**International Journal of English Research**
**www.englishjournals.com**
**ISSN: 2455-2186**
**Received: 06-12-2025, Accepted: 05-01-2026, Published: 20-01-2026**
**Volume 12, Issue 1, 2026, Page No. 37-40**

# Navarasa: The nine jewels of Indian aesthetic experience

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**Abstract**
Nourished in the soil of prehistoric Indian theatre, Navarasa the nine emotional essences, continue to shimmer like jewels in the coronet of Indian aesthetic thought. In this essay, the eternally beautiful Navarasas: Shringara (love), Hasya (laughter), Karuṇa (pity), Raudra (anger), Veera (valor), Bhayanaka (fear), Bibhatsa (disgust), Adbhuta (wonder), and Santa (peace) these are treated not merely as acting moods, but as profoundly rooted emotional archetypes that govern the Indian artistic mind. From traditional works such as Bharata's Natyashastra and from contemporary wisdom in dance, theater, film, and poetry, this research investigates how the rasas persist over time and medium. Instead of examining them independently as discrete expressions, this article examines their intertwinement—how one performance, verse, or glance can be a multiplicity of rasas in tension and harmony. Through the union of literary theory, philosophical analysis, and cultural inquiry, this book seeks not simply to describe the Navarasa model but to ask: why, all these centuries later, do these nine still move us?
The answer is found not only in the pleasing appearance of these rasas but also in their ability to connect on a human level.

**Keywords:** Indian aesthetics, rasa theory, natyashastra, emotional layers, art, ancient Indian elements

## Introduction

### Nava Rasa

The element of Rasa in Sanskrit is more than just a terminology. It is an atmosphere of essence, a vibration, a subtle fragrance of emotion that pervades the soul of Indian art. Derived from the root word “ras,” meaning to taste or relish. But here, we’re not talking about the tongue; we’re talking about the mind, the spirit, the atman (soul). In Indian beauty, Rasa is the aspect of beauty in the realization of experience, that instant in which the actor-onlooker distinction dissolves, and both share in one universe of feeling. It is not unbridled emotion, but beautification of emotion. It is not sympathy but delight, a subtle gesture of emotional tasting apart from ownership. It is emotion stilled, purified, and sanctified.

### The Foundational Eight

The initial systematic exposition of the Rasa theory is to be found in Natyashastra, a monumental Sanskrit work on dramaturgy traditionally attributed to Bharata Muni. And ranging in date from 2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE. It's not a treatise; it's scripture, science, and divine revelation rolled into one. There, Bharata writes of eight Rasas, each stemming from a related Sthayibhava; the abiding emotion in the human psyche. These are evoked by Vibhavas (the causes or determinants such as situations and characters), transmitted by Anubhavas (the automatic physical responses such as facial expression and gestures), and tinted with Vyabhicaribhavas (the short, fleeting emotional responses which accentuate the underlying emotion).
Bharata had presented a dramaturgical psychology century before Freud or Jung ever considered charting the human psyche.
The eight Rasas are not just separate emotions; often they overlap and interact with one another. Nonetheless, each of these feelings maintains its own unique 'rummage' or sensation. It's interesting to look at them as ongoing cultural forces rather than something historical, dead, or over with: All eight are still found throughout Indian poetry, dance, theater; even in everyday life!

### Shringara: The Rasa of Love and Beauty

**Sthayibhava:** Rati (Love, Desire)
Describing Shringara can be a delightful task. It is one of the “rasas” or moods, that are considered particularly beautiful.
This mood involves feelings of love, desire, as well as sacredness– and it is often luxurious or sensual too! There’s something appealing about wanting to be together (or even apart): first meetings and last farewells all fall within this range of feeling.
When someone experiences Shringara everything looks different; even an ordinary day feels special– perhaps because things seem more vivid? The moon in particular seems to shine brighter when lovers are apart: there’s also a belief that if you long enough for someone your anklets may start to tinkle!

### Classical aesthetics identifies two subcategories of Shringara:

Sambhoga Shringara refers to love when together– its sweetness increasing through closeness, celebrations, and shared intimacy.
Vipralambha Shringara describes love from a distance-marked by longing, yearning; a bittersweet kind of beauty.
It’s not just about being erotic at all. Shringara also includes divine love— such as that felt between world soul (paramatma) & individual souls (jivatma). For that reason, the divine romance between Radha and Krishna is the par excellence icon of this rasa: it is not erotic love, but cosmic oneness in the disfigurement of warmth.

### Hasya: The Rasa of Laughter and Joy

**Sthayibhava:** Hasa (Laughter)
Where Shringara entices the senses, Hasya calms the heart. It is the offspring of incongruity, wit, hyperbole, and

enjoyment of the surprise. From snide contempt to belly-laughing hilarity, this rasa educates us in the lesson that humor is not insignificant. It is a strong means of criticism, turning about, and cure.

In ancient drama, the Vidusaka, the clown or fool, elicited this rasa, ridiculing kings and sages and systems, but with love and compassion. Never was his intention to shame, but to expose. Hasya teaches us that to laugh is not to turn away but to disarm ego and bring balance.

**Karuṇa: The Rasa of Grief and Compassion**

**Sthayibhava:** Soka (Grief)

This is the whine at the back of the smile, the gentle pain that reminds us that we are human. Karuṇa originates in suffering, loss, injustice, and isolation, but it does not remain sunk in suffering. Rather, it provides a vessel for compassion. It invites the viewer into one's suffering and permits catharsis.

It is a central rasa in Indian epics. Consider Kunti's silent agony, Karna's moral conflict, and Sita's trials; Karuna humanizes the hero and redeems the villain.

This is what creates the sublime quality in tragedy. It serves as a reminder that pain, when filtered artistically, has the potential to elevate; unlike suffering, it may cause one to shatter.

**Raudra: The Rasa of Fury and Righteous Rage**

**Sthayibhava:** Krodha (Anger)

Raudra burns. It's red-eyed, fiery, and uncompromising. But unlike petty anger, this is dharmic rage, the force of justice. Think of Draupadi's curse, Shiva's third eye, or the roar of Narasimha. This is anger purified by purpose.

Performing Raudra requires tremendous energy, discipline, and presence. Eyes enlarge, brows move, and the body becomes a thundercloud. Yet it's never chaos; it's controlled, meaningful, and aimed at restoring order, not wreaking havoc.

**Veera: The Rasa of Courage and Valor**

**Sthayibhava:** Utsaha (Courage, Determination)

Veera goes beyond pretension; it is genuine courage.

It is about having the bravery to act, protecting individuals, and speaking truth to those in positions of power.

From Arjuna on the battlefield to Gandhi with his non-violence, "Veera" elevates the heart and calls for human beings to be their best selves, true and dignified.

This rasa is symbolized by standing postures, open stances, and an unyielding stare. It puts the audience on guard. It says: improve, go up, act boldly.

**Bhayanaka: The Rasa of Fear and Dread**

**Sthayibhava:** Bhaya (Fear)

Rasa of shadows, silences that scream. Bhayanaka moves in. It does not jump; it crouches. It implies rather than tells. In a haunted grove of an ancient play or in the frightening stare of a Kathakali character, this rasa caresses our naked vulnerability.

Indian aesthetics does not revel in gore or fear for the sake of horror. Bhayanaka is an honorable rasa. It instructs us to be vigilant, modest, and respectful of powers beyond us.

**Bibhatsa: The Rasa of Disgust and Aversion**

**Sthayibhava:** Jugupsa (Revulsion)

Difficult, disturbing, and deeply necessary. Bibhatsa holds up the mirror we'd rather avoid. It shows the decay in society, in morality, in the self. When performed with integrity, this rasa doesn't repulse; it awakens.

It is the rasa of condemnation; of decadence, corruption, and moral decline. In drama, it is in conflicting images or offensive action. In poetry, it is the foul odor of envy or the spiritual vacuum behind profligacy.

**Adbhuta: The Rasa of Wonder and Marvel**

**Sthayibhava:** Vismaya (Astonishment)

The wide-eyed child, the stargazer, the pilgrim's flash of the temple spire after a long and exhausting journey; such as Adbhuta. It is the rasa of curiosity, humility, and awe. It opens the gate of the unknown and the infinite.

Adbhuta in classical Indian performance is majestic—movements are light, eyes expand, and hands move upwards. It is the intake of breath before the miracle, the pulsation before revelation.

**Shanta: The Rasa of Peace and Transcendence**

**Sthayibhava:** Sama (Tranquility)

Not one of the eight original rasas of Bharata, Shanta was added by Abhinavagupta, the 10th-century Kashmiri philosopher-aesthete. It is a ninth rasa, unique, a rasa of no conflict, no climax. It is the rasa of fulfillment, stillness, and ultimate understanding.

Here, art becomes philosophy. Actors are still the spectators who inhale with the universe. There are no fireworks, only the glow of understanding. The ego is not heard. This is moksa on stage.

Shanta is too often misinterpreted in contemporary arts since it is so fine. It should be best seen, not with eyes, but through becoming. It is one of the last aesthetic goals, a rasa for something greater than aesthetic.

**The Transmutational Power of Rasa**

Most fundamental to the emotional enchantment of literature is the theory of Rasa, the aesthetic experience translating from feeling to a universal, cultured emotion between the work and the reader. Rasa is not emotion, though; it is the soul's deep identification with art, a feeling substance elicited and concentrated into an artifact that stimulates the reader's mind, heart, and senses in a sustained but balanced experience. Such an experience calls the reader out of the hiding places of his or her own emotions into a transitional zone in which the emotions are felt with vast power but at a reflective distance. This dual vision of immersion and distance makes Rasa so valuable; it enables us to experience intensely without being engulfed and to sympathize without getting lost in the act. The experience of Rasa is redemptive in that it purifies the uncooked, mostly random emotions of ordinary life into aesthetic feelings purified, stripped, and systematized states of feeling. In contrast to the disordered emotional responses in which we live life, Rasa cleanses and makes sense of such passions, allowing the reader to enjoy their feelings with sense and clarity, rather than disorder or chaos. Such purged experience builds emotional consciousness that allows readers to appreciate and see the depth of human feeling in a manner that invites empathy and self-knowledge. At the center of this is the function of Bhava, the transitory states or feelings represented in the piece of literature: happiness, grief, love, fear, and fury that provide the material of feeling. Bhava is the fertile ground upon which Rasa grows, but it is not enough in and of itself. Through artful

presentation: rhythm, imagery, and repetition, the Bhava is elevated into Rasa, an aesthetic emotion that moves from the specific to the universal. The reader is engaged with Bhava, experiencing it and yet keeping aesthetic distance so that the Bhava gets let into the richer experience of Rasa: a contemplative, well-adjusted state where the feeling is released but isn't overwhelming. Rasa builds the reader's emotional literacy, a skill one needs for self-knowledge and other-knowledge. By witnessing Rasa, the reader is in an effective conversation that instructs them to recognize slight emotional subtleties, tolerate vagueness, and discover meaning in pain, joy, and conflict. Rasa provides a protected emotional workshop where sophisticated feelings can be practiced and worked through in fearlessness of actual-life repercussions, so catharsis and self-reflection are possible. This ability to contain and comprehend emotion deepens the reader's interior life and prepares them to move into the challenging landscape of human relations with greater compassion and insight. The push and pull between Bhava and Rasa create something amazing. When artists use their skills to put emotions in our minds, the feelings we get (Bhava) can be changed into the noble Rasa.

Individual feelings get completely mixed up with inner thoughts and emotions in a kind of alchemy vessel; this creates an aesthetic feeling that really lasts.

It can be felt by lots of different people because it has deep resonance. This is also why literature does more than simply tell stories or provide entertainment!

It helps connect your own private world with shared emotional experiences spanning human beings both past and present, as well as all cultures.

Finally, Rasa takes the reader on an inner path that revives latent emotional faculties, overcomes dogmatic thinking, and illustrates the interconnectedness of human emotion. It proposes a subtle consciousness where feelings are felt to the limit and examined with prudence so the reader will see personally but agree with universal verities. Hence, Rasa is not merely an ornament but a vital element in literature's potency, governing the reader's emotional and mental response to the world. In a time too frequently sundered by distraction and overload of affect, Rasa is an ever-burning flame spurring readers along a beautiful, deep path of feeling in which emotion becomes poetry, and poetry is living. Bhava's transmutation into Rasa provides readers with the invaluable boon of emotional seeing and sympathetic acknowledgment, such that every engagement with art is a moment of opening, thinking, and transcending.

**Application of Rasas in Literature**

The Rasa theory, as articulated in Bharata's Natyashastra, washes over performance and into literature like a divine undertow, providing emotion with a voice, a form, and most of all, an omnipresent presence that lingers long after the final line is turned. Whether in the honey-hued cadences of Kalidasa or the existentially squalid pages of Albert Camus, Rasas appear not as distinct categories but as emotional essences that permeate a reader's experience. The most concentrated instance of Shringara Rasa (beauty, love, aesthetic delight) is in Kalidasa's Meghadūta, where a lovesick Yaksha's longing is fixated on a cloud. But move to our own days, and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things overwhelms readers in a somber variation of Shringara, where love is fated, gentle, and yet extremely sensual. And the same way that Karuṇa Rasa, or mood of sorrow, runs through such texts as the Mahābhārata itself, if we can just take one example, in the death of Abhimanyu or Karna's doomed fate. Anyway, we see this clearly today in Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns, where war and patriarchy silence women. The suffering these characters go through makes readers profoundly empathetic– an emotion with both personal and political implications. fire and anger at injustice (Raudra Rasa) as she shouts her vow in a superb courtroom scene: this same rage is expressed poetically in Maya Angelou's Still I Rise.

Here Angelou defies the racism that would keep her quiet about its history, using words like weapons. The Veera Rasa, the heroism, is not only Arjuna preparing his bow with bravery under fire, both literal and metaphorical. Hasya Rasa, the wit, glows in the teasing of Birbal or Tenali Rama and also permeates contemporary satire such as George Orwell's Animal Farm, in which parody strips the grotesque bare. The Adbhuta Rasa, the marvel, has its place in Banabhatta's ornate couplets but also quakes in the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, in which floating carpets and showering flowers are made fact by literary legerdemain. Bhayanaka Rasa, or fear, once resided in Vetala Panchavimshati, but now lingers over the dystopian landscapes of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, where fear is not supernatural, it is structural. Bibhatsa, the repulsive or the grotesque, appears in the graphic realism of Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable, where the stench of oppression of caste is not metaphorical but actual. Even Shanta Rasa, the most refined and lofty of them all, rests silently in The Bhagavad Gita, in the serene state of detachment of Krishna, but also in Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day, where there is no peace in closure, but rather in accepting loss and unfulfilled possibility. Thus, the Rasas are time, place, and genre-free. They are smudges on human life, spread out over all the centuries and civilizations. All great writers, knowingly or unknowingly, write their stories to evoke one or more Rasas in the reader. The true art of fiction is not in plot turns and twists or just verse, but in this emotional chemistry, which is an unseen, intangible power to make us more alive, more human. Thus, Rasas are still the finest contribution of Indian thought in aesthetics, being timeless, universal, and emotionally boundless.

**Conclusion**

Rasa theory emerged from the depths of ancient Indian aesthetics. It is not only an obsolete inheritance of classical drama but also a living idea, a throbbing philosophy of aesthetic creation and affective being. These feelings are not rigid sentiments but plastic experiences that are beyond time, space, and genre. Each Rasa, from the alluring charm of Shringara to the terror-inspiring presence of Bhayanaka to the calming peace of Shanta, welcomes spectator and creator both into a society of intersubjective feeling experience. This is no static society; it is one that changes. Poetry, drama, film, and even contemporary political oratory respond to these rasas, demonstrating their unrestrained strength in contemporary settings. In our fractured, accelerationist contemporary world, Rasa provides us an antidote: the capacity to profoundly feel without attachment to ourselves, to empathize without burnout, and to release without indifference. It shows us that feeling genuinely and consciously is not a lack but a refined art. Rasa is not just the sap of art; it is the sap of life. It

sustains imagination, cuts down on ignorance, and gives us a long-lasting aesthetic space in which to make sense of what we create, as well as why we are so driven to create it in the first place. To learn about the Rasas is to investigate the heart of Indian poetry and by inference, the heart of human life itself.

The Nine Rasas, therefore, are not fixed categories; they are the perpetual pulse of life. They are not only a product of the past but continue to make themselves felt in the emotional vocabulary of art and literature in each new generation. In stealing them, we are not merely turning back to tradition; we are making active again the possibilities of art as emotional aspects.

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