
Bharatamuni's Natyashastra and the Concept of Social Emotion: A Critical Study

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Abstract

Bharatamuni's Natyashastra is one of the most comprehensive treatises on dramaturgy, aesthetics, performance, and cultural psychology. Beyond its artistic contributions, the text serves as a major sociological document that reflects the values, emotions, and ethical principles of ancient Indian society. This research paper explores the concept of social emotion embedded in the Natyashastra, particularly through the lens of rasa, bhava, performance ethics, audience psychology, and social function. By examining these dimensions, the study highlights how the Natyashastra contributes to the understanding of collective emotional experience, social harmony, moral education, and cultural identity. The paper also discusses contemporary relevance, showing how the principles illuminated by Bharatamuni continue to influence modern theatre, cinema, communication studies, and social behaviour.

1. Introduction

The Natyashastra of Bharatamuni (circa 200 BCE – 200 CE) stands as a monumental text not only in the field of performing arts but also in the understanding of social behaviour and emotional expression. While often studied as a treatise on dramaturgy, its depth extends far beyond theatre, covering psychology, ethics, musicology, stagecraft, and the socio-cultural purpose of art.

One of its most notable contributions is the exploration of emotions—both individual and collective—and how they operate within a community through dramatic representation. This paper analyses the Natyashastra as a fundamental text that shapes the concept of social emotions, especially through the theory of rasa, bhava, and the performative expression of human experience.

2. Review of Literature

The scholarly interpretations of Bharatamuni's work are vast. Key contributions include:

2.1 Classical Commentaries

Abhinavagupta's Abhinavabharati emphasises the psychological experience of the spectator.

Commentaries highlight the ethical and didactic value of drama.

2.2 Modern Scholarship

Scholars such as Kapila Vatsyayan, P. V. Kane, Adya Rangacharya, and Sheldon Pollock note the sociological dimension of the Natyashastra, observing that drama functions as a mirror of society.

2.3 Gaps in Research

Although literature extensively addresses rasa and performance aesthetics, fewer works explore:

Social emotions emerging through performance

How collective audience response shapes cultural norms

Socio-psychological purpose of dramatic art

This paper fills these research gaps.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the Natyashastra as a source of social and emotional understanding.
2. To explore the theory of rasa in the context of collective emotional experience.
3. To examine how drama shapes social values, ethics, and behaviour.
4. To highlight the contemporary relevance of Bharatamuni's emotional theory.

4. Methodology

This study uses:

Qualitative textual analysis of the Natyashastra.

Interpretative method for rasa-bhava theory.

Comparative approach linking ancient dramaturgy to modern performing arts and social psychology.

Secondary sources from aesthetics, cultural studies, and sociology.

5. Discussion and Analysis

5.1 The Purpose of Drama in Society

In the Natyashastra, Bharatamuni describes drama as a reflection of life (lokanukriti). Drama is created not merely for entertainment but for the following purposes:

Educating the masses

Enhancing moral judgment

Providing emotional catharsis

Preserving cultural memory

Creating social harmony

Thus, drama is a vehicle of social emotion, encouraging collective reflection and moral introspection.

5.2 Rasa Theory: The Heart of Social Emotion

5.2.1 Definition of Rasa

Rasa is the "essence of emotion" or aesthetic experience enjoyed by the audience. It arises from the harmonious interaction of:

Vibhava (determinants)

Anubhava (consequent expressions)

Vyabhichari bhava (transitory emotions)

Sthayi bhava (permanent emotion)

5.2.2 Collective Emotional Experience

Rasa is not just an individual response—

it is a shared emotional experience felt simultaneously by a group of spectators.

For example:

Karuna rasa creates collective empathy.

Veera rasa fosters social courage.

Shaanta rasa brings communal calmness and unity.

Thus, Bharatamuni introduces one of the earliest theories of social psychology and emotional contagion, centuries before Western scholars.

5.3 Bhava: The Roots of Emotional Expression

Bhava refers to emotional states portrayed by actors. Bharatamuni classifies them into:

Sthayi bhava (permanent emotions)

Sattvika bhava (involuntary emotions like tears, trembling)

Vyabhichari bhava (fleeting emotions like shame, fear, hope)

These emotional states create a sophisticated system of emotional communication, allowing audiences to experience societal emotions through art.

5.4 The Actor as a Social Communicator

In the Natyashastra, the actor (nata) is envisioned as a:

Messenger of cultural values

Vehicle of emotional expression

Instructor of ethical behaviour

Medium to connect society with philosophical truths

The actor's responsibility extends into the domain of public communication, making him a social educator. The concept is similar to today's mass communication ethics.

5.5 Natyashastra as a Manual of Audience Psychology

Bharatamuni emphasises understanding audience psychology (prekshaka-psychology):

Different audiences respond differently based on social background.

Effective performance must align aesthetics with audience emotions.

The audience experiences "empathetic transcendence"—feeling emotions without personal risk.

This demonstrates an advanced understanding of group behaviour, emotional influence, and collective identity.

5.6 Social Emotion and Ethical Values

Drama, according to the Natyashastra, creates ethical awareness by portraying:

Justice and injustice

Dharma and adharma

Heroism and cowardice

Compassion and cruelty

By emotionally engaging the audience, drama teaches ethics more effectively than lectures.

Social emotions stimulate moral behaviour.

5.7 Natyashastra as a Source of Social Harmony

Bharatamuni explicitly states that drama was created to unite society by:

Reducing emotional conflict

Providing entertainment to all social classes

Offering psychological relief during crises

Celebrating cultural identity

Drama becomes a universal language binding diverse groups.

5.8 Contemporary Relevance

A. Influence on Modern Theatre

The Natyashastra remains a fundamental text in Indian theatre training, guiding:

Acting techniques

Stage design

Dialogue delivery

Music and dance

B. Influence on Cinema

Indian cinema—from mythological films to modern dramas—uses:

Rasa-bhava theory

Emotional structuring

Visual symbolism

C. Influence on Mass Communication

Concepts like:

Audience engagement

Emotional storytelling

Symbolism

Narrative impact

are rooted in Natyashastra principles.

D. Influence on Psychology

Modern concepts like:

Emotional catharsis (Aristotle's theory)

Empathy

Social emotion

Emotional contagion

have parallels with Bharatamuni's earlier insights.

6. Findings

1. The Natyashastra is not merely an art text; it is a profound sociological document.

2. It introduces one of the earliest concepts of collective emotional experience.

3. Drama in the text functions as a medium of cultural education and emotional refinement.

4. Bharatamuni's theory anticipates modern psychological and communication principles.

5. The rasa theory remains central to understanding emotional behaviour in Indian performing arts.

7. Conclusion

Bharatamuni's Natyashastra stands as a timeless text that blends art, psychology, ethics, and social philosophy. Through the theory of rasa and bhava, it teaches how emotions can be represented, understood, and shared collectively. This collective emotional experience forms the basis of social emotion, enabling unity, empathy, learning, and harmony within society.

The text continues to influence modern theatre, cinema, and communication systems, proving its enduring relevance. Bharatamuni not only shaped the aesthetics of Indian drama but also offered a comprehensive understanding of how emotions govern social life.

Thus, the Natyashastra remains the world's earliest and most sophisticated manual on emotional culture, demonstrating how art elevates human consciousness and strengthens social bonds.

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