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Unveiling The Layers of Abhinavagupta's Bharatiya Aesthetics

Dr. Mukta Arvind Avachat

Associate Professor,
MIT ADT University, Loni Kalbhor
muktaavachat@gmail.com

Abstract

The polymath Abhinavagupta born between 950 and 960 A.D. in a scholastic, Kashmiri family who were the devotees of Shiva. He is one of the most important figures who had written on aesthetics. He is mainly known for his thoughts on shaivism but his works can be investigated from different point of views like philosophy, metaphysics, aesthetics, tantra and spirituality. Some of his known works are Tantrāloka, AbhinavaBhāratī, DhvanyālokaLocana, Anuttarāṣṭikā, Īśhwara-Pratyabhijñā-VivṛtiVimrśinī, BhagavadgītārthaSaṁgraha. Many scholars around the world are studying his philosophy on art. A 10th century Kashmiri philosopher who wrote the theory of Rasa and transferred it into one of the most known and systematic framework of aesthetic experience dealt with the question of what art does to us, why and how. He had compared the pure creation with the powers of the universal self. His works are unique blend of theology and arts. Many studies have been done on the cognition or impact of art on viewer's mind through scientific way but it is also important to find philosophical reasoning behind the process of art creation. Hence it is essential to understand both art and its impact on viewer through Bharatiya Aesthetical point of view. This paper tries to understand and analyze some of his concepts like 'Prakaśa' and 'Vimarśa', Sahridaya along with the process of creation of art mentioned by him. This paper aims to amalgamate his various thoughts on artist, viewer and creative processes. Qualitative analysis method has been used for this study. This study will be helpful to understand the role of Bharatiya Aesthetics to perceive art on spiritual level.

Key Words: Bharatiya Aesthetics, Abhinavagupta, Rasa Theory, Creative Process, 'Prakaśa' and 'Vimarśa', Sahridaya

Introduction

Bhartiya Aesthetics is always inspired by the country's spiritual, philosophical and cultural way of life. It traces the conceptual lineage from Vedic symbolism to the metaphysical rigor of classical enquiry (Kulkarni, 2025). Bharatiya Aesthetics is not only about sensory enjoyment but it is a systematic pathway towards metaphysical transcendence (Kulkarni,

2025). Since ancient times philosophers and scholars are trying to elaborate on questions like what is creativity? and What is the role of art? Bharatmuni, Shrishankuka, Abhinavagupta, Kshemendra, Dandin, Mammata, Bhattanayaka, Anandvardhana are few of the scholars who have talked about these topics. The subjects like Natyashāstra, rasa theory, dhvani siddhānt etc. had been created and analysed through times. Rasa theory created by Bharatmuni's Natyashāstra is the groundwork of Bhartiya aesthetics which narrates how an artwork creates emotions and artistic response in viewer. Bhartiya aesthetics is an amalgamation of spirituality and human life. This paper is focused on the Abhinavagupta's contemplations among them as his works are the best example of this blend.

In saivism it is believed that 'everything is connected to everything else' (Bäumer, 2008). This suggests that the bit of art can reflect the beauty of the entire artwork. But to understand the concept of even a small part of artwork there is a process mentioned in hindu literature. This process is Bhartiya aesthetics. Abhinavagupta used similes of the world drama and the world picture to show links between theology and arts (Rizo-Patron, 2010). Abhinavagupta measured the success of artistic act by whether it is successful to emotionally absorb the audience or not. His definition or concept of sahrdaya expects the knowledgeable spectator or audience (Abhinavagupta's Insights into Aesthetics: Unveiling the Layers of Rasa Theory, 2025).

Abhinavagupta was born between 950 and 960 A.D. in a scholastic, Kashmiri family who were the devotees of Shiva. It is mentioned that he was a Yoginibhu meaning born from Yogini. After completing his work it is believed that he went to Bhairav cave and never seen again (Pandey, "Abhinavagupta - An Historical and Philosophical Study"). He was a philosopher, etymologist and a metaphysician. He was the scholar of Trika system. Trika system is about three types of knowledge bheda, abheda and bhedābheda. His aesthetic framework is rooted in the non-dualistic metaphysics of Pratyabhidnya. He was the author of many Sanskrit works including Tantraloka, saivite scriptures, Abhinavbharati, Dhvanyaloka-Lochana, Isvarapratyabhijna-vimarsini.

Abhinavagupta's scriptures aim to guide readers towards self-realization. According to Abhinavagupta it is very essential that the idea of self, linked with the body and sensation for liberation. Abhinavagupta embraces the idea of generalization but not supports with Bhattanayaka's idea that Rasa is neither apprehended nor produced or revealed and can be only enjoyed. According to him importance of having creative genius from both side artist and viewer is important. In this paper the researcher is focusing on his three point of views or opinions regarding art creation, cognition of art and emotional response of viewers.

Objectives

1. To understand how Abhinavagupta's theories are related to each other

2. To understand why understanding Bhartiya Aesthetics is important to perceive art

For these objectives the researcher has taken three most relevant and known theories of Abhinavagupta regarding art, artist and the audience. Concept of Rasa Theory, Concept of creation and the concept of *Prakāśa and Vimarśa*. Qualitative analysis has been used for this study

1. Rasa Theory by Abhinavagupta

One can observe that many scholars have studied Abhinavagupta's Rasa Theory in detail. The most important addition of Abhinavagupta in Rasa theory is the introduction of Śānta Rasa. A composed stillness, tranquility.

Virosh Baghel concluded in his paper that a self in a detached state of consciousness becomes impersonalized in nature. When such an impersonalized self experience generalized emotions in an aesthetic context, he can be termed as 'aesthetic self' (Baghel). As mentioned by Naik the spectator undergoes a temporary dissolution of self-identity merging with the emotive and cognitive reality presented in the artistic work (Naik, 2024). Dr. Rekha Navneet stated that Abhinavagupta's Rasa theory stood out because emotions should be understood by the general mass of humanity (Navneet, 2020). Anand Vaidya in his book review stated the importance of Abhinavagupta's work. Abhinavagupta's creative engagement is historically and analytically informed (Vaidya, 2023). Pallathadka, Roy and Devi in their study traced the evolution of Ānanda as philosophical concept and experiential goal in artistic creation. They have stated case studies that explicitly engage with this concept demonstrate how traditional aesthetic principles continue to generate innovative artistic approaches. They have talked about Abhinavagupta's attitude of aesthetic identification, *tanmayībhavana*- the process through which spectators temporarily transcend their common identity by identifying with artistic representation (Pallathadka, Roy, & Devi, 2025). One can observe that Abhinavagupta delivered a detailed analysis on Bharatmuni's work. According to him aesthetic experience of Rasa is equivalent to *Brahmananda*. It is microcosm of *Brahmananda* because both have egoless absorption (Naik, 2024).

In Abhinavagupta's interpretation of Rasa theory with the concept of *Sādhāranīkaran* (universalization), he uplifts rasas above emotions response to transcendental experience and hence making aesthetic engagement to spiritual level. According to him Rasa is the manifestation of viewer's own suppressed feelings awakened by art. Emergence of rasa needs universalization, meaning clearance of personal references and notions.

2. Creation of Art

Even though Abhinavagupta had written mainly in the context of drama and poetry but one can relate this to visual arts also. He himself had compared the powers of the



universal self or Param Siva with the pure creation. As per his opinion and as mentioned in the *Trikā* system, there are five super-sensuous and supernatural beings which are not connected with the body. It correlates to the five powers of the Universal Self or ParamŚiva.

The five powers of the Universal Self are as follows

1. Being (Cit)
2. Self-rapture (Ānanda)
3. Will (Ichā)
4. Knowledge (Jñāna)
5. Action (Kriyā)

As Abhinavagupta stated these five powers exist in each individual. They arise in the exact sequence behind each decision and creation of art. In the book ‘Abhinavagupta-An Historical and Philosophical Study’ Dr. K. C. Pandey enlightened this concept with an example of the process behind an artist’s creation (Pandey, “Abhinavagupta - An Historical and Philosophical Study”, 1935).

Action

He asks us to imagine the artist with his brush. After some time, he takes his brush near the canvas, but something stops him. The artist thinks for some time and puts his brush back. The author suggests us to think what has controlled his activity?

Knowledge

When an artist creates something, he is converting his mental image or idea. What exactly is it? According to Dr. Pandey, this is nothing but the affection of his self or understanding. This shows that it requires technical and conceptual knowledge to control the process of creation.

Will

The emergence of a specific idea suggests the artist’s will behind it. According to Abhinavagupta, it is the will of an artist that retains a particular idea for a certain period. Abhinavagupta also observes that if the powers get weak, other ideas take place and destroy the original idea. Therefore, knowledge of the artist appears after his will.

Self-rapture

The state of consciousness decides the will. The will is dependent on the state of consciousness, which wants to experience the self-rapture or Ānanda. An unconscious or senseless object cannot will.

Being

The consciousness is always attached with ‘being’ and the being (Cit) shows the existence of ‘ego’ for which the word ‘self’ stands for.

According to Abhinavagupta, these steps are necessary for creation and these five powers belongs to ParamŚiva, the manifestor. This process exists in individual. Hence as he stated pure creation is a super sensuous creation. The predominance of any of these powers take place in the absence of thinking of all material worlds. This follows the certain state where there is only affection of purity or self (close to senselessness).

3. *Prakāśa and Vimarśa*

The researcher finds another concept of Abhinavgupta related to artist and his creation. The *Trika* system states '*prakāśavimarśamaya*' for the universal self. 'Prakāśa' and 'Vimarśa' are two concepts. As mentioned by Abhinavagupta, Vimarśa is a form of energy. The five powers occur in the same sequence because of 'Vimarśa'. 'Vimarśa' is responsible for the analysis of ideas in artist's mind till manifestation. 'Prakāśa' is the self. According to Abhinavagupta, Vimarśa cannot exist without Prakāśa. It is not different from individual like 'Vimarśa'. Abhinavagupta compared this Prakāśa aspect with the mirror. The mirror reflects the exterior (objects) and at the same time the objects reflect themselves retaining their purity (Deshpande). Like while dreaming the individual is the ground for dreams but he himself is detached from the dream (Pandey, "Abhinavagupta - An Historical and Philosophical Study").

According to *Trika* system, *Vimarśa* is the driving force behind manifestation and *Prakāśa* is manifestable or manifested. This aspect of *Prakāśa* is stated in the shloka as follows-

Prakāśatmāprakāśyorthonāprakāśāścasiddhyati

The above shloka loosely translates as that the manifestable and hence the manifested are same as *Prakāśa* itself (Pandey, "Abhinavagupta - An Historical and Philosophical Study", p. 206).

Within the context of creative process, '*Prakāśa*' and '*Vimarśa*' aspects of Abhinavagupta may be used to resolve the confusion of the relevance of practical work and context and to find the relation of art and artist. If one substitutes the terms 'Artist' and 'Artwork' for *Prakāśa* itself, then it can be viewed from different point of view. In the process of creation *Prakāśa* aspect works twice. First the Artist himself or herself is *Prakāśa* through which the aspect of *Vimarśa* works. In this process *Vimarśa* acts as knowledge and the power of analysis of thoughts, memories, experiences. As a result a *Prakāśa* gets created. Here it

means a mirror which is a reflection of those thoughts or visuals. In short if *Prakāśa* means an artwork or manifested form then the manifestable means those thoughts or visuals which can be manifested and controlled by *Vimarśa* -which can also be called as knowledge.

Sr. no.	Rasa Theory	Creation of Art	<i>Prakāśa and Vimarśa</i>
1	Rasa is the manifestation of viewer's own suppressed feelings awakened by art.	Pure creation is a super sensuous creation.	Artwork is the reflection of artist's knowledge
2	Emergence of rasa in viewer needs universalization, meaning clearance of personal references and notions.	The predominance of any of the 5 powers take place in the absence of thinking of all material worlds. This follows the certain state where there is only affection of purity or self (close to senselessness).	A detached state where there is only reflection of knowledge or thoughts can be seen in art just like in mirror.

Table 1. Abhinavagupta's concepts in brief regarding Rasa Theory, Creation of Art and *Prakāśa and Vimarśa*

Conclusion

Natyashastra established the foundation of basic framework of Bhartiya dramaturgy by creating the interplay between bhavas and the resulting rasa. For Abhinavagupta, Rasa ānanda is egoless. One can conclude that artwork is the reflection of artist's knowledge. On one sense the artwork, like *Prakāśa* works as a mirror or witness that has been created by *Vimarśa* which in this case is the theoretical and/or technical knowledge works as a driving force behind the manifested artwork. Abhinavagupta's synthesis of Rasa along with the theories of Creation of Art and *Prakāśa and Vimarśa* redefines the artistic engagement as spiritual realization and make it a total different experience than western philosophy. To conclude one can say egoless or senselessness (purity of self) is needed while creating and art as well as viewing of art. This proves that Bhartiya aesthetics is not just philosophy it is a process encounters ethically, scientifically, spirituality and also includes the thoughts on perception, wisdom. One can say that art is the reflection of viewer's thought because the viewer gets involved in art and then the state of *Sādhāranīkaran* mentioned by Abhinavagupta is achieved by viewer also. This suggests that Bharatiya aesthetics does not talk only about beauty but connection of thoughts at emotional level. Abhinavagupta kept spectator as the centre and not only art and artist. A spectator's role is also important as Abhinavagupta expected the literacy of the viewer also.



One can see how important this contribution is in aesthetics as it can be applicable to contemporary arts also.

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