

## ***Sholay, Shaan* and the Box Office: A *Rasa Bhava* Approach to Understanding Films**

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### **Abstract**

This article compares two apparently similar Bollywood films, *Sholay* (1975) and *Shaan* (1980), and explains the difference in their performance at the Box Office by analysing them in terms of the *Rasa* theory, as posited in the *Natyashastra*. A three-part study was conducted to indicate a positive relationship between the creation of *Sthayibhava* in a film, the *Rasa* thus generated in the audience and Box Office performance of that film. The attempt here is to demonstrate that an analysis of popular Hindi films using the *Rasa* theory of the *Natyashastra* better explains why apparently similar films could have such widely differing audience responses. The paper is based on the unpublished doctoral research of the author.

**Keywords:** *Sthayibhava*, *Rasa*, *Natyashastra*, Bollywood, Box Office

### **Introduction**

The *Natyashastra* was originally composed many centuries ago in multiple languages: Sanskrit, Prakrit and a few other, now forgotten, languages. Neerja Gupta (2017), among other scholars who have worked in this field, conservatively estimate the date of the text to be anywhere between 2 BCE and 2 CE. The original text was composed in the context of performance art only, which in traditional Indian performances was a combination of action, narrative, music, and dance. Eventually, the theory became applicable to many classical art forms of dance and music, traditional and folk theatre forms, even painting, architecture, and literature. Over the last two decades, the theory has begun to be applied to films as well, especially films made in India.

On one hand, the usual way to understand an individual film has been through film theories developed with Western aesthetics, looking for a cohesive and sensitive storyline, character development and plot resolution at the end, along with technical innovation and cinematic experimentation in the film narrative. This way of looking at films sometimes fails to fully explain the popularity of non-cohesive, non-innovative Bollywood films. On the other hand, a Marxist approach, while extremely insightful, looks at all Bollywood films as a single product of its socio-political and economic context. This approach does not satisfactorily explain the individual film or why apparently similar films fare differently at the Box Office.

An online article discussing Bollywood films on the website of IOWA, points to the Western viewer's dislike and incomprehension of the mishmash of so many elements and moods in a single film. Yet, as the article astutely points out, the fact that scores of masala films are produced each year, including a handful of hits, suggests that the genre has, for receptive audiences, an aesthetic logic of its own (Lutgendorf, 2022). This aesthetic logic could be found in the *Natyashastra* and its *Rasa* theory, applying which could better explain the phenomenon that is Bollywood.

The significance of this article is to suggest the *Rasa* theory as postulated in the *Natyashastra* is a better, more culturally rooted theory to use during discussions of Bollywood films. In Indian aesthetic theory, *Rasa* and *Bhava* form the basis of the practice and understanding of all art. While the words *Rasa* and *Bhava* occur throughout the *Natyashastra*, the concepts are detailed specifically in Chapters 6 and 7. All Indian theorists of art since antiquity seem to believe that the generation of the *Rasa* experience, which is a viewer experience and an elevation, is the specific goal of any artistic performance (Gupta, 2017).

Although the earliest mention of *Rasa* is found in the *Upanishads*, it is the *Natyashastra* that has first explained *Rasa* as being generated by the *Sthayibhava* in a creative production. This *Sthayibhava* is the overall dominant mood that gets created when all the *Bhavas* in a performance coalesce. In any analysis of an art form, attention must therefore lie on all its elements (the *Bhavas*) that come together to create an overall mood (the *Sthayibhava*) that generates the sense of elevation in the audience (the *Rasa* experience) (Ghosh, 1951).

Extrapolating this concept on to Bollywood films, this article considers two mainstream, apparently similar, Bollywood films—*Sholay* and *Shaan*—and attempts to explain the difference in their Box Office performances by applying the *Rasa* theory of the *Natyashastra*. Since *Rasa* is generated by *Bhava*, the application of the *Rasa* theory on film needs to first identify the *Sthayibhava* in that film. To that end, in studying *Sholay* and *Shaan*, the focus is on the cinematic elements in the two films to explore whether these elements synergize into the *Sthayibhava*, which in turn generates the *Rasa* experience in the audience. The attempt in this article is to demonstrate how elements of cinema (*Bhavas*) helped create a strong *Sthayibhava* in *Sholay* but failed to do so in *Shaan* and to establish a positive relationship between the *Sthayibhava*, the *Rasa* experience and the performance at the Box Office for each film.

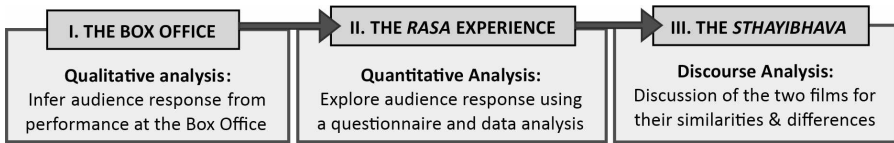
Before presenting the argument, it is important to state the following as disclaimers:

1. The *Rasa Bhava* theory of the *Natyashastra* has had many commentaries composed over the centuries and later scholars have expanded to it substantially. It is believed that primary among these scholars is Abhinavgupta, the sixth century scholar from Kashmir, who composed *Abhinavbharati*. However, the *Natyashastra* being the first text to posit this theory of performance and entertainment, this article references only the tenets of that text, as found in the translated version.
2. The original text of the *Natyashastra* has been accessed through the English translation of the text by Dr. M.M. Ghosh. As Sunil Kothari has said in his article: “A Dance Historian’s Notes on How the *Natyashastra* was Mastered”, “However clumsy the translation is, it has remained to this date an important text” (2019, p. 15).
3. The word ‘Bollywood’ is being used in this article to indicate a genre of Hindi films that are mainstream, big budget and intended for regular viewership. In this article it is not a term of disparagement.

This study has been conducted to understand how *Sholay* compares with *Shaan* by applying the *Rasa* theory as posited in the *Natyashastra*. The objective is to identify the relationship between *Bhava*, *Sthayibhava* and *Rasa* in each of the two Bollywood films and to indicate a connection between the *Rasa* experience of a film and its performance at the Box Office.

The hypothesis is that a strong *Sthayibhava* gets created in the film when all the cinematic elements in that film (the *Bhavas*) coalesce, which then leads to a strong *Rasa* experience for the audience of that film. Conversely, if the *Sthayibhava* is weak, then the *Rasa* experience is also weak. This *Rasa* experience being strong or weak explains the success or failure of a film at the Box Office.

The figure below summarizes the methodology and logic of this three-part study:



The study uses a mixed approach, with both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

The first stage of this study infers audience response by exploring the profitability of *Sholay* and *Shaan* through Box Office numbers; the second stage uses a quantitative approach to establish the *Rasa* experience of the audience of both films through a questionnaire circulated among regular viewers and statistically analysing the responses received; and the final stage uses discourse analysis techniques to demonstrate the connection between *Rasa* and *Bhava* by indicating the strength of the *Sthayibhava* of each film.

### Stage I of the Study: The Box Office

On the release, *Sholay* initially had negative reviews and low commercial success. But *Sholay* went on to run for 75 weeks at a stretch and has gone on to become one of the most popular films in Hindi cinema. An online article recently pays tribute to the film saying, *Sholay* “...exploded onto 70 mm screens to become one of the Bombay film industry’s greatest success stories—the film that would, for vast audiences, definitively embody the masala blockbuster” (Lutgendorf, 2022). In fact, it was the first film in the history of Indian cinema to celebrate a silver-jubilee initial release at over 100 theatres across India.

According to the website [bestoftheyear.in](http://bestoftheyear.in), in terms of total earnings *Sholay* has proved to be an all-time blockbuster, earning Rs. 45 crore by 2018, while *Shaan*’s performance at the Box Office was disappointing, as

it had earned only Rupees 12.7 crores by 2018. (<https://Bestoftheyear.in/Movie/Sholay/>, 2018).

Exploring reports on the internet revealed similar numbers. The figures below are examples:

Budget for <i>Shaan</i>	4.20 crores
First Day Collection	6 lakhs
1st Week Collection	46 lakhs
India Net Box Office Collection	4.25 crores
Worldwide Collection	6.50 crores
Verdict	Average

Budget for <i>Sholay</i>	3 crores
Domestic Nett	15 crores
Overseas Gross	15.00 crores
Worldwide Gross	35 crores
Final Verdict	All-time blockbuster

Source: imdb.com

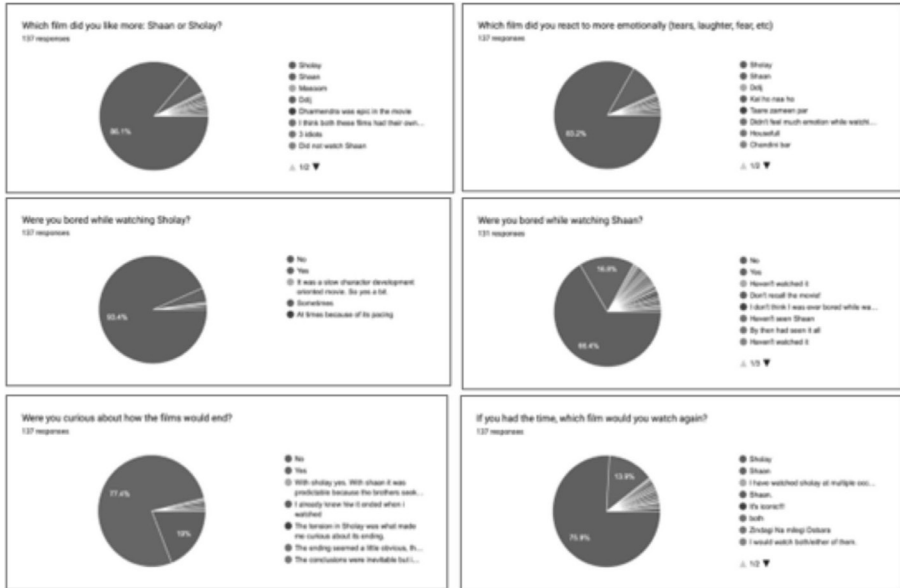
Even though decades have passed since *Sholay* was first released in theatres, the film is etched in public memory. The figures above are reports confirming *Sholay* as a blockbuster, while *Shaan* disappointed expectations at the Box Office.

### Stage II of the Study: The *Rasa* Experience

The aesthetic flavour that is generated in the audience by the artistic production is known as *Rasa*. The suggestion here is that the *Rasa* experience being strong or weak explains the success or failure of a film at the Box Office.

**Audience Response** was measured by requesting a large group of 137 volunteers to watch *Sholay* and *Shaan* online, even if they had seen the films before. A questionnaire designed to assess viewer response to *Sholay* and *Shaan* was then filled by this volunteer group cutting across age and gender. The responses were quantified and graphically represented to reveal the impact of *Sholay* which had the stronger *Sthayibhava* than *Shaan*.

The results are summarized as follows:



This part of the study revealed that 86 per cent of the audience preferred *Sholay* to *Shaan*. While more than 66 per cent of the respondents were bored by *Shaan*, 83 per cent reacted empathetically to *Sholay* and 93 per cent were not bored by it. Nearly 78 per cent were interested to know how both films ended, nearly 76 per cent of the respondents would watch *Sholay*, not *Shaan*, for the second time.

The responses to the questionnaire confirm the conjecture that *Sholay* is more impactful than *Shaan* for audiences even today, implying that the *Rasa* experience of *Sholay* is stronger than that of *Shaan*. Interestingly, as the questionnaire responses were being mailed back to the researcher, many respondents confessed that they could remember *Sholay* vividly even after years but had to watch *Shaan* once again on the OTT platform to be able to participate in the survey.

Even as the chasm between experimental cinema and commercial cinema widens, the difference does not always get reflected in their earnings. It is interesting to observe that 'Art' films are sometimes commercially successful, and rate high at the box office, while there are several big budget films that fail to entertain and are very disappointing at the box office. The predictable formula of multi-starrers, dramatic dialogues,

music and item numbers and feel-good storylines might still fail to excite audiences and apparently similar films can fare differently at the Box Office. The clue to the success or failure of a film could lie in the way the film is made... in other words, the *Sthayibhava* (the dominant *Bhava*) of the film that generated the *Rasa* experience in the audience.

### **Stage III of the Study: Identifying the *Sthayibhava***

With very similar themes of revenge, *Sholay* and *Shaan* were both advertised as action-thrillers. The assumption is therefore that the intended *Rasa* is *Veera Rasa* (translated as 'heroic'). According to the *Natyashastra*, *Veera Rasa* is generated through a *Sthayibhava* of *Utsaha* (translated as 'heroism') (Ghosh, 1951). The elements of each film, then, can be studied to see the strength of the *Utsaha Sthayibhava* created by the degree of its congruence. This study asserts that the popularity of *Sholay* was due to the strong *Uthsaha Sthayibhava* in the film that generated a strong experience of *Veera Rasa* in the audience. *Shaan*, on the other hand, failed to create a strong *Sthayibhava* and hence generated an ineffective *Rasa* experience for its audience.

### **The Plot Outline of *Sholay***

This is a story of an honest police officer, Thakur Baldev Singh, who arrests a dreaded dacoit, Gabbar Singh. Gabbar escapes from jail and massacres the police officer's family. The police officer, whose arms have been cut off by Gabbar, recruits two young men to help him get his revenge. These two men, Veeru and Jai, arrive at the Thakur's village and help capture Gabbar. During their stay at the village, they find love, friendship and a community to belong to. Even at the heavy price of Jai's death, good triumphs over evil by the end of the film.

### **The Plot Outline of *Shaan***

This is also a story of an honest police officer who gets killed by a villain named Shakaal. The officer's two no-good worthless brothers now feel the burden of responsibility and joined by Ramesh, another sufferer of the cruelties of Shakaal, try and avenge their brother's death. Each of the young men have a romantic interest and all the people involved end up in the villain's den on an island and manage to defeat him. Once again, good triumphs over evil and all is well with the world.

Outside the obvious plot similarity, *Sholay* and *Shaan* are similar in other ways too, with each having the same production team and similar casting decisions. The story and screenplay for both films were created by the writer duo, Salim-Javed. The producer of both films was G.P. Sippy and the director Ramesh Sippy. Music for both films was by the legendary R.D. Burman while the multi-starrer cast included Amitabh Bachchan in both films. The basic theme of both films is revenge, with the assured triumph of good over evil, despite an initial setback. Publicized as an 'Action-Thriller', the films have the usual Bollywood mix of 'tragedy', 'romance' and 'comedy' along with the promised 'action'. Both were big-budget films that had elaborate urban releases. Despite these surface similarities, there are fundamental differences in the details of each film. The analysis below focuses on how the *Sthayibhavas* of the two films were affected by the way certain aspects in the two films were handled.

**The theme of revenge** in *Sholay* is introduced early in the film and the main story begins within the first half hour. There are few sub-plots, and the film stays focused on revenge and Thakur's desire to avenge his wrongs throughout the film. Every episode of the film has the story of the tragedy of Thakur's family as an epicentre. The introductory episodes were kept to the minimum and scenes that had been shot (for example, scenes with the Jailer and with Soorma Bhopali), were reportedly edited out for the final version, keeping the film tightly knit.

In contrast, there is a lot going on in *Shaan* with too many sub-plots with the theme of revenge being introduced one and a half hours into the film. Blogger Ambar Chatterjee writes about *Shaan*, saying "This 3-line plot is stretched to 2 hours and 45 minutes of mind-numbing caricature of a film what is very hard to get on the same page with" (2018, p. 3). The problem with the film is that audiences do not know what to feel and oscillate for too long between *Sringara Rasa* of the romantic episodes, *Veera Rasa* of the violent scenes and *Hasya Rasa* of the comic, con-man scenes. The impact of *Uthsaha Sthayibhava* is diluted and hence the *Veera Rasa* experience is also diluted.

The **star cast** in *Sholay* matched in popularity. Dharmendra, Sanjeev Kumar, Hema Malini and Jaya Bhaduri were all stars in their own right, getting top billing for the films they were cast in. Though Amitabh Bachchan did not have a successful career at the time of signing the film, by the time the production of *Sholay* neared the end, *Zanjeer* and



*Deewar* had placed Bachchan as a potential superstar. Only Amjad Khan was unknown, but for the current audiences, he too has achieved iconic status. This congruence in the mass appeal of each actor kept the scenes balanced and all the *Bhavas* emerged as a strong *Sthayibhava* in the film. Like *Sholay*, *Shaan* too is a multi-starrer. However, unlike the former, this film has too many identities that do not coalesce. For example, Amitabh Bachchan in *Sholay* kept the *Bhava* associated with him through movies like *Zanjeer* and *Deewar*, —that of an ‘angry young man’. In *Shaan*, however, he tried to add a comic, almost clownish feel that contradicted with his image. In addition, the multi-star cast did not match each other’s popularity. For example, Bindiya Goswami was not as formidable a name as Shashi Kapoor. In fact, none of the leading ladies had any role or impact in the film unlike *Sholay* whose heroines—both Hema Malini and Jaya Bhaduri had already been in female-centric films—*Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972) and *Guddi* (1971), respectively, and were names that independently delighted the audiences and the Box Office.

**The focus** in *Sholay* was single-minded. Despite being a multi-starrer, each episode highlighted one star or one romantic pair at a time. For example, in the comic scene where Veeru pretends to commit suicide, the focus is mostly on him and only he was speaking. Jai has few close-ups and barely one line to speak. This kept the *Bhava* undiluted, and the comedy raised laughter in the audience. Similarly, the silent, yet intense romance between Jai and Radha kept the audience focus only on the pair, with no other star interrupting the scene. This single focus contributes towards creating a strong *Sthayibhava* that, in turn, generates a strong *Rasa* experience for the audience. In *Shaan*, on the other hand, screen-time was shared in almost all the episodes by multiple stars, disturbing the strength of focus on one mood. For example, the on-screen romance between Parveen Babi and Amitabh Bachchan shared the spotlight with that between Bindiya Goswami and Shashi Kapoor through a series of intercuts, dividing the audience attention between the two pairs constantly.

In *Sholay*, each sub-plot ends with a reminder of the over-all story of heroism. The film has been complimented by critics and regular viewers alike for its spectacular cinematography, with shots capturing menacing clouds, panning over rocky heights and starkly bare landscapes. This lends the movie much of its eerie tension. This is absent in *Shaan* which

has too many episodes only to introduce the many characters in the film. The brand identities and focus match in *Sholay* by highlighting a single star or star pair at a time. However, they do not match in *Shaan*, and the attention is split between stars in the same episode.

**The inclusion of songs** in *Sholay* shows a single focus on the mood. Whether it is *Yeh Dosti* that established the deep, sometimes comic but always loyal relationship of Veeru and Jai, or *Koi Haseena* that marked the quality of romance between Veeru and Basanti as energetic and passionate, the screentime is for one pair of stars at a time and not shared with other pairs.

In contrast, many reviewers have commented on the perplexing shifts in mood in *Shaan*. An article titled, “Ramesh Sippy’s spectacle that failed to impress but endures in Popular Memory” in the online magazine Cinestaan.com comments especially on the song *Jaanu Meri Jaan*: “... while a great song by itself, comes at a strange moment in the story and shifts the serious mood completely” (Kahlon, 2020). To use the vocabulary of the *Natyashastra*, this incongruence is what disturbs the *Sthayibhava*, causing a confusion in the *Rasa* experience of the viewer.

**The villains** in both *Sholay* and *Shaan* are remarkable and unusual—Gabbar and Shakaal—both having reached iconic stature today. However, the impact of Gabbar outweighs that of Shakaal as the out-door, dacoit feel of the former was more recognizable than the tech-cruelty of the latter. “Unlike earlier villains who were content to bring about a misunderstanding between the lovers’ families, Amjad Khan’s Gabbar seems to pursue evil as an end in itself,” says Vinay Lal, Professor of History at UCLA in an article (“*Sholay*”, p. 3). The extreme long shots of *Sholay* created an atmosphere of loneliness and danger even before the appearance of Gabbar. In contrast, the indoor, mid-long shots made Shakaal’s lair ordinary.

**The endings** of the two films are also noteworthy in this context. Considering only the escape sequence near the end as representative of the two films, the editing choices reveal how much stronger the *Sthayibhava* of *Sholay* is when compared to *Shaan*. In *Sholay*, the quick intercuts are between different actions: the escape, the chase, the running out of ammunition, the decision to stay back and all this with the looming danger of the dacoits catching up with the escaping trio. This multiple, simultaneous action increases the tension that shockingly

concludes with the death of Jai, a death that seals the revenge motive now for Veeru as well as Thakur. The death scene with its multiple close-ups of the various actors on the scene allows the full impact of the *Bhava* of the film. In *Shaan*, however, the escape scene is a continuous journey of the characters leaving the villain's lair and the intercuts were of the same action. Though the extreme long shot of the beach in *Shaan* was interesting, the rugged terrain did not match the urban sophistication of Shaakal, and the high-tech nature of his villainy meant that there was no delay in catching up with the escapees as he flies in with his helicopter all too quickly. The tension did not build up and hence the *Sthayibhava* got diluted for the film once again.

### Conclusion

The *Natyashastra* says that *Bhavas*, through words, gestures, and representation, coalesce into a single dominant mood that infuses the essence of the play into the spectators. This idea of *Sthayibhava* can be extrapolated into the world of films too. The study revealed that *Sholay*, with its strong *Sthayibhava*, leads to a strong *Rasa* experience. Hence it is an all-time blockbuster. *Shaan*, with its weak *Sthayibhava*, leads to a weak *Rasa* experience resulting in its disappointing performance at the Box Office.

M.M. Ghosh translates *Rasa* as emotions and goes on to remind the readers that the experience of *Rasa* is specific to an artistic performance, not the emotions experienced in real life. It can perhaps be deduced that the experience of *Rasa* is related to elements in a performance (the *Bhava*), not factors in real life of the viewer. Choices in various cinematic elements work as different *Bhavas* and these come together to generate a dominant mood (the *Sthayibhava*) in the film. This dominant mood in turn leads to the final take away, the emotional response (*Rasa*), for the audience to experience. Just as classical dance historians are trained to look for *Bhava* within the style of dance being performed, with tools of the body (facial expression, mudras, body stances, walks, jumps, etc.), and the melody, beat and lyrics that accompany the dance performance, film historians too need to see how cinematic elements come together to generate *Rasa* for a receptive viewer.

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