

Dynamics Aesthetics: The Co-existence of Dual Rasa in a Single Composition

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Abstract

Rasa, as codified in Bharata's *Natyasastra*, forms the cornerstone of emotional experience in Indian art, especially in music and dance. In Carnatic music, rasa is not merely a theoretical concept but a lived aesthetic, expressed through *sahitya* (lyrics), *raga bhava* (the emotive essence of melody), and *laya* or *tala* (the rhythmic framework). Traditionally, Carnatic compositions emphasize a single predominant rasa, drawing listeners deeply into one emotional state. However, certain compositions deviate from this pattern by embodying dual rasa, where two contrasting emotions coexist or unfold sequentially. This phenomenon reveals the emotional and philosophical richness of Indian aesthetics, highlighting the interplay of human sentiment and divine qualities.

The aim of this study is to situate dual rasa within the broader framework of Indian aesthetic theory and demonstrate how it manifests in select *kritis* (compositions). Rather than merely cataloging examples, the study investigates how *sahitya*, *raga bhava* and performance techniques interact to bring these emotional contrasts to life. It also explores the spiritual, aesthetic, and pedagogical implications of dual rasa, showing how it enhances both performer interpretation and listener engagement.

The methodology is qualitative and interpretive, focusing on the analysis of texts and performances. First, the poetic imagery and emotional tones of the *sahitya* are examined. Simultaneously, the *bhava* of the *raga* is analyzed, since many *ragas* can express multiple emotions depending on how they are composed and performed. Finally, live and recorded performances are studied to understand how musicians vary melody, tempo, and expression to convey emotional transitions or coexistence.

A clear example is Subbaraya Sastri's "Sankari Sankuru" in Saveri raagam, which features both *karuṇa* (compassion) and *raudra/vira* (fierce/heroic) rasas. The opening lines reflect a humble plea for the goddess's grace, evoking *karuṇa* through soft *gamakas* and a slow tempo. As the lyrics shift to describe the goddess's fierce, protective nature, the musical phrasing becomes more forceful and brisk, expressing *vira* and *raudra* rasas. Saveri raaga, known for its ability to balance gentleness and intensity, serves as an ideal melodic medium for this emotional duality. Other compositions are discussed in the article.

Dual rasa performances challenge artists to express opposing emotions with depth and sensitivity. For audiences, this creates a rich, immersive experience. In Indian aesthetics, such emotional contrasts like love and sorrow or valor and compassion are seen as complementary. Dual rasa reflects the idea that true beauty lies in the harmony of emotional opposites.

In conclusion, dual rasa enriches Carnatic music by offering a deeper emotional and spiritual experience. It invites greater attention in performance, pedagogy, and scholarship not as an anomaly, but as a vital component of the art form's expressive potential. By blending opposites, dual rasa affirms the unity at the heart of Indian artistic and spiritual expression.

Keywords : Navarasa, Emotion, Dual Rasa, Carnatic Compositions

INTRODUCTION

Emotion lies at the heart of all artistic experience, and in Indian aesthetics, this emotional essence is captured by the concept of rasa. More than a mere feeling, rasa is the refined, contemplative joy that arises when art transforms emotion into aesthetic experience. First articulated in Bharata's *Natyasastra*, it provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how music, dance, and drama evoke responses that transcend ordinary human emotion. Later aestheticians such as Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta deepened this vision, describing rasa as a form of spiritual bliss (*ananda*) shared by performer and listener alike.

Within the Carnatic tradition, rasa is not an abstract principle but a lived reality. It flows through *sahitya* (the poetic word), *raga bhava* (the emotive character of melody), and *laya* or *tala* (the rhythmic pulse). Together, these elements create an aesthetic space where emotion becomes experience and sound becomes meaning.

While many Carnatic compositions center around a single predominant rasa, the tradition also embraces pieces that embody dual emotional states—what may be termed dual rasa. In such works, two contrasting emotions coexist or evolve in sequence, enriching both expression and interpretation.

This study explores dual rasa as a dynamic aesthetic principle in Carnatic music, situating it within the wider philosophy of Indian art. It seeks to understand how composers and performers balance emotional contrasts to reveal the unity underlying diversity—the essence of Indian aesthetic thought.

OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this study is to explore the phenomenon of dual rasa—the coexistence or sequential unfolding of two emotional states within a single Carnatic composition—and to situate it within the broader framework of Indian aesthetic theory.

More specifically, the study seeks to:

- Contextualize dual rasa within aesthetics by examining how the concept aligns with and extends the principles of *rasa siddhanta* as codified in the *Natyasastra* and later commentaries.
- Identify and analyze selected Carnatic compositions that demonstrate the presence of more than one rasa, focusing on how *sahitya*, *raga bhava*, and *laya* interact to create emotional contrasts or transitions.
- Examine performance interpretation, observing how musicians use melodic variation, tempo, and expressive nuance to highlight shifting emotional states during rendition.

- Explore the spiritual and aesthetic implications of dual rasa, emphasizing how the balance of contrasting emotions enhances both artistic expression and the listener's inner experience.
- Encourage deeper appreciation and teaching of emotion in music, by showing that multiple rasas can coexist beautifully without disturbing the unity of a composition.

RESEARCH GAP

While the theory of rasa has been extensively studied within aesthetics, most existing scholarship in Carnatic music focuses on the expression of a single, dominant emotional state in each composition. Discussions of raga bhava and sahitya typically highlight how musical and lyrical components work together to evoke one predominant rasa, reinforcing the idea of aesthetic unity as central to compositional integrity. However, there is comparatively little analytical work on compositions that embody more than one rasa. The idea of dual rasa—where two contrasting emotions coexist or unfold within the same musical framework—has received limited theoretical attention and even less systematic exploration in performance practice. When such dual expressions are mentioned, they are often treated as incidental or interpretive choices rather than deliberate artistic constructs. Moreover, existing studies tend to analyze rasa in isolation from the dynamics of performance. The interaction between lyrical imagery, melodic emotion, and interpretive nuance in producing dual rasa remains underexplored. This research addresses that gap by integrating textual, musical, and performative perspectives. It approaches dual rasa not as a deviation from classical norms but as a vital mode of emotional expression that reflects the philosophical depth and expressive flexibility of the Carnatic tradition.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, emphasizing the analytical and experiential dimensions of rasa in Carnatic music. Since the objective is to understand how dual rasa manifests through composition, performance, and interpretation, the research combines textual, musical, and performative analysis.

- Textual Analysis (Sahitya) :

The first stage involves a close reading of selected sahitya (lyrics) from representative compositions that suggest the presence of more than one rasa. The poetic imagery, emotional tone, and choice of devotional or descriptive language are examined to identify contrasting emotional cues. Classical commentaries on rasa theory and aesthetic philosophy are also consulted to interpret how these emotional states align with the larger Indian aesthetic framework.

- Musical Analysis (Raga Bhava and Laya) :

The second stage focuses on the musical dimension—specifically, how raga bhava and laya (rhythm) interact to express emotional contrast. Certain ragas inherently allow multiple moods depending on the performer's treatment, gamaka patterns, and tempo (khanda chaapu in slow tempo is srungara rasa and in speed tempo is rudra rasa) variations. The study therefore analyzes how melodic and rhythmic elements accentuate transitions or coexistence between rasas, illustrating how music itself becomes the vehicle of emotional transformation.

- Performance Interpretation :

To capture the living dimension of *rasa*, both live and recorded performances by eminent vocalists are observed. Special attention is given to interpretive nuances—such as phrasing, tempo modulation, and dynamic control—that enable performers to shift emotional focus while maintaining aesthetic coherence. Interviews and informal discussions with practitioners also inform the interpretive understanding of dual *rasa* in performance.

- Comparative Synthesis :

Findings from textual, musical, and performative analyses are then synthesized to identify recurring patterns in how dual *rasa* emerges and is sustained. This integrated method allows the study to move beyond theoretical description, highlighting how the interplay of lyric, melody, and rhythm transforms emotion into aesthetic experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The exploration of dual *rasa* in Carnatic music reveals that emotional plurality is not an exception but an inherent possibility within the system. The interdependence of *sahitya*, *raga bhava*, and *laya* allows the coexistence of multiple emotional tones without disturbing aesthetic harmony. This section presents selected examples of compositions where more than one *rasa* is perceptible, followed by interpretive observations on how these emotions interact in both composition and performance.

The following compositions illustrate the presence of dual *rasa* through clear textual and musical cues. Each example highlights how specific lines of *sahitya* correspond to distinct emotional states, while *raga bhava* and *laya* reinforce or transition between them.

- Sankari Sankuru Chandramukhi – Subbaraya Sastri (Raga: Saveri)

‘Sankari Sankuru Chandramukhi’ — The soft pleading tone and humble address evoke *Karuna rasa* (compassion and surrender). The devotee stands in vulnerability before the Goddess.

‘Kankana dharini Katyayani’ — The description shifts into a majestic portrayal of her form, with firm rhythmic emphasis, revealing *Vira rasa* (heroic grandeur).

Here, *karuna* emerges from the devotee’s emotion, while *vira* arises from the Goddess’s persona — dual perspective within one frame.

- Vatapi Ganapatim Bhajeham – Muthusvami Diksitar (Raaga: Hamsadhvani)

‘Vatapi Ganapatim Bhajeham’ — The declarative, commanding invocation conveys *Vira rasa* (heroic devotion).

‘Musikavahana modaka priyam’ — As the composer paints the deity’s form and playful attributes, *Adbhuta rasa* (wonder and amazement) unfolds.

The shift from invocation to vivid imagery marks the transition from strength to awe.

- Brochevarevarura ninu vina raghuvara – Mysore Vasudevachar (Raga: Khamas)
‘Brochevarevarura ninu vina raghuvara’ — playful complaint of the devotee expressing Hasya rasa (light humour) through tone and repetition.

‘ni charanabujamunu ne vidajala karunalavala’ — quickly turns to Srungara–bhakti (affectionate devotion), where humour gives way to tenderness.

Dual rasa arises not from meaning alone, but from how Khamas carries teasing affection.

- Bhairavi Swarajathi – ‘Kamakshi Amba’ :

In the last charanam, the first half portrays the Rudra rasa, reflecting the fierce and protective aspect of the goddess through commanding phrases and assertive rhythmic movements. As the latter half unfolds, the tone softens—lyrically and melodically—revealing Karuna rasa, an expression of tender devotion toward Kamakshi Amba. This seamless emotional shift within a single section demonstrates the refined aesthetic control of the composer and performer alike.

Lyrical Expression :

Analysis of sahitya shows that many compositions juxtapose two emotional tones—such as compassion and valor, love and sorrow, or humour and affection. This contrast often emerges through narrative shifts or alternating perspectives between devotee and deity. Thus, dual rasa operates as a literary device, transforming human emotion into layered aesthetic meaning.

Musical and Rhythmic Expression :

Certain ragas (like Atana , Khamas, Bhairavi, Ananda Bhairavi, Saveri, Bilahari) naturally support multiple moods. Performers highlight this duality through subtle changes in gamakas, tempo, or phrasing. Rhythmic design also aids emotional transition—slow tempos heighten pathos (karuna), while brisk patterns evoke energy or heroism (vira). In Bilahari raga, the presence of dual rasa is particularly significant. The very name—“Bila” meaning cave and “Hari” referring to Vishnu—symbolically alludes to Lord Narasimha, the divine manifestation who emerged from a pillar to destroy Hiranyakashipu. Compositions in this rāga that center on Narasimha Swamy reveal two contrasting emotions: the Rudra rasa of divine ferocity during the act of slaying the demon, and the Karuṇa rasa of tenderness that follows when Goddess Lakshmi appears and rests upon his lap. The transition between these emotions is beautifully achieved through the use of Kaisiki Nishādam, a delicate swara that softens the raga’s tone, transforming the atmosphere from intense to compassionate. Within the same melodic framework, Bilahari thus becomes a perfect vessel for expressing the coexistence of power and grace, anger and love—an embodiment of dual rasa in its purest musical form.

Performance and Interpretation :

Performance analysis indicates that dual rasa often comes alive through interpretive nuance. A single phrase, sung with altered tone or dynamics, can shift the emotional centre. Thus, the phenomenon lies as much in how a piece is rendered as in how it is composed.

Emerging Patterns :

Across genres—kriti, padams, and javali—three consistent patterns of dual rasa are observed:

- Contrast of Roles or Perspectives

Dual emotion often arises when the sahitya alternates between the voice of the devotee and that of the deity, or between reverence and complaint

- Sequential Transformation of Emotion

Here, one rasa evolves into another as the composition unfolds—typically from love or joy to sorrow, or vice versa.

- Simultaneous Coexistence of Feelings

Some compositions intentionally layer two rasas at once—such as affection intertwined with humour or devotion tinged with playfulness.

These instances demonstrate that dual rasa operates both as structural design and expressive intent. The coexistence or progression of emotions enriches the aesthetic depth, allowing compositions to mirror the emotional intricacy of human experience.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The exploration of dual rasa in Carnatic compositions presents several interpretive and methodological challenges.

- **Subjectivity of Emotional Perception:** The experience of rasa is inherently subjective, varying with each performer's interpretation and the listener's sensitivity. What may appear as karuna–vira interplay to one artist might be perceived as pure bhakti by another. This makes definitive classification difficult and calls for a contextual, rather than absolute, approach.
- **Lack of Explicit Theoretical Frameworks :**

While the Natyasastra and later commentaries provide elaborate descriptions of single rasa expressions, they offer little guidance on how multiple rasas can coexist within one artistic unit. The absence of explicit textual models in musicological literature often leaves performers and scholars to rely on intuition or interpretive tradition.

- **Performance Variability:** The realization of dual rasa heavily depends on the performer's musical and emotional choices—such as the handling of gamakas, tempo, and sahitya articulation. As a result, the same composition may project different emotional shades across renditions, complicating scholarly generalization.
- **Limited Documentation:** Although padams and javalis display rich emotional dualities, few detailed commentaries or notations capture these nuances. Oral transmission and stylistic variation between banis (schools) make consistent analytical study challenging.

CONCLUSION

The study of dual rasa in Carnatic music illuminates the art form's unique ability to hold opposites in harmony. Within a single composition, tenderness can coexist with strength, and devotion can flow seamlessly into valor or compassion. This fusion does not fragment the emotional experience—it deepens it, mirroring the layered nature of both art and life.

Through the dynamic interplay of sahitya, raga bhava, and performance nuance, dual rasa reveals that emotion in music is never static; it evolves, transforms, and transcends. For performers, it invites introspection and emotional discipline; for listeners, it offers a multidimensional journey through sound and feeling.

Ultimately, dual rasa embodies the spiritual vision of Indian aesthetics—the unity of contrasts, the oneness of diverse emotions. It reminds us that the truest expression of beauty arises not from singular perfection, but from the balance of opposites that together create the complete experience of ananda, the bliss that lies at the heart of all art.

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