

HISTORY OF EMOTIONS THROUGH INDIAN PAINTINGS

Corresponding Author:

Ms. Durva Ravindra Desai

Student of K.J. Somaiya School of Education,

Somaiya Vidyavihar

University, Mumbai, Maharashtra,

India.

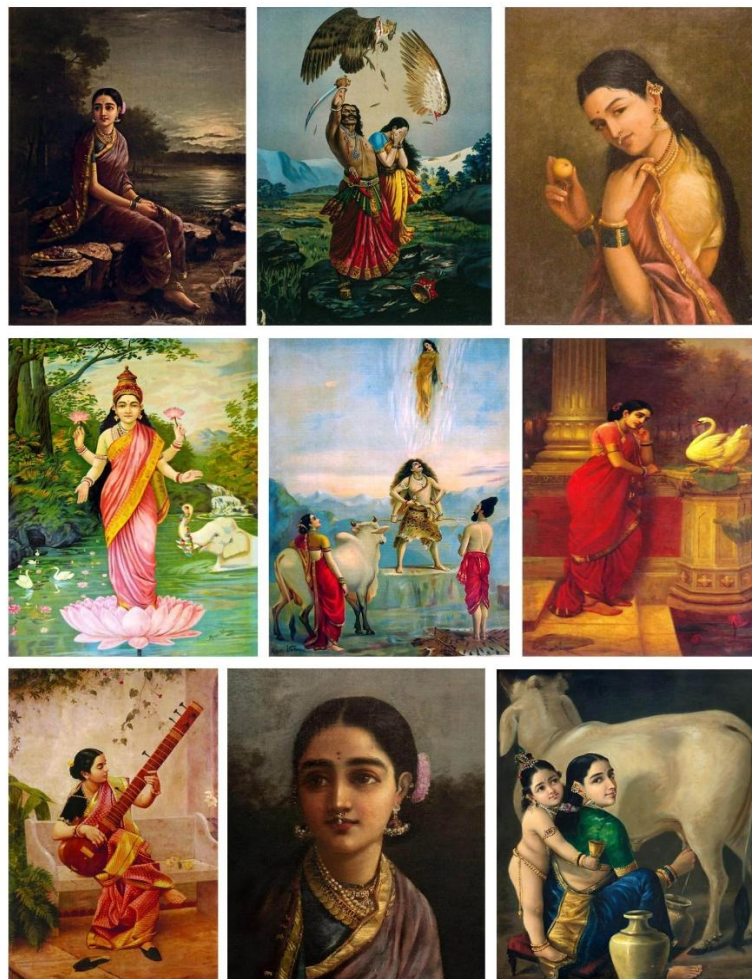
Dr. Hema Bhadawkar

Associate Professor,

K J Somaiya School of Education,

Somaiya Vidyavihar University, Mumbai, Maharashtra,

India.



Raja Ravi Varma Paintings

Raja Ravi Varma holds a special place in my understanding of Indian art. As a celebrated Malayali painter, his work goes beyond technical mastery and touches something deeply human. I see him as one of the greatest figures in Indian art history not only for his refined sense of beauty and realism, but also for the way his paintings made art accessible and emotionally relatable to society at large.

ABSTRACT

Indian paintings have always been more than just visual art. They show how emotions were understood, shaped, and experienced in Indian society. Rather than seeing emotions as personal or temporary reactions, Indian aesthetic traditions considered them shared and refined experiences that could be nurtured through art. This research looks at how emotions have been expressed in Indian paintings throughout different historical periods by using the classical framework of *rasa*.

The study follows the representation of emotions from early mural and devotional traditions to miniature paintings and later artistic changes. Through careful choices in gesture, posture, colour, composition, and symbolism, artists created emotional environments that encouraged viewers to feel rather than just watch. By focusing on specific *rasas* such as love, sorrow, courage, fear, wonder, and tranquillity, this paper demonstrates how paintings serve as emotional records of their time.

Instead of seeing paintings only as historical or stylistic objects, this research views them as emotional texts. This approach emphasizes how Indian paintings reflect cultural attitudes toward feelings, balance, restraint, and expression, providing valuable insight into the history of human emotions.

Keywords: Rasa theory, Indian paintings, emotions in art, bhava, Indian aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

Emotions significantly influence how individuals comprehend themselves, interact with others, and react to their surrounding environment. In the context of Indian cultural philosophy, emotions have never been regarded as solely personal or random. Instead, they were viewed as experiences that could be honed, shared, and elevated through various forms of artistic expression. Thus, painting emerged as a crucial medium for conveying emotions that were not only portrayed but also thoughtfully directed toward the audience.

Indian artworks throughout history demonstrate a deliberate intention to foster emotional connections. Rather than striving for meticulous realism or individual psychological depth, artists focused on conveying universal emotional atmospheres. Through nuanced facial expressions, restrained body movements, harmonious composition, and symbolic colour usage, painters invited viewers to experience certain emotional states. These emotional reactions were influenced by the concept of *rasa*, which is a key element of Indian aesthetic philosophy.

This paper explores the evolution of emotions in Indian paintings using the framework of rasa. By examining how various rasas were visually conveyed over time, the research emphasizes both the persistence and transformation in emotional depiction. While earlier artworks predominantly highlighted spiritual devotion and shared sentiments, subsequent pieces increasingly showcased personal emotions, internal struggles, and societal experiences. Analysing paintings through this perspective enables us to view art as not just a visual narrative, but also as a significant documentation of how emotions have been envisioned and valued in Indian culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RASA AND BHAVA

The core idea for understanding emotions in Indian art comes from classical aesthetic theory, particularly as presented in the Natya Shastra. Two connected concepts, bhava and rasa, are essential to this idea. Bhava refers to the emotional states shown within an artwork. Artists convey these states through visible cues like facial expressions, gestures, posture, and how figures interact with their space. In Indian paintings, bhava is expressed in a subtle way, allowing figures to share their inner emotions without relying on excessive realism. Rasa is the aesthetic emotion the viewer feels. It emerges when bhava is skilfully combined with composition, colour, symbolism, and narrative context. This transition from depicted emotion to experienced emotion turns the viewer into an active participant in the artwork. The connection between bhava and rasa helps paintings evoke shared emotional experiences that go beyond time and individual differences.

RASAS IN INDIAN PAINTINGS

Indian paintings offer a deeply human understanding of emotions, shaped by the classical theory of rasa. Rather than showing emotions in a loud or exaggerated way, artists carefully suggested feelings through expressions, posture, colour, space, and mood. Each rasa represents a particular emotional experience that the viewer is meant to feel, not just observe.

1. Shringara Rasa (Love and Beauty)

Shringara is the most prominent and emotionally rich rasa in Indian paintings. It represents love in both its worldly and spiritual forms. Artists often expressed this rasa through romantic scenes, gentle body language, graceful movements, soft colours, and intimate gazes. In devotional art, love transforms into divine longing, where beauty becomes a path to spiritual connection. Shringara reflects joy, attraction, tenderness, and emotional fulfilment, showing how love has always been central to human experience.

2. Hasya Rasa (Laughter and Comedy)

Hasya captures moments of joy, humour, and playful laughter. In Indian paintings, this rasa appears through exaggerated facial expressions, amusing situations, courtly jokes, or scenes of everyday life. Artists used humour not only to entertain but also to comment gently on social behaviour, power, and human foolishness. Hasya reminds viewers that laughter is a shared emotion that brings people together and softens life's seriousness.

3. Karuna Rasa (Sorrow and Compassion)

Karuna expresses grief, loss, and deep compassion. Indian paintings portraying suffering, separation, sacrifice, or injustice evoke this rasa. The emotion is often conveyed through lowered eyes, slumped postures, muted colours, and silent moments of pain. Importantly, Karuna does not end in despair; it awakens empathy in the viewer. Through this rasa, paintings encourage moral reflection, emotional sensitivity, and shared human understanding.

4. Raudra Rasa (Anger and Fury)

Raudra represents controlled anger and intense emotional energy. In Indian paintings, this rasa is often associated with powerful figures, dramatic gestures, sharp lines, and bold colours. Anger here is not meaningless violence; it is usually linked with justice, protection, or the destruction of evil. Raudra reflects moments when emotions rise strongly in response to wrongdoing, showing anger as a force that restores balance.

5. Veera Rasa (Heroism and Courage)

Veera celebrates bravery, confidence, and moral strength. Indian paintings depict this rasa through upright postures, fearless expressions, weapons, and scenes of battle or righteous action. Courage is shown not only on the battlefield but also in acts of sacrifice, leadership, and duty. Veera reflects society's admiration for strength guided by ethics and responsibility.

6. Bhayanaka Rasa (Fear and Terror)

Bhayanaka captures fear, anxiety, and the sense of danger. In paintings, this rasa is suggested through dark backgrounds, tense movements, wide eyes, and unsettling environments. Fear often appears in scenes involving chaos, threats, or moral consequences. Rather than shocking the viewer, Bhayanaka serves as a reminder of vulnerability and the emotional response to uncertainty and danger.

7. Bibhatsa Rasa (Disgust and Aversion)

Bibhatsa deals with feelings of repulsion and discomfort. Indian painters used this rasa carefully, often to highlight moral decay, ignorance, or negative human tendencies. The aim was not to disturb but to create awareness and rejection of what is harmful or unethical. Bibhatsa marks emotional boundaries and encourages self-reflection by confronting unpleasant realities.

8. Adbhuta Rasa (Wonder and Amazement)

Adbhuta expresses awe, curiosity, and a sense of the extraordinary. In Indian paintings, this rasa appears through miraculous events, divine visions, cosmic scenes, and imaginative compositions. Bright colours, unusual forms, and dramatic scale help create a feeling of wonder. Adbhuta reflects humanity's timeless fascination with the unknown and the limitless nature of imagination.

9. Shanta Rasa (Peace and Tranquillity)

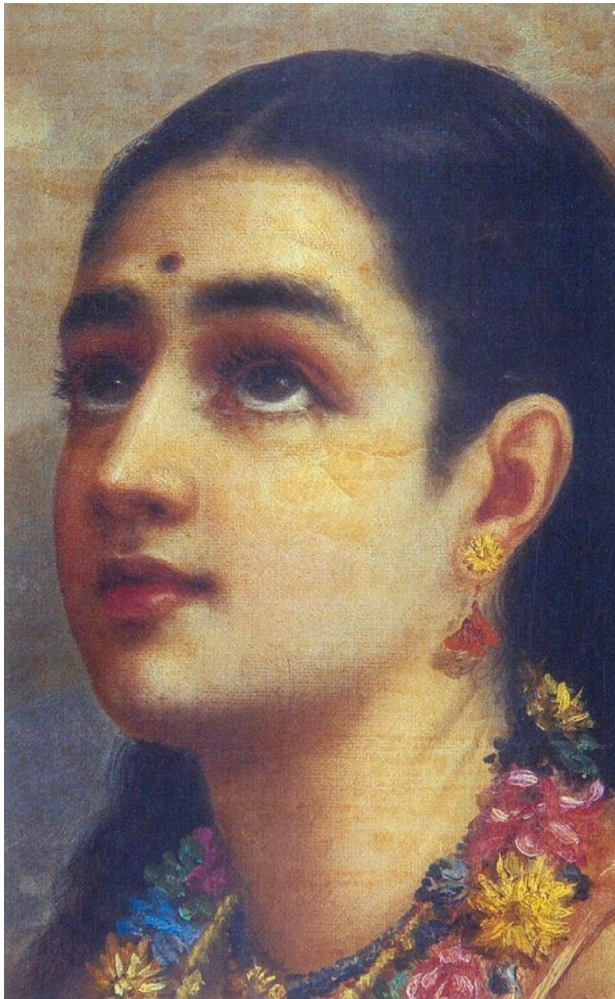
Shanta represents calm, balance, and inner stillness. This rasa is conveyed through minimal movement, serene expressions, open spaces, and harmonious compositions. Indian paintings

evoking Shanta invite the viewer into silence and reflection. Considered the highest rasa by many thinkers, it reflects emotional maturity, detachment, and spiritual fulfilment.

INDIAN PAINTINGS OF RAJA RAVI VARMA

1. Shringara Rasa (Love/Beauty)

Raja Ravi Varma Painting - Shakuntala and Her Companion



When I look at Shakuntala by Raja Ravi Varma, I don't see a dramatic love story I feel a quiet, intimate emotion. Shakuntala's slightly raised eyes seem lost in thought, as if her mind has wandered toward someone she loves deeply. That gentle gaze speaks more than words; it reflects longing, anticipation, and emotional closeness.

Her face is soft and calm, yet full of feeling. The absence of a visible lover makes the emotion stronger, because love here exists within her, not around her. The floral ornaments, warm skin tones, and simple background enhance her natural beauty without overpowering her expression. Everything in the painting feels balanced and tender.

For me, this artwork captures Shringara Rasa in its purest form love that is silent, graceful, and deeply personal. It feels human and relatable, like a moment of private emotion frozen in time rather than a staged scene of romance.

2.Hasya Rasa (Joy / Gentle Laughter)

Raja Ravi Varma Painting – Maharashtrian Lady with Fruit

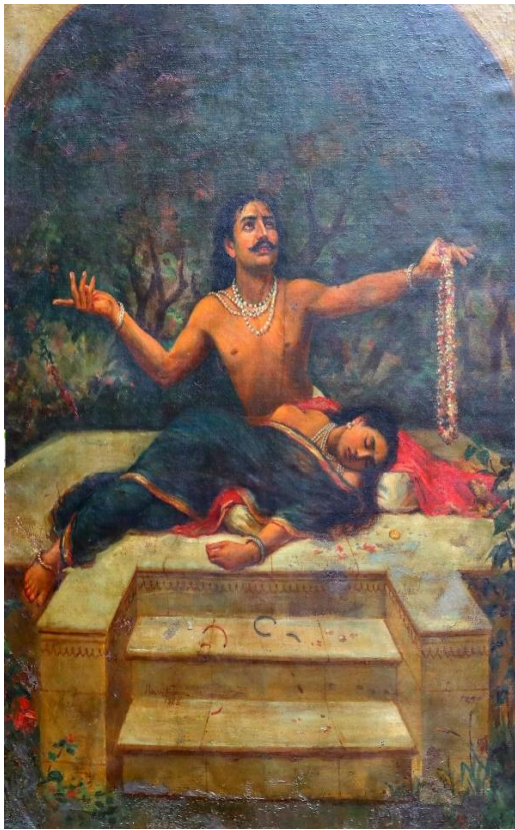


In this painting of Raja Ravi Varma, he expresses Hasya Rasa here through warmth and everyday happiness rather than loud laughter. When I look at this painting, I don't see open laughter I feel a quiet happiness. The woman's soft smile and steady gaze remind me of the simple joy found in everyday moments. Holding a plate of fruits, she appears confident and content, as if she is proudly offering abundance from her own space. Her expression feels welcoming, almost as though she is sharing a gentle joke or a pleasant thought.

What touches me most is her natural ease. There is no rush, no tension only comfort and self-assurance. Through her calm posture and subtle smile, Hasya Rasa becomes a reflection of inner joy and emotional warmth. This painting makes me feel that happiness does not always need laughter; sometimes, it quietly rests on the face.

3. Karuna Rasa (Sorrow / Compassion)

Raja Ravi Varma Painting – King Aja’s Lament



Raja Ravi Varma portrays Karuna Rasa in a way that deeply moves me, because the grief here feels silent and honest. When I look at this painting, I feel the weight of loss without words. King Aja’s open arms and upward gaze make me sense his helplessness, as if he is questioning fate itself. The still body of his beloved beside him makes the sorrow even heavier there is nothing left to be done except feel the pain.

What touches me most is the stillness. There is no dramatic crying, only exhaustion and heartbreak. The soft, muted colours and fallen flowers remind me how fragile happiness can be. This painting allows me to connect with grief on a human level, making Karuna Rasa not just sorrow, but shared compassion and emotional understanding.

4.Raudra Rasa (Anger / Fury)

Raja Ravi Varma – Rama Vanquishing the Ocean



When I look at this painting by Raja Ravi Varma, I don't feel uncontrolled rage I feel disciplined anger with purpose. Rama stands firm before the ocean, weapon raised, his body tense but steady. To me, his expression speaks of responsibility rather than aggression. This is anger born from duty, not ego.

What strikes me most is how his emotions feel familiar. Rama has waited, reasoned, and remained patient, but now that patience has reached its limit. The restless sea behind him seems to reflect his inner turmoil, making his frustration visible without making it violent. I can sense that moment when calm determination turns into action.

For me, this painting shows that Raudra Rasa is not about losing control. It is about knowing when to stand firm. Rama's restrained fury reminds me that anger, when guided by righteousness, can become strength.

This balance between restraint and resolve makes the emotion feel powerful, dignified, and deeply human.

5. Veera Rasa (Heroism / Courage)

Raja Ravi Varma – Krishna Killing Kamsa



When I observe this painting by Raja Ravi Varma, I clearly feel the presence of Veera Rasa through quiet confidence rather than aggressive force. Krishna is captured at the exact moment of victory, yet what stands out to me is his calm expression. His courage does not come from anger it comes from purpose and moral clarity.

What moves me most is the contrast between Krishna and Kamsa. While Kamsa lies defeated, Krishna remains composed and focused, reminding me that true heroism lies in control, not cruelty. Even though Krishna appears young, his strength feels firm and unshakable, symbolizing the triumph of righteousness over injustice.

For me, this painting shows that bravery is not just about physical power. It is about taking responsibility and standing against wrong without losing inner balance. Through this scene, Veera Rasa becomes deeply inspiring, teaching that courage guided by justice can change the course of fate.

6. Bhayanaka Rasa (Fear / Terror)

Raja Ravi Varma – Sita in Ashoka Grove



When I look at this painting by Raja Ravi Varma, the fear I feel is not sudden or dramatic it is slow, heavy, and deeply unsettling. Sita sits in isolation, surrounded by unfamiliar figures and dense shadows. Her withdrawn posture and distant eyes make me sense her inner anxiety, even though she appears outwardly calm.

What affects me most is the silence. Nothing violent is happening, yet the stillness itself feels threatening. This makes the fear more intense and personal. Through Sita's quiet endurance, Bhayanaka Rasa becomes, for me, the emotion of vulnerability and loneliness fear that is endured, not expressed, making it painfully human.

7. Bibhatsya Rasa (Disgust / Aversion)

Raja Ravi Varma – Keechaka and Sairandhri



When I look at this painting by Raja Ravi Varma, the feeling that rises in me is not shock, but deep discomfort. Keechaka's forward movement and reaching hands immediately make me uneasy, as they suggest power being misused. In contrast, Sairandhri's backward step and raised hand feel like a silent cry for boundaries and dignity.

What disturbs me most is that the disgust comes from intention, not appearance. The richness of the setting only makes the situation more unsettling, reminding me that moral decay can hide behind status and luxury. Through this contrast, I experience Bibhatsya Rasa as a strong emotional rejection of lust, dominance, and injustice an aversion that feels painfully real and human.

8. Adbhuta Rasa (Wonder / Surprise)

Raja Ravi Varma – The Marriage of Matsyagandha



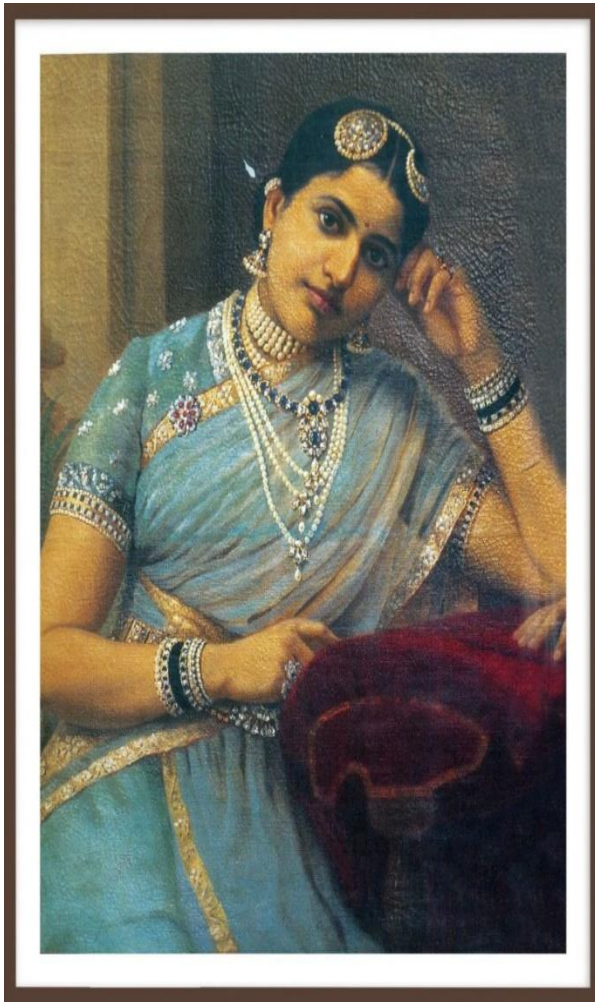
When I look at this painting by Raja Ravi Varma, I feel a sense of quiet amazement, as if I am witnessing destiny unfold in front of me. Matsyagandha's transformation from a simple life to a radiant bride feels almost magical, reminding me how unexpectedly life can change.

What draws me in is the calm wonder on the faces around her. Everyone seems aware that this is more than a marriage it is a moment touched by fate. The rich colours and ceremonial stillness make the scene feel sacred, not dramatic.

For me, this painting expresses Adbhuta Rasa as hope and belief the idea that even the most ordinary beginnings can lead to extraordinary outcomes. It feels gentle, inspiring, and deeply human.

9. Shanta Rasa (Peace / Tranquillity)

Raja Ravi Varma– The Rani of Kurupam



When I look at this painting by Raja Ravi Varma, I feel an immediate sense of calm and stillness. The Rani's relaxed posture, with her head gently resting on her hand, makes me pause and slow down. Her steady gaze and soft expression feel thoughtful, as if she is completely at peace with herself.

What stands out to me is the absence of tension. There is no movement demanding attention, no strong emotion pulling the mind in different directions. The cool colours, balanced jewellery, and smooth background work together to create harmony.

For me, this painting expresses Shanta Rasa as inner balance and quiet strength. It leaves me feeling reassured, reminding me that peace does not come from silence alone, but from emotional maturity and self-acceptance.

CONCLUSION

The study of emotions through Indian paintings reveals that art in India has always been deeply connected to human feeling and inner experience. Rather than treating emotions as temporary personal reactions, Indian artistic traditions understood them as shared, refined, and meaningful states of being. Through the framework of rasa, paintings became spaces where emotions were carefully shaped and offered to the viewer for contemplation and emotional participation.

Across different historical periods, Indian paintings consistently reflected the emotional concerns of their time. Ancient and medieval artworks emphasized collective and spiritual emotions such as devotion, wonder, courage, and peace, while later traditions gradually introduced more personal, psychological, and socially grounded feelings. Despite changes in style, theme, and medium, the emotional language of rasa remained a guiding principle, ensuring continuity in how emotions were expressed and experienced.

A rasa-based analysis shows that Indian paintings do more than represent stories or religious ideas; they preserve emotional values, social ideals, and ethical reflections. Love becomes a path to devotion, sorrow transforms into compassion, anger turns into moral strength, and

peace emerges as emotional fulfilment. In this way, paintings act as emotional archives, recording how societies understood balance, conflict, attachment, and transcendence.

Ultimately, the history of emotions through Indian paintings highlights the enduring relevance of Indian aesthetic thought. It reminds us that art has the power to educate emotions, cultivate empathy, and connect individuals across time and culture. By engaging with these visual traditions through rasa, we gain not only insight into India's artistic heritage but also a deeper understanding of the human emotional journey itself.

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