
Long Before “Emotional Branding,” There Was Bharata’s *Natyashastra*

If you’ve ever cried at a movie, felt your pulse quicken during a thriller, or laughed at a perfectly timed joke, you’ve experienced something an Indian scholar named Bharata was writing about more than two thousand years ago. His text, the *Natyashastra*, is often described as a manual for theatre — but that undersells it. It’s really one of the earliest attempts anywhere in the world to explain how art makes people *feel* things on purpose.

Bharata’s opening line sets the tone perfectly: the stage, he wrote, is “a one-stop entertainment solution for people of varied tastes and orientations.” Two thousand years before Netflix algorithms tried to solve the same problem, Bharata was already thinking about how to hold a mixed, distracted audience’s attention.

The emotional operating system: Rasa

The heart of Bharata’s work is something called *rasa theory*. The idea is simple but powerful: a performance should be engineered to evoke a specific emotional flavor in its audience — love, humor, courage, fear, wonder, disgust, compassion, anger, or peace. These are the “nine rasas,” and Bharata treated them almost like a toolkit. A skilled performer, he argued, doesn’t just tell a story — they use expression, gesture, tone, and timing to *deliver* a feeling.

Sound familiar? It should. This is essentially the founding logic behind every romance film, horror movie, and tearjerker ad campaign ever made. Modern storytellers rarely use the word “rasa,” but they’re doing exactly what Bharata described: designing an experience to land a specific emotional punch.

The audience is the whole point

What’s genuinely radical about Bharata’s framework is where he puts the emphasis. Instead of focusing purely on the performer or the “correct” way to act, he centers the *audience’s experience*. Meaning isn’t just transmitted from stage to seat — it’s completed by the viewer. That’s a strikingly modern idea, one that shows up today in media studies as the notion that audiences actively interpret and “finish” a story rather than passively receiving it.

A blueprint for every screen we stare at

Bharata also broke down communication into its component parts: facial expression, gesture, voice, and context, all working together. That’s essentially a 2,000-year-old description of multimodal communication — the same principle behind why a well-shot close-up, a well-timed piece of music, and a well-written line of dialogue all have to work together for a scene to land.

He didn’t see this as trivial entertainment, either. Bharata argued that art has a responsibility: to educate, uplift, and bring people together across differences, not just distract them.

Why it still resonates

Every time a brand tries to make you feel nostalgic, every time a film score swells right on cue, every time an ad makes you tear up before you even register the product — that's rasa theory at work, whether the people behind it know Bharata's name or not. The *Natyashastra* is, at its core, a very old, very thorough answer to a question every storyteller still asks: how do you make someone *feel* something? Bharata's answer holds up remarkably well.