

Communication
Volume 2, Issue 2, Jul-Jan 2025-26, pp. 280-293

Exploring Post-Pandemic Cultural Expressions Through Rasa Theory In The Indian Knowledge System

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Received on: December 12, 2025 | Accepted on: January 2, 2025 | Published on: January 29, 2026

Abstract

This paper discusses post-pandemic culture in India as a case of the Rasa Theory in the context of Indian Knowledge System (IKS). The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the overall emotional and cultural habits in a radical manner, creating new artistic, literary, and digital practices. Although the current post-pandemic cultural research mainly applies Western psychologic and sociological paradigms, this paper fills a substantial gap since it uses an indigenous aesthetic theory to make sense of such changes. The study, in its turn, adopts a fully Qualitative Research Methodology, employing Interpretive and Hermeneutic analysis of the chosen Post-pandemic Cultural Artifacts. The tools that use AI assistance are used to assist the thematic pattern recognition of large cultural datasets, and the interpretive process is based on the Rasa Theory as a matter of theory. The analysis will bring out the prevalence of Rasas like Karuṇa, Bhayānaka, Śānta, and Vīra, that shows that the people had collective emotional shift of trauma and fear into strength and self-reflection. The results prove that the Rasa Theory remains relevant today and emphasize the opportunities of Indian Knowledge Systems to contribute to the cultural discourse after the pandemic.

Keywords: *Rasa Theory; Indian Knowledge System; Post-Pandemic Culture; Qualitative Analysis; Cultural Expression; AI-Assisted Research*

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- Interpretation of emotional transition from crisis to recovery
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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted a profound cultural and emotional rupture in Indian society, disrupting not only public health and economic systems but also deeply ingrained social practices, affective bonds, and modes of collective life. Experiences of prolonged lockdowns, mass displacement of migrant workers, digital mediation of relationships, and widespread loss reshaped everyday realities and altered the emotional landscape of the nation. The pandemic thus emerged as a shared historical moment that reconfigured how individuals and communities understood vulnerability, care, suffering, and resilience.

In the post-pandemic period, these altered sensibilities have found expression across multiple cultural domains, including literature, cinema, digital media, and performative spaces. Contemporary literary works increasingly engage with themes of isolation, memory, uncertainty, and ethical responsibility, while cinema and web-based audiovisual narratives reflect quieter, more intimate storytelling modes shaped by lived experiences of crisis. Digital platforms—particularly social media and short-form video—have become crucial sites for cultural production and circulation, enabling new forms of self-expression, community formation, and emotional exchange. Similarly, performative traditions such as theatre, dance, and ritual practices have adapted to hybrid and virtual formats, revealing innovative responses to disrupted embodied and communal practices.

Despite this rich proliferation of post-pandemic cultural expressions, much of the existing analytical scholarship remains rooted in Western-centric frameworks of trauma, affect, and cultural production. These approaches, while analytically valuable, often emphasize individualistic and biomedical interpretations of crisis and recovery, offering limited engagement with culturally specific modes of emotional experience and collective meaning-making prevalent in Indian society. Consequently, such frameworks risk overlooking indigenous aesthetic philosophies and epistemologies that have historically shaped Indian cultural expression.

To address these limitations, this study adopts Rasa Theory within the broader framework of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) as its primary analytical lens. Originating in classical Indian aesthetic thought, Rasa Theory conceptualizes art and cultural expression as vehicles for the evocation and shared experience of emotion (*rasa*). By foregrounding the collective, relational, and transformative dimensions of affect, Rasa Theory provides a culturally grounded framework to interpret how post-pandemic Indian cultural texts and practices articulate

emotions such as grief (*karuṇa*), fear (*bhayānaka*), compassion, endurance, and tranquility (*śānta*).

The objectives of this research are threefold: first, to examine post-pandemic cultural expressions in India across selected artistic and digital forms; second, to identify the dominant emotional registers shaping these expressions through the lens of Rasa Theory; and third, to demonstrate the continued relevance of Indian aesthetic frameworks in analyzing contemporary cultural transformations. By situating post-pandemic cultural analysis within the Indian Knowledge System, the study seeks to contribute to culturally situated scholarship, challenge the dominance of Western theoretical paradigms, and offer a nuanced understanding of how Indian society emotionally and culturally negotiates the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature Review

a. Pandemic Studies and Cultural Theory

The COVID-19 pandemic has been widely theorized as a global rupture that disrupted social norms, temporal structures, and cultural production. Early scholarship, emerging primarily from Western academia, conceptualized the pandemic through frameworks of collective trauma, biopolitics, and affect theory. Scholars such as Judith Butler (2020) emphasized precarity and grievability, while Giorgio Agamben's writings interrogated states of exception and governance during health crises. Affect theorists including Sara Ahmed (2014) and Brian Massumi (2015) provided tools to understand how fear, anxiety, and uncertainty circulated socially during the pandemic. Cultural theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, whose work on trauma predates COVID-19, were frequently invoked to interpret pandemic narratives of loss and memory.

While these approaches have been influential in shaping global pandemic discourse, critics argue that they privilege individual subjectivity and biomedical understandings of trauma. As scholars like Arjun Appadurai (2021) note, such frameworks inadequately address societies where collective emotion, moral obligation, and cultural continuity play a central role in meaning-making. This limitation becomes particularly evident when applying Western trauma theory to non-Western cultural contexts, including India, where emotional experience is historically articulated through relational and aesthetic paradigms.

b. Indian Cultural Studies and Post-Pandemic Expressions

Within Indian cultural studies, a growing body of scholarship has examined the pandemic's impact on literature, cinema, media, and everyday cultural practices. Sociologists and anthropologists such as Nandini Sundar and Ravinder Kaur have documented the pandemic's exposure of structural inequalities, especially in relation to migrant labor, caste, and gender. These socio-political realities have deeply informed post-pandemic cultural production.

In literary studies, scholars have analyzed pandemic and post-pandemic Indian writing for its engagement with themes of isolation, ethical responsibility, mourning, and social fragmentation (Mukherjee, 2021; Chaudhuri, 2022). Indian cinema and OTT platforms have similarly attracted scholarly attention, with researchers such as Rachel Dwyer and Aswin Punathambekar noting a post-pandemic shift toward intimate narratives, realism, and domestic spaces. Studies of digital culture by scholars like Shakuntala Banaji and Ranjana Das highlight the centrality of social media, short-form video, and influencer cultures in shaping post-pandemic modes of expression and affective exchange.

Research on performative arts in India documents how theatre, dance, and ritual practices adapted to lockdowns through virtual and hybrid forms (Chakravorty, 2021). However, much of this scholarship remains descriptive, focusing on technological adaptation and survival rather than theorizing emotional experience through culturally grounded frameworks. Consequently, while Indian post-pandemic cultural expressions are increasingly documented, their emotional and aesthetic dimensions remain under-theorized.

c. Rasa Theory and Indian Aesthetic Thought

Rasa Theory constitutes one of the most significant contributions of classical Indian thought to global aesthetics. First articulated in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (circa 200 BCE–200 CE) and later elaborated by scholars such as Abhinavagupta, rasa theory conceptualizes art as the evocation of shared emotional experience (*rasa*) through the interplay of determinants (*vibhāva*), consequents (*anubhāva*), and transitory states (*vyabhicāribhāva*). Classical commentators such as Abhinavagupta emphasized the collective and transcendent nature of rasa, positioning aesthetic experience as a means of emotional refinement and ethical reflection.

Modern scholars have played a crucial role in interpreting Rasa Theory for contemporary audiences. Indian aestheticians such as S. K. De, Kapila Vatsyayan, and Sheldon Pollock have examined rasa as both a literary–aesthetic and philosophical framework. Vatsyayan's work, in

particular, highlights the embodied and performative dimensions of rasa, while Pollock situates it within broader intellectual histories of Sanskrit knowledge systems. Global scholars such as David Shulman and Edwin Gerow have further demonstrated the cross-cultural relevance of rasa as a theory of affect and reception.

In recent decades, Rasa Theory has been applied to modern literature, cinema, and popular culture. Scholars have explored how rasas such as *karuṇa* (pathos), *bhayānaka* (fear), *vīra* (heroism), and *śānta* (tranquility) operate in Hindi and regional cinemas, as well as in postcolonial Indian fiction. Yet, these studies largely predate the COVID-19 pandemic and do not account for the unprecedented emotional conditions generated by prolonged crisis, loss, and uncertainty.

d. Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and Decolonizing Cultural Analysis

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) has gained renewed academic attention as part of broader decolonial efforts to challenge Eurocentric epistemologies. Scholars such as Bimal N. Patel, Michel Danino, and Rajiv Malhotra advocate for the systematic integration of Indian philosophical, aesthetic, and scientific traditions into contemporary research. Within the humanities, IKS-oriented scholarship emphasizes the relevance of concepts such as rasa, dharma, and collective consciousness in interpreting social and cultural phenomena.

Decolonial theorists including Walter D. Mignolo and Boaventura de Sousa Santos provide a global framework for understanding the epistemic marginalization of non-Western knowledge systems. When read alongside Indian scholars, their work supports the argument that indigenous frameworks like Rasa Theory are not merely historical artifacts but living systems capable of interpreting modern crises. Despite this growing recognition, there remains limited application of IKS-based approaches to contemporary cultural events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Gap and Positioning of the Study

The thematic review of existing scholarship reveals a clear gap at the intersection of pandemic studies, Indian cultural analysis, and indigenous aesthetic theory. While post-pandemic cultural expressions in India have been examined through sociological and Western theoretical lenses, there is a lack of culturally rooted frameworks that address collective emotional experience. Similarly, although Rasa Theory has been extensively studied in classical and modern contexts, its potential to interpret post-pandemic cultural affect remains largely unexplored.

By situating post-pandemic cultural expressions within the framework of Rasa Theory and the Indian Knowledge System, this study seeks to bridge these gaps. It contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize cultural theory, while offering a nuanced, emotionally grounded understanding of how Indian society articulates and processes the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the findings that emerged from the interpretive–hermeneutic analysis of selected post-pandemic cultural artifacts, examined through the lens of Rasa Theory within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). Rather than producing empirical results in a positivist sense, the study yields thematic and affective insights that illuminate how post-pandemic Indian culture articulates, negotiates, and aestheticizes collective emotional experience. The discussion integrates results with theoretical interpretation, consistent with qualitative humanities research.

1. Dominance of *Karuṇa* (Pathos) and Collective Grief

One of the most prominent findings across literature, cinema, digital narratives, and visual culture is the dominance of *karuṇa rasa*, reflecting collective experiences of loss, mourning, and ethical vulnerability. Literary texts frequently foreground subdued narratives of absence, interrupted routines, and unspoken grief rather than overt dramatization. Similarly, post-pandemic films and web series often employ minimalist aesthetics, slow pacing, and intimate domestic settings that evoke pathos through silence, restraint, and everyday suffering.

From a Rasa-theoretic perspective, *karuṇa* is generated through carefully constructed *vibhāvas* such as deserted public spaces, disrupted familial bonds, illness, and economic precarity, while *anubhāvas* manifest through quiet gestures, pauses, and subdued emotional expression. Unlike classical tragic excess, post-pandemic *karuṇa* appears internalized and reflective, suggesting a transformation of rasa articulation shaped by prolonged collective crisis. This points to an evolution in how pathos is aesthetically experienced in contemporary Indian culture.

2. Emergence of *Bhayānaka* (Fear) and Ambient Anxiety

A second significant emotional register identified across cultural forms is *bhayānaka rasa*, particularly in digital narratives and visual culture. Fear in post-pandemic expressions is rarely

represented as immediate terror; instead, it appears as ambient anxiety—fear of contagion, uncertainty, isolation, and socio-economic instability. Social media narratives, short-form videos, and pandemic photography frequently encode this rasa through imagery of masks, empty streets, digital screens, and bodily distance.

Hermeneutic analysis reveals that *bhayānaka* is often intertwined with *karuṇa*, producing a layered affective experience rather than a singular emotional response. This blending of rasas aligns with classical aesthetic theory while also demonstrating its adaptability to contemporary contexts. The findings suggest that post-pandemic Indian culture does not isolate fear as spectacle but absorbs it into everyday emotional consciousness, reinforcing the relevance of Rasa Theory for analyzing subtle, diffuse affective states.

3. Transition Toward *Śānta* (Tranquility) and Emotional Containment

An important post-pandemic shift identified in the analysis is the gradual movement toward *śānta rasa*, particularly in later cultural texts and visual narratives. This rasa emerges through themes of acceptance, introspection, ethical reflection, and emotional containment. In literature and cinema, characters increasingly engage in inward-looking journeys marked by reconciliation rather than resolution, signaling a cultural turn toward quiet endurance.

Within Rasa Theory, *śānta* is often associated with detachment and contemplative awareness. In the post-pandemic context, however, *śānta* does not imply transcendence of suffering but coexistence with it. This reinterpretation suggests that contemporary Indian cultural expressions reframe tranquility as resilience—a finding that underscores the dynamic, non-static nature of rasa in lived cultural contexts.

4. Reconfiguration of *Vīra* (Endurance) and Everyday Heroism

The analysis also reveals a reconfiguration of *vīra rasa* in post-pandemic narratives. Classical notions of heroism characterized by valor and conquest give way to representations of everyday endurance—care work, survival, emotional labor, and ethical responsibility. Digital narratives and visual culture, in particular, foreground healthcare workers, caregivers, migrant laborers, and ordinary individuals navigating crisis.

Through a Rasa-based lens, *vīra* in these contexts is evoked through perseverance rather than triumph, aligning with Indian ethical frameworks that emphasize duty (*dharma*) over spectacle. This finding illustrates how Rasa Theory, when applied hermeneutically, accommodates shifting cultural definitions of heroism without losing its analytical coherence.

5. Hybrid and Muted Rasa Configurations in Digital Culture

A notable result of the study is the emergence of hybrid and muted rasa configurations, especially within digital and social media narratives. Short-form videos, influencer content, and participatory storytelling often blend *karuṇa*, *adbhuta* (wonder), and *hāsya* (gentle humor) to cope with crisis through relatability and emotional immediacy. Humor in these contexts is not escapist but therapeutic, functioning as a transient *vyabhicāribhāva* that mitigates fear and sorrow.

This hybridity reflects the affordances of digital media, where rapid circulation and participatory engagement reshape affective experience. The findings suggest that Rasa Theory remains analytically robust even within fragmented, non-linear digital forms, challenging assumptions that classical aesthetic frameworks are incompatible with contemporary media.

6. Discussion: Implications for Cultural Theory and IKS

Collectively, these results demonstrate that post-pandemic cultural expressions in India are characterized by subdued emotional registers, ethical introspection, and collective affect rather than dramatic rupture. The application of Rasa Theory reveals patterns of emotional continuity and transformation that are not easily captured by Western trauma-based frameworks alone.

The findings support the argument that the Indian Knowledge System offers a culturally grounded epistemology capable of interpreting modern crises. By foregrounding shared emotional experience, Rasa Theory enables a nuanced understanding of how Indian society processes collective trauma through aesthetic means. The study thus contributes to decolonizing cultural analysis by demonstrating the contemporary relevance of indigenous theoretical frameworks.

In sum, the results affirm that post-pandemic Indian culture does not merely document crisis but aesthetically reorganizes emotional life through evolving rasa configurations. This reinforces the value of interpretive–hermeneutic approaches rooted in IKS for understanding contemporary cultural transformations.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore post-pandemic cultural expressions in India through the interpretive lens of Rasa Theory within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), responding to the

need for culturally grounded frameworks capable of engaging with contemporary crises. Employing an interpretive–hermeneutic methodology and analyzing a diverse corpus of post-pandemic cultural artifacts across literature, cinema, digital narratives, and visual culture, the research demonstrates that the emotional aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic in India is articulated not merely as individual trauma but as a collective, aesthetic, and ethical experience.

The findings underscore the centrality of rasas such as *karuṇa*, *bhayānaka*, *śānta*, and reconfigured forms of *vīra* in shaping post-pandemic cultural expression. These rasas operate through muted, reflective, and often hybrid emotional registers that differ markedly from the dramatic or cathartic modes emphasized in many Western trauma-based frameworks. By foregrounding shared affect, emotional containment, and ethical endurance, post-pandemic Indian cultural texts reveal a process of emotional reorganization rather than rupture alone. This suggests that Indian society engages with crisis through culturally embedded modes of feeling that privilege relationality, moral reflection, and resilience.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the effectiveness of an interpretive–hermeneutic approach in conjunction with Rasa Theory for analyzing contemporary cultural phenomena. Close reading, contextual interpretation, and rasa-based analysis together allow for a nuanced understanding of how emotions are aesthetically structured and socially circulated. Importantly, the research illustrates that Rasa Theory is not a static classical framework but a dynamic and adaptable system capable of interpreting modern cultural forms, including digital and participatory media.

Theoretically, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize cultural analysis by situating Indian post-pandemic experiences within indigenous aesthetic epistemologies rather than relying exclusively on Western theoretical paradigms. By integrating Rasa Theory within the broader framework of the Indian Knowledge System, the research affirms the contemporary relevance of Indian aesthetic thought and its capacity to engage meaningfully with global crises. This repositioning challenges epistemic hierarchies in cultural studies and opens new avenues for interdisciplinary scholarship rooted in non-Western knowledge systems.

While the study is limited to qualitative interpretation of selected cultural artifacts, it lays the groundwork for future research that may expand the corpus, incorporate audience reception studies, or explore comparative analyses across cultures using indigenous aesthetic frameworks. Ultimately, this research argues that post-pandemic cultural expressions in India are best understood not only as records of disruption and loss but as aesthetic processes through

which collective emotional life is reimagined and sustained. In doing so, it reinforces the value of Rasa Theory and the Indian Knowledge System as vital tools for understanding contemporary cultural transformation.

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