

Creating an Audience: Social Implication of Aesthetic Experience

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Abstract

The study of aesthetic concepts gives us an understanding of the nature of aesthetics either as the experience or as the judgment of beauty and emotions. In contemporary times, one can also extend the scope of aesthetics to the field of sociology. There are many attempts in the field which have suggested the idea of Communitarian aesthetics. In this paper, I attempt to understand the sociological implications of the experience of aesthetics with the help of two theatre plays which were performed by a renowned theatre institution, Ninasam. Using certain concepts that are discussed in the theory of *Rasa* in India, I have attempted to understand the role of aesthetics in the ontological study of an audience of a theatre performance and argued for the importance of 'collective' in aesthetic appreciation.

Keywords

Audience, *Rasa*, theatre, *Sahṛdayatva*, empathy, Communitarian Aesthetics, *Tanmayībhāva*

Introduction

Many scholars across cultures discussed the concepts that are associated with aesthetics either as an experience of bliss or as the judgment of the beauty of an object or an emotion. In theatre, there are many theories that deal with the concept of aesthetic experience as a pleasurable experience in a theatre performance. But I strongly felt the dearth of studies that discuss the effect of aesthetic experience by members of the audience in a theatrical performance. In this paper, I attempt to examine whether the experience of aesthetics leads to build a theatre community. This examination leads one to focus on the subject of such experience, i.e. audience. While the Oxford dictionary (n.d.) defines the English term 'audience' as "[t]he assembled spectators or listeners at a public event such as a play, film, concert, or meeting", Park defines audience as:

The group of people [...] listens intently because they have some specific involvement in the situation. They have a part to play. The speech [or the performance] shapes itself around the fact of their presence and their involvement.ⁱⁱ

While the term 'spectator' may refer to an individual, the term 'audience' is a status of a collective entity or a group that seems to be eligible to undergo a collective aesthetic experience. Subbanna notes that an audience is an important factor in a performance.ⁱⁱⁱ Their "intimacy, involvement and identification do not necessarily follow from such a restricted and literal technique, but rather from proximity of hearts (*Sahrdayatva*)".^{iv} He (2009, 29) also notes that this is the reason why Sanskrit theoreticians call the audience as *sāmājika* (social being) and *sahrdaya* (ideal audience).^v Therefore, one could consider the audience not only as an individual identity of a person but also as a collective-social entity.

In the premodern phase of literature and philosophy in India, the concept of *rasa* was used to capture the emotional experience of the audience in a performance. But in contemporary times, many philosophers both in the Indian traditions of thought and the non-Indian traditions of thought consider aesthetics as a rational judgment of beauty. For Kant, aesthetics is a type of judgment. Berger notes that "[a]esthetic judgments based on a 'mere sensation' (including, for instance, a 'mere tone') necessarily fall within the to-each-his-own conception of taste and thus within Kant's category of the agreeable".^{vi} But for premodern Indian scholars, the aesthetics (which they call as *rasa* in the Sanskrit language) is an experience.^{vii} *Rasa* is manifested through the union of determinants, consequents, transitory emotions and the invariable psychological state.^{viii} Thus *rasa*, in Indian theories is an experience that is manifested in the psyche of the audience.

Abhinavagupta, who is the fourth major interpreter of the *rasasūtra*, understands and explains *rasa* as a shared experience which is neither subjective nor objective in nature. This nature of the experience of *rasa* leads one to think that *rasa* is inter-subjective where it is the result of the process of empathy. Abhinavagupta discusses the concept of empathy under two terms such as *hrdayasaṁvāda* (empathetic response) and *tanmayībhāva* (empathetic involvement). Thus, using these two terms he constructs his own idea of an ideal state of an audience (*sahrdaya*) to experience *rasa*.

The role of empathy (in Indian theory the terms which suggest empathy are *tanmayībhāva* or *sahrdayatva*) is one of the primary steps in theatre to reach aesthetic experience, according to him. But he doesn't seem to explain this concept in detail.

Furthermore, in an ideal situation, a 'good performance' ought to captivate the audience and at the same time, the members of the audience have to be ready to open

themselves to the imagination. The experience co-constituted by imagination and empathy can be understood as a type of communication. This communication is what Abhinavagupta calls as *hrdayasamvāda*. For this kind of communication, the audience needs to have an empathetic understanding with the character which is initiated by the faculty of mind called imagination.

Theatre and Social Ontology of Audience Experience

While it is safe to assume that some aspects of aesthetics are influenced by culture, it is, however, too radical to claim that all ideas of aesthetics are subject to cultural patterns and therefore relative. Philosophers have always claimed that aesthetic judgment is universal.^{ix} How can one extend the concept of Communitarian aesthetics^x to the field of theatre without radically challenging the idea of aesthetics as a phenomenon of an individual experience of aesthetic beauty or individual judgment?

I posit here that the concepts such as *Tanmayībhāva* (empathetic involvement) and *Hrdayasamvāda* (empathetic response) that have been discussed under the theory of *Rasa* explain the concept of Communitarian aesthetics in the field of theatre. *Tanmayībhāva* leads to *sahrdayatva* (the state of empathetic response). Pandey, while noting about the training of the audience, interprets the state of *Sahrdayatva*:

[...] after a few experiences of the same kind, the nervous system like a trained body of soldiers, gets ready for all the appropriate responses at the stimulation by any part of the total situation. Let it be clearly understood that this response is involuntary and more or less mechanical, because it does not presuppose any psychic function. When the vital forces are so affected by a series of practical experiences, the response to the stimulation by any part of an emotive situation is such as if the whole situation had stimulated it. The constituent of personality, which is responsible for this type of reaction, is technically called *Sahrdayatva*.^{xi}

The above definition where a psycho-physical complex of an audience is responding to the events of the play with this interest that is not personal is called *sahrdayatva*. In opposition to the sympathy which indicates personal involvement *sahrdayatva* indicates empathy, because, in the state of sympathy there is an involvement of personal interest, whereas the state of empathy needs not necessarily involve personal interest. If there is any personal interest involved in the experience, Abhinavagupta doesn't consider that experience as *rasa*. For him, the experience of *rasa* is *alaukika* (other-worldly experience) in nature. Therefore, we need to understand the concept of *sahrdayatva* with the help of the concept of empathy.

Along with these three concepts, Abhinavagupta borrows the concept of intersubjective universalization (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*) from Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka. This concept is the one that is the most significant for our discussion as it links the social to the concept of aesthetics without doing away with either the individual particular experience of aesthetics or leaning towards a theory of aesthetics that pays attention only to socio-cultural patterns. The concept of *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* is defined as a process in which the emotional state of the character and the emotional state of the audience are detached from their personal connection and hence become a kind of "intersubjective universal." Therefore, in this process, the emotion of Sīta on the stage will no longer remain as the emotion of the character Sīta in Rāmāyaṇa, rather it gets intersubjective universalized as the emotion of a community or many communities who are in the process of watching that play. Misra notes:

When one enjoys a dramatic performance or a piece of literature, the plot may be a known one and the characters may be familiar, the actors may be the same, the sequence may also be somewhat known but ecstasy experienced is not that of an individual but of the one identified with the collective self (the all-self) through total communion (be that for a fraction of a moment) is always new and unique. As such the participant is someone who arrives on the scene as an individual, but when he has gone through the experience, he is no more an individual, he is an All-Man. For attaining this state of consciousness one has to enter into this activity with this anticipation and therefore one has to be mentally prepared for it. That is what is meant by being a 'Sahrdaya'.^{xii}

Therefore, the experience of *rasa* could not be considered a completely individual experience. Rather it is a kind of 'intersubjective universal' experience because the emotions are already reached to the audience through the process of universalization (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), and the audience shares the common experience among themselves.

Ninasam: A Theatre Community Rendered by the Experience of Communitarian Aesthetics

Ninasam (abbr. Sri Nilakanteshwara Natya Samgha), located in Heggodu, is a theatre community established by a group of same-minded people led by K.V. Subbanna, in 1949.^{xiii} Though Ninasam has been established as a theatre group, the major vision of Ninasam is not only to concentrate on the performance of the traditional theatrical plays, but Ninasam is also in the process of building its own community through the medium of theatre. The major focus of Ninasam is to provide the space for people who are interested in theatre, to

discuss with theatre personalities, and thus identify with theatre either personally or professionally. In these discussions, the major point of debate was theatre and the appreciation of theatrical performances. These debates and discussions among the audience who come to watch the theatre performances and the directors, actors and theatre critics form a common interest among the participants in Ninasam events.

The observation of the development of Ninasam as a theatre community gives us the instances where Ninasam finds its existence as one of the culturally vibrant communities in India through theatrical activities with society. The very idea of Ninasam has been sprouted in the minds of people in Heggodu who would gather in a place and discuss and debate among themselves about theatre, literature, politics and family issues almost every evening. K.V. Subbanna, who led this group of people slowly started to transform these discussions into theatrical plays. Hence, in 1953, they staged the play 'Shahjahan' under the direction of K.V. Subbanna. From then onwards, Ninasam has been involving in many theatrical, cultural as well as art-oriented activities to build its community. The people who have been part of these events gradually started to get interested in theatre and many of them gradually find their identity in theatre, as actors, as directors, as a critic, as technicians, or as an audience. This process of involvement by the people around the village Heggodu is restricted to one particular generation, but they gradually have become successful in spreading the interest of theatre among their children, grandchildren, and other family members. Thus, Ninasam has its own theatre community which belongs to many people across Heggodu. One can observe that there is a sense of ownership in these people who are associated with Ninasam. The idea of 'identity' has thus become the core essence for their sense of community. It is the nature of identity which enables the people in Ninasam to participate actively in almost every activity in Ninasam.

When one observes the activities of these people and their sense of community, one can point out the influence of Ninasam on these people. That is, the knowledge which has been provided by Ninasam enabled these people to develop a sense of empathy towards other fellow people. It is this empathy, which is rendered by theatrical communication, resulted in the formation of a kind of theatre family that involves these people.

The connection between empathy and the formation of a community by a theatre group implies the effect of aesthetic experience one can get in a theatre performance. In other words, a person who watches the performance in a theatre group develops a kind of empathy (in Sanskrit *Sahrdayatva*), which is initiated during the process of watching. It is this *Sahrdayatva* which results in the audience to have a sort of empathetical connection

with the co-audience. Therefore, this empathetical experience builds a family-like or a friend-like connection among the audience. This connection is possible only when both the persons share the common experience from the play through the idea of universalization of characters and the emotions carried out by those characters. This idea of universalization is the first step towards building up a community that is initiated by the theatre. However, it is this community that results in the sustenance of theatre, as a reciprocation. Therefore, one can observe the constant give-and-take between theatre and community always, in various forms.

Two Plays as Variations of Social Experience

Let me discuss these set of theories with the help of two plays that were a part of my fieldwork observations, – “Atta Dari Itta Puli^{xiv}”, a play based on Manipur society and “Baba Saheb Ambedkar” which is originally written in English by Mukunda Rao and translated to Kannada by B. R. Venkataramana Ithal. The first play was performed by Ninasam Tirugata^{xv} in the year 2016-17 and the second play performed by a theater troupe called ‘Janamanadata^{xvi}’ in the year 2014-15.

The play “Atta Dari Itta Puli” was directed by Heisnam Tomba, a veteran theatre director from Manipur. The play is the improvisation of the difficult socio-political situation of North-East regions of India. The play revolves around the social conditions of the people in Manipur who bear the brunt of a police-controlled state, mainly the presence of the Indian army and the special powers given to them in this region, even after their struggle during colonial times ended with independence.

The play “Atta Dari Itta Puli” does not follow any prewritten script. In an interview with one of the actors (AC-1^{xvii}) of this play, he narrates the process behind the production of this play. He notes that director Tomba started the rehearsal with a set of improvisations. These improvisations were based on the narration of the conditions that are faced by the Manipur Society. AC-1 also notes that the director provided the complete biographical details of the characters.^{xviii} Therefore, even though there was no written script available for the actors, they certainly had access to a narrated script. The history of theatre in India shows us that the performance of a theatre play needs not always be dependent on any script. Indeed, it certainly needs a storyline or an incident that can be reflecting any themes such as characters in history, mythology, folklore, Sociological, fictional or any other genre. However, there are many theatre performances that are based on the problems that have been faced by certain communities.

The different performances of such theatre play invoke an experience in the audience which is not merely restricted to the experience of emotions. The experience one could attain in these performances encourages the audience to expand the scope of their individual experience to have a kind of connection with the victims or the subjects who are facing such problems in society who are indirectly represented by the actors on the stage. This process of expansion of the experience is what Abhinavagupta calls as *sahṛdayatva*. For example, in the interview I conducted, an audience (AD-1) who watched the play "Atta Dari Itta Puli" explains his experience of the play. AD-1 notes:

It is true that through the play *Atta Dari Itta Puli*, we came to know about the issues of Manipur society. I don't think that play will that much effective in the places around. If you do that same play in Manipur itself, it may influence them very much. However, the play has its own political limitations. But the performance here in Heggodu, gave us the awareness of the problem happened in Manipur society (Tapaswi 2019, 75).^{xixxx}

AD-1's explanation points out two major components that are present in the experience of a play. First, the 'intimacy' that a theatre performance provides to its audience. This 'intimacy' takes place between the audience and the characters in the play through *hṛdayasaṁvāda* (intersubjective empathetic communication). In the first part of his explanation, AD-1 seems to note that kind of 'intimacy'. Hence, he suspects the effectiveness of the play in Karnataka. But in the last sentence, he admits that the play is succeeded in providing the awareness of the problems that are challenging the Manipur society. At this level, the play has worked out its intention successfully.

What are the implications of such awareness or the experience of the others' problems? What constitutes such experience? The answer to these questions takes us back to the concepts that are explained by Abhinavagupta. It is the *tanmayībhāva* which initiates such experience and *hṛdayasaṁvāda* provides the awareness of the problems. The *sahṛdayatva* of the audience helps her to experience such problems. In other words, the audience, through the state of empathetic with the character (*tanmayībhāva*), involves in a kind of intersubjective empathetic communication (*hṛdayasaṁvāda*) with the characters. This communication provides an experience of the emotions of the characters to the audience. This experience helps the audience to undergo a process of building an 'audience identity' that is social in nature. As and when she watches the theatre performances, the experiences she attains from the performances indirectly helps to consolidate her *sahṛdayatva*. All these processes are also based on the understandability of the audience, in theatre performance. If a person could not understand the different elements of a theatre

performance such as theatrical symbols, images that are used in theatre performances, suggested meaning of the dialogues that are delivered by the actors and so on, she may not be able to empathize with the characters.

For instance, the second play which I consider here is "Baba Saheb Ambedkar" which provides a case to understand the lack of *sahṛdayatva*. To talk about the play, the theme of the play "Baba Saheb Ambedkar" is based on historical encounters that may take place between Mahatma Gandhi and Baba Saheb Ambedkar.^{.xxi} The play also discusses the ideological differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar on many issues. But at the end of the play, in a scene, both Gandhi and Ambedkar embrace each other despite their differences of opinion.

In one of the interviews I have conducted with the director of this play (DIR-1), he narrates an incident of the performance of this play in which the play stood canceled because of the misunderstanding from a group of audience. At the end of the play, there is a scene where Gandhi is about to leave and asks for a warm hug from Ambedkar. Ambedkar says, "why not" and he opens up his hand gets ready for a hug. They hug each other. Ambedkar calls Gandhi 'Mahatma' and after that, they leave each other and part away in different directions. This was supposed to indicate that even though these two leaders have their differences they share a common love for India and the society. Members of many Dalit organizations couldn't understand this theatrical symbolism. Hence, they began to say that "In history, there is no instance in which Gandhi hugs Ambedkar. Ambedkar hadn't ever called Gandhi as 'Mahatma'. He always would oppose Gandhi. By showing all these things in this play you are twisting the history." These kinds of reactions started in one village and it spread across to the villages nearby. In Chamarajanagar, after the show, a group of activists (BVS) entered the theatre from outside and began to beat up the actors. Since the group was very large, actors couldn't control them. Later the actors left that village with police protection.^{.xxiixxiii}

These two examples mark the importance of *sahṛdayatva*. To achieve the state of *sahṛdayatva* one certainly needs to have the thorough understanding of the performance, be able to empathize with the characters in the performances, be able to imagine certain images in the mind and finally be opened to receive the performance through the process of intersubjective universalization (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*). In the example of the first play, the audience AD-1's answer suggests the importance of understanding the cultural patterns which are most crucial in the experience of Communitarian aesthetics. The play provides such kind of social awareness through theatrical images, symbols, and suggestions. These

theatrical elements become trigger points to enhance the sociological imagination of the audience through intersubjectivity and empathy. They also serve the purpose of theatre in the performance level, whereas the sociological awareness which is presented by the performance influences the social ontology of the audience. It is through this state of *sahṛdayatva*, audience achieves the state of true 'audience-hood'.

If the performance fails to present such triggers, or the audience fails to receive such triggers, as in the case of the second example, the audience cannot experience aesthetics. This state of the audience also suggests that there is no *sahṛdayatva* present in the audience, which leads the audience to consider the performance personally and motivates them to act adversely. The social imagination of the particular group of the audience does not seem to match with the social imagination that the performance suggests. This is what Abhinavagupta considers as the obstacle to experience *rasa*, i.e. *pratītyupāyavaikalya* (deficiency in the means of clear apprehension).^{xxiv} According to Abhinavagupta, when the play doesn't provide enough materials to the imagination of the audience, or the audience is not able to understand and imagine certain sequences, this obstacle arises. In this case, there is no aesthetic experience possible and one cannot consider those kinds of members of the audience as 'the audience', rather they are just individuals. Hence, I posit here that the existence of the state of *sahṛdayatva* is very much necessary for a person to achieve the state of 'audience'.

Conclusion

The examples which are discussed so far provide a solid instance to show how Ninasam has been involved in habituating theatre to build community. In the process of watching theatre performances, there is a kind of emotional transformation in human beings which makes them connect with each other. This transformation, in the case of theatre, has been happening through *sahṛdayatva* (the state of empathetic response). This process has been creating a special kind of identity for the human being which results in the formation of community. Ninasam provides space for the audience to watch a theatre performance, think about it from different dimensions, and discuss it with the directors and actors. Thus, there is a kind of 'becoming' process in the case of the audience in Ninasam. Ninasam and its involvement in theatre and aesthetics can be understood in two significant ways – the understanding of aesthetics as an experience of *rasa* for the people of Heggodu as '*prekṣakas*' and the common ground for an aesthetics of community that is created through activities around theatre production and appreciation.

Therefore, one could claim that the experience of the other forms of art that does not create a `sāmājika (or sahrdaya) will not be able to fall under the purview of Communitarian aesthetics. Perhaps, the patterns and cultural conditioning is required to match the social imagination and the clarity of shared meanings in order to have any kind of social impact. At the same time, it is necessary to train the audience in some sense to accept a collective aesthetic experience. One might, therefore, understand why certain kinds of theatre performances such as street plays may be appreciated by certain communities and yet fail to make an impact among others. It is up to the director to extend her imagination to match that of the community in order to create an "ideal audience".

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i This article is a compilation of the arguments extracted from my unpublished research work entitled "Understanding Rasa (Aesthetic) Experience: Towards the Conceptualization of Contemporary Theatre Community in Karnataka" which I submitted to Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal in 2019.

ii Douglas Park B, "The Meanings of "Audience"," *College English* 44, no. 3 (March 1982): 249.

iii Subanna, K.V, "Ninasam: The Springs of Inspiration," in *Community and Culture*, ed. Manu Chakravarthy (Heggodu: Akshara Prakashana, 2009), 28.

iv Subanna, "Ninasam," 28-29.

v Subbanna, "Ninasam," 29.

vi David Berger, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory: The Beautiful and Agreeable* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 13.

vii For more See (Gnoli 1985, 99).

viii V.M.Kulkarni, "The Alaukika Nature of Rasa," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 75, no. 1/4 (1994): 282.

ix David Berger, *Kant's Aesthetic*, 19.

x Communitarian Aesthetics here means the experience of aesthetics which leads to build a community.

xi K.C. Pandey. *Comparative Aesthetics: Indian Aesthetics (Vol.1)*, (Varanasi: Chowkhambha Sanskrit Series Office, 2008), 162-163.

xii Vidya Niwas Misra, "The Concept of Sahrdaya," in *East West Poetics at Work: Papers Presented at the Seminar on Indian and Western Poetics at Work, Dhvanyaloka, Mysore, January 1991* ed. Closepet D. Narasimhaiah, (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994), 49.

xiii For more see (Ninasam, n.d.).

xiv For the video see "Atta Dari Itta Puli," YouTube video, 1.26.35, from a performance by Ninasam Tirugata in 2016, posted by "Sanchi Foundation," March 1, 2017, https://youtu.be/aCniRr_n9Lk.

xv Ninasam (established in 1949) is one of the prominent theatre community located in a small town called Heggodu in Karnataka. It has several working branches among which Tirugata is an itinerant theatre repertory which has been performing plays all over Karnataka and sometimes outside Karnataka as well, since 1985. For more about Ninasam see <http://www.ninasam.org/ninasam-page/overview/>

xvi 'Janamanadata' is a theatre troupe established by a group of theatre enthusiast who have passed out from Ninasam theatre institution. It is a small theatre troupe which travels across Karnataka and performs one play per year. The troupe has performed many theatre performances which are based on caste, class, gender, religion, and so on.

xvii Since in this dissertation I used the opinions of the people I interviewed, and I could not disclose their names, I have used the acronyms such as for the director, DIR-1, for the actor, AC-1, and for the audience, AD-1, throughout this work.

xviii AC-1 (an actor) in discussion with the author, November 04, 2016.

xix Tapaswi H M, "Understanding Rasa (Aesthetic) Experience: Towards the Conceptualization of Contemporary Theatre Community in Karnataka." (PhD diss., Manipal Academy of Higher Education, 2019), 75.

xx AD-1 (an audience and an actor) in discussion with the author, April 02, 2017.

xxi For more see (Ja. Ho. Na 2014, 4).

xxii Tapaswi H M, *Understanding Rasa*, 140.

xxiii DIR-1 (an audience, actor and a director in theatre) in discussion with the author, October 27, 2016.

xxiv This is one of the seven obstacles (*rasa vighna*) to the experience of rasa.