

# Abhinaya, the Path to Rasa

Sudha Regunathan

An integral part of classical dance in India is *abhinaya*. It does not recognise barriers of language or region, nor even of styles, call it Bharatanatyam, Kathak, or Odissi. It is the universal language of India, even if its currency be limited to the elite. In this respect, it is the counterpart of Sanskrit.

*Abhinaya* literally means 'to bring before the eyes, as if face to face with the spectator'. There are, no doubt, aids such as speech, costume, and bodily movement (on the stage), all of which are subordinate to the most significant, viz. *sattvika* or emotional representation. This is where the eyes, the face and the hands are used—not freely but in a stylised manner that is calculated to evoke in the spectator the same feeling that attended upon the creation of the poem that is being represented. In other words, the purpose of *abhinaya* is to recreate the poem or lyric in all its intensity and subtlety. This concept is underlined in the famous dictum of Bharata on *bhava*. Thus let it be recognised that *abhinaya* takes its origin in poetry.

Now, *bhava* may be interpreted as 'causing something to be' (from root *bhoo*), the sense in which all the aids in *abhinaya* (sets, costume) are employed so as to create the impression of something other than what is seen. But the finer sense of the word implies 'affecting the viewer' the way the artist wants for his purpose. This aesthetic transmission, if one may call it so, is what Abhinavagupta seems to imply when he cites the analogy of the musk and the clothes where communication (of fragrance) occurs even without contact, through the medium of air. In this sense, *bhava* pervades the mind of the spectator, as it emanates from the poet *via* the dancer's *abhinaya*.

A powerful device which aids the dancer in this effort is what is known as *sadharanikarana*. This can be interpreted as universalisation through depersonalisation. It is this removal of the elements of time, space and personal identity that turns it all into an experience that viewers can share, *each according to his own light*.

(This, by the way, accounts for the differing levels of aesthetic relish in the audience.)

*Sadharanikarana* takes place on the stage all the time. Visually, it is the costume that depersonalises an actor, to turn him into the character he portrays; the sets transform the stage into a garden or palace. What we are concerned with here is the depersonalisation by which the dancer turns herself into a *nayika* in order that the emotional content of the lyrical statement emerges aesthetically as it is transmitted through *abhinaya*. Even though the emotion is intense and personal, it is not personalised; there is seldom a name mentioned, or if mentioned at all, it is universal, like Krishna. The outcome of all this is that anybody can share the experience; it is the *rasa* that calls for immediate cognition.

Besides, it is this aspect of universalisation that keeps a *rasa* from descending into emotional outburst, even in the dancer. The moment she is swayed by the emotion which she seeks to represent, stylistically, *rasa* slips away. Her purpose is—or, should be—at all times to recreate before the audience a vibrant form of the lyrical poetry.

This is where, it seems to me, dance stands apart from drama; whereas an actor's aim is to step into the role he seeks to play, the dancer does not. For, her forte is the ability to relate emotions of subtlest shades, impersonally.

While the drama-stage employs *sadharanikarana* in relation to *aharya*, *vachika* and *angika*, it is in the field of *sattvika abhinaya* that the dance-stage applies *sadharanikarana* (though *angika* would also be involved, to a small extent). Thus it is that a dancer is able to render *abhinaya* while seated (without body movement) and without any props like costumes or make-up. She is, in a sense, a lyrical narrator employing the face and hands to communicate, in the language of *abhinaya*.

If the validity of this trend of thought is recognised, it is easy to perceive what *abhinaya* is not, viz. mono-acting, which occurs when a dancer acts out different roles, switching places on the stage. It seems to me that unmindful use of narrative and apostrophic songs has led to aggravate the confusion. When a dancer employs gestures and poses to denote the numerous characters on the stage (as in a coronation scene) or acts out the role of the many princes who came

to try their hand in breaking the bow of Siva, she can't be said to be doing *abhinaya*, whatever be the merit in such display. The song '*Bhavayami Raghuramam*', ascribed to Svati Tirunal, is an example of the kind of intrusion that has changed the complexion and character of the dance-stage. There is not a line that is feeling-oriented; events and the description thereof characterise the composition which seeks to cover the story of Rama. Tyagaraja's '*Saadinchene*' in Arabhi is another example, followed by innovations such as excerpts from Tulsi or Kamban. All this happens once we forget that *abhinaya* takes its origin in lyrical poetry; emotion is its sap. In the choice of music, it is good to recognise that *rasas* and *nayikas* are central. Emotions are no doubt conditioned by events—both when they happen and fail to happen. But the event is important only to that extent, not more; it cannot supersede all else and occupy the stage when *abhinaya* is the preoccupation.

Let me illustrate. In the *padam* '*Nettrandi nerattile*', an event—the lover's affair with the 'other woman'—is employed as a module which helps to launch the capsule of emotion, so to speak. Freely rendered, it reads:

By the stream, at dusk yesterday,  
Who was it that came so close and beckoned to you?  
When you and she stood, face to face  
my dear Lord Kanda,  
as you drank of wine through your eyes,  
I was there—a little away.

Time was when you came to me,  
as if you were mine;  
Words fell like pearls from your lips  
and you made me sick with love.

The 'event' is just a backdrop; once stated, it has lost its use. It is the effect on the *nayika* that is significant. Her injured pride is the point of focus. How it manifests itself is the relish. For, while she knows of deceit, she is neither angry nor hopeless. As she speaks of the days of yore and the level of intimacy, she seeks to admonish through recall, unlike the *khandita* who would tell him to go where his heart delights. The charm of the lyric is the mild colours in which the portrait is painted. The blend of self-pride and attachment to the man is what is described as *anurakta manini*. To depict her, to dwell upon her, and to ponder on her is *rasa*. □

*Library*