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# Abhinavagupta's Concept of Intuition (Pratibhā) and Its Role in Aesthetic Experience

Dr. Kartikkumar Pandya

Research Officer, Research & Publication Section, Shree Somnath Sanskrit University, Veraval, Gujarat (India)

**Abstract--** This paper examines *Pratibhā* (intuitive insight) in the philosophy of Abhinavagupta, the 10th–11th-century Kashmiri polymath, focusing on its central role in the aesthetic experience (*rasa*). Drawing from his commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* on *Nāṭyaśāstra* and his Śaiva-advaitic metaphysics, it argues that intuition is the cognitive bridge that transforms pre-linguistic emotion into universal aesthetic *rasa*. Contrary to purely emotional or representational models of art, Abhinavagupta posits intuition as a suprarational illumination enabling both the artist and audience to access the universal within the particular. This interpretation enriches understanding of Indian aesthetic theory and provides a framework for comparative study with Western theories of aesthetic cognition.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The notion of *Pratibhā* — often translated as “intuition” or “creative insight” — occupies a pivotal place in Abhinavagupta's aesthetics. In the *Abhinavabhāratī*, his seminal commentary on Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Abhinavagupta elaborates on *rasa* theory, wherein he introduces *Pratibhā* as the fundamental cognitive function responsible for the creation, recognition and appreciation of *rasa* (Abhinavagupta 10th–11th century). While contemporary aesthetics foregrounds emotional response, formal structure, or cultural context as core to aesthetic experience, Abhinavagupta reframes the discussion: *rasa* is not merely felt or perceived; it is intuited through *Pratibhā*.

## II. ABHINAVAGUPTA'S INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

Abhinavagupta wrote at a confluence of aesthetic, metaphysical and yogic traditions within Kashmir Śaivism. His work is informed by:

- ***Nāṭyaśāstra*** — the foundational text on dramaturgy and aesthetics.
- **Sāṃkhya, Vedānta, and Tantra** — evident in his ontological framing of consciousness and experience.
- **Kashmir Śaivism** — providing a non-dual philosophical backdrop wherein consciousness (*cit*) is fundamental (Pandey 2004).

In his interpretation, artistic expression (*kāvya*) becomes a vehicle for realizing universal consciousness, and *Pratibhā* serves as the cognitive faculty enabling this realization.

## III. DEFINING PRATIBHĀ

*Pratibhā* is best understood as suprarational insight — a direct, immediate grasp of truth transcending discursive reasoning (*vikalpa*) (Abhinavagupta 10th–11th century). For Abhinavagupta, *Pratibhā* is not merely a psychological phenomenon but a cognitive condition of elevated consciousness enabling the artist to actualize the potential (*śakti*) of an aesthetic form into manifest *rasa* (Abhinavagupta 10th–11th century).

He writes: “*Pratibhā* is the flash of innate illumination by which latent elements of expression are spontaneously realised in their totality” (Abhinavagupta 10th–11th century).

This positions *Pratibhā* as parallel to concepts of intuition in other traditions — such as Plato's anamnesis or Bergsonian intuition — yet grounded in a distinctively tantric non-dual view of mind.

## IV. PRATIBHĀ AND THE EMERGENCE OF RASA

*Rasa as Universal Aesthetic Delight:* *Rasa* is the sentiment or flavor arising in the audience through an experience of art. While emotions are personal and transient, *rasa* is *universalized* emotion — a purified aesthetic state devoid of personal attachment (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 6.12–6.18).

Abhinavagupta explains that *rasa* arises when *vibhāvas* (determinants), *anubhāvas* (consequents), and *vyabhicāribhāvas* (transitory states) are synthesized through aesthetic imagination and *Pratibhā* (Abhinavagupta 10th–11th century). This synthesis transcends specific particulars of the artwork, enabling spectators to experience universal emotion, achievable only through *Pratibhā*.

*The Cognitive Mechanism:* Abhinavagupta situates *Pratibhā* as an inner faculty more primary than analytical reasoning. The process unfolds as:



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1. *Perception*: Sensory engagement with the artwork.
2. *Recognition*: Identification of relevant emotional elements.
3. *Intuition (Pratibhā)*: Direct insight into the universality of emotional content.
4. *Rasa Experience*: Transcendent aesthetic delight (Abhinavagupta 10th–11th century; Pandey 2004).

In this schema, *Pratibhā* functions analogously to “pattern recognition” in modern cognitive science, yet without reducing the experience to neural computation (Shklovsky 1925).

#### V. PRATIBHĀ IN THE ARTIST AND THE AUDIENCE

Abhinavagupta attributes *Pratibhā* to both the creator and the receiver:

- *The Artist*: Utilizes *Pratibhā* to envision and craft works resonating with universal sentiment — akin to the creative genius in Western aesthetics but rooted in spiritual cognition (Pandey 2004).
- *The Audience*: Employs *Pratibhā* to spontaneously grasp distilled *rasa*, participating in the artwork’s universal meaning (Abhinavagupta 10th–11th century).

The aesthetic process is interactive: *rasa* is co-realized by both artist and audience.

*Comparative Perspectives*: Western aesthetics from Kant to Bergson has explored intuition, often as a supplement to rationality. In Abhinavagupta:

- *Pratibhā* is central, not marginal.
- It is ontologically grounded in non-dual consciousness rather than epistemologically ambiguous.

Comparative studies suggest *Pratibhā* offers a richer account of aesthetic creativity than empirical or formalist models (Kant 1790; Shklovsky 1925).

*Implications for Contemporary Aesthetics*: Abhinavagupta’s framework challenges dominant paradigms:

- **Emotion-based models** overlook intuition’s universalizing function.
- **Cognitive science approaches** may underplay the transcendent quality of aesthetic experience.
- **Cross-cultural aesthetics** can integrate *Pratibhā* as a bridge between subjective experience and universal meaning.

His philosophy invites reevaluation of how art is perceived, created and appreciated beyond cultural boundaries.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Abhinavagupta’s *Pratibhā* provides a robust grounding for aesthetic experience, moving beyond reductive explanations of emotion or perception. As cognitive illumination grounded in universal consciousness, *Pratibhā* enables creation and reception of *rasa*, positioning aesthetic experience as a transformative encounter with the universal. This has implications for Indian aesthetics and comparative philosophical inquiry into intuition and art.

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