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VASUGUPTA, *Gli aforismi di Šiva con il commento di Kṣemarāja (Śivasūtravimarśinī)*, a cura di Raffaele Torella, Milano, Adelphi (Piccola Biblioteca 641), 2013 (Bettina Baumer) ........................................................................................................ p. 267
The beginning of attention to *rasa* in Western scholarship may be brought back to the end of the 19th century and above all to the famous *Le Théâtre Indien* by French scholar Sylvain Levi, who one of the first gave a high assessment of this category. In the following century many Western scholars and among them Russian Indologists¹ have shown increasing interest in the *rasa* theory. Their research brought to life many valuable publications on the notion of *rasa*, determining its importance as the supreme ancient Indian aesthetic category. Without shrugging off this latter view, we feel bound, however, to stress that the ancient Indian concept of *rasa* contains numerous aspects not to be explained from the point of aesthetic ideas. The present work concerns these aspects, which, will be shown, arose in a ritual context and testify to the ritual roots of this category.

As is known, the oldest description of *rasa* is found in the

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**Nāṭyaśāstra**, a treatise dated approximately to the 2nd cent. BC – 2nd cent. AD. The concept proper emerged earlier, as demonstrated by the author repeatedly alluding to his forerunners, with numerous citations which confirm many of their premises. No doubt, by the time when the **Nāṭyaśāstra** acquired its modern form, the doctrine of *rasa* already possessed a renown befitting its antiquity, authority and the age-old tradition sanctifying it.

The **Nāṭyaśāstra** provides detailed characteristics of eight *rasa* varieties: Śṛṅgāra⁵, desirable; Ḥāsyā³, risorial, Karuṇa⁴, sorrowful, Raudra⁵, violent, Vīra⁶, heroism,

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² Śṛṅgāra – adjective derived from śṛṅga, which means “animal horn”, “elephant tusk”, “mountain peak”, “zenith”, “acme”, “limit”. The literal meaning of Śṛṅgāra – “the utmost” or “the highest” might be interpreted in two ways: 1) the more earthly one pertains to carnal passion and sexual desire. In this instance, Śṛṅgāra transparently hints at the hard and erect animal horn as visually symbolizing potency; 2) the more abstract and general as the highest limit or the peak. It possibly pointed at the special status of Śṛṅgāra, which was regarded as the highest and most important of the *rasas*. The translation “desirable” is situational, based on semantic, and expresses the principal characteristic of Śṛṅgāra as an emotion connected with the utmost, passionate desire to attain something. It was desire par excellence, which originally concerned everything, including the religious spheres of life and later was reduced to erotic desire and carnal love. (Telling in this respect is one of the epithets applied to Kama the love god – Śṛṅgāra-janman, “born of desire”). For the theory of Indian culture as “anthropology of desire”, see: M. Biardeau, *L'hindouisme: Anthropologie d'une Civilization*. Paris: Flammarion, 1981 (the Index under kama, desire, etc.). See also: Ch. Chapple. *Karma and Creativity*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1986, who treats the desire as one of the fundamental ideas of Hinduism. G.C.O. Haas, in his translation of the Dāsarūpa (see: *The Daśarūpa. A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy by Dhanamjaya*. First Transl. from the Sanskrit with the Text and Introd. and Notes by G.C.O. Haas. New York: Columbia University Press, 1912, p. 145 (Rpt.: Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962) (further – DR) interpreted Śṛṅgāra in the later and narrower sense as erotic sentiment. M. Ghosh, who followed him in translating many terms, interpreted Śṛṅgāra similarly (See: *The Nāṭyaśāstra*. Completely transl. for the first time from the Original Sanskrit with an Introduction, Various Notes and Index by M. Ghosh. Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya, vol. 1, 1967, p. 102) (further – MGT).

³ Ḥāsyā – adjective derived from hāsa, which means “laughter”, “joy”, “jubilation”, “entertainment”. Haas (DR, p. 142) and Ghosh (MGT, p. 102) translated Ḥāsyā as “comic” sentiment.

⁴ Karuṇa – verbal adjective from kṛ, or kṝ, meaning “despondent”, “gloomy”, “melancholy”, “grim”, “pathetic”, as well as “compassionate”, “merciful”, “condolent”. To all appearances, in the Nāṭyaśāstra context Karuṇa mostly described the mournful mental state after the battle. Haas (DR, p. 146) and subsequently Ghosh (MGT, p. 102) translated Karuṇa as ‘pathetic’.

⁵ Raudra – adjective derived from raudra, lit. “Rudric”, i.e. endowed with the nature of Rudra (Śiva) or his rudra companion demons, and possessing their qualities. In other words, it is a strong, powerful, fierce creature, who also brings, forbodes or symbolises misfortune, and ill-starred. Haas (DR, p. 142) as well as Ghosh (MGT, p. 102) translated Raudra as ‘furious’.

⁶ Vīra – verbal adjective from vīr (vi-īr), which means “split”, “divide”, “pierce”, and “wound”. The idea of suppression and armed combat underlying these words determined the meaning of the noun Vīra – it designates a hero or leader, which may apply to a god, mostly
Bhayānaka\(^7\), terrifying, Bībhatsa\(^8\), disgust and Adbhuta\(^9\), wondrous\(^10\).

Proceeding from the inevitably conventional translations of rasa names, expressed by different parts of speech, one may assume that they are mere emotions felt by the theatre audience. This interpretation is true only in part, and does not fully exhaust the whole range of meanings connected with rasas, especially because the Nāṭyaśāstra treats rasa as the basic — if not the only goal of the drama\(^11\). To be properly understood, the

\(^7\) Bhayānaka — adjective derived from bhaya, meaning “panic”, “fear”, “horror”, “trepidation” or something fearsome. Haas (DR, p. 130) and Ghosh (MGT, p. 102) translated Bhayānaka as ‘terrible’.

\(^8\) Bībhatsa — desiderative of bādh or possibly bhī, with the wrong duplication and suffix, meaning “repulsive” or “nauseating”. Haas (DR, p. 141) and Ghosh (MGT, p. 102) translated Bībhatsa as ‘odious’.

\(^9\) Adbhuta — participle meaning “wondrous”, “miraculous” and “supernatural”. Haas (DR, p. 145) and Ghosh (MGT, p. 102) translate Adbhuta as ‘marvellous’.


\(^11\) The author of the treatise provides a direct indication to it, pointing out that: “no meaning [of the drama] has any development unrelated to rasa” (na hi rasād-ṛte kaścid-arthaḥ pravartate) (NS, p. 82). The majority of the quotations are from Calcutta edition of the Nāṭyaśāstra: M. Ghosh, ed. The Nāṭyaśāstra ascribed to Bharata-Muni. The Original
content of this category demands an analysis, even if concise, of
the whole system of related categories, which together make up
a kind of *rasa* concept within the general theory of the drama\(^{12}\).

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* presents the concept of *rasa* as a three-level
hierarchy. The first level, initial in a sense, materializes in the
*vibhāvas* (causes) and *anubhāvas* (manifestations)\(^ {13}\), which
condition the choice of scenic representational means, termed
*abhinayas* by the author. Man’s actions and responses, and a
surrounding best suited to his feelings are represented on stage
with the help of a range of devices, which help to disclose the
message and content of the drama. In this, the *vibhāvas* concern
the scenic props, make-up, costumes and *mise-en-scènes* while
the *anubhāvas* determine the choice of acting devices.

“So, why [is it called] *vibhāva*? It is said that the *vibhāva*
is an instrument of knowledge. *Vibhāva* is [the same as]
‘cause’, ‘motiv’, ‘impulse’ – [all these words are]
synonyms. It determines [such] means of representation [as]
speech, [movements] of the body [and manifestations] of the
nature. That is why it is [called] *vibhāva*. Just as ‘defined’
[and] ‘comprehended’ are words close in their meaning”
(atha vibhāva iti kasmā | ucyate vibhavo vijñānārthaḥ |
vibhāvah kāraṇaṁ nimittaiḥ hetur-iti paryāyāḥ |
vibhāyate'nena vāg-aṅga-sattva-abhinayā ity-ato vibhāvah |
yathā vibhāvitaṁ vijñātam-ity-anartha-antaram NŚ, p. 92).
Also: “It is called *vibhāva* because it defines many
meanings [of the drama] resting on [such] means of

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\(^{13}\) Haas (DR, p. 106) and Ghosh (MGT, p. 102) translated *vibhāva* as “determinant” and *anubhāva* as “consequent”.

As for the anubhāva, “the means of representation produced by speech, [movements of the] body [and manifestations of] nature is perceived with this” (anubhāvyate'nena vāg-aṅga-sattvaiḥ-kṛto'bhinaya iti NŚ, p. 92). The same idea is expressed in verse a bit later in greater detail: “As the message [of the drama] is perceived with the help of [such] means of representation [as] speech [and movements of] the body, when combined with speech [and the movements of the principal and] auxiliary parts of the body, [it] is known [as] anubhāva” (vāg-aṅga-abhinayena-īha yatas-tv-artho'nbhāvyate | vāg-aṅga-upaṅga-saṁhyuktastv-anubhāvas-tataḥ smṛtaḥ NŚ 7.5).

The treatise demands the vibhāvas and anubhāvas be related to natural human conduct in particular practical situations and there are so many that define all of them is simply impossible: “vibhāvas and anubhāvas are well known in the world. For the reason of their closeness to the nature of the world, their traits are not specified in order to prevent excessive liking [for specification]” (vibhāva-anubhāvau loka-prasiddhā-v Eva | loka-svabhāva-upagatatvāc-cā-esāṁ lakṣānaṁ na-ucyate | ati-prasaṅga-nivṛty-artha- ca NŚ, p. 92). And further on: “The wise know the vibhāvas and anubhāvas, [as well as] the means of representation that fully reflect the essence of the world and follow the ways of the world” (loka-sva-bhāva-saṁsiddhā loka-yātrā-anugāminaḥ | anubhāva-vibhāvās-ca jñeyās-tv-abhinayair budhaiḥ NŚ 7.6).

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15 As follows from the context, vibhāva is a condition that evokes or develops a particular mental or physical state. In the drama, it determines the outward characteristics or results of emotion. For an attempt to interpret vibhāva in the Western psychological context, see: H.D. Sharma. “A Psychological Analysis of vibhāva”. Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, vol. LXIII, 1982, pp. 253–254.
As the theatre merely imitates reality, the combination of vibhāvas and anubhāvas causes the emergence of a purely theatrical image, the bhāva, which imitates natural human conduct and, at the same time, essentially differs from it. Unlike the number of vibhāvas and anubhāvas, which is practically unlimited, as is the number of actual situations in real life and spontaneous human reactions to them, the bhāvas are limited in number. The treatise indicates it as 49: “eight stable bhāvas, thirty three transitory and eight essential ones – such are the [three] varieties” (aṣṭau bhāvāḥ sthāyinaḥ | trayas-triṁśadvyabhicārinah | aṣṭau sātvikā iti bhedāḥ NŚ, p. 92).

As follows from the last definition the bhāvas differ among themselves. Thirty three of these, known as the vyabhicāri bhāva, could be interpreted as transitory, passing or unsteady psychological states. Eight more, the sāttvika bhāva, or essential ones, serve to enact outward manifestations of the hero’s nature or essence (like tears or a blush) and to reveal his emotional state. The remaining eight, the sthāyi bhāva, are regarded as stable, steady or permanent psychological states, closely connected with rasas and evolving into them under certain conditions.

All bhāvas characterize various aspects of the scenic practice. This is what the Nāṭyaśāstra has to say about them: “why are they bhāvas? What do bhāvas manifest? It is said: the

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16 Bhāva (whose name derives from the Sanskrit root ‘bhū’, “to become”, “to be”, “arise”, “come into being”, “exist”) literally means “state” and “that which takes place or manifests itself”. Haas (DR, pp. 106-129) interpreted it literally as “state”, while Ghosh (MGT, p. 102) defined it more precisely as “psychological state” as he pointed that such meanings as “emotion” and “feeling” were also characteristic of the treatise. For the sthāyi Haas proposed translation “permanent”, for the vyabhicāri “transitory” and for sāttvika “involuntary”. Ghosh interpreted them slightly differently and translated sthāyi as “durable” and vyabhicāri as “complimentary”. The term sāttvika he preferred to leave without translation, because in his opinion it “cannot be properly translated into English”. He did not accept the interpretation of Haas, because it is “very misleading for the NŚ takes sātvā to be connected with manas” or mind (MGT, p. 103, note 22).

17 The Nāṭyaśāstra uses bhāva as a polysemantic term that supposes several semantic layers: apart from the emotional psychological sphere that affects the playwright, the performers and the audience, it also determines a number of specific purely scenic means of the drama production.
bhāvas reveal the meanings of the drama endowed with words, gestures [and manifestations of] nature. Bhāva designates the device that leads to the [desired] result. Of the same meaning [are the words]: “created”, “caused to dwell”, and “made”. It is known in the world: Oh, everything is produced by this smell or taste [that create] each other. There is also the meaning [bhāva] – “dissemination”. There are ślokās here: The meaning brought by vibhāvas and disseminated by anubhāvas [and] means of representation: speech, [movements of] the body and [manifestations of] nature is called bhāva. The bhāvas are known to the producers of the nāṭya because they manifest the rasas related to the various means of representation” (bhāvā iti kasmāt kiṁ bhāvayanti-iti bhāvā | ucyate vāg-aṅga-sattva-upetān-kāvya-arthaṁ-bhāvayanti-iti bhāvāḥ | bhāva iti karaṇa-sādhanaṁ tathā bhāvitaḥ vāsitaḥ kṛta ity-an-artha-antaram | loke'pi ca siddham aho hy-anyonya-gandhena rasena vā sarvam-evā bhāvitam | api ca vyāpy-artham ślokās-ca-aatra bhavanti | vibhāvair-āhṛto yo'rtas-tv-anubhāvena gamyate | vāg-aṅga-sattva-abhinayaṁ sa bhāva iti samjñītaḥ || nāna-abhinaya-sambaddhān-bhāvayanti rasāṁ-imān | yasmāt-tasmād-amī bhāvā vijñeyā nāṭya-yoktṛbhīḥ NŚ, p. 92; 7.1, 3).

An essential issue is related to the status and character of the bhāva category in the theoretical system of the Nāṭyaśāstra. According to the cited definitions, the bhāva is a specific creative power to which the drama owes its existence. A generic element like smell or taste, the bhāva creates, in a way, the illusory matter of the nāṭya as it spreads in the drama and imbues it. This is what makes the bhāva the means of bringing forth the content on the drama to lead to the desired result – rasa. According to the Nāṭyaśāstra, the bhāva appears on the basis of the sum total of the interrelated vibhāvas and anubhāvas as the logical result of their joint impact, and materializes through such means of representation (abhinayas) as speech, movement and manifestations of nature (sāttva). However, unlike the latter, the bhāva cannot be perceived visually – we cannot say it is “seen” or “heard”. It can be only suggested and instilled in a specific way in the audience’s heart.
and mind. However closely connected through the vibhāvas and anubhāvas with the basic means of representation – even though it is direct fruit of expert acting, it is an ideal fruit, which impacts first of all the viewer’s heart and supposes his emotional response.

Contemporary research regards the bhāva as spontaneous human emotion, a man’s actual psychological state, which arises in everyday life and describes his genuine emotional world. According to the scholarly literature, the scenic action merely bases itself on these feelings and interplaying with them to bring forth an aesthetic feeling – rasa. However, neither the general definition of bhāva nor the descriptions of its forty nine varieties gives grounds for a conclusion about its verisimilitude. On the contrary, all bhāvas directly result from acting and emerge only in the scenic action thanks to carefully selected vibhāvas and anubhāvas.

The conclusion that the bhāva is not a genuine emotion, characterizing humans in actuality but its artistic image, pure and unadulterated – one that arises and seizes the audience only in the theatre – makes us review current concepts of the rasa theory presented by the Nāṭyaśāstra. These concepts were based on the assumption that rasa alone can be regarded as an aesthetic emotion. As things really are, the bhāva, as a unique theatrical emotional experience closely linked to all stages of plot development, shall rather be defined as an aesthetic category. Formed on the basis of vibhāvas and anubhāvas, all bhāvas possess theatrical illusionary qualities and belong to the specific artistic reality of the stage.

As the eight sthāyi bhāvas closely correspond to the eight rasas\(^\text{18}\), we see the introduction of these latter as artificial – even redundant. The system is complete due to the interdependence and interaction of the various bhāvas. Nevertheless, the author of the Nāṭyaśāstra follows his

\(^{18}\) The desirable rasa (Śṛṅgāra) corresponds to the sthāyi bhāva of delight (Ratī); risorial rasa (Hāsya) to laughter (Hāsa); sorrowful (Karūna) to grief (Śoka); violent (Raudra) to irritation (Krodha); heroism (Vīra) to courage (Utsāha); terrifying (Bhayānaka) to fear (Bhaya); disgust (Bībhatsa) to aversion (Jugupsā); and wondrous (Adbhuta) to astonishment (Vismaya).
predecessors in arguing that *rasas*, rather than *bhāvas* shall be the goal of the drama.¹⁹

Late theoreticians made numerous attempts to give a logical resolution of this contradiction, evident to them. In these attempts, they proceeded from the contemporaneous stage practice and the ideas of *rasa* as a pure aesthetic phenomenon. As none other than *rasa* took the place of the basic aesthetic category, they tried to impose a new meaning on the entire hierarchy and reinterpret the status of *bhāvas* in it. Probably, this was how the *bhāva* grew to be interpreted as the genuine feeling, man’s actual psychological state in everyday life. The performance influenced these very feelings. Thus, *rasas* emerged as aesthetic equivalents of *bhāvas*. With mediaeval theoreticians, the correlation of *rasas* and *bhāvas* roughly imitated that of actual events and those represented on stage. The former are reality, and the latter illusions suggested and received.

Be this as it may, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* disproves the allegation of the verisimilitude of the *bhāva*. Evidently, the content of *rasa*, as presented in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, also vitally differs from its late interpretations and the resultant views of present-day researchers.

The treatise offers two types of *rasa* description. The first sees *rasa* as a dramatic structural link and presents the technicalities of its achievement. In this, *rasa* emerges as natural result of the various production elements interacting, and really does come close to *bhāva*. The second kind of description characterizes the impact of *rasa* on the audience and defines the essential features of this phenomenon. To the definitions of the essence of *rasa* which, as I see it, the author of the treatise borrowed from the older tradition, belong all that concern the interpretation of the term *rasa*, based on its comparison with the

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¹⁹ It is also indicative that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* describes the *rasas* in much greater detail than the *sthāyi bhāvas* corresponding to them. It would be more natural to see the reverse, with the greatest possible attention to particulars in the analysis of *sthāyi bhāvas* and reference to the presented material for each corresponding *rasa*. More than that, the *rasas* are characterized before all the other categories, and so the description of the eight *rasas* virtually substitutes for the more concise definitions of the correspondent permanent *bhāvas*, making them redundant, in a way.
pleasure experienced by the eater of an excellently cooked dish. I ought to see in this context the number of protecting gods and colour associations, the emergence of rasa from sthāyi bhāva, and its impact on the audience, i.e., the description of rasa in its receptive aspect – as a kind of savouring.

Of the many meanings of the word rasa, the traditional theoretical evaluation of the theatre selected only one, taste. The word had grown to be used as a technical term by the time the Nāṭyaśāstra appeared. The treatise never gives a direct explanation of rasa as taste. It has no precise definitions for the essence of rasa, offering intuitive analogies instead: “What is an example [one may ask]? It is said: as taste emerges from the various seasonings, herbs and other components, so does rasa emerge from a combination of the various bhāvas. As six tastes are produced with treacle and other components, seasonings and herbs, so do sthāyi bhāvas combined with various bhāvas attain [the characteristics] of rasa” (ko drṣṭāntah | atra-aha yathā hi | nānā-vaṃjana-oṣadhi-dravya-saṛṇyogād-rasa-niṣpattiḥ tathā nā-nā-bhāva-upagamād-rasa-niṣpattiḥ | yathā hi guḍa-adibhir-dravyair-vaṃjana-dravyair-aṣṭadhihiś-ca śād rasā nirvartyante tathā nānā-bhāva-upagatā api sthāyino bhāvā rasatvamā-āpnuvanti-itī NŚ, p. 82).

Through this comparison with taste – a quality of food defied of verbal description and emerging out of a combination of components, which do not possess this quality when taken separately – the author stressed the ability of rasa to emerge out of sthāyi bhāvas being combined with other bhāvas in a special way. This idea is continued by the following analogy: as the taste of food cannot be felt unless you taste it, so you cannot perceive rasa through your eyes or ears alone – only in the specific way of partaking or savouring it.

“It is said here: what is the meaning of the word rasa? It is said: [it emerged] due to savouring. [One might ask:] how to savour rasa? As wise men savour well-cooked food with

20 The six tastes are sweet (madhura), sour (amlā), salty (lavaṇa), acrid (kaṭuka), bitter (tikta) and pungent (kashaśa).
diverse seasoning to enjoy diverse tastes and attain joy and other [pleasant feelings] so do wise spectators enjoy *sthāyi bhāvas*, ornate with diverse [other] *bhāvas* and means of representations, and endowed with speech, gestures and [manifestations of] nature, and attain joy and other [pleasant feelings]. That is why they are known as the *rasas* of *nāṭya*” (atra-aha rasa iti kaḥ pada-arthaḥ | ucyate āsvādyatvāt | katham-āsvādyate rasaḥ | yathā hi nānā-vyanjana-sarinskṛtam-annam bhuṇjāna rasān-āsvādayanti sumanasaḥ puruṣa harṣa-ardhān-āsvādayantā tathā nānā-bhāva-āsvādayantā vāg-āṅga-sattva-upetān sthāyi-bhāva-āsvādayantā sumanasaḥ preksakāh harṣa-ardhān-āsvādayantā | tasmān-nāṭya-rasā ity-abhivyākhyātāh NŚ, p. 82).

An analysis of this definition leads us to a number of conclusions. First, the partaking or savouring of *rasa* gives pleasure. Second, *rasa* is savouring not directly but through the mediation of *sthāyi bhāvas* which, as natural results of the *abhinaya*-based acting, influence the audience’s senses and can be actually perceived. This idea is developed further in the quotation from earlier authors: “As gourmets savour of food, coupled with a number of components and diverse seasoning enjoy, so the wise [spectators] enjoy in mind (*manas*) the *sthāyi bhāvas*, coupled with [other] *bhāvas* and means of representation. Therefore, they are known as the *rasas* of *nāṭya*” (yathā bahu-dravya-yutair-vyanjanair-bhuhbhir-yutam | āsvādayantā bhuṇjānā bhaktarī bhaktavido janāḥ || bhāva-abhinay-saṁbaddhān-sthāyi-bhāva-aris-tathā budhāḥ | āsvā-dayantā manasaḥ tasman-nāṭya-rasāḥ smṛtāḥ NŚ 6.32-33).

As follows from this latter definition, the *sthāyi bhāvas* can directly penetrate the viewer’s *manas*, which, according to the Indian understanding embodies the indissoluble unity of heart, soul and mind, and thus is an emotionally coloured, rather than logically austere reason. This point is borne out by another quotation from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*: “The meaning
consonant with the heart\textsuperscript{21}, [precisely] its \textit{sthāyi} \textit{bhāva} brings forth the \textit{rasa}, [and] the body [is] penetrated by it as dry wood is devoured by flame” (\textit{yo’rtho hrdaya-saṁvādī tasya bhāvo rasa-udbhavaḥ | śarīraṁ vyāpyate tena śuṣkaṁ kāṣṭham-iva-agninā NŚ 7.7}).

Thus, to put it in a modern idiom, the \textit{sthāyi bhāvas} appeal both to the rational and emotional elements in man, and are capable of deeply touching the entire human self. Hence an important conclusion which can be drawn from this statement: the emergence of \textit{rasa} is preceded by a certain goal-oriented intellectual activity, a unique reflection based on an interested perception of the scenic action.

Last but not least, we see the following definition as pivotal in the understanding of the essence of \textit{rasa}: “Thus, these forty-nine \textit{bhāvas}, [which make] the basis for the manifestation of poetic \textit{rasas}, should ascend [to them]. \textit{Rasas} emerge out of them as they merge with the quality of universality” (\textit{evam-ete käyva-rasa-abhivyakti-hetava eko-na-paṁcāsad-bhāvāḥ pratyavagantavyāḥ | ebhyaś-ca sāmānya-guṇa-yogena rasā nispadyante NŚ, p. 93}).

As follows from this, the \textit{rasa} appears precisely at the instant when the \textit{bhāva} acquires a certain supplementary quality named \textit{sāmānya}\textsuperscript{22}. The author of the \textit{Nāṭyaśāstra} makes this concise thesis, without getting back to it later in order to give it any


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explanation. Neither does he explain the concept of sāmānya, which characterizes a vital difference between the rasā and the bhāva. Nevertheless, certain statements in the text help us to clarify what is supposed to happen at this crucial moment of conversion of bhāva into rasā, as the text has it: “The colours of [the divine world in the theatre should be] fully manifested23, though colourfulness is difficult to achieve in the [real] world; [drama] which is acted out with diligence results in the breakthrough (vimardā)" (citrāṇi na virājante loke citraṁ hi durlabhham | vimardor-āgamāyāti prayukto hi prayatnataḥ NŚ 7. 123). The literal meaning of the word vimarda is “break”, “crush”, “rapid qualitative change” or “the advent of a principally new state”. In other words, this moment marks a qualitative change in the course of the performance and a shift to a completely new emotional state.

Thus, the concept of rasā initially could manifest the borderline state of transition from real earthly values to transcendental ones, when the impact of the drama made the audience’s subjective consciousness discard its definite personal quality to dissolve in the supreme spiritual reality. Possibly, as they felt rasā, the spectators went through superhuman, superpersonal experiences, and knew delight, laughter, grief, irritation, courage, fear, aversion or astonishment as such.

How, then, was this superpersonal feeling achieved in practice? What kind of efforts made the audience go through a superhumanly strong emotion all together as the drama reached its peak? Evidently, this question vitally concerned the author of the Nāṭyaśāstra. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have asked it in the treatise: “It is said here: if rasās emerge through confluence with the quality of universality and [on the basis of] the 49 bhāvas, enriched of vībhāvas and anubhāvas, and interrelated

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23 na virājante means literally “are not discoloured”, i.e., they do not lose colourfulness as their quality. In GOS this śloka (7. 186) is read a bit differently: “The poetic work is not born of one rasā, one bhāva or one vṛtti but, when performed with diligence, [all this taken together] leads to a breakthrough” (na hy-eka-rasajāṁ kāvyaṁ naikabhāvaikavṛttikam vimarde rāgamāyāti prayuktaṁ hi prayatnataḥ GOS I, p. 385).
by meaning, how then the *sthāyi bhāvas* attain the quality of *rasa*?” (atra-aha yad anyonya-artha-saṁśritair-vibhāva-anubhāva-vyañjitair-eko-na-pañcāśad-bhā-vaḥ sāmānya-guṇa-yogena-abhinispadyante rasās-tat-kathāṁ sthāyina eva bhāvā rasatvam-āpnuvanti NS, p. 93).

One had every reason to ask this question – but, in fact, it remained unanswered. The essence of *rasa* as a specific *sthāyi bhāva*, that acquired the universal quality (*sāmānya*) achieved through the breakthrough (*vimarda*), is void of practical expression and shall be cognized intuitively, by an insight or through revelation. Evidently, a *rasa* arises as a thoroughly new quality – something entirely different from what has given it birth. Strictly speaking, *rasa* can’t be created – only evoked and anticipated through a correct combination of diverse *bhāvas*, as a gourmet anticipates and produces the taste of a dish by seasoning it with particular spices. This is why the attempt to specify the appearance of *rasa* leads the author only to one more analogy. The *sthāyi bhāva* is likened to a king surrounded by other *bhāvas* as retainers24 – a comparison mainly aimed to bring out the exceptionally elevated status of the *rasa*.

As we see it, the very description of *rasa*, made of hints and half-spoken statements, testifies to the esoteric nature of the doctrine exposed, which is wholly opened solely to an adept’s understanding. More than that, this description shows that the scenic impact on man produced a supernatural quality defying direct and outspoken expression. Indicative in this connection is the testimony of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* specifying the patron deity of every *rasa*, but never linking the other categories to anything

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24 The *Nāṭyaśāstra* says on this: “Of humans possessing the same properties, similar bodies with a stomach and limbs, and similar convictions, [some] reach majesty due to their ancestry, character, knowledge, works, mastery [and] wisdom, while the others, of inferior intelligence, follow them. Likewise, *vibhāvas, anubhāvas* [and] the transitory [bhāvas] base on the *sthāyi bhāvas*, which dominate due to [their] fundamental essence, the other *bhāvas*, [even present] as *sthāyi*, being subordinate to them and based [on them] due to their extraordinary qualities. [In this] the *vyabhichāri bhāvas* make the retinue” (NS, p. 93).
superpersonal\textsuperscript{25}. More than that, all r\textit{asas} had a divine origin and, according to tradition, we owe the initial knowledge of them to none other than Brahm\textit{a} (N\textit{Ś}, p. 81; 6.16). It will be appropriate to mention here the correlation of every r\textit{asa} to a particular colour: “Śr\textit{ṅgāra is dark}\textsuperscript{26}, H\textit{āsya is announced to be white}\textsuperscript{27}, Karu\textit{ṇa grey}\textsuperscript{28} and Raudra red\textsuperscript{29}, while V\textit{īra} should be known as pale yellow\textsuperscript{30}, Bhay\textit{ānaka} black and Bībhatsa blue\textsuperscript{31}, while Adbhuta is known [as] bright yellow” (śyāmo bhavati

\textsuperscript{25} Viṣṇu protects the Śr\textit{ṅgāra} r\textit{asa}, Pramatha H\textit{āsya}, Rudra Raudra, Yama Karu\textit{ṇa}, Mahākāla Bībhatsa, Kāla Bhay\textit{ānaka}, Mahendra Vīra and Brahm\textit{a} Adbhuta (N\textit{Ś} 6.44-45).

\textsuperscript{26} The Śr\textit{ṅgāra} possibly associates with dark colours due to Viṣṇu, the heavenly patron of this r\textit{asa}. On the one hand, he is of dark complexion; on the other hand, he personifies the female basis of the Universe. The author of the N\textit{āṭyaśāstra} was well acquainted with this symbolism, as testified by the pūrvaraṅga ritual, which worships Brahm\textit{a} as the bearer of the neuter element, Śiva of the male and Viṣṇu the female (N\textit{Ś} 5. 98-101). When there were no actresses in the early ritual theatre and only male Brāhmaṇas performed, it was none other than Viṣṇu, who transformed on the stage into a beautiful woman (mohini). This scenic device was used even in one of the oldest dramas, the Am\textit{ṛtamanthana}. For details, see: N.R. Lidova. \textit{Drama and Ritual of Early Hinduism}. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994, pp. 59-79. Curiously, Viṣṇu’s bow, mentioned in the N\textit{āṭyaśāstra} (N\textit{Ś} 22.12), made of horn or resembling a horn in shape, is named śārng (or śṛṅga). Possibly, it is also related to the name of this r\textit{asa}.

\textsuperscript{27} Also “bright”, “light”, “pure”. The positive element symbolized in Indian culture by white – the colour of Brah\textit{mā} the supreme god and of the Brāhmaṇas caste, the basic colour of sacrifices, and the natural colour of pūj\textit{ā} sacrificial flowers – allows assume that, in this instance, laughter is synonymous with divine rejoicing and is interpreted as its most graphic expression.

\textsuperscript{28} In other words, dove-grey. The symbolism of this colour is analyzed in: H.C. Patyal. “Pigeon in the Vedic Mythology and Ritual”. \textit{Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute}, Poona, vol. LXLI, 1990, pp. 310-317. The connection of the sorrowful r\textit{asa} with this colour may be naturally explained by the colour of ashes on the site of a funeral pyre. This assumption is borne out by Yama the underworld god being the divine patron of this r\textit{asa}.

\textsuperscript{29} The connection of the red colour with wrath is more or less evident – suffice to recall human eyes bloodshot in violent anger. We should also mention the predominance of red in the makeup of demons opposed to the protagonist in the modern kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre. Despite all the differences, it is fairly close to the Sanskrit drama tradition and the N\textit{āṭyaśāstra}.

\textsuperscript{30} Also creamy reddish and red shot by yellow, with their additional meanings of “glowing”, “bright”, “clean”, “pretty”. Possibly, this colour, which resembles natural complexion, was emphasized by many shades of red in the makeup as the dominant colour of heroic characters. Sharing the basis with the colour of the Raudra r\textit{asa}, the “heroic” colour came as its mollified and ennobled version.

\textsuperscript{31} Possibly, the link between this colour and revulsion ascends to the episode in the myth of the churning of the \textit{amṛta} in which Ś\textit{iva} drinks kālakūṭa poison appearing out of the water, which forever dyes his neck blue. This assumption is all the more probable because Ś\textit{iva} as Mahākāla is the patron of this r\textit{asa}.
śṛṅgāraḥ sito hāśyaḥ prakīrtitaḥ | kapotaḥ karuṇaś-ca-eva rakto
raudrāḥ prakīrtitaḥ || gauro viṁsa-tu viṁśeṣyāh kṛṣṇaś-ca-eva
bhayānakaḥ | nīla-varṇas-tu bībhatsaḥ pītaś-ca-eva-adbhutaḥ
smṛtaḥ NŚ 6.42-43).

The author of the Nāṭyaśāstra postulates colour correlations for the rasa alone, not for other categories – a fact probably to be seen as one more proof of its sacral status, as the tradition of esoteric knowledge regarded colour among the vital properties of the divine world and visual manifestations of cosmic energies emanated by the highest spiritual spheres. This included colours in the arrangement of mystical correlations meant to demonstrate the most secret of the pillars of being. Barely discernible today, the link with gods and colours must have meant much to adepts in its time, with its clear indication of the place of rasa in the network of sacral symbolism.

All the above improves our understanding of the interrelation

between bhāvas and rāsas. We may presume that initially the rasa was a sacred, religious category, while bhāva reflected far more practical, even profane phenomena – rather than considering the two of them as one reflecting a real-life emotion, and the other – its aesthetic equivalent. Both belonged to a world conventional and fictitious, which but imitated reality. The bhāvas, however, were, in a way, natural and spontaneous fruit of acting and the scenic representation of real life (in this sense, they were much closer to the present-day idea of the aesthetic effect), while rāsas arose as the result of transition by bhāvas to another quality; as a phenomenon of the supersensual world – rather mystical, to be “savoured” than illusory, to be suggested.

The roots of this concept of rasa most probably belong to the earliest formative period of the drama, when it was a ritual performance, a unique liturgical frame for an offering and part of the religious ceremony33. As supreme goal of such ritualistic drama, the rasa was outside the everyday emotion. Thus, supernatural qualities and protection by patron gods were bestowed on it. Intrinsic to the rasa, its sacral and supernatural qualities were inseparable from its symbolic content. The analysis of the latter is crucial for the substantiation of the ritualistic origin of this category and would help to explain why rasa as taste was chosen to express a mystical experience.

Due to the limitation of short paper, this analysis, based on a great number of texts, starting from Vedic sources, could not be presented here at length. Thus I will limit myself to several most important statements and conclusions, arguing the hypothesis that the initial concept of rasa re-interpreted the ancient ritual soma complex.

The word rasa occurs as early as the Rgveda, where it stands for the elan vital or juice of a plant, for potions and liquids in general, and milk and water in particular. A magic potion, not unlike an elixir or nectar, was also known as rasa (here it was equivalent to amṛta). Last but not least, the word designated the

pivotal and best part of a thing; the quintessence or essence of a phenomenon; taste, mentality, an emotional state and later the religious feeling.

It presents no difficulty to single out two basic groups of meanings – first is quite concrete and related to plant juice, liquid, potion and sacred elixir; second is more abstract, and reflecting such notions as the quintessence, essence, vital force and taste. The *samhitas* and, above all, the *Ṛgveda*, included *rasa* in the semantic circle of *soma* and steadily used them together, so that the word combination “the *rasa of soma*” was well known in the Vedic ritual culture. Most often, what is meant by *rasa* is the inebriating *soma* juice, which produces hallucinations and grants supernatural strength (*ṚV* IX.6.6; 14.3; 16.1; 24.5; 38.5). In this, frequently in a specific practical ritual context, the dilution of pure *soma* juice with milk and water was part of the preparation of the immortality elixir (*ṚV* VIII.72.13; IX.64. 28). Each of these liquids could be referred to as *rasa*. The potion usually consisting of the components mixed was usually known as *amṛta*, but also could be termed *rasa*. To all appearances, this name stressed that the elixir not merely gave eternal life but was the essence and quintessence of *soma*.

The initial semantics of *rasa* as taste were also emerged in the Vedic period and related to the *soma* cult. One of the most graphic examples is found in the following *Ṛgvedic* hymn, which says: “This bull reared by Parjanya, was supported by the daughter of Sūrya, [then] it was taken by the Gandharvās, who put this *taste* into *soma*”.

The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* more than once referred to *rasa* as “the juice of juices and essence of essences”, meaning its notional relation to *soma*.

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34 *Rasa* frequently indicates juice or the élan of Indra and other gods. See: *ṚV* IX.23.5; 47.3; 97.1; 57.
36 The *Ṣatapatha Brāhmaṇa* more than once referred to *rasa* as “the juice of juices and essence of essences”, meaning its notional relation to *soma*.
37 *parjanya-vṛddham mahiṣaṁ tāṁ sūryasya duḥtādbhārata / tāṁ gandhavāḥ pratya-grbhīmaṁ tāṁ some rasam-ādadhur (*ṚV* IX.113. 3). Another instance is provided by the hymn *ṚV* IX.63.13: “Pressed out by stones, Soma, like the god Sūrya, is purified, acquiring taste in the jug” (*somo devo na sūryo adribhīḥ pavate sutāḥ dadhānaḥ kalaśe rasam*).
period the word *rasa* meant not taste in general but the unique taste of *soma* as an actual potion. The word *rasa* meaning “taste” also occurs in the *Atharvaveda*38, from where according to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* the category of *rasa* was borrowed (NS 1.17-18). Last but not least, it is essentially important that *rasa* repeatedly occurs in the poetic context as early as the *Rgveda* to be described as the property of *soma* that nourishes and inspires poets39.

*Rasa* retains its meaning of “taste” in the *Upaniṣads* (see: BrU II.4.11; III.2.4; III.8.8; VI.3.25; VI.3.31; VI.4.2; VI.5.12-13) and also begins to be used as a philosophical term for the “best part”, “essence” or “quintessence” of something (BrU I.3.8; I.3.19; VI.4.1; ChU I.1.2-3; I.1.9; III.2.3; III.3.2), including those of the Vedas (ChU III.5.4). These texts also begin to associate *rasa* with Brahman (BrU II. 3. 2-5) as it describes a number of his properties from taste40 to the most sublime form of pleasure – the pleasure of knowledge (TaiU II.7.1).

Importantly, even the *Brāhmaṇas* use *rasa* in a context precisely coinciding with the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, that is, as taste imbuing the ritual thanks to music and recitation. Characteristic in this sense is one of the chapters of *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, where the theme of *rasa* emerges in the description of *soma* as ritual food. Here, *rasa* is portrayed as unique taste born of canticles and recited scripture: “*Udgātār* (singer) [by singing] *mahāvrata* creates the *rasa*. All that are these tunes [of *Sāmaveda*] is *mahāvrata*, in it [soma] the *rasa* is produced by all tunes [of *Sāmaveda*]. In it [soma] the *hotār* produces *rasa* by

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38 See, e.g., *Atharvaveda* III.13.5: “May the pungent supporting taste of [waters] mixed with honey come to me with the breath and the brilliance” (tīvro raso madhupečām aramgama ā mā prīṭena saha varcasā gamet). Evidently, here, too, *rasa* denotes the taste of *soma*, whose pure juice was considered too pungent and so was to be diluted with milk and water in the rite of *amṛta* preparation.

39 It is exemplified by a quatrain from the hymn RV IX.67.32, which says: “He who memorizes Pāvamānī’s [verses], the juice collected by the ṛṣi…” (pāvamānīryo adhyety ṛṣibhiḥ sambhṛtam rasam). See also: RV IX.74. 9; IX.84. 5.

40 “He comes to the abode of Sālajya, [and] Brahman’s taste penetrates him” (sa āgacchati sālajyaṃ saṃsthānam taṃ brahma-rasaḥ praviśati KauU I.5).
sublime speech. All that are these hymns [of Rgveda] is sublime speech, in it [soma] the rasa is produced by all hymns [of Rgveda]” (udgātā mahāvrataḥ rasam dadhāti servāni haitāni sāmāni yan-mahāvrataṃ tad-asmin-sarvaiḥ sāmabhī rasam dadhāti tasmin-hotā mahatokthena rasam dadhāti servā haitā ro yanmahadukthaṃ tad-asmin-sarvābhīr-ghī rasam dadhāti (ŚBr X.4.1.13). The importance of this testimony of Satapatha Brāhmaṇa can hardly be exaggerated because it adds a missing link to the symbolic chain of the sacral drink, food and taste – a chain that is the basis of rasa concept in the Nāṭyaśāstra. This link connects rasa with the visual element of the ritual, i.e. the religious paradigm that later was made the foundation of the Ancient Indian theatre.

All this together suggests that that the initial concept of rasa re-interpreted the ancient ritual complex of soma and inherited from him a number of provisions. The crucial ritual aspect of soma was related to the specific hallucinating intoxication into which it had the power to put gods and mortals (Vedic priests drank soma in particular rites). Soma drinking belonged to esoteric rituals in which the human body, like a vessel, was to be filled with a divine potion. The magic trance caused by soma elevated humans above their nature. Ecstasy born of it gave unique, superhuman experiences. It made humans part of the suprapersonal divine world, and gave them a knowledge of it. This was the heart of the soma rites.

Perhaps, the early ritual drama had for supreme goal the acquisition of a specific psycho-physical state by all adepts without exception. In its ritualistic setting, they strove to imitate the ecstatic influence of soma. The supersensual emotion similar to the mystical experience of communication with gods (also enacted in the mystery play before the pious audience) came as an analogy of the hallucinogenic effect of soma, as its essence, quintessence and taste – to put it into one word, as rasa.

Evidently, a cathartic response shared by all was among the basic functions of the ritual performance, which brought sensual affections into order – as indicated in Ch. I of the Nāṭyaśāstra, which defined the drama as “restraint for the recalcitrant, humility for the humble, courage for the coward, resolution for
him who thinks himself a hero, reason for the unreasonable, knowledge for the instructed, steadfastness for him agitated by sorrow, and firmness for him whose mind is in a tumult” (NŚ 1.108-109).

The Nāṭyaśāstra offers many oblique proofs of the genetic link between the notions of rasa and soma. As follows from its definitions, rasa possesses three basic features: universality (sāmānya), being savoured and bringing pleasure.

Let us cursorily regard each of these properties. According to the Nāṭyaśāstra, the drama reached its culmination when the sthāyi bhāva reached universality and the rasa appeared as a consequence. This instant finally gave an unreal quality to the aesthetic experience – already cleaned of everyday admixtures and thus not entirely this-worldly to liken it to the religious emotion proper, the mystical moment of divine communion with god. As a real-life, even if refined, aesthetic experience, the sthāyi bhāva was always endowed with a more or less clear expression and personal colouring, whereas the rasa was uniform and universal. The power of its impact brought it close to the suprapersonal hallucinogenic effect of soma. Evidently, the concept of rasa initially designated a borderline state of transition from earthly values to transcendental ones of a universal scope. It was not for nothing that the treatise described its appearance as a specific form of breakthrough. Doubtless, the instant of the transformation of bhāva into rasa was the central moment of the drama. The bhāva became universal when the aesthetic feeling, cleaned by that time of everything earthly and, in this sense, not quite of this world, finally lost its earthly properties to become a transcendental feeling akin to the mystical experience of the advent and cognition of God.

The Nāṭyaśāstra repeatedly stresses the receptive aspect of rasa. It is what it is because it is savoured almost repeating the


42 The idea of the connection of rasa with the perception of the divine essence was known in the Indian tradition even before the Nāṭyaśāstra, as borne out by the known passage in TaiU II.7.1.
way one partakes of *soma* as an actual drink. The very definition of *rasa* rested on its comparison with the partaking of food of different tastes. Though many scholars view this comparison as naively drawn from cooking, we see it as sophisticated and justified by succession to another function of *soma* – as food. In the late Vedic period food was regarded as the basic substance of the world. Of crucial importance was the contrast between the food (*anna*) and the eater (*annāda*). All essences of being were reduced to this fundamental dualism. The Vedic ritual knew two kinds of food offerings – burned (*pravargya*) and eaten by priests (*brahmodana*). In this, the basic *anna-annāda* dualism was retained in the contrast between the fire and the sacrifice, moreover the Vedic ritual practice viewed *soma* poured onto the sacrificial flame as the embodiment and universal equivalent of food.

The idea of *soma* as special sacral food was widespread enough in the late Vedic period. Already the *Atharvaveda* identified *soma* with food (XI.10.16). We see the same in the *Aitareya* (7.1.5), *Kauśītaki* (12.5) and *Śatapatha* (I.6.4.5; II.2.5.3) *Brāhmaṇas* which repeatedly refer to King *Soma*, the food of gods, also refer as food to the sacrificial rite as a whole (ŚB VIII.1.2.10). The *Brāhmaṇas* and the *Upaniṣads* (*TaiU* 46) describe the perception of the taste *rasa* in eating: “by eating herbs and drinking water, thus this taste appears. For the same reason, due to the universality (or perfection) of taste, it brings forth [the essence of food] by removing [everything redundant]” (oṣadhī-rjagdhva-āpaḥ pītvā tata eṣa rasaḥ sambhavati tasmādu rasasyo caiva sarvatvāya tad-udvāsya-ātanakti ŚB I. 7.1.18; cp. I. 3.1.25, III.7.4.4). Indicative is the use of the verb ā-tañc, which means “solidify” or “coagulate”, approximately the way ferment works in milk to coagulate it and obtain more solid substances as cream and butter. Taste (*rasa*) does something similar. Endowed with universality, it removes everything redundant and appears

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44 “Men are truly born of food, those who dwell on the earth, then they live on the food and afterwards, at the end, they join it, since the food is the oldest of creatures” (TaiU II.2.1).

45 “For all this is so great – the food and the eater. Soma is food and Agni is eater of food, and both are the supreme creation of Brahman” (etāvad vā idaṃ sarvam annaṃ caiva āttānādaḥ ca | soma evānāma agni annādaḥ | saśā brahmaṇo ‘īśṛṣṭiḥ Br̥U I.4.6).

46 Of special interest in this context is the passage often repeated in the *Brāhmaṇas*, which describes the perception of the taste *rasa* in eating: “by eating herbs and drinking water, thus this taste appears. For the same reason, due to the universality (or perfection) of taste, it brings forth [the essence of food] by removing [everything redundant]” (oṣadhī-rjagdhva-āpaḥ pītvā tata eṣa rasaḥ sambhavati tasādūra saṃbhavati tasmādu rasasya caiva sarvatvāya tadbhāvenātānātānīti SB I. 7.1.18; cp. I. 3.1.25, III.7.4.4). Indicative is the use of the verb ā-tañc, which means “solidify” or “coagulate”, approximately the way ferment works in milk to coagulate it and obtain more solid substances as cream and butter. Taste (*rasa*) does something similar. Endowed with universality, it removes everything redundant and appears
II.1.1) also repeatedly refer to rasa as the taste, juice or quintessence of food. No doubt, the link between soma and food was well known in the Aryan milieu. The chain of imagery anna-soma-rasa and the comparison of rasa with the savouring of food – which had always borne another, sacral message allowed, to our mind, not merely an oblique reference to soma but an emphasis on the ritual essence of rasa.

Last but not least, the ability of rasa to cause pleasure can also be regarded as inherited from the ideas of soma. The above-quoted Rgvedic hymn dedicated to soma says: “Where the Brahman, oh Pavamāna, reciting metric speech, exalts in Soma with the stone [press] in his hand, causing bliss (ānanda) with assistance of Soma” (yatra brahmā pavamāna chandasyāṃ vācaṃ vadan / grāvṇā some mahīyate somena-ānandaṃ janayann RV IX.113.6). The unique sacral pleasure of soma drinking correlates, in the theoretical description of rasa, to the superpersonal bliss of its savouring. Possibly, it reflects the same idea of bliss given by the approach to god – no matter by what way – and the cognition of his essence. The certain irrationality and immateriality of the idea of rasa can also be explained by the ritual origin of this category.

The rasa concept in the treatise can not be described as an aesthetic theory in the proper sense of this term because, in its description, rasa contains a large cluster of meanings from the earlier stages of its evolution, when it was regarded not as an aesthetic, properly artistic notion from the world of the arts, but a phenomenon from another reality, sacral and defying expression. That is why we cannot find in the treatise even a single direct elucidation of rasa, which always receives only a technical definition in connection with the bhāvas. Evidently,
during its formation the system of relations between the eight rāsas and the eight sthāyi bhāvas corresponding to them was by no means redundant. The permanent bhāvas, which almost fully coincided with the rāsas, were necessary as the initial stage of the sacral feeling. The initial correlation between the rāsas and the bhāvas was most probably that of the mystical experience and the total of specific emotions helping to produce it. It is possible to regard them as aesthetic emotions from the point of present-day ideas of art.

The concept of rāsa in the Nātyaśāstra is a conglomeration of information more or less devoid of inner contradictions – information coming from various eras when theoretical substantiation was being sought for the theatre. The treatise retains an echo of the past when the rāsa emerged as sacral idea and the bhāva as an aesthetic emotion that promotes it. At the same time, it contains a concept of the rāsa as an element of the artistic structure close to the bhāva typologically and by the nature of its manifestation. The many layers of which the idea of the rāsa consists in the treatise account for the heterogeneity of its content and bred the various interpretations that occurred in the mediaeval tradition of the theory of drama. Characteristically, mediaeval theoreticians were concerned about the same several fundamental questions: whether the rāsa and the bhāva belonged to phenomena of the same nature or whether the rāsa was something entirely different; whether all rāsas could produce the most sublime form of bliss (ānanda-rūpa) or whether some rāsas produced pleasant sensations (sukha) and the others disagreeable ones (duḥkha); and, last but not least, whether the rāsa was transcendental, supernatural and other-worldly (alaukika) or it entirely belonged to the earthly world (laukika).

Abhinavagupta finally put the matter to rest in some of these questions. His main merit was that he brought back to the rāsa

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its original status of the sublime goal⁴⁹, or, to use Indian theoreticians’ vocabulary, of “the soul of poetry”. It was repeatedly suggested that in the Abhinavabharatī Abhinavagupta not so much interpreted the theory of rasa presented in the Nāṭyaśāstra as brought forth an original aesthetic concept. As it really is, it becomes evident in attentive reading that Abhinavagupta proceeded from the Nāṭyaśāstra and, possibly, also relied on oral and other traditions to revive the original concept of rasa. As he saw it, though the sthāyi-bhāva was generating (siddha), while the rasa generated (sādhya), the former was an earthly sensation ordinary and common by nature (sādhāraṇa), while the rasa was extraordinary (asādhāraṇa), unique and transcendental (GOS I, p. 335), while its perception (rasāsvāda) brought special pleasure (camatkāra) and the utmost bliss (ānanda-rūpa), comparable to the yogi’s religious ecstasy in the contemplation and cognition of Brahman⁵⁰. In the years that followed, Abhinavagupta’s interpretation of rasa became dominant and was supported by almost all theoreticians of the 11th-14th centuries CE. It had an impact on the 15th century doctrine of bhaktī-rasa in Gaudiya Viṣṇavism⁵¹.

⁴⁹ The theoreticians of the Alaṃkāra school for example gave rasa a far more obscure place. Particularly, Bhāmaha (6th cent.) and Daṇḍin (7th cent.) regarded it as a property of one of the poetic figures known as rasavat, while Udbhāta (7th cent.) connected it with four poetic figures, and Vāmana (8th cent.) with guṇas, poetic qualities. To all appearances, the doctrine of the dramatic rajas began to spread to the theory of poetry with the comments to the Nāṭyaśāstra, written by Bhaṭṭa-lollaṭa at the turn of the 9th century and Śaṅkuka in the 9th century. None of these commentaries have survived to this day, and we can judge their content only thanks to the writings of Abhinavagupta, who summarized their views in his dispute with them. The rasa was finally established as the basic doctrine of the theory of poetry in Ānandavardhana’s Dhvanyāloka (9th-10th cents.).


Indicatively, the author of the Nāṭyaśāstra chose possibly the most earthly and realistic of the concepts of rasa, almost fully ignoring its sacral element. This choice finds only partial explanation in the treatise’s status of practical manual. Evidently, though the Nāṭyaśāstra transmits ritual and other knowledge stored over the centuries, the aesthetic rasa matters far more to its concept than the sacral rasa. Similarly, the classic literary drama was far more topical than its mystery forerunner at the time the treatise was written.

As I see it, three stages can be singled out in the evolution of the concept of rasa: first, its emergence as a symbolic expression of a ritualistic content; second, close in time to the Nāṭyaśāstra, when rasa evolved into a theoretical term and acquired a specific aesthetic content, which gradually ousted its sacral essence; and the third, when the aesthetic aspect became dominant, but the transcendental (alaukika) element of rasa was also singled out and emphasized in the late philosophical and mystical tradition. As the result, the sacral aspect of the analysed category was the reason for the unique popularity and broad dissemination of the concept of rasa.