

# Evoking the Divine: Aesthetic Dimensions of the Vishnu Sahasranama through Rasa, Dhvani, and Symbolism

N R Gopal

Associate Professor, Dept. of English, CUHP, Dharamshala.

## Abstract:

The Vishnu Sahasranama (The Thousand Names of Vishnu), a renowned hymn from the Mahabharata, lies at an extraordinary confluence of spirituality, philosophy, and poetry. This paper investigates the hymn through the route of Indian aesthetics, with a concentration on the effects of rasa (emotional resonance), dhvani (suggestive meaning), and alankara (poetic embellishments) to unfold its deeply felt aesthetic and spiritual dimensions. By exploring how the text evokes bhakti rasa (devotion), shanta rasa (tranquility), and adbhuta rasa (wonder), the study reveals the text's capacity to transcend mere recitation and immerse devotees in an experiential journey of the divine. Further, the symbolism inherent in Vishnu's thousand names reflects a cosmological and philosophical depth, embodying the unity of the temporal and eternal. This research also parallels other classical Indian texts to position the Vishnu Sahasranama as a vital bridge between spiritual practice and literary tradition. In doing so, it highlights the hymn's relevance in contemporary discourses on spirituality, literature, and the transformative power of art.

**Keywords:** Vishnu Sahasranama, Indian Aesthetics, rasa, dhvani, symbolism, alankara, bhakti literature, devotional poetry, spirituality, and art.

## 1. Introduction

The Vishnu Sahasranama is a revered text in Indian devotion and spirituality. It is embedded within the Mahabharata, one of the greatest epics of Indian literature, particularly in a part known as the Anushasana Parva. Here, a moment unfolds between the elder Bhishma of the Kuru dynasty and the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira. This context shapes the Vishnu Sahasranama deeply. It is not merely a litany that could function as a chant or mantra. Just like all the Hindu literature this scripture also has its significance and context that can be beneficial for the one who recites it (Vishnu Sahasranamam). It takes place as a moment of worship, happening right at the heart of the larger story. In his attempt to bring Yudhishtira to the light of understanding, Bhishma divulges the depth and the wealth of the wise sayings that make up the recitation of the thousand names of Vishnu.

More than an act of worship, the recitation of the Vishnu Sahasranama becomes a meditation on the Divine. When chanted, each name unleashes the potent, transformative energy of the specific form of the Divine that it symbolizes. So when we invoke "Hari," for instance, we actually call forth the very essence of Vishnu that deals with absolution and reconciliation, while "Govinda" delicately unpacks the associations and meanings tied to Vishnu's earthly and pastoral avatars. With both theology and artistry, this text seeks to delve into the essence of devotion and Indian aesthetics. It examines the Vishnu

Sahasranama through three classical theoretical lenses—*rasa* (emotional essence), *dhvani* (suggestive meaning), and *alankara* (ornamentation). In doing so, it draws both on the concepts of these theories themselves and on the profound, if sometimes overlooked, relationship that they hold with the Vishnu Sahasranama, allowing a truly aesthetic appreciation of the hymn. For example, if the Vishnu Sahasranama evokes *shringara rasa* (romantic or devotional love) through names like "Madhava" (beloved of Lakshmi), *karuna rasa* (compassion) may emerge from names like "Narayana" (refuge of humanity). In what follows, though, the study fortifies the Vishnu Sahasranama itself with some serious artistic theory and criticism. Thus, this investigation seeks to discover how the thousands of divine names within the Vishnu Sahasranama serve as the very lively, albeit nuanced, expressions of divine reality and poetic beauty. It is not a secret that the Sahasranama is unique in the way it mixes spirituality and poetry. However, this research aims to shed light on just how that happened and why it matters not only for the Sahasranama but also for the devotional and philosophical lives of those who engage with it.

## 2. Indian Aesthetics a Theoretical Framework

The aesthetics of India is a complex and multi-layered structure that studies the delicate relationships between beauty, emotional experience, and artistic expression. This tradition stands on three solid pillars—*rasa*, *dhvani*, and *alankara*—each of which has a very distinctive role in evoking emotional and spiritual "ah ha!" moments in audiences.

**Rasa:** The first and foremost is *rasa*. *Rasa*, according to the Upanishadic tradition, is the essence or the core of aesthetic experience (Thampi 75). *Rasa* carries the gigantic burden of the emotional or aesthetic experience. It contains various *bhavas*, the emotions that come into play when one experiences the taste or flavor of a piece of art or performance. The taste may vary widely because each *rasa* embodies a rather distinct emotional state. For example, *bhakti rasa* allows the devotee to taste a very intimate and profound emotional experience with the divine.

**Dhvani:** The second principle is *dhvani*, which underlines the implicit meanings in the texts and the significance of suggestion. Suggestion is the soul of artistic interpretation (Mukherjee 91). What does it mean for a text to be full of suggestions? Think of all the possible ways something can be interpreted, especially when the text in question is a religious one. *Dhvani* encourages a deeper analysis of the layers of meaning and the contemplation of the word's (or silence's) true significance.

**Alankara:** The third principle is *alankara*, which has to do with the poetic devices used in texts. What makes a text significant goes beyond its textual content and its basic adherence to grammar. A poetic text is aesthetic by its very nature, and the use of alliteration, for example, may or may not make it "musical," but it beautifies it in some way. It is about a profound spiritual and aesthetic experience, where the meaning of the text, *dhvani*, takes one on a journey to something much greater than itself, to that most divine of realizations. According to Srinivasacharyulu to the poetics of the *Alankara* school, *Alankara* meant the central beauty of a literary work(5).

## 3. Aesthetic Dimensions of the Vishnu Sahasranama

The Vishnu Sahasranama gives a perfect demonstration of an aesthetic ideal, one that is very much sought after in classical Indian art and thought. This ideal might be termed "multi-levelled," in that it exists on many different strata of meaning and understanding at any one time. We can see that the hymn gives forth meanings easily at the most elementary (or superficial) level and then also at much deeper levels that are

not so easily comprehended or appreciated but that give the work its true worth and make it resonate spiritually and emotionally for many devotees.

Rasa: A Framework for Understanding the Experience of Devotional Hymns

The experience of a devotional hymn's spiritual significance is aligned with the core aesthetic realization of rasa, or emotion. Bhakti rasa, meaning the "aesthetic experience of devotion," is the catalyst for facilitating the spiritual profundity of a hymn. Vocative phrases that establish a direct address to Vishnu's presence as "the source of all existence" provoke a profound reverence that acts as the hinge for rendering a profound transformative moment when a devotee transitions from this realm into that of the divine. Shanta rasa, or the peaceful state that comes from establishing Vishnu's tranquil, protective nature, allows a devotee to experience the hymn as "blissful and serene." Not addressed particularly to Vishnu's cosmic form, the verses that establish this aura of calm and protective peace turn the hymn, in a sense, into a "sanctuary." Finally, the hymn addresses Vishnu's wondrous, mysterious nature. The adbhuta rasa, or "wonder," that emerges from realizing that Vishnu is truly immanent in the world and oftentimes almost concealed from the eyes of His devotees enhances the "reverent space" that is experienced during and after the recitation of the hymn.

The Vishnu Sahasranama weaves a rich fabric of rasa (emotional aesthetics) that brings out and centers on various features of Lord Vishnu's divine qualities. Here are some of the prominent rasas found in the Vishnu Sahasranama:

(i) Shanta Rasa (Peaceful Emotion) The ultimate refuge for his devotees, Vishnu is serene and tranquil and has several names that express these qualities. Example: "Shantah" (The peaceful one). This name holds within it the very command that is required in calming a mind that has lost its peace—because the lost mind can never find the refuge it seeks if it is not first tranquil.

(ii) Karuna Rasa (Emotion of Compassion) Vishnu's all-encompassing compassion for every being is a constant in many of his names. Example: "Bhaktavatsalah" (The one who is affectionate toward his devotees) This name emphasizes his divine sway over affection and even a "push" toward the devotees he has. It makes my feelings toward Vishnu transform into more than just those of a serf toward a master. I am a devotee, but I am also someone whom Vishnu is said to bless "in his temple of no roof."

(iii) Veera Rasa (Heroic Emotion) The power of the heroic acts of Vishnu, especially those performed in his incarnated forms as Rama and Krishna, is conveyed through a range of names. Example: "Parakrama" (The valiant). This name of Vishnu shines with luminance of courage and strength, as if to say: "If you want to be strong and courageous, be like the valiant one."

(iv) Adbhuta Rasa (Marvelous Emotion) The divine and cosmic qualities of Vishnu fill us with reverence and awe. Example: "Vishwam" (The universe itself) This name has us marveling at and with the divine, presenting Vishnu as the very personification of the universe and its unfathomable wonders.

The Suggestive Power of Dhvani

The hymn's implicit layers of significance emerge from thoughtful name choices and metaphors. Names such as "Narayana" and "Madhava" point to deeper themes. They are not mere names but suggestive in their meanings, full of divine love and sustenance. Their use here is an invitation to consider the many roles Vishnu plays. Taken together, the names in the hymn reflect Vishnu's duality: as both near to us (immanent) and far from us (transcendent).

In cultures across the world, poetry is renowned for its capacity to evoke in its listeners a kind of transcendent experience. When the Sahasranama is experienced as dhvani, the divine is made to resonate. Names such as "Achyuta" (the one who never falls) represent the unwavering nature of Vishnu and inspire

feelings of reassurance and calm (shanta rasa). But these names also carry rich, multi-layered meanings and allusions that reflect Vedanta and Puranic philosophy. For instance, "Sarvagatah" (the all-pervasive one) doesn't just signify omnipresence; it also offers a nod to the Advaita Vedanta idea that all is one, that there's no meaningful distinction between the different aspects of reality. Similarly, "Madhava" (source of bliss) can be said to convey (shanta rasa) just as well as any kind of meditation could. Yet it's also harmoniously conveying the material-spiritual dual prosperity of the society that worships him. The Vishnu Sahasranama uses dhvani to create a spiritual ambience in which the explicit meanings of the names it offers yield to a deeper kind of resonance. When devotees chant the sahasranama, they are not simply invoking the many names, each of which clearly identifies Vishnu and suggests particular themes associated with him. In "Narayana," for instance, whom the namesakes clearly identify and protect, the chant also suggests an act of surrender and the essence of guidance. Instead, this guidance is far more intimate and signified through the emotion that is so tightly interwoven with the clearly articulated themes and suggestions in the names. Vishnu Sahasranama gives us more than just a set of names.

#### Alankara: Poetic Ornamentation

Alankara, or poetic ornamentation, is what makes the hymn beautiful and enhances its devotional impact. When we analyze a hymn, the first thing to check is how many poetic devices it contains, because the more it has, the better it is considered to be, in general. The first device that can be present in a hymn is **simile**. A simile is a type of figure of speech in which two elements are compared using "like" or "as." The hymn employs similes to compare the qualities of Vishnu to natural phenomena, yielding some striking imagery and making the figure of Vishnu as described in the hymn easy to visualize. **Metaphor**, of course, is a more potent figure of speech and serves to make the comparison in a more striking way. The chanting experience is enhanced by the hymn's rhythm and melody, which help transform the recitation into a meditative act that directs attention to a single object and fosters devotion.

The Vishnu Sahasranama is a deeply devotional text that uses various figures of speech to enrich its spiritual and aesthetic dimensions. One such figure is alliteration, which is the repetition of sounds, found in phrases like "Shivah, Sharvah, Shreeman," where the sound "sh" is emphasized. Because of the rhythmic flow provided by alliteration, one is more likely to be drawn into the meditation for which the hymn serves as a vehicle or means. Then there is Yamaka, or the kind of repetition that is not quite the same but close enough to convey the idea that is meant; one finds this figure at work in "Vishwam, Vishnuh, Vaishnavah," where the root "Vish" is common to all three forms of the name and is understood to convey an idea of Vishnu's omnipresence, worship, and identity as the very universe that one inhabits. Of course, in any text that is as rich in meaning as the Vishnu Sahasranama, one would expect to find figures of speech that multiply meanings and make the text amenable to contemplation and meditation. Additionally, the hymn uses apparent contradiction to intertwine paradoxical attributes like "Aneeshah" (masterless) and "Sarveshvarah" (Lord of all) that highlight Vishnu's nature, which is beyond our understanding but not beyond our experience. And while we're busy being astonished at how infinite and all-pervading he is, the hymn adds depth and meaning to these qualities and to our astonishment.

To sum up, the aesthetic layers of the **Vishnu Sahasranama**—rasa, dhvani, and alankara—collaborate to produce an emotional landscape where the devotee can effectively connect with Vishnu. More than that, they ensure that the hymn's beauty doesn't just hit the ears but also resonates on a far deeper level, leading to a potentially transformative experience where the listener appreciates not only the content of the hymn but also the sheer beauty of it.

#### 4. Symbolism in the Thousand Names of Vishnu

The Vishnu Sahasranama uses the symbolic names of Vishnu to show divine character and connect it to the fundamental Hindu philosophy and cosmology of the universe. This makes for an enriching experience during devotional time. When one worships this text with the kind of attentive reverence as when one actually reads a sacred book, one will find oneself in an experience that leads to an understanding of the kind of theology and philosophy that divinely ordered the universe in which we live—from the very basics to our extraordinary and mysterious interactions with one another.

The name 'Madhava' means something like "the consort of Lakshmi." It connotes not just good fortune, not just prosperity, but a balancing act between the material and the spiritual, the very pursuit of which renders a human life meaningful. The name invokes a particularly Vedic and very Upanishadic understanding of prosperity. And Hari, the refrain almost in the name of Krishna, isn't just a call to the worshipful activity of saying Krishna's name. Though it signals Krishna's role as the redeemer, it also signals the remarkable Vedic vision of the divine that calls for humans to understand Vishnu-Krishna as divinity that pervades all things and liberates from not just living a life of sin but from the very state of being in sin.

Vishnu Sahasranama symbolizes the oneness of the cosmos and divinity, integrating essential motifs of time, space, and infinity. By depicting Vishnu as an eternal sustainer, the hymn aligns him with the tasks of creation, preservation, and destruction in Hindu cosmology, establishing him as both an imminent force within the cosmos and a transcendent power beyond time.

The names function as a spiritual guide. They hint at unfathomable cosmic principles, dharma, and the mature forms of life that might lead to liberation (moksha). Chanting the hymn makes the cosmic principles, on which our existence in this universe is based, very personal—not in an individualistic way that today's capitalism might promote, but in a way that recognizes each of us as parts of a larger whole, with divine and cosmic connections. The existence of the Vishnu Sahasranama is not a mere schematic portrayal of Vishnu's existence but a profound contemplation of the merged worlds of life (the way a cell lives and resonates with the divine, the way a lifeform experiences existence, the way billions of forms and lives coexist, and the divine and cosmic within each life) and holistic principles of existence.

#### 5. Comparative Insights

The thousand names of Vishnu (Vishnu Sahasranama) constitute an important text in Hinduism, akin to other classic texts like the Bhagavad Gita, the Ramayana, and the Upanishads. Though each of these serves a different purpose and audience, they share fundamental themes that constitute the bedrock of Hindu philosophy, spirituality, and ethics.

##### **Analogous Themes:**

**Bhakti:** The Vishnu Sahasranama has as its very essence bhakti, the devotional sentiment that proclaims the glory of Vishnu and extols Vishnu's thousand names. This is very similar to the opening portion of the Bhagavad Gita, which declares that undivided devotion leads to the most direct path to God. The nature of the worshipping devotee is also beautifully expressed in the Ramayana through the character of Hanuman, who is always at the feet of Rama, worshipping him in a way that is constantly meditating on the theopanic (revelatory) name of Rama.

**Moksha:** Every scripture offers guidance on the road to deliverance. The Bhagavad Gita instructs that "selfless action" (karma yoga) can blithely propel one toward moksha, the state of being released from the cycle of birth and death. The Upanishads assume a more heady approach, pursuing the notion of the Atman

(the individual self) in contrast or in comparison to the Brahman (the Absolute). The Vishnu Sahasranama, in contrast, suggests that "remembrance" (smriti) of the Lord's divine names can empty a person of all impurities of mind and soul, thus liberating him or her from the fetters that bind.

**Divine Splendor:** The representation of gods and their attributes showcases divine splendor across all these writings. The Vishnu Sahasranama reveals the many faces, even kinds, of the deity. It lists a thousand names for Vishnu, most of which are never or rarely repeated in any other texts. These names and their accompanying descriptions are meant to highlight Vishnu's omnipresence and omnipotence. Indeed, in Indian tradition, he is understood to visualize not only with but also in through many forms.

The themes mentioned create synergies among the texts, but they also foster some divergence in the texts' emphasis and interpretation. For instance, the Bhagavad Gita remains much more fixated on the practical side of achieving dharma in everyday life and gives several paths that are quite dynamic and action-oriented in leading an individual toward spiritual realization. The Upanishads are more philosophically bent, with many (not all) of their texts emphasizing meditation and reed-thought as the royal road to knowledge and, ultimately, enlightenment. The Vishnu Sahasranama stands out in its systematic adoration of Vishnu through sacred sound; on the surface, this text encourages a quite vocal, communal form of meditation that is "undistracted in the reverent recitation of Vishnu's name."

Our comprehension of Hindu spirituality is deepened by performing a cross-textual analysis of its foundational texts. When these texts are studied in concert, the bhakti that permeates them, along with their multifaceted discussions of dharma (duty), appears with greater clarity. This allows us to grasp with greater richness the spiritual practice these texts encourage us to undertake—such practice rendering us increasingly aware of the path to moksha (liberation) along which we are all journeying.

Substantial contributions have been made to the genre of bhakti literature by the Vishnu Sahasranama. It has established a strong presence in the fabric of devotional poetry and songs throughout Indian history. The focus on the divine names in the Sahasranama laid the groundwork for the subsequent emergence of poets like Tulsidas, Mirabai, and Surdas, who seemed to meditate upon and hear the themes of devotion and love for the Divine intoned by the Sahasranama. In their works, especially in that of Tulsidas, who may be the poet most aligned with the theological direction of the Sahasranama, the repeated invocation of divine names in their bhakti compositions serves both as a vehicle of personal fortification for the poet and as a means of ushering the listener or reader into moments of spiritual engagement.

Today, the Vishnu Sahasranama's influence can still be seen in devotional practices and liturgy. Contemporary poets and musicians often still derive inspiration from the text's themes, and they integrate the reverence of Vishnu's names into forms that are much more palatable to whole generations that didn't grow up in context with the original text. Even in an ever-evolving cultural milieu, the profound relevance of the text and the themes and devotion that it embodies continue to resonate and attract. It is the dharmic influence of the Vishnu Sahasranama that we see expressing itself in the many and diverse forms of bhakti literature. The Sahasranama acts, as it were, at the mega level of influence in the pathway from the ancient world to the present, from old forms of expression to new (and sometimes unrecognizable) contemporary ones. Still, its ancient influence must reflect something, if only that a widespread presence in the past equals a community of something path worthy and spiritually enriching.

## 6. Contemporary Relevance of the Vishnu Sahasranama

A highly respected collection of verses in the Hindu tradition, the Vishnu Sahasranama is a revered part of daily devotion among many practitioners. Part of the evening prayer, or sandhya, the Vishnu

Sahasranama serves as a meditative means to bring both individual and communal worshipers into a place of calm focus, the mind centred on Vishnu in his many forms. Reciting the Sahasranama is fortifying both for attaining the good purposes (dharma) that constitute the overarching goals of individual lives and for bringing a practiced community into greater unity. Indeed, practicing the chanting has become a contemporary means of building community in a number of yoga and wellness retreats.

The Vishnu Sahasranama is a part of modern family life in many homes. There, it is recited during spiritual get-togethers and celebrations. However, the recitation of this ancient text is no longer limited to the niche relationships of private devotional settings. By virtue of online platforms, both social media and streaming services, it is available in audible and visual form for virtually anyone in the world to experience. These same platforms could also be converted into apps for meditation.

The many psychological benefits of reciting the Vishnu Sahasranama have been long associated with the practice. Among these benefits are stated reductions in anxiety levels and improvements in one's overall emotional state. Reported newfound feelings of serenity and peace, alongside one's increased focus, have accompanied this ancient practice into modernity, highlighting a way by which participants have sought emotional resilience in an increasingly chaotic world. This recitation is truly multifaceted, holding mirror-like qualities that reflect the countless ways its participants find strength and comfort. A study on the benefits of chanting states:

Mantra recitation is a part of physiological process of speech and influenced by buddhi (intelligence), manas (mind), agni (flame) and vayu (air). It was mentioned that chanting Vishnu Sahasranam regularly will help us to achieve the goals professional and personal, relax from stress and improve positive thoughts, In our study we have observed significant decrease in depression and anxiety and stress levels followed by chanting. Systolic and diastolic pressures were controlled and remained within normal limits. Significant improvement was observed in spacial memory followed by chanting. (Kumar Sailesh et al 89) Investigating the recitation of sacred texts reveals some potentially powerful therapeutic effects. For many, the enhanced sense of ability to cope with everyday stress and the augmented feeling of living with a true sense of purpose and as a key member of a community are bound up with the practice of reciting the Vishnu Sahasranama. In the same breath, we might say the invocators of the Vishnu Sahasranama aren't merely religious practitioners—they're partaking in the psychiatric and insightful 'secret' benefits of this text as well.

Various modern interpretations and adaptations of the Vishnu Sahasranama are found in contemporary expressions of devotion. Today's authors and spiritual leaders explore and explain this text in accessible language, linking the esoteric knowledge imparted by the Sahasranama to the kinds of existential crises we face as individuals in the modern era. Almost universally, they highlight the kind of values one would hope to find at the core of any ancient text: the texts' inarguable commitment to compassion, service, and devotion to that which is higher than oneself. Modern commentaries, books, and sessions led by respected scholars and practitioners provide fascinating philosophical insights into the Sahasranama's rich depths. These adaptations—some quite academic, others more conversational—aid in reconciling the Sahasranama with our contemporary existence, making it accessible to today's practitioners and skeptics alike. All of them encourage a contemplation of the profound significance of the names of Vishnu.

## 7. Conclusion

An in-depth study of the Vishnu Sahasranama uncovers a fusion of poetry and spirituality. The text's poetic architecture and rhythmic buildup to the ecstatic climax of a thousand names create an immersive

experience for the practitioner. This experience has even been described as an "aesthetic" one, replete with the beauty of language, the emotion and feeling that bind us to the text, and the ultimate visualizing (or darshana) of Lord Vishnu in his thousand forms.

Integrating aesthetic principles into the study of sacred texts such as the Vishnu Sahasranama can lead researchers to a more rounded appreciation of the cultural and spiritual worth of those texts. In the case of the Vishnu Sahasranama, this integrative approach highlights the text's not insubstantial poetic qualities and allows researchers to explore with greater daring the text's intoxicating effect on those who repeat or recite it.

Later studies could investigate the application of Indian aesthetics to an array of other religious or philosophical texts, both within and outside the Hindu tradition. This undertaking might involve everything from comparing the aesthetic expressions found in the sacred texts of different traditions to examining what aesthetics might mean in divine communion as modern interpreters/reinterpreters of spiritual literature understand it. Research of this nature could deepen the comprehension of the ways in which aesthetics drives belief and action across different cultures.

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