

# *Insights to Emotion in Art*



## Bhagavan Das on the danger of over-indulgence in imaginary benevolence.

From Bhagavan Das. *The Science of the Emotions*. Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1924 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Ch. X, EMOTION IN ART – ILLUSTRATIONS, pp. 372-81. (A searchable PDF of the 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., of 1908, can be found in our Constitution of Man Series.)

There have been human beings who, originally virtuously inclined and taking pleasure in deeds of charity and help and service to others, have begun to take pleasure in mere tales or dramatic representations of such, and so have gradually sunk into being contented with purely imaginary exercise of their Benevolence. And they have fallen further, if their worldly position has given them the requisite power, into that awful condition of the apparently unintelligible human monster who, not content with imaginary scenes for his imaginary Pity, devises actual real scenes of cruelty and torture to human and other beings in order to excite and expand his “pitying self.” Lest this seem too far-fetched, consider the case of singing-birds separated from their mates and confined in different cages in order to make them sing more passionately and sweetly. The very commonness of the practice hides the subtle and refined cruelty underlying it, which is sometimes not even redeemed, as it partially, and only partially, is and can be, by the “petting” of the animals; and it is no more noticed than the true significance referred to before of the fattening of animals for the slaughter-yard. The “refined and cultured” men who sat on the throne of decadent Rome, Caligula and Nero and their kin, and deliberately planned and brought about dire situations involving the murder of hundreds and thousands in the arena (or even by burning Rome itself in the case of Nero) which would enable them to see and “enjoy” the passions, the emotions, the behaviour of human beings *in extremis* — men of the sort that have been prominent in all nations in the days of their disruption, even as foul worms in a putrefying corpse; who were common in the mediaeval ages of Europe as well as of Asia — these seem to have been really such “aberrations of nature,” and not only wild savages with merely the instincts of Hate predominant in them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Most leaders of men, wielders of great power, successful fighters and conquerors, develop a dramatic vein. The constant self-reference, the self-consciousness, “All this is in *my* hands,” “I can order and arrange as I please,” makes the *action* take on the complexion of deliberate *acting* (in the histrionic sense). Napoleon’s previous planning of what he would do after capturing Moscow, the proclamations that he would issue, etc., which all ended in an awful fiasco, shows the desire for “dramatic” effect. In the Great European War, too, of 1914–1918, though there is nothing to choose between the principal belligerents on the score of national morality, and they were all equally jingoist and chauvinist and junkerist, or if one was more frankly brutal the other was more deeply hypocritical — still, perhaps the Kaiser Wilhelm took a more “dramatic” view, in the earlier part of the war, to judge from newspaper accounts, of how he would guide the course of the successive events of the vast conflict — and ended with a more awful fiasco than Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow.

This phenomenon is naturally rare on the large scale and the tremendous form. But on the small scale and in the milder forms, it is fairly common. Even children take a deliberately “dramatic” delight in teasing their elders and getting a rise out of them and seeing them fret and fume. And some grown-up men and women (often uneducated) love to set others by the ears and see the fun, and thus become authors as well as audience of their real plays more effectively than many cultural playwrights. Nārada, the ever-wandering Rishi of the gods, the bringer about and the enjoyer of immense fights between the mighty, is the archetype of all such, in the Purāna-mythos. The crowd that at once gathers to the scene of a street-brawl or an accident, is animated by a

These abnormal jīvas seem to appear largely only at those stages in human history when a turning-point is reached, when the Self and the Not-self elements of the jīva are both almost equally strong, when the struggle between them is the severest, when Pity is necessary to indulge in, and yet the pain of the sacrifice of the Not-Self, alluded to before, is so great as to prevent a real and true indulgence of it.

Of course, it may be that in any one or all of the particular instances referred to above, the jīvas were only purely vicious natures, in whom the element of Not-Self, and consequently the forces of separation, were overpoweringly predominant, and who therefore look a pleasure in the cruel sights of the arena only to gratify their Emotion-desires of Hatred and Pride. But the other view is not altogether useless. It supplies a possible explanation in certain cases which are otherwise inexplicable.

### **Comparative absence of tragedy from Sanskrit imaginative literature**

And in that explanation, perhaps, may be found a reason why the science of the Indian drama tacitly discourages tragedy-writing; why tragedies, songs “Of old unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago,” “Sweetest songs that tell of saddest thought,” “Songs of the separation of lovers,” belong not to the strongest and most vigorous aspect of the life of a people, but perhaps to its weaker and more sentimental aspect, if also more delicate and refined.<sup>1</sup> The Indian view is so strong on this point that the author of the *Uttara-Rāma-Charita* — unrivalled as a study in Pathos in Sanskrit literature — has given a happy ending to his work, directly contradicting even the traditional history of the sage Vālmiki.

It is desirable in many ways that the valuable emotion of Pity should not be wasted on air. The literature and the scenic representation of the Pathetic should be only sparingly allowed, and used principally for the cultivation and development of the finer feelings, when such is deemed expedient and possible, in view of the ever present danger of arousing sympathy in a vicious nature with the evil characters of the drama. In the words of Rāma to his lifelong servant and causeless devotee Hanūmān:

I do not wish at all to pay thee back the kindness thou hast done to me; to wish this were to wish that thou should'st be in pain and need my help; and such wish is the wish of the false friend and not the true.

To be always *seeking in imagination, i.e.*, in imagined scenes of suffering, which is very different from prayer for the well-being of the world — for the gratification of one's

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similar feeling — the wish to “taste,” to feel the *rasa* of unusual excitements and emotions, outside the monotonous routine of the daily life. As has been observed by psycho-analysts, persons who are always preaching vehemently against cruelty to animals, etc., are all the time tilling their minds with images of the cruel deeds they are preaching against, and are “tasting” them too. Such is the ambivalence, the duality, the paradox-māyā of human and all other Nature, of the whole World-process. And, as the Hindi proverb says,

“You will be sorry if you eat the confection; and you will be sorry if you don't.”

The extraordinary phenomena of psychiatry, sadism-masochism (pleasure in inflicting and in suffering pain), “the joy of grief,” “the secret joy of melancholy,” “the luxury of tears,” “the ferocious pleasure of fierce pessimism,” etc., will all find explanation in the dual nature of man, that he is a compound of Spirit and Matter, of love and hate, of other-pity and self-pity. In powerful excitement, and that of sex is the most so, the *whole* nature functions in an enhanced degree, and so *both* its sides are stimulated, by the law of diffusion of energy, but always the one more and the other less.

<sup>1</sup> The songs of the village-folk, and especially those favoured by the women, are mostly of “the pathetic,” perhaps because the “woman”-nature is inherently that which, in excess, becomes masochism, as the “man”-nature becomes similarly sadism.

benevolent propensities, is to be always desiring that others should be in misfortune.<sup>1</sup> The wish to save others is one thing; the wish to become a saviour and be regarded as such, is an entirely opposite thing. As the nadir is to the zenith, so is the latter to the former. Yet only the geometrical line divides two, and the soul rushes from the one to the other, and back also, unconsciously, in an infinitesimal moment.

For similar reasons too, public instinct has always, in all times and places, looked more or less askance at the profession of “acting”; for though, in a sense, the very quintessence of all the arts combined, the very perfection of them all together, yet it is also inseparable from “putting on,” “pretence,” “masquerading,” “make-believe” and “insincerity.” So closely do good and evil elbow each other in human life and so difficult is it to distinguish between them always.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> See, in this connection, the observations in Höfding’s *Psychology*, as regards “free ideas” (pp. 125, 126, 304, *et seq.*). The observations in Theosophical literature, about the tendency of persistent thought-forms to get realised on the physical plane, are also useful to bear in mind in this connection.

<sup>2</sup> These remarks might be regarded as illustrating one possible interpretation of *Bhagavad-Gītā*, iv, 16-18.

[16. Even sages have been deluded as to what is action and what inaction; therefore I shall explain to thee what is action by a knowledge of which thou shalt be liberated from evil.

17. One must learn well what is action to be performed, what is not to be, and what is inaction. The path of action is obscure.

18. That man who sees inaction in action and action in inaction is wise among men; he is a true devotee and a perfect performer of all action.

Excerpted from “The Bhagavad Gita - tr. Judge,” Higher Ethics and Devotion Series. — ED. PHIL.]

## Analysis of motifs

To understand the why of these *rasas*<sup>1</sup> we have to interpret them in terms of the basic emotions. It is clear that

(1) the Beautiful and Erotic,

(3) the Pathetic, and

(8) the Sublime and Wonderful

belong to the side of Love and Attraction, while

(5) the Furious and Cruel,

(6) the Fearful, and

(7) the Disgusting,

belong to the side of Hate and Repulsion.

The interest of

(2) the Comic, and

(4) the Heroic is mixed.

The Comic consists of Ridicule and Good-humour; while the Heroic is similarly made up of Pride and Self-Sacrifice.

In terms of our basic six Emotions, in detail, we may say that the Erotic corresponds with Love-proper, the Pathetic with Pity, the Sublime and Wonderful with Reverence, the Furious and Cruel with Anger, the Terrible with Fear, the Disgusting with Scorn. In Sanskrit works on *Sāhitya*<sup>2</sup> the usual way of putting the matter is that the “persisting emotions” (*sthāyi-bhāvas*) which are the bases or sources of these “artistic tastes or enjoyments” (*rasas*) are respectively the following: *rati* or sex-love, *shoka* or distress, *vis-maya* or humble wonder (literally, “absence of the smile of superiority,” absence of the *nīl admirari*<sup>3</sup> spirit, absence of pride), *lerodha* or anger, *bhaya* or fear, *jugupsā* or scorn. For the Comic, the Heroic, and the *Shānta* or the Quiescent (or better, the Resignant or Renunciant), they are, respectively, *hāsa* or laughter, *utsāha* or energetic valour, and *shama* or peacefulness.<sup>4</sup> It is obvious that some of these require further analysis and reduction into the elemental emotions.

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<sup>1</sup> In Hindu aesthetics, *rasa* is a fundamental quality of classical music, dance, and poetry. *Rasa* implies flavour, sentiment, emotion; in the *Rig-Veda*, liquid, extract, or flavour. In the *Atharvaveda*, taste, and also the sense of “the sap of grain.” In the *Upanishads*, the “essence, self-luminous consciousness, quintessence,” but also taste in some contexts. In post-Vedic literature, *rasa* suggests “extract, essence, juice or tasty liquid.”

[For further analysis of the term, see Bhagavan Das’ *The Science of the Emotions*, p. 334 *et seq.* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of 1924. A searchable PDF of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, of 1908, can be found in our Constitution of Man Series.

For insights to some deeper connotations of *rasa* see Dr. Namita Bhatia’ article, [The Rasa Theory and the Concept of the Sublime: A Universal Approach of Bharatamuni and Longinus](#) — ED. PHIL.]

<sup>2</sup> The word includes matter which in the West is distributed under rhetoric, literary criticism, social psychology, aesthetics, poetics, dramaturgy, etc., and may, with reference to its etymology, be interpreted as “the Science of Companionship, of refined social life,” or, briefly, social science.

<sup>3</sup> [To be surprised by nothing]

<sup>4</sup> The order here is that of the *rasas* as given in the verse quoted in the footnote to the first paragraph of this section (d), *supra*.

## The Comic

Comic Laughter has been analysed before.<sup>1</sup> The artistic interest or “taste” of the Humorous or Comic proper is based always on the *good*-humoured sense of superiority. The elements of sympathy and kindness in it are quite equal in amount to, if not more than, those of the belittlement of another. The laugh which, on the other hand, is sardonic, or sinister, or sneering, or scornful, belongs to the Cruel or the Heroic, and not to the Comic. Many degrees and kinds of laughter may be distinguished even under the Comic, in consequence of admixture of other moods.<sup>2</sup>

## The Heroic

Heroism also has been dealt with.<sup>3</sup> To fight bravely and strongly is not enough to make the hero. Tigers and wolves fight thus over their prey. So do dogs over a bone, or at the bidding of their owners. So do nations, at the bidding of *their* masters, the greed-and-pride-driven plutocrats and bureaucrats, over the lands and labouring capacities and other belongings of weaker and exploitable and enslavable nations. There is any amount of courage in such fights; but no heroism. That the wire-pulling and ultimately profiting cliques deceive and delude the actual fighters and sufferers by means of moral myths and pretensions of righteousness and sanctimonious hypocrisies of all kinds, embodied in catch-phrases about “defence of home and hearth,” or “of national honour,” or “of weaker nations,” or “securing a place in the sun for the surplus population” (result of unrestrained indulgence), etc., and so inspire them with the feeling of heroism — that they do so only helps to illustrate the difference between the simpler motif of the Furious, on the one hand, and the more complex and noble interest of the Heroic on the other. The former is the simply Angry because of frustration of selfish desire. The latter is a compound of the Self-Confident, the Proud towards the Arrogant, the Righter of wrongs, the actively Compassionate towards the weak and suffering, the Self-Sacrificing.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> pp. 226-238 *supra*.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, the *Sāhitya-Darpana* says,

Laughter has six degrees. A slight widening of the eyes, a slight stretching of the lips — this is the smile, *smitam*. If the teeth become slightly visible also, it is *hastitam*, the broad smile. These two belong to the grave and cultured elders, the reverend seigneurs. Add a gentle sound, and we have *vihasitam*, the soft laugh. If head and shoulders shake and the cachinnation is loud, it becomes *ava-hasitam*, the loud laugh. These two are the property of the middling, the younger-minded. With tears streaming added, it becomes a case of *apa-hasitam*, the painful laugh. Finally, with the limbs flung about, comes the *ati-hasitam*, the guffaw and excessive laughter. These last two characterise the vulgar.

And the author of the play must assign the different sorts of laughter to the different characters in accordance with these principles, and the actors must laugh correctly according to rule and not violate the dramatic proprieties.

<sup>3</sup> p. 144, *supra*

<sup>4</sup> Four kinds of heroes, *vīras*, are mentioned in *Sāhitya* works, the Generous, the Righteous, the Compassionate, the Warrior; *i.e.*, he who begs himself to help others in need, he who does his duty at all costs, he who takes suffering upon himself in order that others may be saved, and he who risks his life in battle to protect others.

Blessed are the poor and the humble in spirit; they are dear to the Lord”; their *inner life* is richer. But, it should be noted, no one is poor, in this sense, who has not been rich and *lost* his possessions. Therefore, the scriptural sayings that “Humility is the crowning virtue,” “Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.” [From the *Bhāgavata* and *Manu*.]

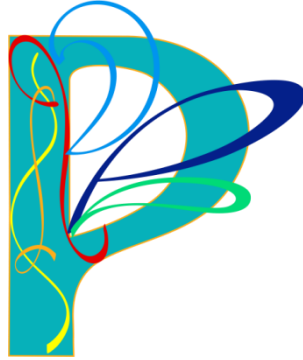
*Voluntary* poverty is blessed; forced, unrelieved poverty is mostly stunting, coarsening, even brutalising.

’Tis better to have loved and *lost*  
Than never to have loved at all.

— Tennyson

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