

## Practice of *Abhinaya* in Classical Indian Dance

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*Abhinaya* in dance is the link between the poet and the spectators, the dancer becoming the central conductor. The dancer employs *abhinaya* to carry forward the poet's content and its aesthetic and/or spiritual message towards the spectators. But the dancer is denied the most potent weapon in the armoury of human existence-his speech. So the dancer's *abhinaya* has to be, perforce, a direct presentation imbued with audio-visual perception manifested by the movements of the body, gestures, facial expressions, stylised but aesthetic costumes - all carried upon the beautiful waves of music; it is in the confluence of all these component that one would find in successful *abhinaya*. The calibre and quality of a dancer's *abhinaya* is judged by the quantum of effectiveness with which the poet's content is carried forward to the spectators invoking the desired emotional response.

A poet usually conceives of a central situation (rather than a theme) and develops it through a multiplicity of supportive or auxiliary ones. During the course of the development of the situation he introduces other character/characters to support the main character. He then visualises the emotional and reactions of these characters under the given situations. This he very naturally bases on his own knowledge of human life relying upon his own observations or experiences.

The poet's artistic creations - his poems - are of the nature where the boundaries of time and space do not come into the picture. He can give full reign to his imagination; in fact the more he imagines and creates literary situation and characters, the more he becomes successful in conveying his artistic sensibilities to the readers, who also rise to the poet's high artistic level. There is another very interesting and attractive facet to the poet's art and that it is not a physical art; there is no need to have a third party intervention between the poet and his reader. The reader also is free to interpret the content of the poem according to his own understanding and inclination. He is equally free to paint a mental picture of the characters according to the range of his imagination.

Coming to the dancer and the art of dance we have already noted that it is dancer

who carries forward the poet's content to the spectators by the means of his *abhinaya*. But the dancer's task is fraught with many difficulties. It has been argued by some experts that the dancer has an easier task than the poet because he can use his entire presence replete with suitable costumes and make up and the facility of using his face and body to convey the content of the poem that he is interpreting by his art. This is actually very wrong inference. The dancer's task is the more difficult of the two. For when the dancer translates the poem by way of his *abhinaya* he cannot leave anything to the imagination of the spectator. The poet's situation and the characters are after all in the minds of the readers whereas the dancer has to give a physical manifestation to the world of imagination.

A poem would be read in two, three or at the most five minutes. The reader then analyses and savours the mental picture that has been conjured by the words. This can be done immediately after reading the poem or, as happens frequently, later, it can be recalled in the reader's mind while performing some mundane task like taking a walk even travelling in a vehicle. This is what the dancer does at first, reads the poem and mulls over it. Up till this point he is like any ordinary reader.

Hereafter there are two processes which the dancer follows. The first is the internal one and the second is the external one. I like to call these the inward look of the dancer and the outward gaze of the dancer.

### **First Stage : The Inward Look**

As soon as the dancer reads the poem to be danced he has to decide with a certainty the following:

1. The correct meaning of the words by themselves and in reference and context to one another. Then the central mood of the poem in general. This mood must then permeate the entire dance. It is here that the dancer must exercise a great care to ensure that this mood permeates rather than overpowers the dance.

2. Having selected the mood the dancer must decide the levels of intensity of the emotions at important junctures. This intensity cannot be at a constant level but be matched with the words.

3. Now a very important step must be taken and that is to select situations that would enhance and elaborate the one predominant situation which impels the central mood. So now there is a central happening, the mood of which is enhanced by numerous supportive episodes. Due care has to be taken in selecting these small episodes which must be inter-related either in terms of chronology or thematic ideas. This process can be described as

filling up of flash upon the bare skeleton. Very naturally the supportive, or as sometimes happens, parallel moods are totally in opposition of the central mood.

4. Traditional Classical Indian dance is almost always subjective in sense that barring a few abstract items (which are *nṛtta* items) the other items always deal with human characters. Even animals, birds and other lower beings, are given human form and thus are imbued with the gamut of human emotions. So the dancer has now to visualize the predominant characteristics of the character or characters occurring in the poem. He has to fix up their good qualities or evil tendencies as per not only the situations and circumstances but also on the basis of age, birth, temperament etc. He has to literally colour the characters. It is an easier task when there is only one character. But when other characters enter into the picture each one has to be painstakingly created and must be distinct from one other. So the dancer visualises different mannerisms, attitudes and deportment for his characters. Now, in this context, it may so happen that one of these characters may be in a contrast to the central character as well as the other supportive characters. So now the dancer paints distinct picture frames on the canvas of his mind where there is lineament, draftsmanship and proper placement of characters with their individual moods and colours. In this contrary case the entire dance would move towards an explosive emotional climax where the characters clash all in one performer's mind to be presented for the benefit of the audience. It must be also achieved convincingly. So the mental exercise is intense.

5. Lastly, but most importantly, the dancer has to visualize if he wants to present the poem at the mundane level or at a higher spiritual level. I have specifically taken this as the last point because only after the characterisation is visualised and episodes linked that a clear picture would emerge. It is easier to interpret a *bhakti*-song. But the dancer has to identify the type of *bhakti* etc. And when the deity is mentioned it is even easier since the supportive episodes or situations that the dancer would include in the dance would be connected with the life and deeds of that deity. It is when a spiritual meaning is to be attributed to mundane words that the dancer's creative ability and emotive expertise are challenged.

## **Second Stage : The Outward Gaze**

It must be stressed here that the dancer's endeavour through his art, is to please or entertain his audience - the *rasikas*. We are talking of a performer or practitioner of an art; one whose job or profession is to create a work of art and thus give pleasure to others. In the process the dancer, usually, also gets pleasure. This entails certain formalised training as well as long period of practice (*sādhana*) in the pursuit of proficiency and earning

approbation. The ecstatic dancing as an outpouring of *bhakti* of the saint-poets is outside the purview of our study.

In order to please the audience the dancer has to be, above all, convincing and understandable. The ground reality of the contemporary Indian dance scene is that there are a number of classical dance styles hailing from different states which have different languages. Yet the linguistic barriers are broken and these dance practices are now all national in character - and are being performed everywhere. A major obstacle for audience enjoyment is more often than not, cited as the dance being performed in an alien language, though being Indian. Even if the content is based on the common heritage of mythology, this argument is put forward which is factually correct.

The Indian *abhinaya* tradition is such that after giving general principles it very wisely falls silent and allows the performer to proceed at his own pace and understanding. But the broad based guidelines must be followed for everybody's advantage and success.

This following of systematised and conventionalised norms of the technique of presentation of *abhinaya* (enactment) is the concretisation of the outward gaze of the dancer. The outward gaze is fixed upon that one aim : Propriety leading to conviction leading to pleasure or entertainment which ultimately grants success. This success is nothing else but the experiencing of aesthetic delight or relish - *rasāsvāda* which is at the universalised level. This means that the audience gets bathed in the flow of *rasa* which is created by the *abhinaya* of the dancer.<sup>1</sup> Here the word audience is to be understood in the plural so that the result of the efforts of the dancer or a group of dancers envelopes almost all the members of the audience who are termed as *rasika-s*.

The dancer follows these aesthetic universalised conventions for :

1. The physical manifestation or concretisation of the mental picture created by him through the studied movements of his entire body that is of the *aṅgas*, *upāṅgas* and *pratyāṅgas* as prescribed in the Nāṭyaśāstric literature. Bharata's dicta which form the foundation of this tradition have not been really surpassed. Succeeding authors or commentators have simplified or elaborated upon or added to these dicta, further enriching the tradition.
2. Characterisation according to the type of the character, age, temperament, condition and sex.
3. For creating major and supportive situations and incidents and their interpretation in the language of dance based upon poetic conventions which are many a

times symbolic. So in the conventionalised terminology of the Nāṭyaśāstric tradition the dancer :

1. Fixes the *sthāyī bhāva* (central predominant emotion).
2. Selects the situations as per either mythology or fables or history and the poetic conventions and symbolism.
3. Fixes the *vyabhicārī bhāvas* (the supportive emotions) for each situation.
4. As per the *bhāvas* sets the actual movements of the different limbs of his/her body.
5. Matches the synchronised movements of his body with the words of the poem - their actual conventional meaning or the suggestive meaning.
6. Creates a visual poetry of dance by imagining and concretising poetic and theatrical plot.
7. Sets his creation to the musical mode and its *tāla* cycle.
8. Embellishes it with decorative but apt physical flourishes which convey the impression that he/she is dancing.

All this is done with his/her deeply concentrated *sattva* (mind) to reach out to his audience and carry to them the intent and content of the poet.

Explained in everyday language it means :

The inner ideas of the poet are made to pervade the mind of the dancer, who conveys them by means of different *abhinayas* to suit the mood and temperament of the poem, which eventually pervades the spectators' mind as dramatic (*alaukika*) sentiments. In this process the *vibhāvas* are the *kāraṇa* (reason or cause) or *hetu* (aim or intention). The *anubhāvas* make the spectators feel or experience the mood or temperament due to the use of the *abhinayas*. The *vyabhicārī bhāvas* are exactly what is meant by the term - those that move about. They move about and are actually responsible for conveying the relationship of a *rasa* with external stimuli and objects. Since each *rasa* has relationship with several stimuli and objects it would have numerous *vyabhicārī-s* which very naturally cannot be fixed and so are termed transitory or temporary.

I can best describe the process of *abhinaya* (enactment) as "totally depersonalised but intensely humanised projection."

It means that the dancer has to leave his/her personality behind and take on the

personality of the character which he/she is portraying. Many a times one reads or hears that a particular dancer got under the skin of the character and became the character itself.

What then is depersonalisation? It is an attitude which lays down that the personal reactions and responses of the dancer are of no consequence in the scheme of *abhinaya* since no two human beings are similar. So it is the universal and not personal responses and reactions which are to be presented in dance.

This entire process has been described in the Indian aesthetics *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* which is the essence of emotive dance presentation termed *nṛtya*. It is by this process only that the intangible, abstract art of the poet becomes a living, pulsating tangible, audio-visual presentation very true to human life and yet far removed from it. This artistic presentation, the dancer's exquisite art, exists in the realm of imagination, at a high intellectual cum emotional strata where the aesthetic sensibilities of the performer and the beholder merge to initiate the flow of *rasa* - the ultimate artistic relish.

To conclude it is the dancer - who ultimately brings the exquisite poems of Jayadeva to life transporting the beholder-*darśaka* to the banks of river Yamunā where Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā play out the eternal *rāsa* of Divine Love enveloping the entire universe. They are the Divine Lovers yet very human, their very explicit Love-play delights the *rasika's* soul without self-identification.

The dancer transforms mundane utterances of explicit sexuality into an implicit out pouring of *bhakti* between the Supreme Being and the poet.

## References

1. स्पर्शग्रहोल्लुकसनैर्हाहाकारैश्च साधुवादैश्च।  
वेपथुगद्गदवचनैःस्वेदाद्यैरभिनयस्तस्य॥ *Nāṭyaśāstrā* 6.77, p. 346. Ed. Babulal Shastri, Varanasi, Sam. 2065.  
This is to be represented on the stage by a gesture of feeling (sweet) smell, joyful shaking of limbs, and uttering *hā, hā, hā* sounds, speaking words of approbation, tremor, choking voice, perspiration and the like (Fig. 11.1).
2. उत्फुल्लनासिकं यत्तु जिह्वदृष्टिनिरीक्षितम्।  
निकुञ्चिताङ्गक शिरस्तच्चोपहसितं भवेत्॥ *Ibid.*, 6.58, p. 321  
During the Laughter of Ridicule (*upahāsita*) the nose should be expanded, eyes should be bent. (Fig. 11.2)  
*Nāṭyaśāstrā*, Manomohan Ghosh, Chapter 6, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi.



Fig.11.1: See Reference No. 1

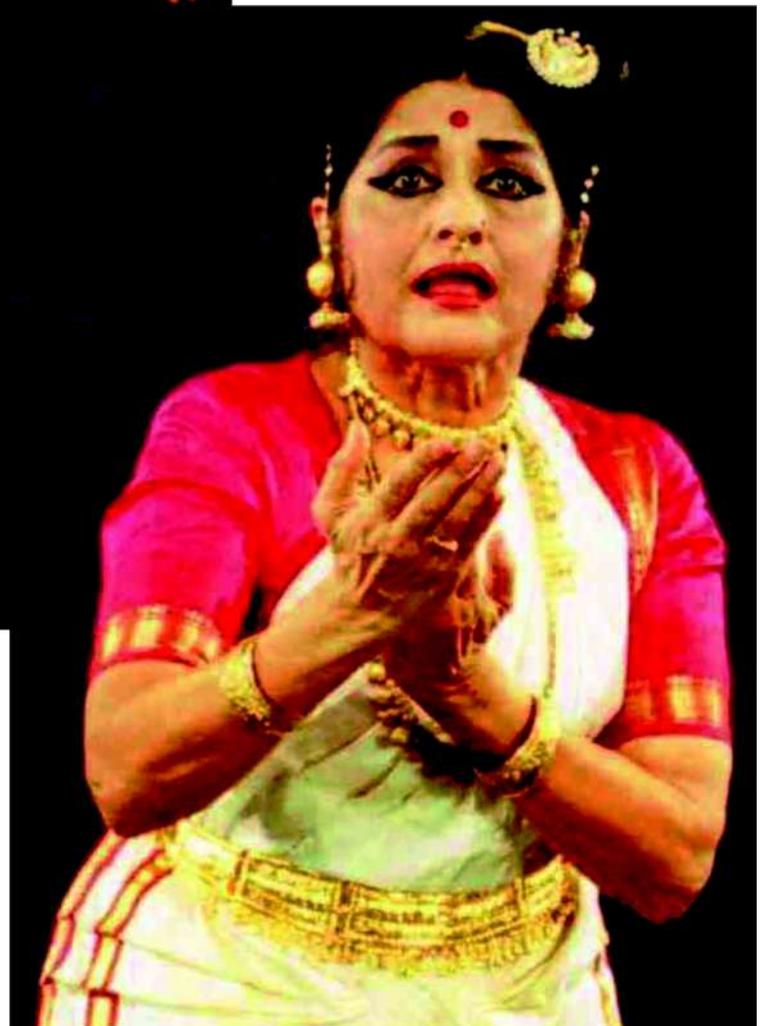


Fig.11.2: See Reference No. 2