

15. The Evolution of Indian Aesthetic Thought from Vedic to Classical Periods

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Abstract

The Indian aesthetic notions have been influenced by the Indian spiritual, philosophical, and cultural way of life over several millennia. This work describes the journey of aesthetic theory from the Vedic period, where beauty was seen as part of the divine harmony, up to the mature classical era represented by Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata and the Rasa theory of Abhinavagupta. This study through primary texts and philosophical traditions finds that the shift in focus from ritualistic and symbolic art towards a metaphysical understanding of aesthetic experience (ānanda) is noticeable. The main point of the research is to explain how the Indian aesthetic system not only comprises the artistic creativity but also elevates it to spiritual realization, thus, making it a totally different paradigm from the Western models.

Keywords: Indian aesthetics, Rasa theory, Vedic art, Bharata, Abhinavagupta, Nāṭyaśāstra, Dhvani, Ananda, classical Indian philosophy

1. Introduction

The study of Indian aesthetics (Ānvīkṣikī or Śāstra of Rasa) was and is still the core of the nation's philosophical and artistic heritage. In contrast to Western aesthetics that concentrate mainly on the form and perception, Indian aesthetics depend on the spiritual experience. The Rigveda and Upaniṣads are the earliest sources that reflect an aesthetic sensibility, where beauty (saundarya) and truth (satyam) were considered as one. Throughout the epic, Buddhist, and classical periods, the idea of art changed to depict universal emotion (rasa), thus, going beyond matter to reach the metaphysical. This article examines the method of the evolutionary process and how these thinkers Bharata, Anandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta to name a few, shaped Indian Aesthetic vision that was different from others.

2. Methodology

Textual analysis of primary Sanskrit sources such as the Rigveda, Upaniṣads, Nāṭyaśāstra, and Dhvanyāloka.

Comparative analysis between Vedic ritual aesthetics and classical aesthetic theory.

Philosophical interpretation of concepts like rasa, bhāva, dhvani, and ānanda.

Review of secondary literature of established scholars in Indology and aesthetics to provide the context for the findings.

3. Discussion

❖ Vedic Foundations of Aesthetic Thought

The Vedas set the grounds for Indian aesthetic perception. Songs praising the beauty of the nature and the cosmic order (ṛta) demonstrate an initial awareness of harmony and proportion. According to the Rigvedic poets, art was the portrayal of divine order, where satyam, śivam, and sundaram (truth, goodness, and beauty) were combined. Music and chant (sāman) were considered to be the most holy acts that make the human in harmony with the cosmic.

❖ Aesthetic Vision in the Upaniṣads and Epics

The Upaniṣads conveyed the metaphysical concept of ānanda—bliss—as the ultimate reality. Beauty was transformed from being something external into the experience of oneness with Brahman. The Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa went on to deeply interweave aesthetic principles in plot and emotion, thus dharma was connected with rasa. The Bhagavad Gītā presented the aesthetic of detachment—performing the act beautifully without being attached to the results.

❖ Buddhist and Jain Contributions

Buddhist art made use of symbolism for the representation of ideas and calmness was depicted through sculpture and architecture (e.g., Sanchi, Ajanta). The concept of śūnyatā (emptiness) in Buddhism along with compassion, helped to extend the aesthetic expression, as it concentrated on the inner tranquility rather than on the sensory enjoyment. Jain art was a representation of strictness and balance, as the spiritual journey towards liberation.

❖ Classical Period: Systematization through the Nāṭyaśāstra

The Nāṭyaśāstra (c. 2nd century BCE–2nd century CE) by Bharata Muni is the pioneer and the very first systematic treatise on art, drama, and aesthetics. Bharata's Rasa-Sūtra—"Vibhāva-anubhāva-vyabhicāri-samyogāt rasa-niṣpattiḥ"—is the one that maintains that aesthetic delight is the result of the most harmonious combination of determinants, consequents, and transient states. Eight fundamental rasas were singled out, each representing an emotional state (sthāyibhāva). This has become the basis of Indian aesthetics.

❖ Dhvani and the Height of Classical Aesthetic Philosophy

The 9th-century figures of Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta led to their works, Dhvanyāloka and Abhinavabhāratī respectively, to expand Bharata's ideas. Anandavardhana associated dhvani (suggestion) with the soul of poetry—implying that art evokes the deepest feelings beyond what is literally said. Abhinavagupta linked rasa with his Kashmiri Shaivism philosophy and stated that the aesthetic experience is the very happiness that comes from realization of one's self. Hence, aesthetic experience (rasa-anubhava) was equated with spiritual experience (brahmānanda-sahodara).

Suggestions

Indigenize Indian aesthetic study into interdisciplinarity philosophy, art, and psychology-based curriculum.

Facilitate the translations and comparative studies of classical Sanskrit aesthetic texts.

Develop media and cinema consumers' aesthetic literacy by introducing them to rasa-based principles.

Foster art education that focuses on the inner experience and moral aspects of beauty rather than just the technical side.

Facilitate the interaction of different cultures regarding the ideas of Indian and universal aesthetic theories.

5. Conclusion

The change of Indian aesthetic ideas from the Vedic to the classical period is an impressive story of going from ritual expression to a metaphysical experience of refined nature. Being closely tied to spirituality, Indian aesthetics sees beauty not simply as a delight of the senses but as a way leading to transcendence. With such philosophers as Bharata, Anandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta, art was made the vehicle to universal bliss experience. The integration of satyam, śivam, and sundaram is still the core of Indian art and thought, thus, it is a never-ending reservoir of inspirations for the modern aesthetics.

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