RASA THEORY AND INDIAN MUSIC

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The implications of the subject Rasa and Indian Music according to my understanding, are that on one hand a general outline of the traditional Rasa-theory is to be attempted and on the other hand, the applicability of the said theory to the context of Indian music has to be examined. "Indian music" in this paper will be restricted to raga-music of the modern times. As the present seminar is, on the whole, devoted to the discussion of Indian music in the context of modern science and technology, this paper will, naturally, have finally to review the subject in that context.

The word "rasa" has three primary associations of meaning,

1. Of being the object of perception by the sense of taste—"Rasana",
2. Of being the essence of anything or any being; the earth is known as "Rasa" as it holds the essence of life for all creatures — vegetable, human or animal,
3. Of being something liquid or dynamic, as opposed to being solid or static.

The Upanishads use the word rasa for that Ultimate Reality which is the basis of Ananda.

रसो मे सः । रसं त्रिवेदीं ललितायुक्तं भवितः ।

(Taitteriya: 2.7.1)

"This (Purusha) becomes blissful by the attainment of rasa". This statement is very significant as it suggests that rasa is more fundamental even than Ananda, which is one of the three aspects of the Ultimate Reality — Sat, Chit, Ananda. Rasa is as though the essence of these three aspects and is in turn the basis of Ananda, the most fundamental of the three.
Having seen the primary meanings and philosophical significance of the word *rasa*, let us now see its usage in aesthetics.

In the Indian tradition the central point of aesthetics is *rasa* rather than Beauty; *rasa*, being the direct source or essence of *Ananda*, is the ultimate goal of all artistic creation. Needless to add that it is also the essence of Beauty.

As we all know, the concept of *rasa* in Indian aesthetics originated and developed in the context of dramaturgy. As drama is a perfect combination of auditory and visual (*drisya* and *sravya*) representation, it provides the best scope for the analysis of the process of experience and the nature of aesthetic delight. The vividness, lucidity and concreteness of drama which is an integral representation of life, is not to be found in any other art. It was, therefore, but natural that the concept of *rasa* evolved in the context of drama. No separate concept of aesthetics was evolved for the specialised arts concentrating only on particular aspects of either *sravya* or *drisya* or both. The *rasa* theory was applied to all of them. But the limitations that go with specialisation as well as the attainment of greater depths or heights made possible by specialisation in one particular medium of art, have to be seriously considered in applying the *rasa* theory to specialised arts. We shall, therefore, have to consider the limitations and intensive potentialities of music, while reviewing the applicability or the *rasa*-theory in its context. Before doing that, it is essential to present a brief outline of the *rasa*-theory.

Bharata, the first extant author on *natya* and *rasa* has pointedly referred to the analogy of the perception of “relish” or “taste” in the description of the enjoyment of art.

This analogy has two important implications —

1. In enjoyment of art the subject-object relationship is most intimate just as in the perception of “taste” the contact of subject and object is one of complete identification with or assimilation of the object by the subject.

2. Just as the “taste” of a delicacy is not merely a sum-total of the taste of the ingredients, but is something quite new wherein the ingredients cannot be perceived separately, similarly the content of the enjoyment of art is not a sum-total of the various components of artistic representation, but is quite different. This
peculiarity is expressed by the analogy रसाः or taste of a पानकाः or spiced sweet drink.

The ingredients of रसाः are — विभविः (cause), अनुभवस् (effect), सन्तोषः भवस् (auxiliary mental states); the proper presentation of these makes the स्रष्यभवस् enjoyable (आस्वदन्याः). The cause and effect relationship inherent in different situations of life, when depicted through drama, tends to free the audience from the bondage of रागाः — द्वेषाः (attraction and repulsion), and enables them to relish the भवस् its universalised सामाजिक state without any particularities or limitations of space, time or individual entity (देश, काल, पार्श्व). Hence artistic enjoyment is आलोकिक i.e. unlike the common experiences of life. It cannot be equated with memory, imagination or direct experience. That experience brings about the cessation of all mental activity (संतति विमानता) for the duration of its own existence. It brings about temporary liberation of the mind from bondages of “I-ness” and “My-ness” and makes possible the experience of basic mental states (स्वावलम्बी) in their universalised form. The mind becomes free from all “particular” or binding or limiting factors of a given situation which accompany it in actual life. Thus there is a perfect blending of ततास्थित्या (neutrality) and तदात्मत्या (identification) i.e. the audience completely identifies with the given situation and is at the same time detached or neutral because the situation does not affect their actual personal life in any way. This is a combination of भोक्त्रित्वा — the state of being the subject of an experience:—(भोक्त्रिक) and सत्स्वित्वा — the state of being merely detached witness:—(सत्स्वित). That is why even painful situations of life become enjoyable in drama.

The earliest extant treatment of the science of music is to be found in Bharata’s नायिकासास्त्रम् and there the subject has been dealt with in the context of drama. Music is an important constituent of the पुरवर्णः or prelude in drama and is also a powerful means of highlighting the important points in a drama. As a part of पुरवर्णः, music calms down the mind, frees it from affections of personal joys and sorrows (निजसुधुप-विविधोपम्य) and equips it with the necessary attitude for receiving the dramatic representation and identifying itself with the various situations represented therein. This function of music is very aptly described by Abhinavagupta in the following words:

निजसुधुपकालितस्विविधोपम्यस्मयं वस्तवंतः संविधयं विमानयं दिति तवस्तुमायमायेन \\
प्रतिपवनिविठ्ठ: सामाध्य-महिष्का सल्लोभयतसमिन्धुम: श्रवित्थिपप्सः \\
विषिक्षणं-पदविद्यमणोकारितिम्य्यपतिम् समयसिद्धम् । \\
सत्स्वित्वमपिण्याम्यम्यमायाश्च सत्स्वित्वमिकते । \\
उक्ता हि ‘ज्ञायमं श्रव्यच’


As a part of drama proper, music is a very powerful means of heightening or deepening the effect of the critical stages of dramatic representation.
Speaking in terms of *rasa*, Bharata in the following passage enjoins the use of different *svara*-s for different *rasa*-s.

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\text{हास्यगृहार्य: कायों स्वरो मध्यमपंचमी।}
\text{पद्मायं तथा चैव बीरोदाहूस्ते तु।}
\text{गाथारस्त्व नियादस्त्व कल्यंकौ कहने रसे।}
\text{प्रवतत्रचेव कल्यं बीमस्ते सम्बवनेकौ।}
\]

*(Natyasastra, Chowkhamba Edn. 19.38, 39)*

It may be observed here that Bharata does not mean the use of isolated *svara*-s here, but implies that respective *svara*-s have to be made the *amsa svara*-s. The following passage will corroborate this observation:

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\text{यो यदा बलवान् यस्मिन् स्वरो जालितसमाधयत्।}
\text{तलापूर्वके रसे गायन काये मेंभित्तेन।}
\text{मध्यमपंचम भूषिष्ठ हास्यगृहार्योमेव।}
\text{पद्मायं अखल बीरोदाहूस्ते च।}
\text{गाथारस्त्व नियादस्त्व कहने गायमिप्ते।}
\text{तथा वेदं भूषिष्ठ बीमस्ते सम्बवनेकौ।}
\text{नवींवेषाऽरस नियमविधानेन सम्बवनेत्वा।}
\]

*(Ibid 29.1215)*

It has to be borne in mind here that the musical pieces introduced within the drama have a complete background of the given situation represented through the four kinds of *abhinaya* i.e. the musical representation has not only its visual correlates, but has also the development of the plot in its background.

Bharata has expounded the above *rasa*-theory of music in the context of *jati*-s and *jati*-based *dhruva*-s (vocal compositions) to be rendered in drama; *gramaraga*-s are not elaborately dealt with by Bharata. The authority of Matanga has, therefore, to be considered with reference to *gramaraga*-s. It is clear beyond doubt from his treatment of *gramaraga*-s that he has simply elaborated Bharata's treatment of this subject and that *gramaraga*-s have been treated as part of drama. As Matanga's treatment of *desiraga*-s is lost to us, it is difficult to form, a direct opinion about his exposition under this topic. But from indirect evidence it is clear that *desiraga*-s were not strictly associated with drama as the *gramaraga*-s were. The system of *raga dhyana*-s seems to have developed in the context of *desiraga*-s and the roots of this tradition could be traced back to Matanga. The following *mangalacharana sloka* found in the beginning of the mutilated section on *desiraga*-s in his text suggests that there must have been some tradition of *tantric dhyana*-s of *desiraga*-s upheld by Matanga.
This surmise is supported by the references to Matanga made by Rana Kumbha (15th cent.) in the course of the latter’s treatment of this subject. The Sangit-Opanishat-Saroddhara (14th cent.) and Sangitaraja (15th cent.) are the two important texts containing a fair record of this tradition. From the 16th century onwards the dhyana-s given in texts bear an imprint of the system of nayaka-nayika-bheda with some faint remnants of the Tantric tradition scattered here and there. It can, therefore, be safely concluded that the Tantric tradition of raga-dhyana continued for more than ten centuries.

The significance of this tradition can be definitely associated with the spiritual basis of musical culture in India. Tantra is the technique of spiritual culture and the musical system based on spiritual cultures or forming part of the same could logically transfer to itself the system of dhyana-s of Devi-s and Deva-s. Naturally, this tradition could originate and evolve only in raga-s independent of drama. In a period of decadence of this tradition, another stream of visual contemplation appeared viz. the system of raga-dhyana based on nayaka-bheda. This system could be reasonably justified by the fact that the detachment of music from drama did leave a vacuum as the background of dramatic representation was lacking a visual raga-dhyana-s filled up the void by supplying a visual correlate for aesthetic contemplation mainly on the part of the musician and to some extent on the part of the listener. Both modern physics and our traditional metaphysics of sound uphold that the objects of visual and auditory perception are not basically different, but are mutually convertible. It is common experience that hearing and seeing are not only mutually supplementary or complementary, but are also capable of replacing each other to a considerable extent. The tradition of raga-dhyana was, therefore, nothing far-fetched or fantastic; it was a realistic approach to artistic imagery.

The above observations regarding the tradition of raga-dhyana-s pertain only to the basic and original idea behind it. We are not concerned here with the degeneration of this concept of visual contemplation of raga, an auditory individuality, into poetic fancy or fantasy.

Coming to modern times, the prevalent conditions may thus be summarised:

1. Raga-music is completely independent of drama i.e. there is no declared situation of life in the background of music.
2. The tradition of raga-dhyana is completely lost and if some stray remnants are rarely found here and there, they are most arbitrary and there is no established norm for the guidance of the musician and the listener.

3. The inclusion of visual representation in music through nritya, which was a component of sangita is no more valid, as gita and vadya are presented quite independently.

4. The verbal element in music, which is the only means for suggesting a situation of life for aesthetic contemplation, is either very brief and hence ineffective, or unrelated to the aesthetic potentiality of the particular raga, or it is totally absent as, for example, in instrumental music. The proper position of virgita or bahirgita is not generally kept in view and the abstract nature of instrumental music is glorified without reference to the lack of the possibility of specific representation due to total absence of verbal element.

5. So far Bharata's theory of associating the murchana-s of particular svara-s with particular rasa-s is concerned, it may be seriously noted that since grama, the central point of reference in Bharata's musical system, is lost for some centuries now, the exposition of Bharata has lost its significance.

The above analysis of the present situation leads us to the following observations regarding the applicability of the rasa-theory to modern raga-music :

1. In the absence of representation or tangible suggestion of any specific situation of life, the cause and effect (vibhava-anubhava) relationship in terms of the rasa theory can be applied only to tonal structure. On the spiritual plane, the unmanifest sound (Anahata Nada) pervading the cosmos and the human microcosm is the cause or basis of svara-s. Accordingly, svara is not the creation of man, but is his discovery. As actual realisation on this plane by the musician or listener is out of question in the present context, we cannot proceed further on this cause and effect relationship. On the common level of experience it can be safely said that the analysis of cause and effect relationship is impossible within the tonal rendering itself.

2. In the absence of connection with drama, four traditional rasa-s viz. hasya, raudra, bhayanaka and bibhatsa have to be excluded from the purview of musical representation, because it is impossible to sustain them in music unrelated to drama. They could only appear as transitory phases.

3. In the absence of any specific situation as aesthetic background, even santa, sringara, karuna, vira and adbhuta rasa-s have to
be reviewed in the present context. Needless to affirm that their
description as found in texts, cannot be applied in toto to present
day music. *Adbhuta* can be identified with all levels of virtuosity.
For the remaining four viz. *santa*, *sringara*, *karuna* and *vira*,
the concept of three *guna*-s is very apt for their description.
*Druti* (melting) and *dipiti* (incitement) of the *chitta* are two basic
categories in which the variety of the aesthetic effect of any art
can be broadly condensed. *Druti* is associated with *madhurya* *guna* and is brought about by *santa*, *sringara* and *karuna*
*rasa*-s and *dipiti* is associated with *ojas* *guna* and goes well with
*vira* *rasa*. These two broad categories can logically encompass
the aesthetic effect of all *raga*-s. The third *guna* viz. *prasada*
implies the direct, straight or absorbing appeal of a *raga*, which
can be equally compatible with *madhurya* or *ojas*. In my
humble opinion, the vagueness and abstract nature of musical
representation can very well be covered logically by these three
terms. The fact that the names of *rasa*-s are very loosely used in
the context of present day music, lends support to this opinion.

Taking into consideration the conditions brought about by modern
science and technology, the following observations may be pertinent:—

1. Preservation and reproduction of sound have become possible
and thereby any musical piece can be repeated any number of
times. The possibility of repetition gives better scope for analysis,
but is not free from serious hazards. It is liable to make listening
less attentive and learning more repetitive. Here is also much
possibility of a large amount of dross being preserved indiscriminately along with what is really worthy of preservation.
Proper discrimination in preservation and restricted use in learning is, therefore, highly needed. As for analysis, a strong note of caution may be sounded here against blind following of Western methods.

2. The *drisya* (visual) element of music, i.e. the performer's visibility to the audience has been eliminated to a large extent through radio, gramophone, tape-record etc. This is ideally a loss both for the listener and the performer. The absence of personal communication makes music more abstract for the listener and the performer is handicapped for lack of rapport. He has to perform in a closed studio, where there is no external focus. In television, the loss is the same for the performer but less for the listener.

3. The propagation of sound through microphones and loudspeakers has made possible the presentation of music to huge audiences, where again the chances of personal communication between the audience and the performer are very remote. The artiste is
faced not by human individuals but by abstract humanity. The individuals in the front rows are unfortunately not appreciative in general. The loss of tone-quality in reproduction is another important factor.

4. The printing press has given an impetus to the use of musical notation which has both its advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are obvious; the main disadvantages are — undue regard for symbols and deterioration in the concentration involved in learning.

The above observations clearly point out the fact that musical presentation, listening and learning have become depersonalised due to science and technology. The time of being dazzled by the achievements of technology in the preservation, reproduction and propagation of sound is over and it is high time that objective stock-taking of the situation is attempted and caution and discrimination exercised in the use of mechanical devices. This country is perhaps the foremost in the vulgar and indiscriminate use of these devices and it is highly imperative to pause and think.

While concluding, let us revert to the *rasa* concept and in that connection it appears pertinent that the gains and losses of specialisation are taken into account. With the development of music independently of drama, the potentialities of sound have found full scope, but there are certain limitations attached to this situation. Once we accept the limitations, we need not expect the whole paraphernalia of the *rasa* theory that developed in the context of drama, to be directly presentable in our music. If the aesthetic effect of our music is vague in the context of traditional *rasa* terminology, if it is nebulous, if it evades or defies analysis, there is nothing to shy of. Herein lies the beauty or speciality of musical "expression." Why should we expect that kind of "expression" from music which could be verbalised? Let us have the courage and conviction to call a spade a spade.

*Rasa* in its essential form of aesthetic delight is undoubtedly present in music, but its direct analysis in terms of traditional exposition is neither fully possible nor is it warranted. As in other arts, so in music, we have to give due recognition also to lower aesthetic levels. It is not proper to expect the *rasa* level in all kinds of musical rendering. The levels of "*Ranga*" and "*Bhava*" have been recognised by our old texts, in addition to *rasa* (cf. *Sangita Ratnakara*, Chap. III — description of musicians of different levels viz. *Ranjaka*, *Bhavuka* and *Rasika*). And let us not forget that music is also capable of making an "*Ahridaya*" a "*Sahridaya*" by purifying his heart. This cathartic value of music should not be lost sight of in an attempt to glorify it with the crown of *rasa*. 
