On Understanding *Rasa* in the Tradition of Advaita Vedanta

Dr. K.S. Sivakumar

Assistant Professor of Indian Culture,
Department of Sanskrit and Indian Culture,
SCSVMV University, Enathur, Kanchipuram, India.

Abstract

An attempt is made to present the understanding of *rasa* in the tradition of Advaita Vedanta. Advaita Vedanta recognizes *rasa-anubhava* at two levels of reality/experience, namely, the *paramarthika* (ultimate spiritual experience) and the *vyavaharika* (empirical experience).

In tune with the *Upanisads*, Advaita Vedanta perceives *rasa-anubhava*, at the *paramarthika* level, as joy/love/bliss (*ananda*) of the Supreme Self, Pure Consciousness, Brahman-atman. Advaita Vedanta states that *rasa-anubhava*, at the *vyavaharika* level, may be experienced not because *avidya* has been completely eliminated, but because its effect, namely, *kama* (selfish desire) and *karma* (selfish action) are temporally suspended. Bliss experience(*ananda-anubhava*) in the state of deep sleep(*susupti*), non-selfish action(*niskama-karma*) and non-selfish devotion(*para-bhakti*) are pointers to *rasa-anubhava* at the *vyavaharika* level.

Even though there are differences, Advaita Vedanta maintains that the imperfect and short-lived *rasa-anubhava* at the *vyavaharika* level is the stepping-stone for the realization of the ever-lasting *rasa-anubhava* at the *paramarthika* level.

Keywords: (1) Rasa-anubhava (2) Advaita Vedanta (3) Paramarthika (4) Vyavaharika (5) Ananda-anubhava
INTRODUCTION

Advaita Vedanta is one of the most complete and holistic tradition of Vedanta. It is based on the three basic texts (prasthana-traya), namely, the Upanisads (sruthi-prasthana), the Brahma-sutra (nyaya-prasthana) and the Bhagavad-gita (smrthi-prasthana). Advaita Vedantic tradition recognizes three levels/degrees of reality/experience, namely, the prathibhasika (subjective experience), the vyavaharika (empirical experience) and the paramarthika (ultimate spiritual experience). In his commentary on the Brahma sutra (II.i.14), Sri Sankara, citing the rope-snake example, states that the reality of the effects of the imaginary standpoint (prathibhasika) is sublated when the empirical standpoint (vyavaharika) is realized. Similarly, the reality of the empirical experience (vyavaharika) is sublated when the absolute standpoint (paramarthika) of non-dual Brahman-atman is realized.

RASA IN ADVAITA VEDANTA

Advaita Vedanta perceives rasa as aesthetics/blissful and therefore rasa-anubhava as aesthetic/blissful experience (ananda-anubhava). Even though paramarthika is the ultimate level of existence, Advaita Vedanta recognizes vyavaharika level for its efficient character/usefulness in the realm of duality. One of the fundamental stand points of Advaita Vedanta is that what is not ultimately real need not necessarily be useless and what is useful need not be ultimately real. Therefore, Advaita Vedanta accepts vyavaharika level for its practicality in the realm of duality. Hence, Advaita Vedantic tradition discusses rasa both at the paramarthika as well as at the vyavaharika level of experience.

Rasa-anubhava at the paramarthika level

According to Advaita Vedanta, rasa at the paramarthika level represents joy/love/bliss (ananda) of the Supreme Self, Pure Consciousness, Brahman-atman.

Advaita Vedanta tradition points out that the Upanisads identify rasa-anubhava with Brahman-atma-anubhava. While discussing the eternal existence of Brahman, the Taïtirîya Upanisad (II.vii.1) states that Brahman is full of joy and the source of joy (Raso vai sah).

The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad (II.iv.5) equate the ultimate truth of the Self with Universal love. The Universal Self, identified with love, is immanent in the individual as it is immanent in every thing else.
The *Taittiriya Upanisad* (III.vi.1) explicitly points out Brahman as bliss (*ananda*). Elsewhere, the same *Upanisad* (II.i.1) defines Brahman as Existence (*sat*), Consciousness (*cit*) and Bliss (*ananda*). Advaita Vedanta states that *sad-cit-ananda* are not the qualities of Brahman, but Its essential nature (*svarupa-laksana*). Therefore, it is not that Brahman has bliss, but Brahman is bliss.

Thus, we are able to see that the Advaita Vedantic tradition perceives *rasa*, at the *paramarthika* level, as supreme joy, love and bliss identified with Brahman-atman, the pure consciousness.

**Rasa-anubhava at the vyavaharika level**

According to Advaita Vedanta, Bliss (*ananda*) is the very nature of the Self. In *vyavaharika*, this joy of the Self (*rasa-anubhava*) is shrouded by desire (*kama*) and selfish activity (*karma*), which are born of ignorance (*avidya*). But, as the *pancadasi* (XV.19) states even while *avidya* persists, we can catch glimpses of the supreme joy that is the nature of the Self. There are moments when under the influence of some external stimulus (nature, art, etc.), we lose sight of our finiteness and our separation from the rest of being. During such moments, we experience *ananda*, not because *avidya* has vanished, but because its effects, namely, *kama* and *karma* are temporally suspended, though not eliminated.

In his commentary on the *Taittiriya Upanisad* (II.viii.1-4), Sri Sankara points out that the glimpses of *atman*-bliss at *vyavaharika* depends upon the degree of desire-less-ness of the enjoyer (ie) in proportion to the purity of the reflecting medium, namely, the intellect. The *pancadasi* (XI.11 & 87) of Sri Vidyaranya mentions three broad categories of bliss. Of the lowest degree is the pleasure derived from sense-enjoyment (*visaya-ananda*). Of a higher degree is the joy resulting from the residual impression left by a previous non-sensuous enjoyment (*vasana-ananda*). Highest is the bliss of deep sleep (*susupti*), non-selfish action (*niskama-karma*) and non-selfish devotion (*para-bhakti*). The highest refers to the experience of the sheath of bliss (*anandamaya-kosa*), as indicated by the *Taittiriya Upanisad* (II.8).

Thus, we are able to see that the Advaita Vedantic tradition recognizes different levels of *rasa-anubhava* or *ananda-anubhava* at the *vyavaharika* level.

Differences between the *rasa-anubhava* at the *paramarthika* and *vyavaharika* level.

Even though the *rasa-anubhava* or bliss experience of Brahman-atman is common to *paramarthika* and *vyavaharika*, the tradition of Advaita Vedanta does not fail to point out the major differences regarding the circumstances surrounding the blissful experience. Let us enumerate three major differences.
1. In his commentary of the Taittiriya Upanisad (II.v.i), Sri Sankara states that the bliss experience at paramarthika level is everlasting or eternal. But, at the vyavaharika level, since avidya persists in a latent form, kama and karma do not disappear. They reassert themselves sooner or later. Hence, the joy experienced can only be short-lived. Moreover, what is experienced is not atman-bliss as such (as in paramarthika) but only Its reflection in the vrtti of the antahkarana.

2. In the rasa-anubhava of vyavaharika, which rests on avidya, one seek joy through the aid of things or stimulus, The beautiful objects of nature and art are the stimulus which evoke the feeling of delight (response). The continuance of the bliss depends upon the continuance of the stimulus. Therefore, the bliss/joy is conditional and relative. In the rasa-anubhava of paramarthika, there is no question of stimulus and response. As the Taittiriya Upanisad (II.vii.1) states: since joy does not depend on anything outside of atman – for there is no longer an other – it remains the permanent condition of the Self.

3. The realization of rasa-anubhava at the paramarthika level requires a good deal of physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual training. Since the experience is based on the knowledge of identity, on the realization of the same Self in all, it is the biggest guarantee that one who experience It would be alive to the responsibilities towards society. Advaita Vedanta states that a person (jiva) who has realized the non-dual Brahman-atman is known as jivan-mukta (liberated-while-living). He lives in the world but is not of it and exists always for the welfare of the world (lokasamgraha), which is the spontaneous expression of pure love.

Most of the instances of rasa-anubhava at the vyavaharika level does not require physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual training. Therefore, there is no guarantee that a person experiencing rasa-anubhava at the vyavaharika would recognize and discharge his obligations to society.

**CONCLUSION**

A discussion on the rasa-anubhava at the paramarthika and vyavaharika levels along with its differences reveals the fact that rasa-anubhava at the vyavaharika level falls short of the paramarthika level only in degree and not in kind. Infact, while deliberating the joy of Brahman with other joy, the Brhadaranyaka Upaisad (IV.iii.32) states “all other joy is but a particle of It”. The condition of bliss, (ie) absence of desire and selfish activity, is fulfilled both in vyavaharika and paramarthika. Ofcourse, the
On Understanding Rasa in the Tradition of Advaita Vedanta

major difference is the want of Brahman-atman realization at the vyavaharika level and Its fulfillment at the paramarthika level.

According to the Advaita Vedantic tradition, the rasa-anubhava at the vyavaharika level is a stepping stone towards the rasa-anubhava at the paramarthika level – the realization of non-dual Brahman-atman, the pure Consciousness. Advaita Vedanta maintains that inspite of the limitations characterizing rasa-anubhava at the vyavaharika level, we have to understand that it is our great good fortune that we are thus enabled to have glimpses of the true nature of the Self, even while we have not crossed the barrier of avidya. In his commentary of the Taittiriya Upanisad (II.viii,1-4), Sri Sankara points out that these glimpses at the vyavaharika level gives us a foretaste of the bliss of moksa and thus serve as incentives to the serious pursuit of that goal. In conclusion, we may state that rasa has a spiritual significance, both at the vyavaharika and paramarthika levels of experience, in the tradition of Advaita Vedanta.

REFERENCES
