

A Glance at Indian Poetics with Special Reference to *Dhvani* and *Rasa* Theories

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Abstract

The Indian literary theory has various references to religion and culture. Indian literary theory has its roots in the sacred text of the *Vedas*. Sanskrit served as the lingua franca of the Vedic tradition. There are four main schools of Indian literary theory, of which, two of them are called *Dhvani* and *Rasa*. This article focuses on some of the interpretations of *Dhvani* and *Rasa* theories.

1. Introduction

All literature starts with religion and all religions have their own rituals and prescribed order of solemn observations of rituals. The religion of a particular group or people is closely linked with their own culture in the form of art and other manifestations of these people's intellectual achievements. The Indian literary theory has various references to religion and culture. Indian culture, it is said, has always emphasized the philosophy of yoga (union) which has been regarded as the most valid postulation in the inter-relation of language, consciousness and nature particularly in Sanskrit poetics. Theoretical doctrines and principles such as *Rasa-Dhvani* meaning the flavour or suggested sentiments in a text leading towards *Moksha* (liberation) have pervaded the Indian culture and have been observed down the ages, and have influenced contemporary writers and critics. Indian literary theory has its roots in the sacred texts of the *Vedas*, *Veda* (knowledge), which are the direct cognition of *Shruti* of Vedic seers. The *Shruti* (listening or hearing) came through meditation which ultimately gave inspiration.

Vedic literature is a vast collection of writings like heroic poems, dramas, text on various mythological and religious scriptures etc, derived from the four basic *Vedas*: the *Rig-veda*, *Sama-veda*, *Yajur-veda* and *Atharva-veda* including the *Upanishads*, *Brahmanas*, *Ithihasa* and *Puranas*. Sanskrit served as the lingua-franca of the Vedic tradition among the Indian readers of diversified native tongues. And because classical Indian literature consists of Sanskrit poetry, Indian literary theory deals primarily with poetic expressions analyzed through various schools of Sanskrit poetics. The term *Dhvani* and *Rasa* are two of the four main schools of Indian literary theory, the other two being the *Alankara* and *Riti*. All of these schools have their basis in the Vedic theory of language which posits a natural unity of sound and meaning, name and form.

The paper's main focus is to study the theory of the *Dhvani-Rasa* and interpret some of its meanings and suggestions. It is said that no other concept has invited as many interpretations as that of *Rasa* and the very fact that it should be associated with *Dhvani* suggests that it can only be suggested and not articulated. Perhaps that may be the reason why the eminent scholar Dr. K. Krishnamoorthy had termed it a riddle in Sanskrit poetics. Thus the *Dhvani-Rasa* tends to muddle and awe us out of our wits end. Although the exact meanings of the term *Dhvani-Rasa* have been illusive to scholars of generations down the ages, the generally accepted meanings given to *Dhvani-Rasa* in Vedic literature can be literally understood as "sound" for *Dhvani* and "sap, juice, taste or flavour" for *Rasa*. And in *Dhvani* theory, the suggested meaning of the word is more communicative and creative than the literal or denotative meaning of the word. The indirectly evoked meaning the *vyajanartna* constitutes the very poetic elements in the language of composition. *Dhvani* suggests sound in its eternal form of *sphota* literally meaning "burst" or "explosion" where organs are involved. *Dhvani* the eternal sound can only be suggested but can never be expressed or articulated. Thus, it can be appropriately applied to poetry, as the ultimate content of poetry also defies all attempts at direct expression. The Sanskrit equivalent for "voice" is *Dhvani* which literally means "tone". Thus *Dhvani* refers to suggestive elements in poetic language imbued with aesthetic significance, showing us the suggested content of poetry manifesting itself in the form of facts, poetic figures or emotions.

In the exegesis of the Vedic literature the very concept of religion came from *Pralaya* (literally meaning a small drum producing fifty eight different sounds) which also content the eternal sound *Dhvani*. *Pralaya* also refers to "god of destruction and creation". With the rhythm of his dance *laya laya* (rhythm), god produced sounds in the dance movement. Thus, at the time of creation of the world there was an enormous sound produced by performing through this *Pralaya*, this huge sound was known as *Bhariavi* (the eternal sounds), a sound so loud that human ear could not bear or withstand it, therefore, the eternal sound was there before the word just as literature was there before writing or the written form. This was *Dhvani*, in theory it means the suggested sound without any modulation or accentuation. However, there are other transitory or temporary sounds like sound produced by animals which can be accentuated, articulated or modulated. Modulation of sound is there in the space, in the sky or in the star but one cannot see through the space with the naked eye and its sound waves that sound which exists in space and cannot be seen is the external sound that is unpronounced or unaccentuated and also unvibrated, this is *Dhvani* the eternal sound.

To illustrate an example of *Dhvani*, let us look at the following poem.

“She/died/with/it/my/world/died/I stopped/living”

The speaker here may be a male or a female, stopped/living - is in the past tense which can be interpreted as “he/she is a living dead“. This is *Dhvani*, the suggestion or the figurative meaning. “Heard melodies are sweet/those unheard are sweeter“ is a paradox, is again another example of *Dhvani*, “Beauty is truth, truth is beauty,“ here we talk about aesthetic beauty that is truth which is heard: that is *Dhvani*. *Dhvani* incorporates not only the consciously stated elements of poetic discourse; but also the resonance generated in the unconscious mind about the overt meanings. For those who produce poetry, *Dhvani* is the soul of poetry. The suggested meaning or sense of *Dhvani* can be understood only by someone who knows the essence of poetry. The eternal *Dhvani* in its figurative sound can never be searched in literature. Only the sound can be searched in literature. We can find only the temporary, the transitory and the meaningless sound which are heterogeneous, but in composition or poetry alone there is the eternal sound *Dhvani*.

2. *Dhavni and Rasa*

Thus, *Dhvani* is the evocative power of language, the power through which language seeks to express the unexpressed and to reveal the concealed. It is the “subtle core of meaning” which “lacks any material surface” (Isaeva 167). It cannot be generated by exhausting or stretching the lateral sense, nor can it be derived by contradicting the same. Even the poet himself doesn't have the capacity to evoke it. According to Isaeva, if we compare suggestion to the melody, then the poet is like a flute to play with, not a composer. The *Dhvani* theory can be better conceptualized and can be more meaningfully interpreted when one reads through the Indian philosophy of language. Through *Dhvani*, poetic language reaches the condition of silence. It functions like a meta-language, generating many meanings by deploying collective and individual memory-banks, latent impressions, mental associations, because *Dhvani* as it is said, itself is a meaning which lies beyond the spoken words.

Rasa: As mentioned earlier, one of the four schools of literary theory is *Rasa* which is closely associated with *Dhvani* theory. According to Vedic literature, the generally accepted and the literal meaning of *Rasa* is sap, juice, taste or flavour. The *Rasa* theory basically came from Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* (*natya* meaning “drama” and *shatra* meaning “science“). Bharatamuni have based its meaning in the fifth Veda of the *Rig-veda* where the gods called the fifth *veda* as a dance drama. The *Natyashastra* presents *Rasa* as the aesthetic flavour or relish of the flavour that

arises from a perfect product of quality ingredients. Aesthetic here is mainly referred to the philosophic study of beauty and taste, and taste is ability to judge according to the senses rather than according to the intellect. Thus *Rasa* gives the aesthetic flavour of the sense of taste. The Indian classical tradition holds *Rasa* as the essential element in poetry which can be felt in *Rasavan* (having *Rasa*), *Rasika* (enjoyer, relisher, lover), *Rasavandh* (tasting *Rasa*).

Now, the ultimate object of all poetry, or dance drama is to evoke certain emotions in the readers and viewers (audiences). Emotions of joy, sorrow, tragedy, comedy, laughter, tears, etc and the emotions excited or aroused, evoked aesthetically can be called *Rasa*. For example, the dance master says to the dancer: "Your chemistry was okay (in your dancing) meaning the dance was in harmony, which here brings out *Rasa*. When we read poetry, it is not a direct record of the poet's personal emotions but the poet's feelings and emotions are selected, organized, sifted and aesthetically presented to the readers, thereby evoking the aesthetic sense of the reader or arousing the *Rasa*, i.e., the various emotions that developed in the heart of the readers.

The following different kinds of *Rasa* were enumerated by Bharata.

1. Srīngar	–	Love (erotic)
2. Hasya	–	Comic (joy)
3. Karuṇa	–	Sadness (pathetic)
4. Raudra	–	Furious (anger)
5. Vīra	–	Heroic (courage)
6. Bhayāka	–	Frightful (fear)
7. Vibhāsa	–	Disgustful (disgusting)
8. Abhūta	–	Marvellous (wonder)
9. Śānta	–	Peace
10. Vatsalāya	–	Filiality
11. Bhakti	–	Devotion

All those *Rasa* explain different conditions of human mind which are displayed while experiencing a picture of human psychology, emotion, reactions and characters that change and develop according to the changes in different situations. Thus giving rise to different expressions, the outward reflection of the various kinds of *Rasa* that arises in the heart of the characters as well as the readers and audience. We can cite a few examples to illustrate some of the above listed *Rasas*, for example: Shakespeare's *King Lear* and his three daughters had the filial relationship of the father and his offspring borne in the round womb of the mother – this is *vatsalāya rasa* (filiality). Before this, first comes the mother, who had given birth to her daughters, taken care of them, washing, feeding, nursing them – this comes under *Bhakti rasa* (devotion). Later when two

of the daughters betrayed their father King Lear, he grew furious, i.e., *Raudra rasa* (furious), which gave way to *Karuna rasa* (sadness), as he remembers and thinks of how he drove away his youngest daughter who loved him the most – *Bhakti rasa* (devotion).

Another example; let us examine the following:

“I am the water in my father’s eyes”, this simple line can be interpreted in so many levels, both positive and negative. “The water in my father’s eyes” means tears; it may be tears of sorrow because the child may have brought the father shame, failure, sadness, giving rise to *Karuna rasa* (sadness) on one level and on another level, it may be the tears of joy, because the child may have brought the father extreme joy by bringing him success, fame, glory etc and this gives rise to *Hasya rasa* (joy).

Hence, it is important to know the human sentiments and the psychology, to understand the problems that are being faced by a particular individual. This can best be done by analysing the particular *Rasa* that is predominant in a particular situation. Analysis of the *Rasa* also helps in understanding the development of the tragic plot of a play. Bharata’s theory of *Rasa* can be relevant and applicable to modern society as well.

A brief analysis of Sarojini Naidu’s poem “If you call me” with reference to *Dhvani-Rasa* terms.

*If you call me I will come
Swifter, O my love
Than a trembling forest deer
Or a panting dove.*

*Swifter than a snake that flies
To the charmer’s thrall..
If you call me I will come
Fearless what befall.*

*If you call me I will come
Swifter than desire,
Swifter than the lightning’s feet
Shod with plumes of fire
Life’s dark tides may roll between
Or death’s deep chasms divide-
If you call me I will come
Fearless what betide.*

Ms Naidu has clearly written this poem in the age old tradition of the school of aestheticism, which itself was the latter-day Romanticism, in which love is the key concept. This poem certainly is a love poem but the philosophy of love here is definitely a platonic one. If we read the poem with reference to *Dhvani-Rasa* theory, the poem is replete with complete features of all the essence of *Dhvani* and *Rasa*.

The speaker is talking about the divine love to whom she is completely devoted – *Bhakti rasa*. The speaker addresses the divine love with the explicit declaration that she is completely at the behest of her love and admits to total subjugation that if she is summoned, she is ready to go.

“Swifter... than a trembling deer”

Trembling – (quivering heart) – *Dhvani*, deer suggests humbleness and humility.

“Swifter... panting dove”

Panting – (breathless) – *Dhvani*, dove – metaphor for innocence – *shanta rasa* (peace)

“Swifter... A snake... charmer’s thrall”, presents elements of Romanticism, reminiscence of Keats’ knight who was enthralled by *La Belle dame sans merci*...

At the bidding of the love, the speaker is totally captivated like a snake that flies to the charmer’s flute suggesting that there is no question of evading the call of her love. The repetition of the word ‘swift’ constantly points to the suggestion or the suggested denotation of *Dhvani* and also literally establishing the speaker’s rock-steady devotion and obeisance to her love – *Bhakti rasa*.

“Swifter... desire – (yearning-sighing longingly) – *Dhvani*, “Swifter... lightning – (thunder-dart) – *Dhvani*, “shod with plumes (nimble footed)... of fire” (highly animated) – “Life’s tides – (current-stream) – *Dhvani* ... roll – (bellow-echo) – *Dhvani* also suggests death’s chasm – (abyss) divide – (separate).

“Fearless what betide” (whatever happens) she will go, suggesting absolute and complete devotion of *Bhakti rasa*. We may also appreciate the poem and interpret it in many other levels but so far as the *Dhvani-Rasa* theories go, the poem is not shorn of the features of the cited terms.

Conclusion

To conclude we can surmise that the theories of *Dhvani* and *Rasa* and its philosophical implications are interestingly unique and doubtless fascinating. These theories can also be considered as part of the world cultural heritage with regard to the Indian poetics and literary theories.

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