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Influence of Sanskrit Poetics on Indian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the influence of Sanskrit poetics on Indian cinema through a comparative aesthetic framework grounded in classical Indian theory and modern film analysis. Drawing on Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra, Abhinavagupta's Abhinavabhāratī, Ānandavardhana's Dhvanyāloka, Vāmana's conception of rīti, and Kuntaka's theory of vakrokti, the paper argues that Indian cinema has repeatedly translated premodern aesthetic principles into cinematic idioms rather than merely inheriting mythological content. The study focuses on six interlinked concepts—rasa, dhvani, alaṃkāra, vakrokti, rīti, and śabda-bhāva—and correlates them with film techniques such as shot composition, mise-en-scène, music, editing, dialogue, and performance. Methodologically, it employs qualitative close reading of selected scenes from five films across periods and regions: Raja Harishchandra (1913), Pather Panchali (1955), Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960), Devdas (2002), and Baahubali: The Beginning (2015). These films were chosen to represent early mythological cinema, art cinema, melodrama, and contemporary epic spectacle. The analysis demonstrates that Sanskrit poetics survives in cinema in multiple forms: explicit epic inheritance, stylized gesture, symbolic indirection, sound-emotion coupling, lyrical visual ornament, and the orchestration of spectatorly affect. The paper further argues that Sanskrit poetics offers a more historically appropriate vocabulary than exclusively Euro-American models for understanding several distinctive features of Indian film form, especially music-led narration, mixed tonal registers, performance density, and emotional plurality. The study concludes that Sanskrit poetics is not simply a historical precursor to Indian cinema but an ongoing interpretive key to its aesthetics, direction, screenplay, acting, and sonic design.

Keywords: Sanskrit poetics; rasa; dhvani; Indian cinema; film aesthetics; melodrama; mise-en-scène

INTRODUCTION

Any serious account of Indian cinema's form must examine not only its stories, industries, and technologies, but also its indigenous aesthetic vocabularies. Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra established an unusually wide theory of performance that integrates sentiment, emotion, gesture, diction, costume, music, and spectatorship. The treatise is not limited to drama in a narrow sense; it theorizes arts of representation at the intersection of body, voice, feeling, and structured delight. Bharata's key formulation—"विभावानुभावव्यभिचारिसंयोगाद्रसनिष्पत्तिः" (vibhāvānubhāva-vyabhicāri-saṃyogād rasa-niṣpattiḥ)—is commonly translated as: "Rasa is produced from the conjunction of determinants, consequents, and complementary psychological states." These claims remain relevant to cinema, which creates affect through setting, gesture, performance, sound, rhythm, and spectatorship.

The historical pathway from classical poetics to cinema was not linear but mediated. Sanskrit drama, temple performance traditions, bhakti performance, regional literatures, folk theatre, and later Parsi theatre created a broad pre-cinematic ecology in which stylized gesture, song, mixed registers, moral-emotional types, and spectacle circulated widely. Parsi theatre in particular blended realism and fantasy, music and dance, narrative and spectacle, and later fed directly into popular Indian film form. Thus, the persistence of Sanskrit poetics in cinema is not merely textual or philosophical; it is institutional, performative, and sensory.

Early Indian cinema confirms this continuity. Raja Harishchandra, commonly discussed as India's first feature film, adapted a well-known mythological narrative, used theatrical performance conventions, and derived its emotional force from a story of dharma under trial. Its release in 1913 marks not the invention of Indian screen feeling from scratch, but the transfer of already circulating narrative-aesthetic forms to a new medium. Later auteurs and mainstream directors transformed those inheritances in different ways, yet the underlying logic of emotional shaping, suggestion, ornament, and mixed affect remained durable.

The argument of this paper is therefore twofold. First, Sanskrit poetics provides a historically grounded interpretive vocabulary for Indian cinema. Second, different kinds of Indian films activate that vocabulary differently: sometimes explicitly through epic inheritance, sometimes implicitly through tonal modulation, sound design, performance texture, and visual stylization.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To examine the relevance of major Sanskrit poetics concepts for the study of Indian cinema.
- To analyze how rasa, dhvani, alaṃkāra, vakrokti, rīti, and śabda-bhāva operate in selected Indian films.
- To show that Indian cinema inherits not only mythological narratives but also aesthetic principles from classical and performance traditions.
- To propose Sanskrit poetics as a historically appropriate framework for Indian film criticism.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholarship on Sanskrit poetics and scholarship on Indian cinema have often developed in parallel rather than in sustained dialogue. On the classical side, Bharata, Abhinavagupta, Ānandavardhana, Vāmana, and Kuntaka provide major conceptual tools for understanding affect, suggestion, style, and expressive deviation. On the cinema side, historians and theorists of Indian film have repeatedly noted the importance of music, tonal plurality, mythological inheritance, melodrama, theatrical transitions, and mixed registers in Indian cinema. Yet the bridge between these two bodies of work remains underdeveloped in many film analyses, which continue to rely primarily on imported vocabularies even when the films themselves are generated from aesthetic assumptions legible within Indian traditions.

The present study uses six concepts. Rasa is the relishable aesthetic flavor produced through the interaction of determinants, consequents, and transitory states; in cinema, it helps us think beyond emotion as mere psychology and toward patterned spectatorly experience. Dhvani concerns suggestion or resonance beyond denotative meaning; cinematically, it is crucial for ellipsis, symbolic imagery, acoustic implication, and the unsaid. Alaṃkāra refers to ornamentation or figured enhancement; in film this extends to color, visual excess, choreographed symmetry, lyrical dialogue, and heightened symbolic design. Vakrokti, the theory of oblique expression, directs attention to indirectness, expressive twist, and the non-literal route by which films create force. Rīti concerns style or the arrangement of words and qualities; cinematically, it maps onto a film's governing texture—its movement, density, rhythm, and manner of compositional elegance. Finally, śabda-bhāva, used here operationally, denotes the relation between verbal-sonic texture and affective state: dialogue delivery, lyric phrasing, vocal timbre, refrain, and music as carriers of feeling.

Two brief sūtra-like formulations summarize the theoretical pivot of this paper. Vāmana's maxim "रीतिरात्मा काव्यस्य" (rītir ātmā kāvyasya), meaning "style is the soul of poetry," remains useful for cinema, where directing is inseparable from stylistic world-making. The dhvani tradition is equally decisive because it shifts aesthetic value from what is merely said to what is made to resonate. In film terms, the symbolic train in Pather Panchali, the sonic lacerations in Meghe Dhaka Tara, or the threshold imagery in Devdas matter precisely because they exceed denotative narration.

The framework also clarifies something often observed but less often theorized: Indian films frequently organize themselves through multi-rasa progression rather than tonal purity. Popular cinema in particular often takes viewers through a sequence of different moods—wonder, laughter, sorrow, anger, romance, and heroism—without understanding this mixture as aesthetic failure. Seen through Sanskrit poetics, this is not excess in a merely pejorative sense; it is closer to a different logic of aesthetic totality.

Sanskrit poetics concept	Core meaning in poetics	Cinematic correlate	Typical film techniques	Illustrative tendency
Rasa	Relishable aesthetic flavor	Spectatorly affect-structure	Performance, pacing, music, close-ups, tonal orchestration	Karuṇa in loss scenes; vīra in battle; adbhuta in spectacle
Dhvani	Suggestion, resonance beyond denotation	Symbolic excess and implication	Ellipsis, recurring motifs, off-screen sound, visual metaphor, silence	Rain, thresholds, trains, empty spaces, echoing lines
Alaṃkāra	Ornament, figuration, embellishment	Visual and verbal intensification	Color design, choreography, ornate sets, stylized dialogue, lyrical camera movement	Opulent melodrama and ceremonial spectacle
Vakrokti	Oblique, artistically deviated expression	Indirect narration and expressive displacement	Irony, juxtaposition, unusual framing, disruptive sound, figurative dialogue	Emotional truth through indirection rather than explanation
Rīti	Style as arrangement and quality	Governing directorial texture	Shot duration, movement, compositional density, editing rhythm, tonal consistency	Lyric realism, grand epic style, austere minimalism
Śabda-bhāva	Sound/word linked with emotive state	Sonic-affective design	Dialogue delivery, song lyrics, leitmotifs, refrain, vocal timbre, ambient sound	Music and speech carrying or transforming emotional states

Table 1. Comparative mapping synthesized from Bharata, Abhinavagupta, Ānandavardhana, Vāmana, and Kuntaka, adapted here for film analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive methodology combining classical poetics with close film analysis. The method is comparative rather than positivist: it does not attempt to prove that every filmmaker consciously borrowed from one named Sanskrit theorist. Instead, it asks whether Sanskrit poetics offers a more historically and aesthetically adequate language for understanding how selected Indian films generate emotional and formal effects. The argument includes both explicit influence, where epic or mythological inspiration is openly acknowledged, and implicit affinity, where scene construction is more productively illuminated by classical concepts than by imported categories alone.

Five films were selected using three criteria: historical spread, regional diversity, and formal contrast. Raja Harishchandra represents early mythological cinema and the transfer from theatre to screen; Pather Panchali and Meghe Dhaka Tara represent two distinct strands of art cinema; Devdas represents high melodramatic and ornamental popular style; and Baahubali: The Beginning represents contemporary pan-Indian epic spectacle. These films also enable comparison between explicit mythological inheritance and subtler aesthetic continuities.

Scene selection was equally deliberate. Each case focuses on moments where performance, framing, music, sound, or editing visibly crystallize one or more Sanskrit poetics concepts: surviving tableau-fragments in Raja Harishchandra; the train and monsoon sequences in Pather Panchali; the sonic shocks and terminal cry in Meghe Dhaka Tara; the choreographed ornamental set-pieces and threshold motifs of Devdas; and the origin, ascent, and battle spectacles of Baahubali. The resulting analysis is interpretive but textually grounded. Where evidence of direct authorial discourse is unavailable, the paper marks its claims as analytical inferences rather than documentary certainties.

CASE STUDIES

Raja Harishchandra (1913): Proto-Cinematic Rasa and Nāṭyadharmī Transfer

As the first Indian feature film, Raja Harishchandra is foundational less because it is technically first than because it establishes a basic mode of adaptation: the migration of mythological narrative and theatricalized performance into cinema. The surviving material and historical accounts indicate tableau-like staging, frontal grouping, strong costume signaling, and gesture-forward acting. These features can be read through the Nāṭyaśāstra distinction between realistic and conventional presentation; the film is not trying to erase theatricality but to mobilize it as a vehicle of moral-emotional clarity. Harishchandra's dharmic trial generates combinations of vīra, karuṇa, and ethical seriousness rather than psychological realism in the modern liberal sense. The effect is closer to enacted sentiment than invisible naturalism.

The surviving stills and production history also make visible a pre-cinematic performance ecology. Male actors playing female roles, stylized costuming, and mythological familiarity reduce the burden of realism while increasing immediacy of recognition. In Sanskrit-aesthetic terms, the film's power lies in recognizable vibhāvas—king, sage, ordeal, vow, and familial suffering—which trigger a relishable moral-affective experience. Even at this early stage, Indian cinema appears less as photographed theatre in a pejorative sense and more as a new apparatus for rasa-bearing representation.

Pather Panchali (1955): Dhvani, Karuṇa, and Lyrical Realism

Satyajit Ray's Pather Panchali is often described as realist, but its realism is inseparable from dhvani-like suggestion. Ray's cinema does not instruct the viewer what to feel at every moment; instead, it lets image, environment, and duration become suggestive. The famous train scene, where Apu and Durga run through the kaash fields to glimpse modernity, is not merely narrative information. It is a resonant image of desire, horizon, movement, and elsewhere-ness. Its meaning exceeds denotation; it is a cinematic instance of suggestion.

The monsoon sequence and Durga's death further deepen this structure. Rain in the film is not only a meteorological event but also an emotional atmosphere. Karuṇa rasa is built not through melodramatic overstatement but through accumulation: poverty, illness, fragile delight, and loss. Ravi Shankar's score does not explain sorrow in a simplistic way; it heightens the relation between śabda and bhāva, allowing sound to carry emotional states that remain only partially verbalized. The result is a form of lyric realism in which karuṇa shades toward śānta: the spectator is moved, but the film also creates contemplative distance rather than raw sentimentality.

Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960): Vakrokti through Sound and Karuṇa under Pressure

Ritwik Ghatak's Meghe Dhaka Tara is a major instance of how Sanskrit poetics can illuminate a modernist film without reducing it to tradition. The film's emotional design is not simply social realism; it is mythically inflected suffering rendered through sonic and formal intensification. The recurring sharp sound-stabs that puncture Nita's moments of humiliation or betrayal operate like cinematic vakrokti: feeling is displaced into expressive deviation rather than straightforward representation. Sound becomes oblique speech.

The climax, in which Nita cries out “Dada, I want to live,” is often remembered as a devastating cry of karuṇa. But the scene draws its force from prior formal preparation: distortion, repression, sonic rupture, and recurrent symbolic build-up. The film continuously oscillates between intimate suffering and historical fracture, allowing karuṇa to gather a subterranean raudra against the world that has consumed Nita. In this sense, Ghatak's modernism is not anti-rasa. It intensifies rasa through broken form, especially through expressive sound, thereby showing how classical categories can survive through rupture rather than continuity alone.

Devdas (2002): Alaṃkāra, Rīti, and the Melodramatic Image

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Devdas offers perhaps the clearest modern example of cinema as alaṃkāric construction. The film's opulent décor, color saturation, monumental interiors, multiplanar blocking, and choreographed camera movement are not decorative surplus alone; they are structured ornament. Bhansali's cinema turns emotional states into visible architecture. The mise-en-scène of Chandramukhi's chambers or the ceremonial intensity of “Dola Re Dola” transforms sorrow and desire into choreographed visual rhetoric. Here, alaṃkāra is not opposed to emotion; it is the mode through which emotion becomes sensorially inhabitable.

The film also exemplifies rīti as governing stylistic identity. Bhansali's direction sustains a coherent manner—slow ceremonial movement, ornamental framing, patterned dialogue delivery, and music-led emotional articulation. Even the famous set-pieces work through śabda-bhāva: lyrics, vocal timbre, classical gesture, and orchestration intensify the feeling-state rather than merely interrupting plot. In the final sequence, when Paro runs toward the gate as Devdas dies outside, threshold imagery creates dhvani: the closed door is not only a prop, but the visible condensation of social prohibition, missed union, and terminal lateness. Śṛṅgāra resolves into karuṇa through spatial metaphor.

Baahubali: The Beginning (2015): Vīra, Adbhuta, and the Return of Epic Poetics

S. S. Rajamouli's Baahubali: The Beginning makes the continuity with classical and epic aesthetics unusually explicit. The film invites reading not merely as a fantasy blockbuster but as contemporary epic aesthetics in cinematic form. Its dominant rasas are vīra and adbhuta. The opening image of the baby held above the water already produces wonder and destiny in one stroke. The hero's ascent of the waterfall, the lifting of the liṅga, the dramatic revelation of Mahishmati, and the battle choreography all build toward relishable heroism and astonishment.

What is most striking is the film's integration of spectacular scale with affective coding. Music and leitmotif function in a manner analogous to the Nāṭyaśāstra's attention to performance song and emotional accompaniment. Costume, armor, battlefield design, and compositional symmetry evoke a monumental rīti proper to epic cinema. Performance is often deliberately heightened rather than naturalistic, approaching a modern screen version of nāṭyadharmī stylization. This does not make the film archaic. Rather, it demonstrates that classical aesthetic principles can be technologically amplified without losing their emotional logic.

Discussion

The case studies suggest that Sanskrit poetics is most valuable to film studies when treated as a living analytical vocabulary rather than as a museumized precursor. For film aesthetics, the category of rasa explains why so many Indian films privilege emotional orchestration over strict tonal unities familiar from some Euro-American critical paradigms. For direction, rīti helps identify the governing manner through which a director organizes movement, density, rhythm, and stylization. For screenplay, dhvani and vakrokti clarify why implication, recurrence, interruption, and symbolic displacement matter as much as plot points. For acting, the bhāva-rasa model remains particularly apt because Indian performance traditions often treat expression as transmissible and stylized rather than merely internal and psychological. For music, the Nāṭyaśāstra's inclusion of song and verbal performance makes it easier to understand why Indian cinema's songs are frequently structural rather than extraneous.

The analysis also indicates that Sanskrit poetics is not confined to mythological or classical cinema. Ray's suggestive realism, Ghatak's sonic modernism, Bhansali's melodramatic ornament, and Rajamouli's digital epic all remain legible through its categories, although in different ways. Classical theory therefore does not function here as an antiquarian key to ancient drama alone; it functions

as a historically rooted metalanguage for Indian moving-image form. Indeed, the broadness of the Nāṭyaśāstra—its concern with body, speech, costume, music, mood, and audience—makes it unusually adaptable to cinema.

Findings

1. Indian cinema inherited not only stories from classical and theatrical traditions but also modes of affective organization.
2. Dhvani remains indispensable for understanding Indian art cinema, especially where emotional power is generated through symbolic or delayed resonance.
3. Alaṃkāra and rīti are central to melodrama and epic spectacle, not superficial embellishments.
4. The relation between śabda and bhāva helps explain the persistent structural role of songs, refrain, and vocal expression in Indian film form.
5. Classical Indian poetics offers a strong explanatory framework for many Indian films, especially where mixed tones, song sequences, or stylization are integral to meaning.

Limitations and Scope for Further Research

The strongest documentary evidence of explicit classical-epic influence is available for some cases more than others. Rajamouli's epic inheritances are widely discussed, and Ghatak's cinema is frequently read through mythic and historical frames. For Ray and Bhansali, however, some of the Sanskrit-poetics links advanced here are interpretive rather than direct statements of authorial borrowing. This limitation does not weaken the analytical argument, but it should be acknowledged. A fuller journal version could expand the archival component through interviews, screenplay drafts, filmmaker essays, and regional-language criticism.

Conclusion

The influence of Sanskrit poetics on Indian cinema is best understood not as a narrow matter of adaptation but as a persistent aesthetic grammar. Bharata's rasa theory, Abhinavagupta's deepening of aesthetic experience, Ānandavardhana's suggestion, Vāmana's style, and Kuntaka's obliquity all continue to illuminate how Indian films create meaning. From Raja Harishchandra to Baahubali, from Ray's suggestive lyricism to Bhansali's high ornament, Indian cinema repeatedly demonstrates that it has not outgrown classical poetics; it has remediated it. For film criticism, teaching, screenplay studies, and performance analysis in the Indian context, Sanskrit poetics should therefore be treated not as peripheral background but as a central theoretical resource.

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