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Balancing Artistic Liberty and Aesthetic Integrity

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Abstract

This study reassesses contemporary Indian cinematic regulation by comparing its principles to the classical dramaturgical directives of Bharata Muni's Natyashastra. It asserts that this foundational Sanskrit treatise provides a sophisticated mechanism for balancing creative expression with ethical and aesthetic accountability. Rasa theory is central to this argument, explaining how discrete cinematic components combine to elicit a unified audience response. The paper examines the interplay of Sthayibhava (enduring emotional states) and transient Bhavas (emotional currents) to show how narrative elements systematically construct the spectator's psychological experience. A thorough comparative analysis reveals startling conceptual structural similarities between ancient aesthetic disciplines and modern Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) protocols. However, whereas modern guidelines frequently rely on reactive censorship, the Natyashastra provides a proactive, culturally grounded approach. It offers an evaluative paradigm that protects artistic freedom not through arbitrary limitations, but by requiring intrinsic aesthetic harmony and cultural resonance. Finally, this study recommends incorporating these classical Indian aesthetic tenets into contemporary film certification boards' training, pedagogy, and operational practices to foster a more nuanced evaluative standard.

Keywords- Film Certification, Modern Cinema, *Natyashastra*

Throughout human civilization, artistic expression has transcended the boundaries of mere entertainment. In the Indian intellectual tradition, art is elevated to a spiritual and psychological discipline, akin to yoga and philosophical realization (*sadhana*). When Acharya Bharata compiled the *Natyashastra*, his visionary objective was to construct an inclusive medium capable of imparting profound existential and ethical values to the general populace-particularly those historically distanced from the complex textual obscurities of the Vedas. The cosmic origin of performance, as detailed in the inaugural chapter of the *Natyashastra*, crystallizes this profound social responsibility. Lord Brahma declares-There is no knowledge, no craft, no lore, no art, no technique, and no activity that cannot be witnessed within the domain of performance[1].

[1] *Natajjñānaṃnatacchilpaṃnasāvidyānasākalā.Nāsau Yogonatatkarmanātye'sminyannadṛśyate.(*Nāṭyaśāstra 1.117)

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Cinema, the preeminent audio-visual narrative medium of the contemporary era, represents the technological evolution of this ancient performance tradition. Given its profound psychological and behavioural reach, the institutional oversight and evaluation of cinema become sociologically indispensable.

In democratic paradigms, freedom of speech and expression remains a foundational constitutional right. Yet, the creative domain is perpetually fractured by a seminal tension- should artistic liberty remain absolute, or does it demand internal and external boundaries? Globally, and within the pluricentric fabric of Indian society, a delicate equilibrium must be struck between creative experimentation and collective ethical health. When modern films employ graphic brutality, sensationalised sexuality, or sectarian provocation under the banner of creative autonomy, they inevitably strain the shared socio-cultural consensus. This tension highlights the institutional relevance of the regulatory mechanisms within the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). Modern commentary frequently dismisses censorship as a blunt, authoritarian apparatus designed to suppress the creative imagination. However, viewed through the lens of classical Indian aesthetics, proper regulation does not signify the strangulation of art, but rather its refinement (*parishkara*). The core intellectual inquiry of this study focuses on whether contemporary certification codes are merely restrictive legal dictates or if they possess a deeper, foundational grounding in classical psychology and aesthetic philosophy. Foundational texts like the *Natyashastra* and Dhananjaya's *Dasharupaka* prove that ancient India operated with highly sophisticated, systematic protocols governing public presentation. The historic goal of these classical strictures was never to stifle creative exploration, but to ensure that performance achieved structural emotional refinement (*rasatmaka*) and universal benevolence (*kalyanakari*). Contemporary statutes like the Cinematograph Act and its associated Certification Rules serve as modern legal transpositions of these ancient cultural values.

While public debates often focus on theatrical cinema, multiple regulatory bodies across the media landscape grapple with applying Indian aesthetic and ethical benchmarks. No intellectual or creative pursuit (*vidya*) within the Indian philosophical tradition commences without a clear declaration of its ultimate purpose (*prayojana*). The *Natyashastra* narrates that Indra and the pantheon of gods requested Lord Brahma for a recreational medium (*kridaniyaka*) that could be simultaneously seen and heard, accessible to all strata of society. Brahma synthesized elements from the four Vedas to fashion the *Natyaveda*, explicitly intended to illuminate those who lacked access to dense metaphysical treatises. Bharata establishes that art is not an indulgence in luxury, but a dynamic re-presentation of the cosmic emotional landscape. Performance is the creative re-presentation and internalization of the emotional states of all three worlds[2].

Modern cinema functions as the contemporary incarnation of this *bhavanukirtanam*, mirroring societal upheavals, structural conflicts, and interpersonal emotional longings onto the screen. It is precisely at this juncture that the regulatory mandate begins- ensuring that this creative mirror does not distort human experience into something degrading. Beyond societal representation, classical thought identifies a vital psychological function for art- therapeutic restoration and emotional sanctuary (*vishranti*). For individuals exhausted by

[2] *Trailokyasyāsyasarvasyanāṭyaṃbhāvānukīrtanam.*(Nāṭyaśāstra 1.107)

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existential struggles, art serves as a psychological balm-When timely presented, this art shall offer profound emotional sanctuary and deep psychological rest to those oppressed by sorrow, physical exhaustion, grief, and spiritual austerity[3].

This verse highlights the therapeutic responsibility of creative industries. If an audio-visual piece leaves an audience destabilised, desensitised to cruelty, or profoundly anxious, it has abandoned its primary teleological purpose of *vishranti*. When modern certification bodies restrict graphic gore or deeply unsettling sadism, their actions find a philosophical defence in this classical principle- art does not possess an absolute right to disrupt the psychological equilibrium of the collective consciousness. Furthermore, the *Natyashastra* connects aesthetic entertainment with ethical education (hitopadesha), stating- Performance shall be the generative source of beneficial counsel, emotional stability, healthy recreation, and intellectual enlightenment for the entire world[4].

This pedagogical intent does not imply dry, moralistic lecturing. Instead, classical theory champions *kanta-sammitad upadesha*-instruction delivered with the persuasive gentleness of a beloved companion. The narrative art gracefully embeds ethical consciousness within the viewer's psyche through aesthetic pleasure. The modern expression of this principle lives within statutory guidelines prohibiting depictions that threaten public order, incite violence, or compromise societal morality. If cinema glamorizes anti-social behavior or paths of cruelty, it runs directly counter to this ideal of *lokopadesha*. The *Natyaveda* is hailed as the Fifth Veda, integrating the core components of the existing four. He extracted textual dialogue from the Rigveda, melodic song from the Samaveda, physical expression from the Yajurveda, and aesthetic flavour from the Atharvaveda[5]. Because performance shares this sacred lineage, maintaining its dignity and boundaries becomes essential. When contemporary creators disrespect cultural symbols or historical legacies under the guise of creative license, regulatory intervention works to preserve this artistic gravity. While art must provoke curiosity and wonder (*kautuka*), this exploration should remain aligned with cosmic order (*dharma*) and justice. Genuine creativity constructs and elevates the social fabric rather than dismantling it, validating the enduring vision Bharata articulated millennia ago.

The beating heart of Indian aesthetic philosophy is the concept of *Rasa* (aesthetic flavour or essence). Bharata explicitly asserts that no communicative or artistic meaning can function in the absence of this emotional essence- *na hi rasadrte kashchidarthah pravartate*. The foundational axiom governing aesthetic generation states that Aesthetic essence is distilled through the organic convergence of situational determinants (vibhava), physical consequents (anubhava), and transient emotional states (vyabhichari bhava)[6].

In cinematic terms, a director orchestrates these exact elements-utilising lighting, sound design, performance, and narrative pacing-to awaken dormant psychological orientations (*sthayibhava*) within the viewer, transforming them into realised emotional states like love (*sringara*), heroism (*vira*), or wonder (*adbhuta*). Regulatory oversight intersects directly with

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[3] *Duḥkhārtānāṃśramārtānāṃśokārtānāṃtapasvinām.Viśrāmtijananaṃkālenātyametadbhaviṣyati.*(Nāṭyaśāstra 1.114)

[4] *Hitopadeśajananaṃdhṛtikrīḍāsukhādikṛt.*Lokopadeśajananaṃnātyametadbhaviṣyati.(Nāṭyaśāstra 1.115)

[5] *Jagrāhapāṭhyamṛgvedātsāmabhyogītamevaca.*Yajurvedādabhinayānrasānātharvaṇādapi(Nāṭyaśāstra 1.17)

[6] *Vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārisaṃyogādrasaniṣpattiḥ.*(Nāṭyaśāstra 6.31)

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this process. If the situational determinants (*vibhava*) within a film-such as raw violence or explicit sexual imagery-become so overwhelming that they cause psychological shock rather than emotional transformation, the work fails artistically. When a regulatory body edits scenes of extreme graphic intensity, its actions can be understood as correcting a structural flaw known as *rasa-bhanga* (the fracturing of aesthetic experience). Aesthetic appreciation requires a clear, unpolluted mental space (*vimala manasa*). If a scene descends into gratuitous vulgarity or graphic violence, the viewer's focus shifts from refined artistic appreciation to visceral shock or physical revulsion (*jugupsa*).

For instance, if a historical epic designed to evoke heroism (*vira rasa*) lingers on gruesome executions, the primary experience of courage is eclipsed by disgust (*vibhatsa*). Restricting unnecessary violence or shock value is not an act of arbitrary suppression; it actively protects the integrity of the emotional experience. In the *Dasharupaka*, Acharya Dhananjaya provides clear advice on maintaining this harmony. Any narrative element that contradicts the dignity of the protagonist or disrupts the primary aesthetic flavour must be entirely excised or creatively altered[7]. When regulatory bodies recommend removing crude dialogue or degrading gestures, they are executing this classical instruction. True creative independence does not demand the validation of the inappropriate (*anauchitya*). As the great aesthetician Kshemendra observed, *anauchityadrte nanyad rasabhangasya karanam* (there is no greater cause for the destruction of emotional essence than inappropriateness). This principle requires careful application when depicting love and beauty (*sringara*), celebrated as the monarch of all emotional essences (*rasaraja*). The *Natyashastra* demands purity and refinement in its presentation, noting- Whatever is pure, sacred, luminous, and visually sublime in the world is comparable to Sringara[8]. If cinema reduces this aesthetic experience to mere commercialised titillation, it degrades the core purpose of *sringara*. Contemporary Adult (*A*) certifications acknowledge that certain mature themes require a level of psychological readiness to separate artistic intimacy from crude exploitation. Classical Indian aesthetics maintains that the role of art is not to blindly duplicate unrefined reality, but to elevate and process it. The artist's duty is not to replicate every crude word or explicit act from daily life, but to communicate human struggles through artistic suggestion (*vyanjana*). In this tradition, suggestion is considered far superior to direct statement (*vachyartha*). What is conveyed through subtle allusion, framing, and metaphorical nuance yields a far richer emotional experience than explicit display. Regulatory edits or deletions often encourage filmmakers to lean into deeper visual creativity, relying on artistic suggestion rather than shock value to convey intense narratives.

The classical Indian performing arts tradition paid close attention to defining what should *not* be explicitly shown on stage. This systematic methodology of exclusion is called *Varjya-Drishya*. Bharata and subsequent theorists recognised that the performance arena is a shared public sphere occupied by diverse generations, including children, elders, women, and scholars. Consequently, actions that evoke collective embarrassment, psychological distress, or deep discomfort are kept off-screen. In the *Dasharupaka*, Dhananjaya lists specific taboos that serve as an ancient blueprint for modern certification guidelines- Calling from afar, acts of killing, active warfare, national insurrections, marriages, eating, uttering curses, bodily

[7] *Yatsyādanucitaṃvastunāyakasyarasasyavā*.Viruddhaṃtatparityāgaṃanyathāvāprakalpayet.(Daśarūpaka 3.34)
[8] *Yatkiñcillokeśucimedhyaṃujjvalaṃdarśanīyaṃvā*,Tatsarvaṃśṛṅgāreṇaupamīyate.(Nāṭyaśāstra 6.45)

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functions, intimate dressing, sleeping, and kissing-all these must never be explicitly shown on the stage[9].

Analysing these rules in a modern cinematic context reveals a clear, protective logic.

- Classical rules dictate that physical killings or gruesome combat should not be displayed directly. When crucial to the plot, these events are communicated indirectly through tools like off-stage announcements (*chulika*). Modern certification bodies follow a similar logic when editing scenes of graphic torture or bodily mutilation, shielding the collective psyche from desensitisation.
- Explicitly glorifying insurrections against the state or community remains restricted. Modern certification guidelines prioritise national sovereignty and public harmony, recognising that the explicit staging of sectarian violence can easily spark real-world unrest.
- Staging personal functions or private grooming is avoided out of respect for public decency. While some modern films cross these boundaries in the name of raw realism, regulatory bodies often intervene to preserve basic standards of public decorum.
- Direct depictions of sleeping or explicit kissing are historically kept out of public sight. Indian aesthetics views intimacy as a subject for emotional suggestion rather than anatomical display, finding greater artistic power in expressive glances and symbolic imagery.

When a scene is inappropriate for direct viewing, classical theatre utilises indirect narration (*suchya*), shifting the event from the visible stage to off-stage reporting (*vishkambhaka* or *praveshaka*). In modern cinema, this is achieved through off-screen sound design, shadow composition, or metaphorical cuts. Showing the falling shadow of a blade, for example, is far more creative and less traumatic than explicitly detailing a physical decapitation. The reasoning behind these restrictions is deeply psychological and social rather than merely religious. Bharata describes the shared family dynamic of the audience. Because an audience gathered in a public hall consists of fathers, sons, daughters-in-law, and mothers-in-law sitting together, these intimate and jarring acts must be avoided with utmost effort[10].
This ancient rule directly anticipates the modern concept of family-friendly cinema. The modern Universal (*U*) rating serves as a legal confirmation that a film is fit for multi-generational viewing (*sansadi*). Cinema is most effective when it processes raw reality into a refined artistic reflection, transforming painful or chaotic subjects into meaningful, well-crafted stories. These boundaries keep art from devolving into commercialized shock value, preserving its role as a valuable cultural asset.

In the Indian tradition, the success of a creative work is not determined solely by the director or the actors; the ultimate benchmark is the audience member. The *Natyashastra* dedicates its twenty-seventh chapter to analyzing the qualities of the spectator. Bharata explains that not every individual possesses the immediate capacity to engage with every piece of art. A qualified viewer requires a specific receptive capacity. He defines this ideal spectator, the Sahrudaya- He who experiences joy when the protagonist rejoices, shares in sorrow when grief strikes, and feels empathy in moments of distress-he alone is recognised as a true

[9] *Dūrāhvānaṃvadhoyuddhaṃrājyadeśādiviplavaḥ*.Vivāhobhojanaṃśāpotsargauśaucaṃprasādhanam.*Śayanaṃcumbanaṃcaivasākṣādetāninādiśet*.(Daśarūpaka 1.34-35)

[10] *Pitāputrasnuṣāśvaśrūdṛśyaṃyasmāttusaṃsadi*.Tasmādetānikarmāṇipratiṣiddhāniyatnataḥ. (Nāṭyaśāstra 24.295)

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spectator[11] Modern age-based rating systems (such as U, UA, and A) are a direct operational extension of this principle. Children and adolescents are still developing the psychological maturity required to process complex violence, intense psychological horror, or mature themes without distress. They are more likely to mistake cinematic fiction for absolute reality or copy dangerous behaviour. Protecting young audiences from these themes respects their emotional development.

The current categories used by the CBFC reflect this classical view of audience capability.

- **Universal (U)-** Designed for the general public across all generations, aligning with Bharata's inclusive *bala-vriddha-stri-sadharana* category, where the narrative remains clear, accessible, and life-affirming.
- **Parental Guidance (UA 7+, 13+, 16+)-** Geared toward developing minds. While the *Natyashastra* encourages heroic and adventurous stories for younger viewers, this category introduces parental guidance to help them process more complex themes safely.
- **Adults Only (A)-** Reserved for mature themes dealing with deeper human conflicts, intense emotional stress, or complex relationships. Classical theory notes that deeply intense or unsettling emotional flavours (*raudra* or *sringara*) should be engaged with by those who possess the maturity to process them constructively.

According to Bhatta Nayaka's theory of *Sadharanikarana* (universalisation), an audience member experiences art by stepping out of their narrow personal perspective to connect with shared human emotions. If a film glorifies criminal behavior or presents cruelty as a virtue, it risks steering the audience's empathy in a destructive direction. Bharata insisted on the ultimate triumph of justice and cosmic balance within stories to ensure this emotional journey leads to a constructive state of mind. Art should enrich the human experience rather than inflict emotional trauma. Modern regulatory features like mandatory health warnings or anti-cruelty disclaimers serve this same protective purpose, keeping the entertainment industry aligned with public well-being.

This study shows that modern film certification principles in India are deeply rooted in classical aesthetic traditions. What is often characterised today as arbitrary censorship is essentially a legal adaptation of Bharata's *Rasa* theory and Dhananjaya's principles of appropriateness (*auchitya*). The *Natyashastra* and the *Dasharupaka* established long ago that the value of art lies not in unbridled excess, but in its ability to balance creative freedom with social responsibility.

1. The primary purpose of film evaluation should be to prevent *rasa-bhanga* (the breakdown of the aesthetic experience). Removing elements that replace genuine artistic engagement with visceral shock protects the quality of the art form itself.
2. The classical categories of *Varjya-Drishya* show that the Indian aesthetic tradition values suggestion (*vyanjana*) over explicit display. This approach challenges filmmakers to use creative visual techniques rather than relying on raw shock value.
3. The concept of the qualified spectator provides a sound foundation for modern age-based ratings. Protecting younger minds from themes they are not yet equipped to process is an essential civic duty.

[11] *Yastuṣṭetuṣṭimāyātiśokeśokaṃcagacchati.Dainyedīnatvamabhyetisanāṭyaprekṣakaḥsmṛtaḥ.*(Nāṭyaśāstra 27.54)

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Ultimately, contemporary film certification is a natural continuation of India's long-standing performing arts philosophy. The core objective of this framework is not the suppression of ideas, but the preservation of emotional depth and public well-being. By emphasising creative suggestion over graphic display, creators can deliver powerful messages without sacrificing public decency. Moving forward, Indian media regulators across all platforms-including television and digital streaming-can benefit from looking to these classical roots rather than relying solely on foreign regulatory models. Aligning modern media practices with these timeless aesthetic guidelines ensures that cinematic art continues to entertain, educate, and elevate society (*hitopadeshajanakam*).

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