

Therapeutic Mindfulness through Rasa

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ABSTRACT:

Is the training and experience of rasa therapeutic in nature? Rasa, aesthetic essence, is the final goal of arts, and the quintessential flavour in all spheres of life. It is ultimate pleasure and satisfaction leading to spiritual bliss. In any field when work becomes a spiritual passion, complete satisfaction is achieved and thus there is rasa in it. This is possible when such activity becomes a vehicle for mind, body and spirit alignment, or yoga. On this I will draw reference to a Taittiriya Upanishad shloka Chapter 2, Section 7: Bliss is the essence of existence. Brahman is bliss. Spiritual bliss in aesthetic satisfaction is akin to the realization of the Brahman (Radhakrishnan, 1997, p. 549). According to Abhinavagupta, the principle commentator on rasa, there are five levels of aesthetic experience for the presenter and the perceiver; the sense level, the imaginative level, the emotive level, the carthartic level and the transcendental level. So how does Rasa work in realm of the spirit? For the performer when the enactment is an embodied representation it becomes encompassed all the five stages described by Abhinavaguta. Richard Schechner, discussing Rasaesthetics, perceives the Rasic performer, defining the performer as the first spectator. Kudiyaattam training as a vehicle: Natyasastra does not explicitly refer to a yogic breath training but Kudiyaattam, the ancient Sanskrit Theatre has specific breath training system to emote which requires focussed mind concentration, akin to a meditative technique. The Satvika Abhinaya practice of the form can easily be identified as a mindful practice. Phenomenological Studies, Empathy and Mirror Neurons: In the recent times there have been studies in Phenomenology with Empathy or concept of 'In Feeling' which resonate rasa sutra. First coined by Robert Visser as "aesthetic sympathy" or Einfuhlung, it was Theodore Lipps who first discussed empathy.

Later Phenomenologists, Husserl, Scheler, and Stein, discussing the subjectivity of individual experiences, notes that everybody has their own lived experiences. Scheler and Stein hold that imitation is not required to understand the emotive content of the other being. Discovered a decade ago in Italy by Rizzolatti, the functioning of the mirror neurons explains why we empathize. Experiments showed that a monkey, observing another in pain or pleasure, had the same reaction. The same neurons are said to be present in human brains This paper will discuss the mindful and contemplative training and experience of Rasa which can be of therapeutic value. Pedagogically devised, this can become an important tool of art practice as therapy.

KEYWORDS:

Rasa, Yogic Breath, Mirror Neurons, Therapeutic

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Rasa, aesthetic essence, is the final goal of arts, and the quint-essential flavour in all spheres of life. It is ultimate pleasure and satisfaction leading to spiritual bliss. In any field when work becomes a spiritual passion, complete satisfaction is achieved and thus there is rasa in it. This is possible when such activity becomes a vehicle for mind, body and spirit alignment, or yoga. On this I will draw reference to a Taittiriya Upanishad shloka Chapter 2, Section 7:

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INTEGRATING MINDFUL PRACTICES

Having the most ancient and extensive system of physical and mental wellness in the principles of yoga, it was natural to look at Natya and yoga to further explore the associations between both with special focus on Rasa.

Yoga and Philosophy

- » “Raso Vai Sah” - He himself is Rasa - Taittiriya Upanishad (2.7.1)

- » Yoga – Root word ‘Yuj’ - Unification of Body Mind Spirit

Dance

- » Physical Training
- » Psychosomatic training

INDIAN CLASSICAL PERFORMANCE

- » Ancient traditions in India integrated various practices.
- » Learning happened in a Gurukula system with structured disciplined routines.
- » Physical – Pure Dance - Nritta
- » Psychosomatic – Narrative dance - Abhinaya resultant for Rasanisatti

PHYSICAL TRAINING

- » Textual, sculptures, paintings evidences.
- » Practice texts enumerate exercises for all parts of the body including the face.
- » The body training of performers is evident in various sculptures, especially the depiction of the “Karanas” of dance as enumerated in the Natyashastra in the Chidambaram temple.

PSYCHICAL TRAINING

Rasa, the aesthetic enjoyment in the Indian classical arts, is the final goal and the quintessence of artistic endeavor, leading to ananda or spiritual fulfillment. The meditative quality of abhinaya in the classical dances can lead to such elevating experience.

The Origin: BHAVA – Embodied Enactment

Outcome: RASA Experience

- » Natyashastra mentions Satvik bhavas which point to a concentrated mind for enactment.

- » Kudiyyattam, the classical theatre tradition of Kerala, has specific breath techniques for emoting.

SATVIKA BHAVAS: EIGHT SATVIKA STATES

- » Are these called Satvik States because the other bhavas are devoid of Satva? The answer is these are called satvik states because these originate in the mind and are caused by concentrated mind focus.
- » These Satvika States which depend on the various kinds of histrionic representation are included in all Rasas.

RASA – CHAPTER 6 – NATYASAstra

- » Rasa – Sentiment, Aesthetic experience, Imaginative Experience
- » The ultimate aim of the performer is to evoke desired sentiments in the audience – Rasanispathi

Rasa occurs:

- » Through “Bhavaanukirtana”
- » When the ‘Sthayibhava’ becomes a collective emotion, “Sadharanikaran”
- » When the “Aloukika” becomes an “Aloukika” experience, thus draws from Atharva Veda.

RASA SUTRA – ABHINAVAGUPTACHARYA

- » There are five levels of aesthetic experience for the presenter and the perceiver (Deshpande G.T.1989, p. 85)
- » Concept/idea - Anukirtana, Adhyatma of the actor – Emotive level
- » Cognition of the idea by receptor – Sense level
- » Conceptualization through imagination – Aloukika
- » Carthacis with Sadharanikarana – awakening of latent

vasanas and samskaras in us

- » Chamatkara – Transcendental bliss, Ananda

FOR THE ACTOR

- » Character enacted, actor is detached
- » Enacts with Bhavaanukirtana
- » Enactment – Rajas and Tamas – imbibed with Satva – leads to Satvik
- » Thus it is when the actor reaches a yogic state of Sama that he/she can perform the leela-anukirtam, which can be referred to as the leela of the Gods with full Bhava Anukarana, with maximum understanding and feeling.

KUDIYATTAM TRAINING AS A VEHICLE

Natyasastra does not explicitly refer to a yogic breath training but Kudiyaattam, the ancient Sanskrit Theatre has specific breath training system to emote which requires focussed mind concentration, akin to a meditative technique. Navarasa Sadhana, the Satvika Abhinaya practice of the form can easily be identified as a mindful practice. This was “meticulously researched and studied by our ancient Indian aestheticians” (Venu, G.2013.p. 6)

Kudiyaattam and Breath Awareness

This particular practice that this study refers to has been in observation only from the middle of the 20 th century at the Kodungallur Kovilakkam under the Kodungallur Royal Family. This unique abhinaya training pedagogy transmitted under three generations of Kudiyaattam practitioners:

- » Vidwan Elaya Thampuran
- » Bhagavathar Kunjunni Thampuran
- » Ammannur Chachu Chakkyar

Ammanur Chachu Chakkyar established his Kalari at his own

expense at Irinjalakuda and imparted training to:

- » Ammannur Madhava Chakkyar
- » Painkula Rama Chakkyar
- » Ammannur Parameswara Chakkyar

These great maestros then imparted this rigorous training to their various disciples to keep this tradition alive and which is becoming a systematic pedagogy that is being used and taught worldwide.

The Important Features of this Pedagogy that initiates mindfulness:

The Eye Training:

- The training of bringing prana, vayu balam, into the eyes is the first initial practice that Kudiyattam training commences with.
- Focusing the eye on the lamp, the vilakku is the first step, ‘Vilakkinu nere’(Venu,G. 2013.p.5). This brings a mind concentration for enactment and the Kudiyattam performs with this concept to take the ‘abhinaya to the maximum possible level’ (Venu,G .2013.p.5).
- The next practice is the movements of the eyeballs as enumerated in the Natyasastra, keeping the power and vayu balam.
- This is akin to the practice of Trataka in Yoga.

The Navarasa Sadhana:

- Described by Bharata, the Sthayi bhava is a concentrated state of mind from which Rasa emerges and is transmitted to the heart and then spreads through the body, like fire spreading through dry logs.
- Kudiyattam training has specific breath techniques, inhalation and exhalation for the enactment of the various Rasas. For example according to the technique a slow, threadlike breath is

to be inhaled starting from the Mooladhara to the centre of the eyebrows from where it will come to the eyes and make the forehead and eyebrows vibrate for the Shringara.

- This practice requires immense concentrated breath practice almost akin to pranayama practices of Yoga.

There are stories of Bhagavathar Kunjuni Thampuran stopping his Prana when he as Bali was killed in Balivadhama. A Tirasseela was brought in for a while for him to revive himself and exit.

Another popular legend goes as a Chakkyar pretended to throw a stone at an Englishman's dog and both the dog and Englishman recoiled as if it was real.

AESTHETICS, RASA SUTRA

Western thought

- Aesthetics – Etymology – from the Greek word “aesthetikos” meaning pertaining to the senses.
- Concept discussed in the West first by Plato and Aristotle pertaining to the philosophy of art.
- Dates back to 400/300 BC
- Discussed concepts like Mimesis, Carthasis.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND CONTEMPLATIVE STUDIES

- Study of consciousness and experience with a first-person approach
- Study of mindful practices with a third- person analysis of a first person practice approach
- Neuro and Cognitive Sciences have already been working on the benefits of the arts for well-being.
- First coined by Robert Visser as “aesthetic sympathy” or Einfühlung, it was Theodore Lipps who first discussed empathy.

- Later Phenomenologists, Husserl, Scheler, and Stein, discussing the subjectivity of individual experiences, notes that everybody has their own lived experiences.
- Scheler and Stein hold that imitation is not required to understand the emotive content of the other being.
- Discovered a decade ago in Italy by Rizzolatti, the functioning of the mirror neurons explains why we empathize. Experiments showed that a monkey, observing another in pain or pleasure, had the same reaction. The same neurons are said to be present in human brains.
- The Studies in Mirror Neurons resonate with the rasa experience, first discussed about by VS. Ramachandran

PEDAGOGY DEVELOPED WITH MINDFULNESS

Envisioned by Prof. K.J Shah, looking at the Natyasastra with the Prasthantrayee principle of Indian philosophy, that is theory, analysis and practice in natyaprayoga methodology, can help us to develop a pedagogy identifying the holistic principles of performance.

- As a first person practitioner, embodied practice even the physical motion of dance is 'Rasic' leads to "Raso Vai Sah"
- Principles of breath practice of Kudiyattam, developed as a dancers preparation is a mindful practice akin to Yogic practice.
- Special focus with breath awareness in the eyes
- Both work at the sense level

ENACTMENT

- Richard Schechner discusses the Rasic performer, defining the performer as the first spectator.
- Exploring abhinaya works at the imaginative and emotive level
- While practicing the abhinaya piece often leads to a cathartic

experience for the Performer

- The performer, trained with such knowledge then can harness their emotive experience and present it as such that it becomes “Ananda” for both the performer and the spectator

CONCLUSION

Reviewing all the above viewpoints we can come to the conclusion that Rasa indeed is therapeutic in nature. Rasa resides in the realm of the spirit. It can be a yogic practice for the performer with such developed pedagogies as discussed above. When such discipline and passion is amalgamated then it indeed becomes wellbeing for the performer. As a spectator it often triggers deep ingrained issues which cannot be expressed in real life. Watching an enactment infused with Rasa, the emotive content portrayed which are close to such circumstances can lead to a cathartic experiences.

‘Raso Vai Saha’

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