

PERSONAL EXPLORATION -2: Analysing Emotions Using Nava-Rasa Theory, January 31, 2026

Exploring the Nava-rasa concept of aesthetics in Indian thought, I was intrigued by the absence of the two prominent emotions: happiness and sorrow that we more frequently experience in our lives. What I thought was a logical, missing piece in the puzzle, soon had a logical explanation that to me was quite revealing and insightful. This short write-up is my learning from this exercise.

I seek your critique to see if I have missed out on anything and help me refine my learning.

NAVA-RASAS

Exposed largely to western thought I was familiar with the theory of Utilitarianism where pleasure and pain are seen as the primary drivers of human conduct. The emotions corresponding to pleasure and pain are happiness and sorrow. Given this understanding, when I explored the *Nava-Rasa* theory in Indian aesthetics, I was quite surprised to see both happiness and sorrow missing from the list of the nine emotions. Given the details which the *Nava-rasa* theory contains about their associated colours, presiding deities and their functional utility, the two prominent missing emotions was quite puzzling.

Table-1: Facets of Nava-rasa

#	Nava-rasa	Colour	Deity	Functional
1	Shringara -Love or intimacy	Light green	Vishnu	Promotes intimacy and bonding in relationship
2	Hasya -Humour	White	Pramatha	Relieves stress and lightens the environment through laughter
3	Karuna -Compassion	Grey	Yama	Drives empathy and counters isolation
4	Raudra -Anger	Red	Shiva	Fuels assertiveness or triggers seeks justice
5	Veera -Heroism	Yellowish	Indira	Builds courage to face challenge
6	Bhayanaka -Fear	Black	Kaala	Prompts survival instincts to fight back
7	Bibhasta -Disgust	Blue	Mahakal -Shiva	Averts harm from toxin or threats by moving away from it
8	Adbuta -wonder	Yellow	Brahma	Sparks creativity and growth
9	Shanti -tranquillity	White	Narayana	Calms anxiety and restores balance

While most of the deities representing the *rasas* are commonly known, the deity for *Hāsya*, *Pramatha* is quite unique. *Pramatha* are the attendants of Lord Shiva who not only display fierce chaotic energies but also playful mischief in their role of defending Mount Kailasa and other designated places. They combine their fierce combative nature with mischief to scare visitors and ward-off threats. Their journey evolved from being wild fierce guards of Lord Shiva to induction into the army of Ganas led by the playful Ganesha. The combination of fierce energies with playful humour blurs the line between fearsome and funny using incongruity. Incongruity looks to be the reason why *Pramatha* represent *Hāsya* as they embody comic and mischief elements both of which use incongruity.

The present-day western thinking recognises the primary role of incongruity to create both humour and mischief using the element of surprise in humour, and breaking the social norms in mischief. Incongruity Theory is best explained as “a cognitive jolt where the brain experiences a moment of error or contradiction that is resolved through laughter”. This theory is the dominant explanation of

humour when a tense situation is diffused by laughter, and mischief is defined as humour with an edge of breaking social norms.

EXAMINING ABSENCE OF HAPPINESS AND SORROW

Exploring the reason for happiness and sorrow missing in the Nava-rasa theory, it becomes apparent when we realise that *Nava-rasa* theory is used to communicate '*bhava*' by the artist to evoke in their audience the corresponding *rasa* or emotions, which include happiness and sorrow. *Rasa* or the emotion is evoked by the artist through the chain of:

- *Vibhāvas* (determinants): The causes or stimuli that evoke emotions like the situation, character and the setting,
- *Anubhāvas* (consequents): Reflect the physical and behavioural expressions of emotions like gestures, colour, tone, or language,
- *Vyabhicāri bhāvas* (transitory emotions): that generate the fleeting emotions in the audience like anxiety, hope and shame.

To enable connect with the audience, the artist has to go one level deeper into what causes these two basic emotions of happiness and sorrow. Given this need, we can now bifurcated *Nava-rasas* into the two broad categories that evoke happiness and sorrow.

- Happiness can be the result of evoking any one of the four *rasas*- *Shringra*-love or romance, *Hasya*-humour, *Veera*-heroism, and *Ambuda*-wonder.
- Likewise, *sorrow* can be evoked using *Karuna*-compassion, *Raudra*-anger, *Bhayanaka*-fear, and *Bibhastā*-disgust
- *Shanti*-peace or tranquillity, is the ninth element which is equidistant to both happiness and sorrow and hence not categorised under either.

EXPRESSING NAVA-RASAS

As the primary purpose of *Nava-rasas* is for communicating emotions in different art form like dance, poetry, music, painting and the like, this theory also includes methods by which these emotions can be communicated by the artist for the audience to feel these emotions.

Table-2: Communicating *Nava-rasas*

	<i>Nava-rasa</i>	Examples of Expressions to Communicate it
1	<i>Shringara</i> -Love or intimacy	Loving glances, gentle touches, words of affection, reaffirming the love or devotion
2	<i>Hasya</i> -Humour	Playful tickling, sharing jokes, watch comedies to laugh together
3	<i>Karuna</i> -Compassion	Emphatic listening, discussion of loving kindness, visualising mercy for each other's struggle
4	<i>Raudra</i> -Anger	Intense discussion on grievances, yelling and shouting, breaking objects in the vicinity
5	<i>Veera</i> -Heroism	affirming courage, role-play heroic acts, set challenging goals, embarking on adventures,

6	<i>Bhayanaka</i> -Fear	Collaborating to face fears or embarking on new activities, supportive hand-holding, reassuring chants like the phrase popularised by 3 Idiots movie "All is well"
7	<i>Bibhasta</i> -Disgust	Sudden recoil or withdrawal, turning away, covering the face or mouth, wrinkling the nose, uttering words of repulsion
8	<i>Adbuta</i> -wonder	Sudden stillness or freezing, eyes and mouth open, eyebrows raised, hands lifted and spread apart, leaning forward, stammering or lost for words
9	<i>Shanti</i> -tranquillity	Synchronized breathing, seating meditation facing each other, practice equanimity by observing conflicts without reaction.

Looking at the distinct emotions and their forms of expression, we can infer that happiness and sorrow is also expressed using any one of these expressions. Does this mean that there are different grades or levels of happiness and sorrow?

HAPPINESS AND SORROW UNBUNDLED

In Indian thought there are multiple levels of happiness and sorrow. In my limited exploration, I was able to find six levels with a corresponding state for both happiness and sorrow that could be linked to a common source or cause. A key implication of this corresponding state is that exposure to positive emotions necessarily means exposure to the negative emotion too. Hence experiencing more or less of each state can be regulated by understanding their source and controlling its influence.

Level-1: Hasya-humour & Karuna -compassion

The source for both these emotions is **vicarious experience**, i.e. they involve something happening to others and to that extent are momentary. We could also say that these emotions do not endure unless the vicarious experience is prolonged. Examples are watching a movie, reading a novel or seeing an individual made a fool of, or seeing them get hurt.

The way to insulate oneself from this emotion is to **reduce exposure** to the vicarious experience.

Level-2: Sukha-pleasure & Viraha-separation

Attachment is the source for both these emotions. Greater the attachment deeper and longer lasting is the resulting emotions. Examples are the gain or loss of a valuable object, or relationship with a dear person or benefactor. Prominent examples are winning or losing any contest, separation from a loved one.

The way to insulate from this emotion is to **reduce the level of attachment or divert attention to something else**.

Level-3: Harsha-excitement & Dukkha - suffering

Focusing **exclusively on results** is the source of these emotions. Higher the focus on results, deeper is the emotional reaction. Examples are of self or a close friend or a relative's achievement or failure in any endeavour.

The way to insulate from this emotion is to **focus on the efforts or process and be neutral to results**.

Level-4: Amoda-joy or cheerfulness & Shoka-sorrow

This category of emotion is triggered by **events and are episodic**. Loss of a dear one or gaining something sought after are some examples. The duration of the emotion is dependent on the desirability of what is gained or lost.

The way to insulate from these motions is **passage of time** or **shifting your mind** from the given episode or event. Prayer or meditation is often used to reduce the impact of *Soka*-sorrow.

Level-5: Mangala/ Kalayanam -riches or auspicious & Dainya- poverty or misery,

Access to material resources is the basis for these emotions. Higher the need, greater the emotion. Income and sources to income like education or wealth are some examples that trigger these emotions.

Insulation from these emotions is through **reducing the need** for wealth or other resources.

Level-6: Pramoda- psychological delight & Visada- melancholy or despair

These emotions are much deeper and longer lasting. I believe that these emotions are compound emotions, i.e. a product of multiple levels of emotions listed above culminating in the outlook of an individual preferring delight or despair.

The way to insulate from these emotions is to **take each life experience in insolation** and not to link it together into one giant chain.

Shanti- tranquillity or equanimity is the neutral emotion that is equidistant from both happiness and sorrow. *Shanti* is seen as the foundation on which *Ananda*-bliss is built. The metaphor of a still lake and reflection of the moon is often used to show the relationship between *Shanti* and *Ananda*. Just as a still lake is essential for seeing the reflection of the moon, the metaphor uses a still lake for *Shanti* and *Ananda* is represented by the reflection of the moon, to show *Ananda* is not feasible in the absence of *Shanti*. Stronger the foundation, more enduring is the state of *Ananda* or bliss.

Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti.