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Sahṛdaya: The Ideal Spectator in Classical Sanskrit Poetics

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Sahṛdaya - the ideal reader or spectator, is a cornerstone of Sanskrit poetics, embodying the refined sensibility required to fully experience rasa - the aesthetic essence of a work. This paper delves into the role and significance of Sahṛdaya as envisioned in classical texts, particularly the Nāṭyaśāstra and later elaborations by theorists like Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta. Far from being a passive observer, the Sahṛdaya is portrayed as an active participant whose cultivated taste, emotional receptivity, and intuitive grasp of suggestion (dhvani) allow for a profound engagement with poetic art. By analysing the qualities that define a Sahṛdaya, this paper highlights the dynamic interplay between artistic creation and aesthetic reception, reaffirming the continued relevance of this concept in discussions of literary theory and the philosophy of art.

Keywords: Sahṛdaya, Indian Aesthetics, Sanskrit Poetics, Nāṭyaśāstra, Bharata, Rasa Theory, Aesthetic Experience, Abhinavagupta, Ānandavardhana, Dhvani, Spectatorship.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian aesthetics is a rich and nuanced philosophical tradition that explores the nature of beauty, artistic experience, and emotional depth. Rooted in ancient texts and developed through centuries of commentary, it is concerned not merely with artistic form or technique, but with the transformative potential of art. It highlights art's ability to evoke powerful emotional states and elevate the consciousness of both the creator and the receiver. Unlike many Western aesthetic frameworks, which often privilege the autonomy of the artwork, Indian thought gives equal importance to the experience of the spectator. Aesthetic fulfilment, in this tradition, arises not in isolation but through a shared imaginative and emotional space in which meaning is collaboratively shaped between the work and its audience.

Within this intellectual tradition, Sanskrit poetics, also known as kāvyaśāstra, offers a systematic and sophisticated approach to understanding literary creation and reception. At the heart of this system is the theory of rasa, which can be described as the distilled essence of emotion. This theory was first articulated in Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra, a foundational text of Indian dramaturgy and aesthetics. According to this theory, the primary purpose of artistic performance is to evoke specific emotional states in the audience. These emotions include love, known as śṛṅgāra, heroism, known as vīra, and tranquillity, known as śānta, among others. The emotional states evoked are not experienced in a purely individual or psychological manner. Instead, they are presented in a universalized aesthetic register. The process by which personal emotion is transformed into a shared and universal experience is called sādharmaṇīkaraṇa, or universalization, through which individual emotion is transmuted into a shared aesthetic experience.

Essential to this process is the figure of the sahrdaya, literally “one with a heart” or “one whose heart resonates.” The sahrdaya is not a passive observer but the ideal reader or spectator. Someone whose sensibilities are refined, whose emotions are attuned, and who is capable of grasping the subtle layers of meaning within a work of art. These layers, referred to as dhvani or suggestion, require an audience member who can respond with empathetic insight and aesthetic sensitivity. While Bharata does not use the term sahrdaya explicitly, his emphasis on the spectator’s role in experiencing rasa presupposes such a figure, capable of participating fully in the aesthetic process.

The idea of the sahrdaya is developed further in the works of Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta. In the Dhvanyāloka, Ānandavardhana introduces the theory of dhvani, positioning suggestion as the soul of poetry. His formulation deepens the role of the reader or listener, who must possess interpretive subtlety to uncover the deeper aesthetic import of a text. Abhinavagupta, writing several centuries later, builds on these foundations in his commentaries, most notably the Abhinavabhāratī on Bharata’s Nāṭyaśāstra and the Locana on Ānandavardhana’s Dhvanyāloka. For Abhinavagupta, the sahrdaya is not just a culturally literate audience member but one who has cultivated a refined inner instrument known as antaḥkaraṇa and a disposition of emotional equanimity. This inner refinement enables the sahrdaya to experience rasānanda, the aesthetic bliss that arises from the full realization of rasa. In his view, the aesthetic experience is as much spiritual as it is emotional and intellectual.

This paper examines the development of the sahrdaya across the works of Bharata, Ānandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta, three foundational thinkers in classical Indian poetics. It focuses on how each thinker conceptualizes the role of the spectator and how the idea of the sahrdaya evolves across their respective systems. While Bharata provides the foundational structure of rasa theory, Ānandavardhana enriches it with his emphasis on poetic suggestion, and Abhinavagupta synthesizes these strands into a highly developed philosophical account of aesthetic experience. This paper traces how the sahrdaya emerges as a central figure in linking poetic creation with aesthetic reception. By examining these three thinkers, the paper aims to shed light on how the sahrdaya embodies a sophisticated model of aesthetic engagement - one that integrates emotional responsiveness, intellectual subtlety, and spiritual receptivity.

2. DEFINITION AND ETYMOLOGY OF SAHRDAYA

The concept of sahrdaya is central to Sanskrit poetics. It refers to the ideal reader or spectator, one whose inner being is deeply responsive to poetic and artistic expression. The word sahrdaya is formed from two Sanskrit elements: sa - which means ‘with,’ and hrdaya, which means ‘heart.’ Taken together, the term literally means ‘one who possesses heart’ or ‘one who shares the heart.’ In the context of literary theory, this refers to someone who shares the emotional and aesthetic sensibility of the poet. A sahrdaya is not merely an informed reader or a trained critic. Rather, this person is a connoisseur, a sensitive appreciator who resonates with the rasa, the emotional essence, of a work of art.

A profound articulation of this idea appears in the opening verse of Abhinavagupta’s Locana, his commentary on Ānandavardhana’s Dhvanyāloka. The verse is as follows:

**apūrvam yad vastu vinā kāraṇakālam
jagad-grāva-prakhyam nija-rasa-bharāt sārāyati ca |
kamāt-prakhyopākhyā-prasara-subhagam bhāsayati tat
sarasvatyās tattvaṁ kavi-sāhrdayākhyam vijayate ||** (*Dhvanyaloka Locana of Abhinava Gupta Ed. Ganga Sagar Rai Chowkambha : Manish_Dutta :Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive, 2020, p. 2*)

This verse may be translated as follows:

That principle which, without any prior cause or temporal precedent, moves even the inert world-stone, known as *jagad-grāva*, through the sheer power of intrinsic rasa, which delights in the flow of charming expression such as myth and legend, shaped by desire—that essential nature of Sarasvatī, known as the unity of the poet and the connoisseur, triumphs above all.

This verse offers a refined understanding of sahr̥daya by portraying it as the presence of aesthetic consciousness within both the poet, called kavi, and the sensitive reader, known as sahr̥daya. The poet and the appreciator do not function in isolation from each other. Rather, they share a common sensibility. This shared aesthetic awareness is described as the essential nature, or tattva, of Sarasvatī, the goddess who presides over speech, literature, and poetic inspiration.

Apūrvam yad vastu vinā kāraṇakālam, refers to the aesthetic object or experience as apūrvā. The term apūrvā means something entirely unprecedented, something that arises independently of any known cause or prior moment in time. This line suggests that rasa, the emotional and aesthetic flavour of a work, is not the result of a logical process. Rather, it appears as a self-contained and self-sufficient experience that transcends ordinary causality and linear reasoning.

Jagad-grāva-prakhyam nija-rasa-bharāt sārāyati ca, tells us that even an object as inert and lifeless as a "world-stone" can be moved and made meaningful through the internal fullness of rasa. The metaphor of the stone symbolizes something that lacks consciousness or vitality. When touched by rasa, even such an object becomes animated. This shows the extraordinary power of aesthetic experience, which can transform the ordinary into something significant and moving.

Kamāt-prakhyopākhyā-prasara-subhagam bhāsayati tat, describes how the aesthetic principle brings charm and illumination to various forms of expression, including myth, story, metaphor, and imaginative narration. These expressions are described as flowing from desire or emotional longing. The aesthetic principle not only allows for their expression but also reveals their inner beauty and meaning. This suggests that the sahr̥daya is someone who is able to perceive not just the content of the work, but also the manner of its presentation and its emotional resonance.

The final part of the verse, sarasvatyās tattvam kavi-sāhr̥dayākhyam vijayate, declares that this shared aesthetic capacity is the essential truth of Sarasvatī. It states that the principle known as the union of the kavi and the sahr̥daya is what ultimately prevails. The creative power of the poet and the responsive perception of the connoisseur come together to define the full realization of poetic experience.

From this perspective, the secret of poetic genius lies in the presence of both the creator and the critic within the same individual. The one who is both a kavi and a sahr̥daya brings together creative intuition and critical discernment. This combination is not an optional element of great poetry. It is, rather, essential to it. The sahr̥daya described in Sanskrit poetics is not to be confused with the historical critic, who limits the analysis of a work to its time period, nor with the biographical critic, who interprets literature only through the life of the author.

Instead, the sahr̥daya represents a more refined and perceptive kind of reader. Some readers may find it anachronistic. Perhaps, in some ways, the sahr̥daya anticipates the discerning reader envisioned in modern literary criticism. The sahr̥daya is someone whose heart and mind are attuned to the inner rhythm and imaginative world of the poet. This alignment is not a natural gift alone. It is cultivated through a specific kind of intellectual and emotional discipline.

Becoming a sahr̥daya involves continuous study, repeated acts of appreciation and thoughtful evaluation, and sustained engagement with a literary culture that fosters refined taste. Such a person does not merely consume literature. The sahr̥daya enters into it deeply, responding from within, participating in its meaning, and resonating with the original creative vision. The poet creates the work, but it is the sahr̥daya who completes the act of poetry through refined perception and inner response. Together, they form the full aesthetic experience that is at the heart of Sanskrit literary theory.

3. SAHRDAYA IN BHARATA'S NĀṬYAŚĀSTRA

Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra is a foundational text of Sanskrit poetics and dramatic theory. At its core lies the theory of rasa, which is widely recognized as one of the most significant contributions to Indian aesthetics. The term rasa is derived from the Sanskrit root "rasah" which means "juice," "essence," or "flavour." In an aesthetic context, rasa refers to the emotional relish or enjoyment experienced by an audience in response to a performance or poetic work. Bharata emphasizes that no dramatic or performative act can proceed without reference to rasa, thus establishing it as the ultimate aim of artistic creation and reception.

While the Nāṭyaśāstra does not explicitly use the term sahrdaya, Bharata's treatment of rasa and its realization implicitly assumes such a figure. The spectator in Bharata's framework is not a passive observer but an active participant whose emotional and aesthetic receptivity is essential to the success of a performance. According to the Nāṭyaśāstra, the purpose of drama, dance, and poetry is to awaken and elevate emotional experience in the audience. The emotional states expressed by the performers are meant to evoke corresponding emotional responses in the viewers, who are thereby transformed from mere observers into active recipients of aesthetic emotion.

Bharata describes the purpose of theatre as manifold. It is designed to provide rest and emotional relief for those fatigued by labour, distressed by grief, or weighed down by worldly suffering. In this context, the creation of rasa serves not only an aesthetic function but also a psychological and even spiritual one. The experience of rasa is intended to transport the spectator to a state of refined emotional awareness that transcends the limitations of individual circumstance. The process involves a transformation of Bhava - the emotional states enacted by the performer into Rasa - the aesthetic sentiment experienced by the audience.

This transformation presupposes a spectator who is capable of both emotional sensitivity and imaginative identification. Such a person must be able to respond to the emotions presented on stage, not by identifying with them in a personal or literal sense, but by savouring them in a detached yet deeply felt aesthetic manner. This idea corresponds closely with the later notion of the sahrdaya.

According to Bharata, the actor serves as a vehicle for conveying emotions, functioning as the bearer and mediator of the character's inner emotional world. Through deliberate and stylized expression, the actor gradually reveals the "bhāva-jagat" - emotional universe, of the character. This emotional atmosphere is universalized through performance, allowing the audience to connect with it regardless of personal background or individual experience. The spectator who is able to emotionally and aesthetically engage with this universalized experience becomes what Bharata would consider an ideal audience member, even though he does not name such a person directly.

Bharata identifies eight principal rasas, each arising from a corresponding stable emotion, or sthāyī-bhāva. These include śṛṅgāra (erotic), vīra (heroic), karuṇa (compassionate), hāsyā (comic), raudra (furious), bhayānaka (terrifying), bībhatsa (repugnant), and adbhuta (marvellous). These sentiments emerge through the interaction of various components such as vibhāvas -determinants, anubhāvas - consequents, and vyabhicāri-bhāvas - transitory emotions. However, the culmination of these dramatic elements into a coherent rasa experience depends entirely on the emotional receptivity and interpretive faculties of the spectator.

The rasa experience, as described by Bharata, is not merely an emotional reaction but a process of aesthetic transformation. The spectator, through sustained attention and empathetic engagement, is able to move beyond the surface-level emotion to a deeper, contemplative enjoyment. This aesthetic emotion is marked by a sense of transcendence, often likened to spiritual bliss. In this way, the viewer becomes a participant in the unfolding emotional drama, undergoing a transformation that elevates personal emotion into a shared aesthetic realization.

4. ĀNANDAVARDHANA AND THE EMERGENCE OF SAHĀDAYA

While Bharata laid the foundation for the theory of rasa, it is in the later developments of Sanskrit aesthetics, particularly in the work of Ānandavardhana, that the concept of sahrdaya is explicitly introduced and philosophically grounded. In Ānandavardhana's framework, the sahrdaya is central to the realization of poetic meaning and aesthetic experience. This figure is not merely an informed reader or viewer, but one who possesses the capacity to intuitively grasp the emotional and suggestive essence of a poetic work.

Ānandavardhana's Dhvanyāloka, composed in the ninth century, marks a significant turning point in the history of Sanskrit literary theory. With the introduction of the dhvani theory, he shifts critical focus from the literal or denotative level of language to its suggestive and emotive potential. He argues that the most profound and aesthetically fulfilling poetry does not operate through direct expression alone, but through suggestion, which evokes emotional depth and resonance. In this view, rasa is best communicated through dhvani, which becomes the very soul of poetry.

For Ānandavardhana, the literal meaning (vācya) of a poem provides the foundation, but the emotional and aesthetic significance is conveyed through the suggested meaning (vyāngya). This deeper layer of meaning cannot be accessed by all readers; it requires a particular kind of interpretive sensitivity. The sahrdaya possesses this sensitivity, marked by a harmonious blending of emotional intuition, cultivated taste, and aesthetic empathy. The sahrdaya responds spontaneously to poetic suggestion, apprehending the underlying emotional and symbolic dimensions that constitute the poem's true essence.

5. ABHINAVAGUPTA'S PHILOSOPHICAL ELABORATION OF SAHĀDAYA

Among the many thinkers who contributed to Sanskrit poetics, Abhinavagupta stands out for offering the most comprehensive and philosophically nuanced interpretation of the sahrdaya. His insights, especially as developed in his commentary Locana on Ānandavardhana's Dhvanyāloka, elevate the sahrdaya to a central figure in the aesthetic experience. While Bharata implicitly assumed such a participant in the aesthetic process, and Ānandavardhana formally recognized their role, it is in Abhinavagupta's work that the sahrdaya is fully theorized as both the condition and culmination of rasa-realization.

For Abhinavagupta, the sahrdaya is not merely a person who enjoys poetry. Rather, Abhinavagupta envisions the sahrdaya as an ideal connoisseur. The one whose inner disposition is refined through sustained exposure to art and literature, emotional maturity, and deep aesthetic sensitivity. Such a person does not passively receive the emotional content of a work but enters into a profound resonance with it. This resonance occurs not through instinct alone, but through a cultivated capacity to identify with the emotional world constructed by the artist.

This identification is possible because the sahrdaya possesses latent emotional tendencies, known as sthāyibhāvas, which become activated and universalized in the presence of artistic expression. When these emotional dispositions are stirred by the poetic content, they produce the experience of rasa. Abhinavagupta emphasizes that this process is neither purely rational nor mechanical. It requires a kind of spiritual and emotional clarity, where the mind acts like a clean mirror, capable of reflecting the emotional truth of the work without distortion. Such clarity of mind is referred to as Chitta Viśādata. It implies a state of emotional purity. The sahrdaya is free from psychological disturbances such as attachment, aversion, anger, or anxiety, which may otherwise obstruct aesthetic receptivity. Emotional disturbances cloud the mental mirror and prevent the full realization of rasa. The sahrdaya, therefore, must cultivate a calm, reflective, and open state of mind in order to receive the aesthetic essence completely.

Yet even the most refined sahrdaya may at times fail to appreciate a work of art, not due to any lack of competence, but because of temporary distractions or emotional fatigue. Recognizing this, Sanskrit aestheticians often suggested that performances should begin with light and mood-setting content to prepare the minds of the audience. Such preparation helps restore emotional receptivity and opens the inner space necessary for rasa to emerge.

Abhinavagupta distinguishes different forms of poetic expression such as drama, narrative poetry, and short lyrical utterances. They are based on the level of engagement they demand from the sahrdaya. In drama, the presence of visual, auditory, and performative aids supports the transmission of rasa. In narrative poetry, the reader must rely more on imagination and inner visualization. In the case of short poems or muktakas, where brevity intensifies suggestiveness, the burden of emotional completion rests almost entirely on the sahrdaya. The less explicit the work, the more it demands from the audience in terms of interpretive and emotional participation. Thus, the significance of the sahrdaya increases in proportion to the subtlety and abstraction of the poetic form. In drama, the audience is often referred to as preksaka or sāmājika. These are terms that imply a general viewing public. But in discussions of poetry and rasa, the more refined term sahrdaya is used, along with related terms like sacétana and rasika, all of which point to a heightened state of emotional and aesthetic responsiveness.

In elaborating this responsiveness, Abhinavagupta draws attention to the importance of identification, known as tanmayībhāva. This is the state in which the sahrdaya becomes so deeply immersed in the poetic or dramatic world that the boundaries between self and other begin to dissolve. The sahrdaya no longer perceives the emotion as belonging to the character or poet alone, but experiences it directly, as if it were their own. This identification, however, is not sentimental or ego-driven. It is marked by detachment and contemplation, transforming personal emotion into a universal aesthetic sentiment.

This process of universalization is central to the concept of sādharmaṇīkaraṇa, a foundational idea in Indian aesthetics. First articulated by Bhaṭṭanāyaka and later elaborated by Abhinavagupta, sādharmaṇīkaraṇa refers to the transformation of personal emotion into a universal experience. In everyday life, emotions are bound to specific individuals and circumstances. However, in the aesthetic context, these emotions are abstracted from personal conditions and represented in a way that allows universal accessibility. The sahrdaya, through emotional and imaginative sensitivity, does not merely witness the individual pain or joy of a character but encounters the essence of those emotions, refined and distilled, and thus elevated for contemplative enjoyment.

Abhinavagupta expands this idea further by linking the aesthetic experience to a broader spiritual process. Through sādharmaṇīkaraṇa, the sahrdaya transcends the limitations of ego and individuality. The aesthetic experience becomes a moment of inner freedom, a temporary suspension of worldly attachments, where the self is aligned with a deeper, universal consciousness. This elevates the experience of rasa beyond psychological pleasure, framing it as a form of spiritual insight.

Within this framework, communication between poet or performer and the sahrdaya is not linear or mechanical but deeply experiential and participatory. The poet begins with an emotional insight (bhāva) and expresses it through artistic language and imagery. This emotional content, conveyed through suggestion (dhvani), reaches the sahrdaya who, through contemplation and emotional receptivity, undergoes a gradual process of reflection and realization. This culminates in the experience of rasa, completing the communicative and aesthetic loop. The process only succeeds when both the creator and the recipient are emotionally attuned, sharing in the same aesthetic vision. In this sense, aesthetic communication is a deeply mutual, transformative act. One that relies not on the transmission of information but on shared resonance and inner alignment.

Abhinavagupta also identifies several essential qualities of the sahrdaya. These include:

- Emotional sensitivity
- Intellectual clarity
- Aesthetic taste
- Imaginative power
- Deep empathy
- Knowledge of language and poetic ornamentation

The sahrdaya must also possess the ability to become absorbed in the object of artistic description, to experience emotions fully and yet impersonally, and to judge a work based not on technical correctness alone but on its capacity to evoke rasa.

Sanskrit theorists further recognized that the development of sahrdayata is a gradual and lifelong process. It requires repeated exposure to literature and performance, ethical cultivation, and even virtuous tendencies from previous lives. One does not become a sahrdaya overnight. Through continuous engagement with art, the reader or viewer develops the ability to enter into the emotional life of characters, recognize subtle poetic devices, and experience rasa with clarity and depth.

6. CONCLUSION

The figure of the sahrdaya is the one whose heart resonates with poetic expression. Sahrdaya stands at the centre of Sanskrit aesthetic theory, not merely as a passive recipient of art but as its co-creator in meaning and experience. Across the classical aesthetic framework, from Bharata's foundational articulation of rasa in the Nāṭyaśāstra, through Ānandavardhana's emphasis on dhvani or poetic suggestion, to Abhinavagupta's philosophical elaboration of aesthetic consciousness, the sahrdaya emerges as an indispensable participant in the aesthetic process.

Bharata's implicit reliance on an emotionally attuned spectator, Ānandavardhana's recognition of the reader's interpretive role, and Abhinavagupta's spiritually inflected model of aesthetic absorption together reveal a consistent concern with the quality of receptivity required for the realization of rasa. The sahrdaya is thus not simply a literary construct but a cultivated ideal. The one who embodies emotional sensitivity, intellectual refinement, and contemplative depth. The aesthetic experience, in this view, is not confined to the object of art alone but arises in the relational space between artist and audience, between bhāva and rasa, between suggestion and realization.

By framing the aesthetic experience as a moment of universalization and transcendence, Sanskrit poetics positions the sahrdaya at the intersection of art and inner transformation. The process of sādharmaṇīkaraṇa does not merely elevate the artwork; it elevates the spectator. In this light, the classical Indian aesthetic system offers a vision of literary engagement that is both affective and philosophical, artistic and spiritual.

In contemporary terms, the sahrdaya serves as a reminder that the full power of art is realized only through an audience capable of deep emotional resonance and critical discernment. Revisiting this concept enriches modern aesthetic discourse by foregrounding the collaborative nature of meaning, the ethical dimension of interpretation, and the transformative potential of beauty. As this paper has argued, the sahrdaya remains not only a central figure in Sanskrit poetics but a timeless model for aesthetic and humanistic engagement.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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