

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

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Abstract

India has a rich literary heritage of both Sanskrit as well as regional writings. The literature of a period gives us an insight into the social, political, economic and cultural life of the people of that period. Language and literature play a very significant role in Indian performing arts – especially, Indian classical dance.

Dance is a language by itself and like any other language it is well- structured and has certain conventions. Out of the two main aspects of Indian classical dance, namely, 'nritya' (non-representational dance) and 'abhinaya' (representational dance), it is abhinaya that is deeply connected to literature or 'sahitya'. Amongst the different types of literature, it is poetry or 'kavya' that leaves a deep impression on the minds of the readers – mainly because of its subtlety and its inbuilt strength and capacity of interpretations and re-interpretations. These attributes are the very basic requirements of abhinaya. And since dance is 'visual poetry', it is kavya that is explored in the abhinaya of Indian classical dance.

Traditionally, the thematic content of Indian classical dance was based only on epics, puranas, mythology and other religious and secular literature. With the passage of time, Indian classical dance too is adapting with the changing trends and has for its thematic content not just mythological, religious and secular themes but also explores historical, folk and contemporary writings. The seven traditional Indian classical dance styles have their origins from different regions in India. As such, the sahitya comprises of not only Sanskrit but also regional languages.

This paper will be discussing the interrelationship of Indian classical dance, language and literature. It will be an attempt to study some of the types of Indian literature that is not only interpreted and enriched by Indian classical dance but literature that also enriches Indian classical dance.

Key words : *Indian classical dance, abhinaya, sahitya, kavya, visual poetry.*

INTRODUCTION

India has one of the richest and oldest literary traditions in the world. The earliest literature which was transmitted through the oral tradition is in Sanskrit. All knowledgeable writings were in Sanskrit. There are three main stages in the history of Sanskrit literature – Vedic, Epic and Classical.

The Vedas comprised of the Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. The Vedas not only form the foundation of Indian religion and philosophy but they are the earliest, priceless treasures of Indian poetry. The Rig Veda, especially, was a collection of sacred hymns – the first example of Indian poetry filled with rich poetic imagery, spirituality and philosophy. The Vedic Rishi was indeed a poet of a high order. This can be seen from the use of the language, metres, similes, literary expressions while giving picturesque descriptions of natural phenomenon in the hymns, etc. In fact, the poetic expressions found in the Vedas seem to have influenced the later poets of the classical age.

The Epics comprise of the Ramayana of Sage Valmiki and the Mahabharata of Sage Vyasa. Known as 'Adikavya', the Ramayana was the first metrical composition after the Veda. Later Sanskrit poetry was modelled on the Ramayana due to the vivid description of the situation, the portrayal of the feelings and emotions, the figures of speech etc. The central theme of the Ramayana is the victory of righteousness over evil. Rama is the ideal son, brother, husband and king. In contrast, Ravana represents evil and immorality due to his lust. Sita is regarded as the epitome of chastity and Hanuman, the true example of devotion and loyalty. The epic abounds in colourful characters, each different from the other. Due to its interesting plot, its religious and spiritual teachings, the Ramayana became popular not only in every Hindu home but its fame spread across the boundaries of India. In India itself, the Ramayana story was retold in many Puranas. Different versions of the story arose in Sanskrit. The most important is the Adhyatma Ramayana which is a philosophical version of the epic. Its influence can be seen in the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas in Hindi. The Rama story has been retold in every Indian language. Kamban's Ramavataram or Kamba Ramayanam in Tamil, Gona Budda Reddy's Ranganatha Ramayanam in Telugu, Madhava Kandali's Saptakanda Ramayana in Assamese, Ramcharitmanas in Awadhi by Tulsidas are just a few examples apart from the versions in Bengali, Kannada, Odia, Malayalam, Marathi, Kashmiri, Gujarati, Urdu, etc.

The Mahabharata of Sage Vyasa has a wider range with respect to its contents and has an intellectual approach. The epic is a narrative of the Kurukshetra war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Establishment of 'dharma' or righteousness, leading a virtuous life to attain peace of the soul and not forsaking one's duty are the teachings of the Mahabharata. Due to myriads of characters in the Mahabharata, the epic portrays the whole gamut of human emotions. The characters of the epic such as Yudhishtira – the embodiment of righteousness, Vidura – the epitome of wisdom, Bhishma, Dhritarashtra, Arjuna, Bhima, Kunti, Draupadi, Duryodhana, Karna, etc. have been so popular that they have formed the central themes of later regional

versions of the Mahabharata. Outside the Indian subcontinent too, several versions of the Mahabharata arose. The epic has also influenced modern regional literature.

Classical Sanskrit literature consists mainly of drama and poetry apart from certain scholarly writings and fables. Sanskrit plays belonging to this period comprises of the works of Bhasa, Ashvaghosha, Kalidasa, Shudraka, Dandin, Harsha. The greatest works of poetry of this period are the five Mahakavyas or 'epic poems' of Kalidasa (Raghuvamsham and Kumarasambhavam), Bharavi (Kiratarjuniya), Magha (Shishupalavadha) and Sri Harsha (Naishadhiyacharita). Scholarly works included writings on astrology, astronomy (Varahamihira), mathematics (Aryabhata). Works on Niti Shastra included the Panchatantra and Hitopadesha. Other notable prose writings included Vetala Panchavimshati, Shuka Saptati, Kathasaritsagara (Somadeva) etc.

LANGUAGE AND DANCE

Language is a method of human communication. This communication can be either spoken or written and consists of the use of words in a structured and conventional way. Every Art form is a language in itself, only the medium of communication varies. Painting uses the medium of lines and colours, sculpture uses stone, bronze etc., in music sound is the medium and in dance it is the human body that forms the vehicle of artistic expression. Communication in dance is non-verbal and it is the language of the body that is a powerful means of expression. The act of communication in dance is known as 'abhinaya'. There are four types of abhinayas viz. angika, vachika, aharya and sattvika. Angikabhinaya deals with the use of hand gestures, facial expressions and the entire human body to communicate. Vachikabhinaya deals with music (both vocal and instrumental) and literature. Aharyabhinaya is concerned with costumes and make up. Sattvikabhinaya is the communication of the psychological aspects through the physical movements.

India has the priceless treasure of seven traditional forms of classical dances. Each dance form is uniquely different from the other and has its own independent characteristics. The seven classical dance styles originate from the different regions of India. Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, Mohini Attam and Kathakali belong to the Southern States of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala respectively; Kathak belongs, to the Northern parts of India; Odissi hails from Odisha and Manipuri has its origin from Manipur. Each dance style reflects the ethos of the soil from where it has originated. The traditions, customs, mannerisms and lingual peculiarities of the region influence the dance style. Every dance style has its own pattern of body movements, music, costumes which is what makes it different from the other. These movements, music, costumes etc. are the result of the culture of their places of origin. "Concepts conveyed by actions are not

particular to a body language alone but pertain to a culture as a whole. They may be shared by one or more idioms of movement; in being familiar with them one is familiar with the culture within which they are performed.”ⁱ (Puri, 1998, p.251). In other words, it is the natural way of living of the people of a particular region ‘lokadharmi’ or realistic, that gets translated into an art form that is ‘natyadharmi’ or stylized.

The two main aspects of Indian classical dance is ‘nritta’ or non-representational dance and ‘nritya’ or abhinaya i.e. representational dance. Nothing specific is conveyed through nritta. It is the sheer beauty of movements through geometrical patterns traced by the body that is conveyed through nritta. On the other hand, it is nritya or abhinaya that takes up the entire responsibility of communication in Indian classical dance. Abhinaya is the very soul of Indian classical dance. Artistic thoughts, emotions, feelings depicted in literature are expressed through each and every muscle of the face (upangas), the single (asamyuta) and double hand gestures (samyuta hastas), angas (major limbs) and pratyangas (minor limbs) of the body. Thus, it is literature or ‘sahitya’ that plays a very major role in the abhinaya of Indian classical dance. Amongst the various forms of literature, it is poetry or ‘kavya’ that is significant to dance. Dance is concerned with the portrayal of the deepest of feelings, every subtle nuance of an emotion in an artistic manner. The creativity expressed through the words of the text is translated by the creativity and imagination of the dancer through the four abhinayas. Thus, it is poetry or kavya that leaves a deep impression in the mind of the reader. Subtle ideas and emotions can be expressed only through kavya because of which it also has the inbuilt strength of interpretations and re-interpretations. These are the very requirements of the abhinaya of dance. Moreover, since poetry or kavya is in metrical form, it has an innate rhythmic character which makes it suitable to be set to rhythm and melody in dance. As such it is kavya that is explored in the abhinaya of Indian classical dance.

The regional influence plays an important role in Indian classical dance, as such, apart from Sanskrit, literature of the regional language is used. Tamil, Telugu and Kannada literature is interpreted in Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi employs literature in Telugu, Mohini Attam and Kathakali use Malayalam, the poetry in Kathak is in Hindi and its dialects like Awadhi, Braj bhasha. Odissi has sahitya in Odia and Bengali and Manipuri in Maithili, Brajabuli.

LITERATURE AND DANCE

Thematic Content of Dance:

If one studies the background of the classical art forms in India it can be seen that arts in India are deeply rooted in religion. The purpose of the Indian arts was not simply entertainment.

They were designed to play a greater role in human life. They had to fulfil the two lofty aims of creation of 'rasa' or aesthetic enjoyment and attainment of 'moksha' or salvation. In addition, the Bhakti Movement that spread throughout the length and breadth of India embraced within its fold all the art forms. Arts became a vehicle through which the teachings of the saints and poets could be disseminated. Dance and music became a part of temple rituals. The best of literature that was created during this period was painted, sculpted, danced and sung in the temples. The hymns in Tamil of the Alvars (Vaishnavite saint poets) and the Nayanmars (Shaivite saint poets) reached the common man through dance and music. The Gita Govinda of Jayadeva written in Sanskrit spread throughout the length and breadth of India and occupies a very significant place in the dance repertoire even today.

It is then no wonder that because of its temple background and its deep association with religion, philosophy and spirituality, the epics, puranas and other religious literature formed the content of the traditional repertoire of Indian classical dance. Later, when the arts of dance and music were also affected by the court culture, secular literature too became a part of the content of dance. As such, one can observe a unity as well as a diversity in the thematic content of the seven tradition dance styles of India. Apart from the above, lyrics both, religious and secular were specially created for dance by the regional poets and thus emerged the genre of 'dance literature'.

Bharata Natyam – The abhinaya of Bharata Natyam consists of items such as varnams, padams, kirtanams, viruttams (shlokas) which are philosophical in nature and javalis which are secular. The compositions of Kshetrappa, Ghanam Krishna Iyer, Annamacharya, Purandaradasa, Swati Tirunal, Dharmapuri Subbarayar, Patnam Subramanya Iyer, Arunagirinathar, Arunachala kavirayar, etc., as also the Ashtapadis of Jayadeva and the Pasurams of the Alvars and Tevarams of the Nayanmars, compositions of the four brothers of Tanjavur, popularly known as the Tanjore Quartette, who belonged to the early 19th century – Chinnaiah, Ponnaiah, Shivanandam and Vadivelu are a part of the repertoire of Bharata Natyam.

Kuchipudi – The present day solo dance form Kuchipudi was once a part of the theatre forms known as Kuchipudi Yakshaganam and Kalapam. As such, Kuchipudi has a rich tradition of dramatic literature Bhama Kalapam written by Siddhendra Yogi, Golla Kalapam by Ramaiah Sastri. Tirtha Narayana Yati's Krishnalilatarangini in Sanskrit and Parijatapaharanam in Telugu, Tyagaraja's operatic works like Nauka Charitram, Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam etc.

Mohini Attam – The Ashtapadis from Jayadeva’s Gita Govinda form a significant part of the content of Mohini Attam. Apart from this, abhinaya is delineated to the padams, javalis, varnams of poets like Swati Tirunal, Irayiman Thampi, the Tanjore Quartette ,etc.

Kathakali – The literary compositions used in Kathakali are known as ‘Aatta Kathas”. Arts like Kuttu, Kudiyyattam, Krishnattam, Ashtapadiyattam have a direct influence on the art of Kathakali and Aatta Kathas. The stories of the Aatta Kathas are based on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Aatta Katha writings as a branch of literature has more than five hundred Kathakali plays. Some of the well-known ones are Nalacharitam, Uttarasvayamvaram, Kichakavadham, Dakshayagam, Kirmiravadham, Kalyanasaugandhikam, Bakavadham, Narakasuravadham, Subhadraharanam, etc.

Kathak – The repertoire of Kathak comprises of abhinaya items like thumris, bhajans, padas, dadras, horis and ghazals. Besides the Ashtapadis of Jayadeva, the padas, thumris and rich literature in Brajbhasha, Maithili, Magadhi, Hindi, Awadhi belonging to saint-poets like Tulsidas, Mirabai and the Ashtachaap poets Kumbhandas, Surdas, Krishnadas, Paramanandadas, Govindsvami, Chitasvami, Nandadas and Chaturbhujadas. Besides the above, the thumris of dancer, poet and composer Bindadin Maharaj that portray Krishna bhakti in all colours is an important part of the repertoire of Kathak.

Odissi – The Ashtapadis of Jayadeva have been a part of the literature employed in the abhinaya of Odissi since centuries. Apart from the Gita Govinda, lyrics penned by the Odia poets for dance such as the compositions of the Trinity of Odissi music based on Radha-Krishna - Kavisurya Baladeva Rath, Gopalakrishna Patnaik and Banamali, the secular songs of the Odia poet Upendra Bhanja. The impact of the Gita Govinda can be seen in all the love lyrics of the medieval period.

Manipuri - The spread of Gaudiya Vaishnavism advocated by the saint-poet Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of Bengal on the land of Manipur resulted in the worship of Radha-Krishna. Manipuri dancing has been enriched not only by the Gita Govinda but also the literary works of poets like Chandidas, Vidyapati, Gyandas, Narottamdas. The padavalis of these poets are in Brajbuli, old Bengali, Sanskrit and Brajbhasha. Apart from this there are also poems in Manipuri which form a part of the dance repertoire.

IMAGERY IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE:

The best poetry is that which can create ‘rasa’ through suggestiveness which, as Anandavardhana says, is the soul of poetry. Ideas and concepts both, aesthetic as well as

philosophical, can be conveyed very effectively through imagery. The poetic imagery found in the Vedas was an inspiration for later creative writings. The Epic period gave rise to the concept of a Personal God. The attachment between God and man have taken the forms of Teacher and student, Father and son, Mother and son, Master and servant, Friend and friend and the highest relationship among all these, that of the Lover and the beloved which came to be known as 'madhura bhava' or 'nayika nayaka bhava'. The concept of madhura bhava has given rise to many schools of bhakti which has permeated all the classical arts of India including classical dance and music. The Puranas speak about the conflict between the gods and the demons. In this connection, innumerable legends are found therein. The most significant in terms of imagery is the 'Churning of the Ocean' or the story of the 'Amrutamanthana'. It is highly philosophical in nature. The Ocean suggests our soul. When churned, initially its poison or impurities come out. Further patient churning brings forth the hidden treasures of the heart and finally the Amrita or Nectar.

In the epic poems, the image of the perfect human form is portrayed. For example, the heroes like Rama, Yudhishtira are described as Ajanubahu – arms reaching the knees, Vishalanetra – long eyes reaching the ears, Prasannamukha – pleasant face, etc. Their majestic gait is compared to the elephant (gaja), lion (simha).

Poets of the Classical Age followed and perfected the entire field of artistic imagery and anatomy. The human form, grace, movements were compared to the flowers, birds, animals, etc. The loveliness of the nayaka's / nayika's face, eyes, palms, feet are compared to the lotus. This imagery is found even later during the Bhakti period. For example, poet Tulsidas describes the beauty of Lord Ramachandra as follows: "... navakanja lochana kanja mukha kara kanja pada kanjarunam". The lotus finds a very prominent place in Indian literature both, Sanskrit as well as Prakrit. The best type of woman was called 'Padmini'. Kalidasa's Shakuntala is of the Padmini type, as such, the bee hovers around her face mistaking it to be a lotus.

The moon too is a very commonly used imagery in Indian Sanskrit and Prakrit literature that has also found its way into the abhinaya of Indian classical dance. The face of both, the nayaka as well as the nayika is compared to the lustrous full moon.

"canda – sarisam muham te..."ⁱⁱ (Basak, 1971, 3.13).

i.e. "candra – sadrsham mukham tasyaah" meaning", "Her face is like the moon".

The other images of feminine beauty found in literature that have inspired Indian classical dance are those of the swan and the deer. The gait of the nayika is compared to the graceful

swan (hamsi gati) and her eyes are like those of the deer (Harinakshi). The swan is also portrayed as a messenger. For example, in the story of Nala Damayanti found in the Mahabharata, King Nala sends the golden swan as his messenger to convey his love and his deepest feelings to Princess Damayanti.

The imagery of not only humans but also nature acting as a messenger of love found in literature is perhaps one of the greatest influence of Indian literature on Indian classical dance. The character of the 'sakhi' or confidante is not only very common but also very important to a woman in love. She is the one whose empathy towards the nayika and nayaka makes it possible for the whole drama of love to unfold. She arranges the secret meetings of the lovers, conveys their messages and takes every effort to unite them. Later, when the Bhakti cult influenced literature and God became the Divine Lover and the bhakta the Beloved, the role of the Guru or Spiritual Preceptor was assigned to the sakhi. Literature abounds in instances where the role of the messenger is not confined to only humans but is taken up by the parrot, swan, cuckoo, cloud, etc.

“To the imaginative mind of the Indian, no conception of an object, no enthusiasm for a thing, is possible without seeing in it what is more than apparent. The expressed words of his poetry must carry a world of suggestion far beyond them; the notes of his music must be rich in subtle overtones. Things must have a halo; in them, he must see the symbol and image of something higher and something deeper, something which converts his physical activity into a spiritual process.”ⁱⁱⁱ (Raghavan, 2002, p.232).

CONCLUSION

Poetry has had a tremendous influence on Indian classical dance. The literary style, imageries used have inspired dance and dancers. Dance is visual poetry or 'drishya kavya'. The dancer is not just contented with the primary or word to word meaning or the 'padartha'. She has to understand the suggestive meaning and then create a whole new literature of literal meaning (padartha), elaborated meaning (vinyasa) and finally the suggestive meaning (expressed through the sanchari). In other words, the dancer too is a poet. She creates poetry through the movements of her body. She interprets and re-interprets the underlying subtlety of the lyrics through her subtle expressions and gestures. Thus imageries found in poetry have been transformed by the dancer as the vinyasas in dance.

Language has never been a barrier for Indian classical dance. Similar ideas and thoughts have been expressed in the literatures of different regions. Similar motifs are used in all regional

kavyas. This is because of the continuity of tradition found in Indian literature that also focuses on the unity in diversity which is the very foundation of Indian culture.

The thematic content of Indian classical dances have also undergone changes. In addition to the traditional poems in the regional languages, classical dances are using literature belonging to other regions. For example, it is not uncommon to find a Bharata Natyam dancer interpreting a song in Hindi, Marathi or Gujarati. This, one can say, is the need of the hour. Dance has transgressed regional borders. Indian classical dance has become not only a national but an international art form. So it is not surprising that there are Aatta Kathas based on the lives of Buddha, Gandhi and Christ. Poets have composed on new themes based on Othello, Cindrella, etc. ^{iv} Moreover, there is an increased awareness among dancers about the rich regional literature that is available, in fact, waiting to be explored. A classic example is the poem in Malayalam 'Kubja' (based on Kubja - the mythological character) especially written for Mohini Attam by the Late Kerala poet, dramatist, Kavalam Narayana Panicker. He was inspired by the collection of poems known as 'Ashtapadi', written by the Odia poet Sitakant Mahapatra. Apart from mythology, historical themes, folk literature and contemporary literature too are being explored by the Indian classical dancer. Literature is intimately connected with Indian classical dance. There is a storehouse of Indian poetry awaiting multiple interpretations by the Indian classical dancer. The dancer has to just widen her horizons and embark on the long, creative and artistic journey.

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