlying mechanisms, these established practices already offer a deeply refined understanding of the phenomenon, knowledge cultivated over centuries not through artificial instrumentation, but through intergenerational embodiment. *Navarasa sādhana* operates as a vernacular neuroscience of *affective time*: a calibrated process that teaches how to stretch, reveal, and transmit emotion with extraordinary clarity and depth.[76] The performer's facial control becomes a tool not just for representation, but for resonance. Through this, the *rasika* does not merely "see" the *rasa*, they feel and understand it temporally, viscerally, and communally.

Western dramatic traditions such as Stanislavski and Method acting, begin with interiority. They focus on memory, psychological motivation, or improvisational discovery. Indian classical training takes the opposite path: it begins with the body. I met Margi Madhu Chakyar, master performer and professor of *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, during an annual *kūṭiyāṭṭam* festival held in Moozhikulam, Kerala where he emphasized that young performers are not expected to understand the emotions they portray. Understanding, he noted, will come with time, life, and repetition. And yet, these teachers must possess an extraordinary affective lexicon, one capable of transmitting emotions their students have not yet lived. In fact, these lessons often do not involve any speaking at all, but physical manipulation of the body and face into the desired forms. This is not instinctual pedagogy. It is intergenerational aesthetic intelligence, operationalized with precision and passed on through embodied intelligence refined through generations of sensory

[76] By *affective time*, I refer to the intentional manipulation of temporal pacing to cultivate emotional resonance and embodied recognition. In performance, emotion is not merely expressed, it is timed, stretched, and sequenced to maximize perceptual clarity and somatic impact.

patterning, affective memory, and somatic modeling. This is vernacular neuroscience in action. What matters early on is the strict repetition, the somatic encoding. This training is not simply mechanical, it is preparatory embodiment; a rehearsal not of emotion, but of its future resonance. The *rasa* is not performed so much as it is channeled through a body trained to hold, shape, and transmit affect with incredible precision.

Even the most subtle facial movement: a glance, a flicker of the eyebrow, a shift in breath, becomes a vessel for *rasa*, provided the performer has undergone the necessary training to stabilize and release it. While improvisation is possible, it emerges primarily in masterful performers. Classical Indian performance training cultivates refined latency: a disciplined waiting for emotion to unfold within a calibrated structure.This is not merely cultural. It reflects the ontology of emotion as relational, embodied, and trained into visibility. *Rasa* is not the product of individual expression. It is the product of a body trained to perceive, to resonate, and to release.

4.3 Resonance, Rhythm, and Altered Perception

Rasa is shaped not only through the musculature of the face, but also through the breath and rhythms of the body. Emotional resonance emerges through both stillness and microexpression, as well as through motion, repetition, and flow.

In musical and performance contexts, the phenomenon known as ‘groove’, a deeply felt sense of rhythmic immersion, is not merely cognitive but fundamentally embodied. Research demonstrates that groove arises from sensorimotor coupling: the

body's automatic synchronization to rhythmic structures, producing feelings of flow, emotional uplift, and loss of self-consciousness.[77] These intentional, rhythmic environments do not simply accompany altered states; they generate the physiological conditions that make them possible through innate aesthetic-somatic loops that are present even in infancy.[78] Performers and audiences alike entrain to the cyclical rhythms and dynamic phrasing of traditional music, particularly through instruments like the *eḍakka* drum whose subtle modulations of pitch and rhythm can profoundly shape the emotional landscape of a performance.

These overlapping processes: entrainment, sensory repetition, and somatic resonance, create ideal conditions for altered affective states marked by intensified emotion, loss of self-consciousness, and heightened presence, although not an entirely dissociative or unconscious trance to emerge. During *kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances, spectators are not passive observers but embodied participants, drawn into rhythmic, emotional, and proprioceptive fields that progressively narrow attention and dissolve self-consciousness. Gilbert Rouget emphasizes that rhythmic environments do not merely accompany altered states; they generate the physiological conditions necessary for them to emerge.[79] These findings align with what *rasa* theory has always proposed: that aesthetic experience, when cultivated with discipline and precision, can produce a form of embodied transcendence. Not a departure from the self, but a saturation of it. In

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[77] Petr Janata, Stefan Tomic, and Jeffrey M. Haberman, "Sensorimotor Coupling in Music and the Psychology of the Groove," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 141, no. 1 (2012): 54–75.; Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).
[78] Jessica Phillips-Silver and Laurel J. Trainor, "Feeling the Beat: Movement Influences Infant Rhythm Perception," *Science*, 308, no. 5727 (2005): 1430.
[79] Raymond Prince, *Trance and Possession States* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1968).; Etzel Cardeña, "The Phenomenology of Trance: A Multidimensional Approach," in *Altered Consciousness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Marc Wittmann and Stefan Schmidt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 73–94.

this state, sensation, emotion, and meaning converge not in metaphor, but in felt clarity. The *rasika* does not become someone else. They become more tuned, more open, more present. This is not escape. It is contact. This is guided receptivity, rhythmically and emotionally embodied and suddenly, there is a flash (*camatkāra*), and everything is understood.

Importantly, altered states of consciousness are not exclusive to the audience. Performers themselves describe the process of 'becoming one with' or 'being absorbed by' the character, understood not metaphorically, but ontologically, as they undergo the long preparatory processes leading into performance.[80] Hours before the performance begins, the artist begins to transform: through strict dietary observances, meditative silence, pupil dilation, the ritualized labor of makeup application, and costume assembly.

In this framework, performers do not merely portray characters, they become *nāyakas*, the aesthetic archetypes whose emotional textures they have trained their bodies to host. This is not superficial decoration, symbolic possession or theatrical illusion, but a cultivated shift in affective presence. To become the *nāyaka* is to allow one's trained body to resonate with an emotional form larger than personal experience. It is not the erasure of self, but the suspension of ego in service of *rasa*. The performer is not pretending. They are *aligning* with the *bhava* and the sensory experience of the character in real time. In this alignment, the *nāyaka* is not an identity worn like a mask, but a relational form activated through rhythm, expression, breath, and attunement.[81] As Phillip Zarrilli points out (via a different translation), Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* offers a concise directive for aesthetic preparation: "Thus after thinking within himself that 'I am he,' a

[80] Zarrilli, *Kathakali Dance-Drama*, 65.
[81] Ibid., 88.

wise actor should represent the states of another person by speech, gait, movements and gesture."[82] Yet while the text gestures toward embodied identification, the actual process is usually far more intricate than the written instruction like the *Nāṭyaśāstra* or the *Attaprakaram* (the acting manuals for *kūṭiyāṭṭam* which provide detailed direction on how to embody the character) imply. Accurate performances also require training structured through physical disciplines, affective cues, and somatic techniques that may never have been fully codified, or that have since been lost to time.

In addition to rhythmic and facial expressivity, performers in *kūṭiyāṭṭam* even employ aesthetic pharmacology to heighten emotional transmission. Significantly, traditional practices have included the use of a plant whose crushed seeds are applied to the eyes to induce pupil dilation and redness.[83]

Audience members, too, experience involuntary pupil dilation during emotionally charged performances, particularly in the low-light settings of temple or nighttime stages.This practice enhances the supernatural appearance of the performer, intensifying the affective impact on the audience. Scientific research confirms that pupil dilation is an automatic somatic marker of emotional arousal, suggesting that both performer and spectator bodies are physiologically primed to heighten affective resonance even before conscious appraisal occurs.[84] This mutual tuning of bodily states further dissolves the

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[82] Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 232.

[83] During a *kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance in Moozhikulam, I observed performers rubbing crushed fruit or seeds from a local plant known as *chundappoo* into their eyes to induce a deep redness. Based on appearance and local identification, the plant resembles *Solanum virginianum* (wild brinjal or *kantakari*), a spiny member of the nightshade family commonly found growing near homes and temples in Kerala. The practice appears to be passed down through oral tradition among performers, with limited documentation in formal literature outside of Ayurvedic texts.

[84] Margaret M. Bradley et al., "The Pupil as a Measure of Emotional Arousal and Autonomic Activation," *Psychophysiology* 45, no. 4 (2008): 602–607.

boundary between audience and performer, allowing *rasa* to unfold not merely as an aesthetic appreciation, but as a measurable, embodied experience, evidenced in synchronized breathing, gaze, and subtle motor responses.

This immersive sensory tuning is not incidental. It is architecturally embedded with forethought. Performances often take place in the *koothambalam*, a traditional temple theater constructed according to *Nāṭyaśāstra* principles.[85] The space is enclosed, intimate, and deliberately low-lit, with minimal distance between performer and spectator. Designed to amplify facial expression, eye movement, and subtle gesture, the *koothambalam* enhances the affective transmission of *rasa* through spatial proximity and sensory focus. In many *koothambalams* the audience sits at or below the level of the actor's gaze, often directly in front of the performer.

My own fieldwork attending *kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances in Kerala confirms this dynamic. Audience members seated closer to the performance exhibited not only facial mimicry of performed emotions but also bodily entrainment: changes in breath, posture, and shared muscular tension during key narrative moments, often culminating in a deep state of wide eyed absorption.

As Margi Madhu Chakyar emphasized during the Nepathya *kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances in Moozhikulam, spectators are encouraged to sit as close as possible to experience the full affective force of facial expression. Proximity intensifies *rasa*'s impact not just visually, but interoceptively. The most powerful performances were marked not merely by intentional technical control, but by a palpable collapse of distance between performer and spectator: an emergent aesthetic field in which emotion was not

[85] Bharata, *N*āṭyaśāstra, Chapter 6.

represented, but directly felt.

I first encountered these performances on film in a classroom, later from a distant seat in a cavernous auditorium, and finally from just a few feet away in a *koothambalam*. Each shift in proximity revealed an increasing density of expressive detail and depth of emotional response, culminating in the close-up experience where the full force of *rasa* became palpable, its architecture built as much from proprioceptive and interoceptive entanglement as from visible form. What matters is not just what is seen or heard, but what is felt in the warm, moist, dark night air that carries the sound of the *mizhavu* and *ilathalam* without distortion, over the everpresent hum of the drone, through the pitched speech of the *eḍakka,* between bodies, through breath, gaze, rhythm, and the microtempo of affect. Each of these have significant effects on the bodymind. South Asian performance traditions anticipate findings in contemporary cognitive science: *rasa* realization emerges through complex feedback loops of sensory stimulation, bodily synchronization, emotional resonance, and cognitive recognition. Feeling, movement, and knowing converge, transforming artistic performance into an embodied revelation. What emerges is not just a response to performance, but a form of participatory epistemology: a way of knowing made possible through sensation, attunement, and co-regulated awareness.

4.4 Rasa as an Integrated Aesthetic Epistemology

In this context, *rasa* is not merely aesthetic pleasure, it is a nondual mode of knowing; a cultivated shift in consciousness where perception, affect, and cognition flow

as one. Bharata's theory does not abstract emotion from form, nor sensation from thought, it integrates them.

While Western philosophical traditions, from Cartesian dualism to Kantian aesthetics, have often separated cognition from sensation, contemporary neuroscience now increasingly affirms their entanglement, an insight Bharata articulated long ago. The *rasa*-experiencing body becomes a site of aesthetic learning. It is not metaphor or mysticism. It is a radical, embodied theory of mind.

Rasa, then, offers not just an aesthetic framework, but an epistemology grounded in lived experience. It shows that embodied, affective states are not barriers to knowledge, they are its foundation. Where classical Western theories have treated emotion as something to overcome, *rasa* traditions cultivate emotion as something to be structured, transmitted, and understood through. This understanding does not rely on conceptual abstraction, it arises through taste, rhythm, gesture, and breath.

5. Why *Rasa* Matters

5.1 Aesthetic Epistemology in Action

Patrick Hogan's early attempt to bring Sanskrit aesthetics into dialogue with cognitive science helped initiate this interdisciplinary conversation. While his analysis of *rasa* and *dhvani* through prototype theory remains primarily literary, it laid groundwork for deeper inquiry.[72] This thesis builds on that foundation by relocating *rasa* from inferred emotion to sensorimotor phenomenology. Where Hogan gestures toward cognition, I

argue for a neurophysiological aesthetic grounded in performance, resonance, and shared affective experience.

Embodied knowledge is everywhere, but rarely recognized as knowledge. R*asa* theory does not invent embodiment, but names it, refines it, and elevates it to the level of conscious epistemic philosophy. In a global intellectual landscape that has long privileged abstraction over sensation, *rasa* stands out for its extraordinary systematization. Bharata and Abhinavagupta offer a formal, reproducible, yet flexible methodology for transforming emotion into aesthetic knowledge.

5.2 Practical Application in Pedagogy and Embodied Care

If we take *rasa* seriously as an embodied epistemology, its implications extend well beyond classical performance. The model it offers, of feeling as cognition, of structured emotional transmission as meaning, has the potential to reshape contemporary approaches to education, design, and therapeutic care.

In pedagogy, *rasa* invites us to move beyond content delivery toward felt engagement. A lesson is not effective because it is well-structured, it is effective because it resonates. Teachers already work intuitively with rhythm, tone, repetition, and timing. A *rasa*-based pedagogy would recognize these not as stylistic flourishes but as the very conditions through which learning becomes meaningful. Rather than separating emotional literacy from intellectual mastery, *rasa* suggests that the two are co-produced, and that the body is where understanding begins.

In therapeutic or care contexts, *rasa* theory helps reframe art, music, and movement not as expressive outlets, but as instruments of emotional attunement and regulation. A *rasa*-informed approach might not ask a patient merely to "express what they feel," but would recognize that emotion becomes recognizable through form, and that bodily repetition, rhythm, and sensory containment make emotional recognition possible. The performer becomes the *rasika*, and vice versa: each learns to attune, to feel, and to know through co-regulated presence.

In each of these domains, *rasa* resists the idea that sensation and cognition are opposites. It shows instead that what is felt, structured, and shared through the body becomes the ground of understanding. Whether in the classroom, the clinic, or the screen, *rasa* offers a model of resonance, not representation, as the condition for knowledge.

Studies on "altruism born of suffering" suggest that individuals are more likely to help others when they feel they have shared in some dimension of the same emotion, even if their experiences differ in the details.[86] Holocaust survivors aiding Sudanese refugees, for instance, are not responding to analytical comparisons, but to a felt memory, a somatic echo of grief, loss, or fear. This is precisely what *rasa* articulates: that recognition is not intellectual alignment but emotional resonance.

This affective structure of embodied resonance, emotional absorption, and ego-transcendence, whether felt in a theater, a classroom, or a humanitarian act, brings us full circle to Valmiki. When the sage witnessed the death of the bird, it was not rational comparison or moral judgment that moved him to speak, it was his body, wracked with

[86] Johanna Ray Vollhardt, "Altruism Born of Suffering and Prosocial Behavior Following Adverse Life Events: A Review and Conceptualization," *Social Justice Research* 22, no. 3 (2009): 219–257.

grief, unbidden and overwhelming. That grief did not isolate him; it opened him. It became form. His verse did not emerge from analysis, it emerged from a felt recognition, a resonance between his own body and the pain of another.

This is also what Abhinavagupta describes in his vision of *rasa* as a universalized emotion, stripped of egoic grasping and surface identity. The detachment he speaks of is not disembodiment, it is the shattering of *māyā*, the illusion that our experiences are entirely our own. In *rasa* realization, the boundaries of the self loosen, not into confusion, but into clarity: the clarity that your joy is not separate from mine, that your grief lives in my tears, that what is performed before me is not a fiction, but a mirror. *Rasa* is not the severing of emotional ties, it is their refinement into shared, aesthetic truth.

5.3 Limitations and Unrealized Directions

This project is necessarily limited by the overwhelming scope of what remains to be explored. While I've drawn connections between *rasa* theory, embodiment, cognition, and aesthetics, these fields are vast, and very little work exists that attempts to bridge them in a sustained, interdisciplinary way. What's missing is not just further explanation, but deeper mapping through embodied witnessing: an autoethnographic observational stance that doesn't pretend to be neutral, but participates delicately, the way that Bharata and Abhinavagupta did, tracing how *rasa* unfolds in the bodymind without uncoupling it from its context. There's immense potential for future research that incorporates textual analysis and the lived experience of aesthetic response across disciplines: South Asian aesthetic philosophies, performance theory, neuroscience,

literary studies, anthropology, and the voices of creators, practitioners, and lay audiences alike.

5.4 Conclusion: To Feel is to Know

Having traced the theory, practices, and implications of *rasa*, we return to the moment of embodied recognition that inspired this study. In a striking poetic symmetry, the very lyric that sparked this inquiry, /*Tujhe dekha toh yeh jaana sanam*/ (When I saw you, I came to know, beloved), describes the instantaneous recognition of the beloved, exemplifying the process this thesis has traced: the bodymind's immediate, somatically grounded apprehension of meaning. The breath, the pacing, the glance, the timing, the music, the scenery, the lyrics; every element of the moment, is tuned to strike the body first. It does not explain love. It makes one feel that they have known it all along. That is not a frivolity. It is *rasa*, crafted and released with precision, received in the flesh with emotional-physical voltage.

Bharata's genius lay in his metacognition, his capacity to perceive in himself and others not only the experience of *rasa*, but the conditions that give rise to it, and to articulate those conditions as a shareable method. The ordinary spectator may simply feel the voltage; Bharata mapped its circuitry. That is why moments like this, whether in Sanskrit drama or so-called "popular" cinema, deserve more than dismissal. They reveal how the bodymind apprehends meaning before the mind explains it, and why to feel is not to step away from knowledge, but to enter its very structure. What Bharata codified, then, is not only a technique for the reliable production of *rasa* but a demonstration that cognition and sensation are not opposed domains. To feel as a *rasika* is to glimpse,

however briefly, the very structure of consciousness itself: knowledge revealed not as abstraction but as embodied vibration. This is why *rasa* matters. It offers a single pathway by which philosophy and physiology, reflection and affect, converge. In the aesthetic event we learn that truth is not beyond the body but disclosed through it.

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