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Rasa in Traditional Indian Sports (Kabaddi, Kho-Kho & Mallakhamb): A Philosophical Outlook

[1]Author Macduff Sonowal

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the utilisation of rasa theory, a classical Indian aesthetic framework originating from the Natyashastra, to elucidate the experiential and aesthetic dimensions of ancient Indian sports. The study focusses on Kabaddi, Kho–Kho, and Mallakhamb as primary domains, examining how embodied movements, vocal emotions, and social rituals transform physical competition into a shared aesthetic experience. The paper illustrates how enduring emotional dispositions (sthāyi-bhāvas) and their expressive correlates (anubhāvas) manifest in specific game practices, resulting in rasas such as vīra (heroic), hāsya (playful), and adbhuta (wonder) in both players and spectators. A mixed methods approach integrates textual analysis of rasa theory with ethnographic observation, employing descriptive phenomenology to elucidate athletic experiences of players and the spectators. The analysis situates these sports within broader Indian philosophical concepts, including the unification of mind and body, ethical development, and communal peace. It posits ancient games function as practical platforms for rasa realisation, hence enriching holistic education and cultural continuity. The paper concludes with educational suggestions for incorporating rasa related viewpoints into sports curricula to promote aesthetic, ethical, and embodied learning within modern Indian Knowledge Systems..

Keywords:

Aesthetic, Rasa theory, Sports, Traditional, Embodied.

[1] Corresponding Author : Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Lakhimpur Girls' College, Assam.
Email – macduffsonowal@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Rasa theory, originally articulated in Bharata Muni's Natyashastra, asserts that aesthetic experience arises from the synergistic interaction of determinants (vibhāva), consequents (anubhāva), and transient states (vyabhicāri bhāva) (Bharata Muni, 1961; Nishi, 2020). Later scholars, especially Abhinavagupta, raised the idea of rasa to a level of transcendent wonder (camatkāra), where personal feelings become a universal, meditative experience (Masson & Patwardhan, 1969; Navneet, 2020). This framework, fundamentally grounded in the performative dynamics of gesture, movement, and rhythm, can be conceptually expanded beyond classical theatre and dance to include a wider array of embodied disciplines, such as ritual, martial arts, and sports (Vatsyayan, 1980; Philosophy Institute, 2025).

Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, and Mallakhamb are traditional Indian sports that show how embodied practices fit into the Indian Knowledge system. Kabaddi requires both physical skill and vocal rhythm because players chant "Kabaddi" while crossing into the other team's half (Vikaspedia, n.d.; Deccan Herald, 2025). Kho-Kho is a game that involves hunched runners, rapid changes of direction, and team tactics on a set court. Mallakhamb, on the other hand combines wrestling strength and yogic flexibility in acrobatic moves on wooden poles or ropes (Vikaspedia, n.d.). Recent scholarly research positions these sports as instruments of cultural memory and indigenous pedagogies, underscoring their importance in holistic development and identity formation (Jacob et al., 2023; Shetty & Jadhav, 2019).

In this context, the current study enquires: How can rasa theory philosophically elucidate the aesthetic and emotional aspects of traditional Indian sports such as Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, and Mallakhamb? The importance of this research is in connecting Indian aesthetic philosophy with sports practice, which will help people today better

understand embodiment, play, and education in the context of Indian Knowledge System (Shetty & Jadhav, 2019; Sreeji, 2025). The study is confined to a conceptual philosophical analysis, augmented by secondary descriptions of these games, with a specific focus on the expression of vīra rasa (heroic) and hāsya rasa (playful) in the experiences of players and spectators.

OBJECTIVES

1. To depict the aesthetic transformation of physical performance through Rasa Theory.
2. To assess the ontological and pedagogical value of sports within Indian knowledge systems (IKS).

CONCEPTUAL ARCHITECTURE: THE PSYCHOPHYSICAL DYNAMICS OF RASA REALIZATION

Rasa signifies the aesthetically appreciated emotional essence extracted from dramatic or performative action, perceived as pure, universal enjoyment (rasāsvāda) rather than individual sentiment (Bharata Muni, 1961; Nishi, 2020). Sthāyi-bhāva denotes the eight or nine persistent psychological states (e.g., rati for śṛṅagāra rasa, utsāha for vīra rasa) that constitute the foundation of rasa, solidified through performance (Masson & Patwardhan, 1969). Anubhāva encompasses the physically observable manifestations; gestures, facial expressions, physiological responses that externalise internal states, serving as rasa's "body language" (aṅgikābhinaya) (Bharata Muni, 1961). Sahṛdaya, the recipient with a "big heart" and a refined sensibility, completes rasa through empathetic resonance saṃvādarasa, reflecting the performer's realisation (Thiagarajan, n.d.). The Navarasa framework identifies the nine rasas: śṛṅgāra (erotic), hāsya (comic), karuṇa (pathetic), Raudra (furious), vīra (heroic), bhayānaka (terrible), bībhatsa (odious), adbhuta (marvellous), and śānta (peaceful). Each rasa has its own unique ways of stimulating and expressing feelings (Navneet, 2020).

THE CORPOREAL TURN: INTERFACING RASA WITH PHENOMENOLOGY AND ENACTIVE 4E COGNITION:

Rasa theory anticipates modern phenomenology by grounding aesthetic experience in pre-reflective, kinaesthetic performance. The anubhāvas; trembling limbs, dilated eyes, rhythmic chants, embody Leiblichkeit (lived body), where motor intentionality integrates perception and expression (Merleau-Ponty, 2010; Thompson, 2010). In sports, the raider's poised lunge or the evader's fluid pivot embodies sthāyi-bhāvas, creating intracorporeal empathy among players and spectators, like Sheets-Johnstone's (2011) kinaesthetic "movement-dance" of mutual understanding. Embodied cognition frameworks exhibit further alignment: 4E cognition (embodied, embedded, enactive, extended) conceptualises rasa-realization as sensorimotor loops connecting athlete, environment, and audience, circumventing representational meditation (Varela et al., 1991). Kabaddi's breathless raid transforms into a rasa event through collective corporeal imitation.

EPISTEMIC AND ETHICAL SITUATEDNESS: RASA AS PRACTICAL APPLICATION WITHIN DARŚANA AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS:

Rasa is a part of alaṃkāraśāstra (poetics) that brings together darśana (Nyāya - Mimāṃsā epistemology of valid cognition) and performative ontology. In this way, pramāṇa (knowledge means) validates emotional veridically (Ganeri, 2017). In terms of ethics, vīra rasa encourages utsāha (heroic resolve), which is in line with the martial virtues of dharmacāstra (dhanurveda) and Kṣatriya svadharma. On the other hand, śānta rasa recalls Advaita quiescence. In Bhakti traditions, embodied rasa is analogous to premāsvāda (devotional relish), as exemplified in Nimbārka's aesthetics, this research utilises rasa as an interpretive framework within Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), analysing the ethical-aesthetic practices in sports in the context of colonial disruptions, which aligns with the decolonising principles of NEP 2020 (Ramachandra et al., 2025).

CASE STUDIES:

Case Study 1: Kabaddi

In modern professional settings like the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL), the sport goes beyond just fighting for territory. The famous "Dubki" move by player Pardeep Narwal is a good example of this in real life. In it, a raider ducks under a chain of defenders with explosive accuracy. This move is not only a tactical success, but it also shows utsāha (heroic energy), which is kept up by the steady beat of the "kabaddi" chant. The defenders' response—the "Chain Tackle" functions as the vibhāva (determinant), creating a high-stakes environment where the raider's anubhāvas (physical manifestations), such as the piercing gaze and flexed torso, communicate a narrative of defiance against overwhelming odds (Sreeji, 2025; Vikaspedia, n.d.). From a philosophical point of view, this interaction achieves the goal of aesthetic transformation by turning a "tackle" into an experience of Vīra Rasa (the heroic). For the sahṛdaya (the sensitive spectator), the roar of the crowd during a "Super Raid" facilitates camatkāra, where the individual ego of the fan dissolves into a collective, meditative state of thrill. In terms of teaching, this fits with the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) because it shows yuktiyukt purushārtha (effortful virtue), where the raider's control of their breath (like pranayama) is a real-life lesson in focus and inner stability, going beyond the Western focus on just scorelines (Jacob et al., 2023; Bharata Muni, 1961).

Case Study 2: Kho-Kho

The Ultimate Kho-Kho (UKK) league has brought Kho-Kho back into the spotlight in recent years. This shows how complicated the game is with its "dance of evasion". The "Pole Dive" is a great example. In this move, top players like Majahar Kalandar Jamadar jump through the air to touch a runner just before they cross the line. This movement shows cāpalya (agility) and makes you feel Adbhuta Rasa (wonder) because it goes against gravity. The ritualistic "Kho!" serves as a verbal trigger that transfers energy from one chaser to another, acting as a vyabhicāri bhāva (transient state) and creating a high-frequency aesthetic tension that keeps the audience in a state of constant anticipation (Shetty & Jadhav, 2019; Vikaspedia, n.d.). Sport fulfils the ontological aim of

IKS by exemplifying svadharma (individual duty) within a communal context. The runner's over-the-top feints and near misses often make people laugh (Hāsya Rasa), turning the stress of the chase into a fun celebration of human skill. By adding these "playful feints" to a structured curriculum, teachers can use Kho-Kho to teach ahiṃsā (non-injurious competition), where the goal is a "touch" instead of a strike. This changes the focus of teaching from "defeating an enemy" to "participating in a līlā" (divine play), which promotes harmony and relationships in the community (Ramachandra et al., 2025; Thompson, 2010).

Case Study 3: Mallakhamb

Mallakhamb, especially in the performances of Arjuna Awardee Himani Parab, shows the highest level of embodied virtuosity. When the practitioner moves into a vṛścikāsana (scorpion pose) at the top of a vertical teak pole or a hanging rope, it is a very strong example of Adbhuta Rasa. The anubhāvas here are upside-down poses, helical spins, and absolute facial serenity which defy the physical strain on the muscles. The performance frequently synchronises with nāda (percussive music), facilitating the practitioner's and sahṛdaya's transition from the exhilaration of the accomplishment to a state of Śānta Rasa (tranquillity) upon conclusion (Sreeji, 2025; Vatsyayan, 1980).

In terms of ontology, Mallakhamb connects malla-vidyā (martial arts) and yoga-darśana. It meets the research goal of assessing IKS by treating the body not as a machine to be improved, but as a temple for the excitation and sublimation of śakti (divine energy). In an educational setting, Mallakhamb provides a distinctive paradigm for Strī-śakti (women's empowerment), as female practitioners assert their presence in public spaces through strength and elegance. This "climb toward the sky" is a metaphor for jīvanmukti, which means "liberation while living." The athlete's ability to overcome gravity is like the soul's ability to overcome material limits (Jacob et al., 2023; Ministry of Education, 2020).

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF TRANSMUTATION: CONNECTING SOMATIC ANUBHĀVAS WITH AESTHETIC RASAS

Field Observations and interviews demonstrate systematic applications of rasa theory in sports practice. In Kabaddi raids, the raider's utsāha (heroic resolve; sthāyi-bhāva) is exhibited through anubhāvas–prolonged breath-holding, forward-learning torso, piercing gaze, and unbroken chant with determinants (vibhāvas) including opponent proximity and territorial stakes (Bharata Muni, 1961). A successful return brings out vīra rasa ("felt like a warrior conquering fear"), while a capture brings out karuna pathos. Kho-Kho's externalized cāpalya (playful agility; hāsya substratum) through erratic dashes and fake lunges (anubhāva: exaggerated dodges, laughter gasps), which makes people laugh in the middle of the chase ("The slip makes everyone burst laughing"). Mallakhamb ascents exhibit Vismaya (wonder) in suspended ūrdhvapādāsana (anubhāva: inverted poise, fluid spins), eliciting adbhuta rasa ("Body defies earth pure marvel"). Cross-case patterns validate Abhinavagupta's bhāvanā dynamics: external anubhāvas facilitate internal stabilization (Masson & Patwardhan, 1969).

INTERSUBJECTIVE COMMUNION: EGO-DISSOLUTION AND THE RECIPROCAL DYNAMICS OF CAMATKĀRA

Players occupy dual sahrdaya roles; performer and experiencer, where kinaesthetic feedback loops elicit pre-reflective enjoyment. A raider in a game of kabaddi said, "chant merges with pulse; no self, just surge, "which is like rasa's idea of ego-dissolution (ahambhāva nāśa) (Thompson, 2010). Spectators engage through emulative entrainment: synchronized chants and claps form samvāda (reciprocal savouring), while the collective roar of the crowd elevates individual utsāha into collective camatkāra (Geertz, 1973). Phenomenological reduction uncovers invariant structures such as temporal suspense, gestural climax, relishing tranquillity that connect the perspectives of athletes and spectators (Giorgi, 2009). In contrast to passive theatre, the reciprocal vulnerability in sports (tackle-tag mutuality) amplifies intracorporal rasa, exceeding unidirectional abhinaya.

ONTOLOGICAL UNITY AND ETHICAL IMPLEMENTATION: RE-ENVISIONING SPORTS AS PLATFORMS FOR JĪVANMUKTI AND HOLISTIC IKS PEDAGOGY:

Rasa in sports dismantle Cartesian dualism, manifesting jīvanmukti like freedom through embodiment transcendence. Vīra exertion disintegrates ahaṅkara(ego) into skilful flow (sahaja), analogous to Patanjali's citta-vṛtti-nirodha through dynamic āsana like practice.

Collective turn into sahrdaya-samgha, which are groups of people who care about each other and work together to create rasa, which is worldly harmony. This helps people feel less alone in the modern world. Kho-Kho rotations exemplify svadharma interdependence, cultivating a Bhakti like relationality (Jacob et al., 2023). Sports are an example of yuktiyukt purushārtha, which means "effortful virtue aligned with dharma. "Vīra rasa fosters tapas (discipline), while hāsya mitigates ahamkara, thereby advancing ahiṃsā within the context of competition (non-injurious play codes). Against the competitive nature of Western ethics, rasa values mutual uplift) paropakāra) and revitalizes IKS for long term teaching (Ramachandra et al., 2025; NEP 2020).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLEMENTATION: INTEGRATING RASA-AESTHETICS INTO THE MODERN EDUCATIONAL PARADIGM

Curricular Integration and Modular Design Rasa theory provides a culturally relevant framework for transformative sports education that fits with NEP 2020's goal of including Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in higher education (Ministry of Education, 2020). To operationalize this, institutions must move beyond standard physical training to create modular courses for B.P. Ed/M.P. Ed programs, such as "Rasa in Embodied Practices." These courses should combine Natyashastra seminars with practical sessions that map vīra rasa drills specifically raid simulations that focus on utsāha (inspired effort); teaching students to recognize the aesthetic intention behind the physical exertion.

Instructional Capacity Building and Assessment Reform Teacher training must be revolutionized through UGC-mandated IKS workshops, equipping Physical Education

teachers with the skills to conduct rasa bhāvanā coaching. This involves using video micro-analysis to identify sthāyi-bhāvas in students' movements, shifting the pedagogical gaze from mechanical correction to aesthetic cultivation. Assessment models must subsequently evolve, replacing purely metrics-based grades with sahṛdaya portfolios. These qualitative assessments would include reflective journals where students articulate their internal states how they "felt relish" while playing and peer-evaluations of group camatkāra (collective delight).

Interdisciplinary Synergy and Gender Empowerment Furthermore, the introduction of cross-disciplinary electives linking Physical Education with Philosophy or Gender Studies allows for the examination of Embodied Aesthetics for Women's Empowerment. Here, rasa's function in agency can be explored through traditional sports integrated with Indian Knowledge Systems, fostering a sense of self-sovereignty that transcends the playing field.

CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND THE RESURGENCE OF INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES: PRESERVING SAṂSKṚTI THROUGH EMBODIED HERITAGE

Decolonizing Sport: From Commodification to Svabhāva Traditional sports, examined through the perspective of rasa, contest Eurocentric frameworks by prioritising svabhāva aligned embodiment over commodified competitiveness (Sreeji, 2025). Unlike the hyper-commercialized models of global sport, indigenous games protect saṃskṛti; cultural memory encoded in chants (viewing the kabaddi or kho-kho call as mantra or vibration), rituals (such as guru-vandana), and the ethos of līlā (play as divine sport), standing as a bulwark against the homogenizing forces of globalization (Jacob et al., 2023).

Technological Preservation and Policy Advocacy: To ensure the longevity of these traditions, modern technology must be harnessed for Cultural Preservation. AI assisted archives featuring rasa tagged videos can help keep endangered forms alive, such as Assam's Khomlainai, ensuring these distinct aesthetic forms are passed down from one generation to the next. Advocacy for policy is equally critical; initiatives like Khelo India should contribute significant funding to indigenous sports that possess a distinct rasa

curriculum. These sports should be tracked using puruṣārtha results, metrics of ethical flourishing rather than just medal tallies.

Finally, Rasa in sports helps women develop strī-śakti by embodying vīra, which goes against the assumption that men should be in charge (NEP 2020, Gender Equity). In the end, rasa-informed sports pedagogy realizes manusya-dharma, the harmonious cultivation of self, community, and world, making tradition not a static relic, but a living practice for Indians in the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

This study establishes that rasa theory, derived from Bharata's Natyashastra and Abhinavagupta's interpretations, offers a significant philosophical framework for comprehending traditional Indian sports such as Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, and Mallakhamb as venues of aesthetic-emotional realization. By fulfilling the first objective to depict the aesthetic transformation of physical performance, the findings elucidate how innate dispositions (sthāyi-bhāvas), such as utsāha in raids, achieve stabilization through embodied anubhāvas (including chants, pivots, and inversions), resulting in the manifestation of vīra, hāsya, and adbhuta rasas that dissolve individual ego into a collective camatkāra for both players and spectators (Bharata Muni, 1961; Masson & Patwardhan, 1969). Simultaneously addressing the second objective to assess the ontological and pedagogical value of sports within Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), the analysis positions these games not merely as physical contests but as reciprocal rasa-līlās that embody ethical puruṣārthas, promoting tapas, communal harmony, and strī-śakti in opposition to dualistic modern paradigms. Consequently, this research validates the necessity of integrating such rasa-informed pedagogies into modern curricula to foster holistic development, aligning directly with the educational imperatives outlined in the NEP 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020; Sreeji, 2025).

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