

Bharata Natyam

Bharata Natyam, one of the most popular and better-known Indian classical Dance styles, is a subtle, sophisticated and graceful dance form. Its antiquity dates back to Rig Vedic hymns and the Indus valley civilization of Mohenjo-Daro. It developed from Natyasastra, the treatise written by the great sage Bharata. At the request of the gods, Natyasastra was conceived by Brahma, and written by sage Bharata under Divine inspiration. Natyasastra expounds the aesthetics of dance and drama. It is the fountainhead of all the classical dance styles of India, including Bharata Natyam, the ancient dance form of the Tanjore devadasis. The word "Bharata" in Bharata Natyam is, according to one view, an acronym composed of: **Bh**ava (emotions), **ra**ga (melody), and **ta**la (rhythm).

Creation of divine beauty is the *raison d'être* of dance. As sage Bharata puts it, "dance is occasioned by no specific need; it is done because it creates beauty." In Natyasastra the art of classical dance is divided into three broad divisions: Nritta, Nritya and Natya. Nritta, meaning pure dance, consists of bodily movements and dance patterns that are decorative and aesthetically pleasing but convey no specific narrative meaning. Nritta evokes aesthetic pleasure in the minds of viewers by its visual beauty and rhythmic richness. In contrast to nritta, nritya means interpretive or expressional dance. In nritya, the lyrics are interpreted and portrayed through stylized hand gestures, facial expressions, mime and action. Rasas or emotions and sentiments that are universal in nature are at the heart of nritya. Natyasastra expounds nine rasas: Shringara (erotic), Vira (valor), Karuna (poignant), Adbhuta (wonder), Raudra (anger), Hasya (comic, ridicule), Bhaya (fear), Bibhatsa (disgust), Shanta (equanimity). Even when the overt emphasis is on Shringara, the underlying import is always of Atma (individual soul) seeking union with Paramatma (Divine). In natya, the third aspect of dance, the drama element is involved along with expressions, mime, action, dance movements and the use of spoken words.

One of the striking features of classical Indian dance is the use of hastas, the language of hand gestures. Natyasastra deals with the topic of hastas in detail. The language of hand gestures is so vast

that it enables the dancer to express practically anything and everything, including the abstract concepts of truth and beauty. The hand gestures are also used to describe the time element e.g. to convey a time interval between the eighth of the waxing moon and the full moon, the dancer turns the 'ardhachandra' hasta into 'alapadma' hasta thereby suggesting the passage of time.

Abhinaya, meaning acting, is another important aspect of classical Indian dance. Natyasastra classifies abhinaya into four parts. Angika (gestural), conveyed by bodily movements; Vachika (vocal), conveyed by spoken words; Aharya (extraneous), consisting of costume, ornaments, makeup, decoration and props etc.; Satvika (emotional), conveyed by manifestation of internal feelings.

Angika abhinaya receives special treatment in Natyasastra. The body is subjected to minute observation and every movement of the angas (major limbs), upangas (minor limbs) and praty-angas (parts of the body and features) is explored. A distinct language of hand gestures, as indicated above, is codified. The movements of eye, neck, face, and torso are described in detail with meticulous care.

Natyasastra deals with Satvika abhinaya in great detail. Satvika, meaning internal feeling or sentiment, manifests itself in tears of joy, change of color, change of voice, trembling, fainting, etc. In a woman in love, it shows itself in instinctive amorous gestures, bashfulness, or in a sense of confusion that arises out of excessive joy.

As Mulraj Anand puts it, "Flowers open in the hands of the dancer, and birds fly off from the tips of fingers, the body sways, now in pride and now in devotion, each muscle of the face is transformed, the eyes move in blandishment or scorn, and the eyebrows express horror or suspicion, even as the whole face expresses different and often contrary feelings in the same breath - such a dance-drama, performed according to the most delicate nuances of a musical piece, or a poem through the vehicle of one body, is surely unmatched in any art."

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