

The Rasa Theory: Analytical Tool from Sanskrit Aesthetics

Sensory communication as an outcome of performing arts has been described in Sanskrit aesthetics two millennia ago as *rasa*. The rasa theory was originally developed by Bharata Muni in *Natya Shastra* around the first century CE¹, and later elaborated by the philosopher and aesthetician Abhinavagupta in *Abhinavabharati* in the tenth century. The rasas are emotional and mental states that art can induce. A fully developed work of art should dynamically incorporate all nine of them:

Sringara – erotic sentiment;
Hasya – comic sentiment;
Raudra – furious sentiment;
Karunya – pathetic sentiment;
Vira – heroic sentiment;
Adbhutam – marvellous sentiment;
Bibhatsa – odious sentiment;
Bhayanaka – terrible sentiment;
Santam – tranquillity, or peaceful sentiment.

My thesis aims to offer an insight into the aspects of Sanskrit aesthetics which prescribe the application of rasas in Indian classical dance. The main research question seeks to explore what the function of rasas in *natya* (the trinity of dance, literature and music) is, with a specific focus on the Bharatanatyam dance style. The sub-questions investigate the components of each rasa, the application of different rasas in a performance according to the *Natya Shastra*, the essence of the concept of rasa itself, and finally, the contemporary use of rasas, and how it differs from the ancient theory. This article will give an overview of the subjects discussed in the thesis, present basic theoretical concepts with an example of their practical implementation, as well as concisely answer the main research question.

The thesis was written as an attempt to create a guide book for which copious amounts of material had been examined – confusing not only due to the plenitude of foreign terminology, and totally alien abstract concepts, but also because the literature on the subject is obscure, with poor referencing, insufficient translations, and contradictory commentaries. The subject being relatively unknown, required the introduction of auxiliary topics, which, vast in their nature, had to be thoroughly researched in order to bring out the essentials. Written as a mini-compendium, the thesis is meant to serve as a starting point and a reference guide for further investigation to whoever finds

1 The scripture, or its compilation attributed to Bharata, is difficult to date and considered to be a surviving part of a now-lost fifth Sanskrit Veda (one of the books of knowledge that form the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature). Different sources provide different estimations but Kapila Vatsyayan, a leading scholar of classical Indian arts, maintains in her seminal work *Bharata: The Natyasastra* (1996) that the texts comprising the *Natya Shastra* were written between 1 BCE and 3 CE (Vatsyayan 6). Bharata originally described eight primary rasas. Since the addition of the Santam rasa by Abhinavagupta the concept is known as *navarasa* (the nine rasas). The *Natya Shastra* has been translated into English in full for the first time in 1950 by Manomohan Ghosh. For the referencing purpose throughout the thesis I use a 2010 edition titled *Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharatamuni*.

the concept of rasas enchanting and wishes to explore it within their own scope.

From ancient scriptures to modern India and back

The research methodology is based on an ethnographic approach.² In order to collect first hand research materials, I applied for a one term residency at Darpana Academy for Performing Arts³ in Ahmedabad, India. There, I had the opportunity to attend Bharatanatyam classes⁴, company rehearsals, and its socially relevant street theatre performances in the city slums. Additionally, I interviewed the dancers, choreographers, musicians, teachers, and art critics about aesthetics and their underlying philosophical concepts, as well as the application of rasas in various forms of Indian dance, whilst having full access to the Darapana library. I collected videos and publications, including copies of local scholarly work otherwise unavailable in the Netherlands.

Two important theoretical works on rasas are central to my thesis: the previously introduced *Natya Shastra*, and the first volume of *Comparative Aesthetics* (1950) by Kanti Chandra Pandey, which in over six hundred pages analyses, among other subjects, the history of Indian aesthetics, Abhinavagupta's theory of meaning and aesthetics, the types of rasas, the techniques and types of Sanskrit drama, the essentials of representation, and the aesthetic currents in poetics and philosophy of music. Written in 1950, this compendium serves as a bridge – just like the work of Abhinavagupta in the tenth century – to understand ancient arts in modern times. During dance analysis I support my arguments with a compendium *Understanding Bharatanataym* (2013) by Mrinalini Sarabhai, which is an important practical guide to the dance form and performance of rasas.

The analyses of three case studies in the thesis: *Mira* (1980) by Mrinalini Sarabhai, *Sampradayam* (2008) by Mallika Sarabhai, and *Long Distance Relationship* (2011) by Revanta Sarabhai, aim at revealing how the previously described rasa theory is applied in contemporary Bharatanatyam. The performances have been created by three generations of choreographers within the same school of abhinaya and were chosen to reflect different approaches to rasas.

2 Ethnographic approach is a widely applied method in dance research – as described by Anya Peterson Royce in her classic textbook *The Anthropology of Dance* (2002), as well as across various disciplines – as exemplified by Pavel Zemliansky in *Methods of Discovery* (2008). In Chapter 10 *Etnographic Research* Zemliansky defines its components as: observation, interviewing, collecting and reading cultural artefacts, keeping field research notes and journal, as well as consulting secondary print and electronic sources. He describes ethnographic researchers as those who 'work in the culture which they are studying to recognize [its] traits and ... describe it to others' (Zemliansky n.pag.)

3 <http://www.darpana.com>

4 Basic training in Bharatanatyam takes six to seven years before the first official public solo performance of a dancer can take place, and usually starts at an early age. To their great amusement, the author of this text was the only adult among a class of six year old students.

For the sake of clarity in the following analysis example, and a subsequent conclusion, I shall now briefly introduce several auxiliary concepts, which are developed further in the thesis itself. Formal components of rasas are called *bhavas* (bhava means to pervade, or infuse). Pandey in *Comparative Aesthetics* defines bhava as 'the medium to a state of mind' in order to 'distinguish them from emotions that arise in real life' (p.23). In short, bhava is the representation of an emotion that serves as an agent in the process of bringing up rasa in the spectator. It is the mental state caused by the surrounding context that leads to an emotion, rather than the experience of that emotion yet. There are primary and secondary bhavas.⁵

The numerous methods of representation are contained under the umbrella term *abhinaya* – which roughly translates into acting techniques. It covers gestures, words, dress and make-up, as well as temperament, which are to be combined in order to adequately represent different types of play. Facial and hand gestures, together with elaborate body positions, are particularly important in the complex representation of rasas in dance.⁶ Another distinctive feature of dance in particular is non-representational rhythmical movement, called *nritta*. As we shall see later, this is increasingly being used to convey emotions in contemporary Indian classical dance,

5 Primary bhavas:

- Rati* – love, gives rise to sringara (erotic)
- Hasa* – mirth, gives rise to hasya (comic)
- Krodha* – anger, gives rise to raudra (furious)
- Soka* – sorrow, gives rise to karunya (pathetic)
- Utsaha* – courage, gives rise to vira (heroic)
- Vismaya* – astonishment, gives rise to adbhutam (marvellous)
- Jugupsa* – disgust, gives rise to bibhatsa (odious)
- Bhaya* – terror, gives rise to bhayanaka (terrible)

Secondary bhavas are classified into determinants, consequents and complimentary psychological states. The examples of the latter are:

discouragement, weakness, apprehension, envy, intoxication, weariness, indolence, depression, anxiety, distraction, recollection, contentment, shame, inconstancy, joy, agitation, stupor, arrogance, despair, impatience, sleep, epilepsy, dreaming, awakening, indignation, dissimulation, cruelty, assurance, sickness, insanity, death, fright and deliberation (*Natya Shastra* 287).

6 Execution of rasas by facial expressions, as described in *Understanding Bharatanatyam*:

Sringara (erotic rasa): 'With a feeling of composure and happiness, the eyebrows slanting and the eyes glancing sideways'.

Hasya (comic): 'In turn contracting and expanding the eyebrows, the pupils quivering in confusion'.

Raudra (furious): 'The look cruel, the eyes reddened and rough, the eyelids and pupils motionless, the eyebrows curved'.

Karunya (pathetic): 'The eyelids lowered, the pupils gazing at the tip of the nose, the eyes filled with tears'.

Vira (heroic): 'The eyes radiant, well opened, the pupils steady and majestic'.

Adbhutam (marvellous): 'The eyelids curved slightly, the eyebrows raised in wonder, the eyes delightfully opened wide'.

Bibhatsa (odious): 'The eyelids lowered crookedly, the pupils moving (literally jumping), the upper and lower eyelids close to each other'.

Bhayanaka (terrible): 'The eyelids raised and kept fixed, the pupils gleaming and quivering'.

Santam (peace, tranquillity): 'The eyelids closed gradually, the eyes in gentle movement, the pupils moving towards the corners' (59).

similarly to the western modern dance.

When gods make love

In *Sampradayam*, even though the main theme has a religious background, the performance is dynamically entertaining with varied effort and contrasting dynamic qualities, and only one part of five presents the traditional story of love between the gods Radha and Krishna. The dancers perform a duet, which is a rarity, especially when they are facing each other in a close swinging movement. Even though almost no traditional abhinaya for sringara rasa (the erotic sentiment) is employed, nor is there any physical contact between the dancers, the scene is very evocative of an erotic encounter, with an element of mystery left to their play. They stand very close to one another with Krishna's back towards the audience, his body concealing what happens when the two dancers, swinging from side to side, meet for a brief moment in an upright position. It is implied that they might be touching each other's faces, or concealing kisses from the rest of the forest.

The challenge to the rigid conventions in this seduction scene is striking. In synchronized and symmetrically opposite side bends and extended angular arm twirls, a frisky foreplay takes place, and the movements become more intricate and accelerate with the music. Radha frantically embraces Krishna with repetitive circular arm movements and Krishna energetically extends his arms as if through her hips, with palms shaking, fingers extended, until the music suddenly subsides and the two embrace in stillness, lights fading.

The predominant rasas employed in this scene are sringara (erotic), and adbhuta (marvellous), which are mostly portrayed with nritta rather than rasa abhinaya. *Sampradayam*, being created by the second generation choreographer, significantly departs from the classical modes of representing rasas via elaborate hand gestures and dramatic facial expressions, which can be seen in *Mira* – created by her mother. *LDR*, made by the youngest of Darpana's choreographers, takes this shift even further by almost completely removing traditional rasa abhinaya, yet accurately representing – or rather creating the right conditions in order to induce – the whole set of bhavas which lead to rasas. He achieves that predominantly with nritta, which due to his cosmopolitan training is interfused with western contemporary dance - thus making the work more accessible, if not abstract, to the wider audience.

A spectrum, not separate things

In conclusion, regarding the main research question – what is rasa and how it is applied – the outcome of this research is that rasa can be many things, which however, does not mean that anything goes. The theory, even though occasionally quite elusive in its metaphors, defines rasa as a state which combines mental, emotional and spiritual aspects. That state is achieved by a mental, emotional and spiritual engagement of the spectator with what is presented to him. A particular kind of representation is required in order to

evoke a particular kind of state. This can be achieved through either, or both, acting out (abhinaya) the emotions (bhava) that comprise the desired state, and through representing that state itself by recreating the conditions conducive to that state with secondary bhavas (determinants, consequents and complimentary psychological states) or with nritya in various proportions. The performer may or may not – just as the spectator – achieve rasa, depending on their personal qualities.⁷

Rasa theory is a ready analytical tool for performing arts, and has been applied outside of them as well.⁸ The potential of rasa in contemporary dance lies in its applicability for composition as well as for aesthetics and philosophy. Regardless of whether a plot is present or absent in a contemporary dance performance, it is generally pervaded by emotion. Rasa theory can dissect that emotion into its constituents. In the instance of non-representational contemporary dance, it can provide architectonics for abstract design. As it explains the science of planning and constructing the plot, rasa theory can be adapted analogously to the latter, as well as directly in the aforementioned pieces containing a plot. In each instance, or in their combination, rasa theory can serve as a matrix for composition. With regard to aesthetics, rasa is a philosophical concept which addresses the fundamentals of an aesthetic experience, the agency of art and its relationality, and human psychological processes. As such it can be widely applied in theory of contemporary dance.

This article is based on: *Application of Rasas in Indian Classical Dance*. MA Thesis by Aleksandra Chmiel. Supervisor: Liesbeth Groot-Nibbelink. Theatre Studies, Utrecht University, 2015. <http://tiny.cc/navarasa>

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- 7 It makes sense to assume that numerous circumstances can influence whether the viewer has the right type of specific rasa in him at the time of the performance. Whether it would be a temporary bad mood caused by such trifles as commuting, or more permanent state of sadness, or perhaps anger at having been ridiculed in the past, the spectator brings with him a whole range of auxiliary factors that may affect whether, and which, rasas flow. *Natya Shastra* beyond imposing strict demands on the qualifications of the spectator does not address the role of these personal factors in influencing the experience of rasas. It is generally assumed that certain actions of the performer will result in specific reactions for the viewer, depending always on their individual qualities and skills. Chapter XXVII of *Natya Shastra – Success in Dramatic Production*, in prescribing the audience's desired reaction to a successful play, considers different psychological and cultural traits of 'cultured' and 'ordinary' spectators very briefly; it does not address the issue of relationality of rasa these traits may influence (NS 1165). However, Bharata Muni attributes the success of a play to both human and divine powers. The latter can manifest in 'wind, fire, rains, insects, fear from ... a serpent, stroke of lightning' (NS 1165). Undoubtedly these can influence not only the execution of the play, but also the spectator's temporary (and more permanent) emotional and psychological states which are not dependent on the show. In my understanding, since rasa is the desired outcome of a successful performance, and since these factors – which can obviously affect the mood of a viewer – are considered obstacles to a success, the influenced mood therefore can be considered the source of relationality of the rasa experience.
- 8 Marina Warner applies rasa theory in her book *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (1998), which explores the function of fear in literature. Sumit Mehndiratta uses the rasa theory as a matrix in abstract painting, as seen in *Navras 1* reproduced here and on the cover of the thesis.

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Performances:

- Long Distance Relationship (LDR)* by Revanta Sarabhai, 2011. Roehampton University London, Korzo Productiehuis Den Haag, Darpana Productions Ahmedabad. Video registration.
- Sampradayam* by Mallika Sarabhai, 2008. Darpana Productions, Ahmedabad. Video registration.
- Mira* by Mrinalini Sarabhai, 1980. Darpana Productions, Ahmedabad. Video registration.

Front cover image:

- Navras 1* by Sumit Mehndiratta, 2011. Acrylic on canvas. Private collection of Aleksandra Chmiel, Leiden.

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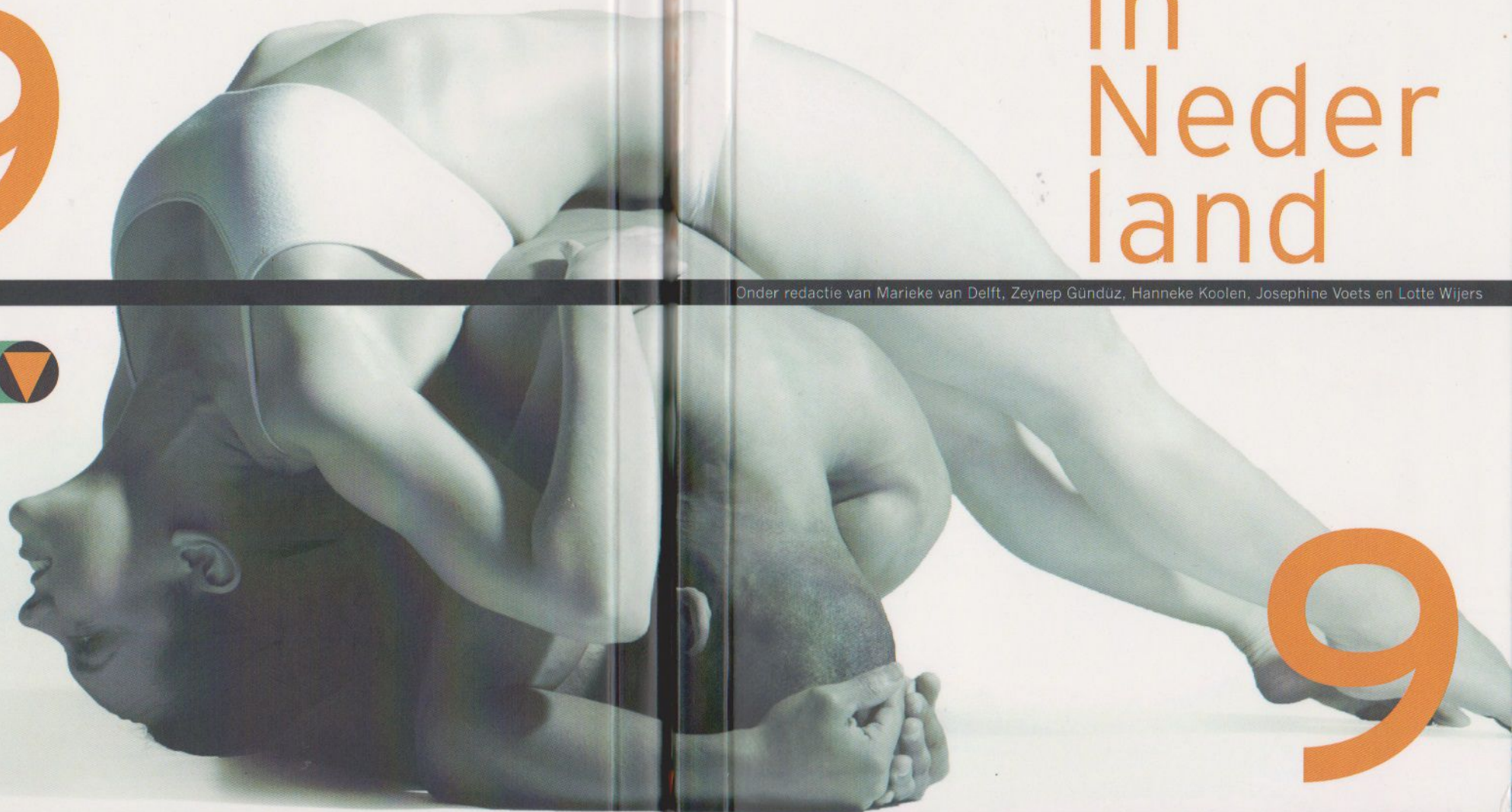
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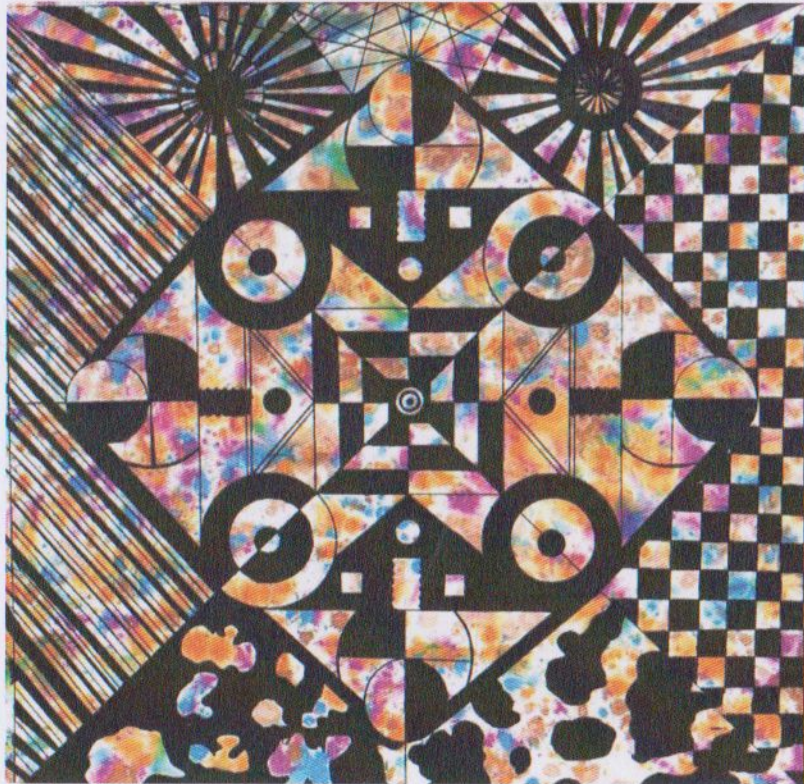
Onder redactie van Marieke van Delft, Zeynep Gündüz, Hanneke Koolen, Josephine Voets en Lotte Wijers

VERENIGING
VOOR
DANSONDERZOEK



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Navras 1 by Sumit Mehndiratta (2011). Acrylic on canvas. Private collection of Aleksandra Chmiel, Leiden.

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The thesis was written as an attempt to create a guide book for which copious amounts of material have been examined – confusing not only due to the plenitude of foreign terminology, and totally alien abstract concepts, but also because the literature on the subject is obscure, with poor referencing, insufficient translations, and contradictory commentaries. The subject being relatively unknown, required the introduction of auxiliary topics, which, vast in their nature, had to be thoroughly researched in order to bring out the essentials. Written as a mini-compendium, the thesis is meant to serve as a starting point and a reference guide for further investigation to whoever finds the concept of rasas enchanting and wishes to explore it within their own scope.

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The analyses of three case studies in the thesis: *Mira* (1980) by Mrinalini Sarabhai, *Sampradayam* (2008) by Mallika Sarabhai, and *Long Distance Relationship* (LDR, 2011) by Revanta Sarabhai, aim at revealing how the previously described rasa theory is applied in contemporary Bharatanatyam. The performances have been created by three generations of choreographers within the same school of abhinaya and were chosen to reflect different approaches to rasas.

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⁶ Examples of rasa executions by facial expressions, as described in *Understanding Bharatanatyam*: Sringara (erotic rasa): 'With a feeling of composure and happiness, the eyebrows slanting and the eyes glancing sideways'; Raudra (furious): 'The look cruel, the eyes reddened and rough, the eyelids and pupils motionless, the eyebrows curved'; Santam (peace, tranquillity): 'The eyelids closed gradually, the eyes in gentle movement, the pupils moving towards the corners' (p.59).

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A spectrum rather than separate elements

In conclusion, regarding the main research question – what is *rasa* and how it is applied – the outcome of this research is that *rasa* can be many things, which however, does not mean that anything goes. The theory, even though occasionally quite elusive in its metaphors, defines *rasa* as a state which combines mental, emotional and spiritual aspects. That state is achieved by a mental, emotional and spiritual engagement of the spectator with what is presented to him. A particular kind of representation is required in order to evoke a particular kind of state. This can be achieved through either, or both, acting out (*abhinaya*) the emotions (*bhava*) that comprise the desired state, and through representing that state itself by recreating the conditions conducive to that state with secondary *bhavas* (determinants, consequents and complimentary psychological states) or with *nritta* in various proportions. The performer may or may not – just like the spectator – achieve *rasa*, depending on their personal qualities.⁷

Rasa theory is a ready analytical tool for performing arts, and has been applied outside of them as well.⁸ The potential of *rasa* in contemporary dance lies in its applicability for composition as well as for aesthetics and philosophy.

⁷ It makes sense to assume that numerous circumstances can influence whether the viewer has the right type of a specific *rasa* in him during the performance. Whether it would be a temporary bad mood or perhaps a more permanent state of sadness, the spectator brings with him a whole range of auxiliary factors that may affect whether, and which, *rasas* flow. *Natya Shastra*, apart from imposing strict demands on the qualifications of the spectator, does not address the role of these personal factors in influencing the experience of *rasas*. It is generally assumed that certain actions of the performer will result in specific reactions for the viewer, depending always on their individual qualities and skills. Chapter XXVII of *Natya Shastra* – *Success in Dramatic Production*, in prescribing the audience's desired reaction to a successful play, considers different psychological and cultural traits of 'cultured' and 'ordinary' spectators very briefly; it does not address the issue of relationality of *rasa* these traits may influence (p.1165). However, Bharata Muni attributes the success of a play to both human and divine powers. The latter can manifest in 'wind, fire, rains, insects, fear from ... a serpent, stroke of lightning' (p.1165). Undoubtedly these can influence not only the execution of the play, but also the spectator's temporary (and more permanent) emotional and psychological states which are not dependent on the show. In my understanding, as *rasa* is the desired outcome of a successful performance, and as these factors – which can obviously affect the mood of a viewer – are considered obstacles to a success, the influenced mood can be considered the source of relationality of the *rasa* experience.

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Regardless of whether a plot is present or absent in a contemporary dance performance, it is often pervaded by emotion. *Rasa* theory can dissect that emotion into its constituents. In the instance of non-representational contemporary dance, it can provide architectonics for abstract design. As it explains the science of planning and constructing the plot, *rasa* theory can be adapted analogously to the latter, as well as directly in the aforementioned pieces containing a plot. In each instance, or in their combination, *rasa* theory can serve as a matrix for composition. With regard to aesthetics, *rasa* is a philosophical concept which addresses the fundamentals of an aesthetic experience, the agency of art and its relationality, and human psychological processes. As such it can be widely applied in theory of contemporary dance.

This article is based on:

Application of Rasas in Indian Classical Dance. MA Thesis, Theatre Studies, Utrecht University, 2015

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