

Perspectives on Continuity and Transformation in Indian Classical Dance

Ms. Anju Bennie Bennie

Assistant Professor, Performing Arts, REVA University

Abstract

This article examines the continuity and transformation of Indian classical dance through a historical and conceptual analysis grounded in the *Natyasastra*. It begins by exploring the early conception of dance as an integral component of *nāṭya*, where *nṛtta* functioned primarily as an abstract, aesthetic embellishment within dramatic performance. Tracing the evolution into the medieval period, the study highlights the emergence of *nṛtya* as an expressive form, shaped by the incorporation of mimetic and emotive elements, particularly within the *Uparūpaka* traditions. The shift from *mārga* to *deśī* practices further contributed to the regional diversification of dance, eventually leading to the formation of distinct classical traditions. Despite these transformations, the article argues that a strong conceptual continuity persists, particularly through the centrality of *abhinaya*. Drawing on the theories of *rasa* and *bhāva*, it examines how *abhinaya* functions as the primary medium for aesthetic communication. The study further analyses the transformation of *caturvidha abhinaya* in performance practice, noting the transition from theatrical to predominantly non-verbal, solo formats. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that Indian classical dance evolves through adaptation while remaining deeply rooted in its foundational aesthetic principles.

Keywords: *Natyasastra*, *Nṛtta*, *Nṛtya*, *Nāṭya*, *Mārga*, *Deśī*, *Rasa*, *Bhāva*, *Abhinaya*, Dance History, Indian Classical Dance

Early Conceptions of Dance within *Nāṭya*

The performing arts tradition of India spans over two millennia, embodying a continuous evolution of aesthetic, cultural, and philosophical thought. In tracing the historical trajectory of Indian dance, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, attributed to Bharata Muni (c. 2nd century BCE–2nd century CE), remains the foundational treatise. It conceptualises *nāṭya*, broadly understood as drama, a composite audio-visual art form that integrates dance, music, gesture, dialogue, and stagecraft into a unified performative experience. This raises an important question: if *nāṭya* fundamentally denotes drama, why do contemporary Indian classical dance forms continue to draw upon the *Nāṭyaśāstra* for their theoretical foundations?

From a close reading of the *Natyasastra*, it becomes evident that “dance” was initially conceived as an integral component of drama. In the ancient period, dance was primarily understood as *nṛtta*—the non-representational, abstract form—whose purpose was to enhance visual beauty. The fourth chapter of the text, *Tāṇḍava Lakṣaṇa*, elaborates on this concept. Bharata Muni states: “Śobhāṃ prajāyayed iti nṛttaṃ pravartitam”—*nṛtta* is that which generates beauty (Unni).

According to the *Natyasastra*, *nṛtta* was introduced into theatrical performance during the staging of the first drama, *Amṛta Manthana*. At the behest of Shiva, Bharata was instructed to incorporate *nṛtta* into the *pūrvaraṅga* (the preliminary ritual segment). Śiva then directed his attendant Tandu to teach Bharata and

his disciples the techniques of *nṛtta*, including *karaṇas* and *aṅgahāras*¹. As this technique was transmitted by Tandu, it came to be known as *tāṇḍava*. With the inclusion of *nṛtta*, the *pūrvaraṅga* evolved from *suddha* (pure) to *citra* (embellished), marking a shift toward aesthetic enrichment.

Emergence of Nṛtya in the Medieval Period

If *nṛtta* functioned primarily as a decorative component within *nāṭya*, how did dance evolve into an autonomous art form? Over time, dance began to absorb expressive elements from drama. In the *Natyasastra*, Bharata outlines ten types of dramatic forms known as the *Daśa Rūpakas*. By around the 10th century, there emerged the *Uparūpakas*—shorter, lighter, and more specialized dramatic compositions characterized by an increased emphasis on music and bodily expression, with relatively limited use of speech (Tandon).

Simultaneously, various medieval Sanskrit texts introduced a new category of dance known as *nṛtya*, the expressive dance form. It may be inferred that the integration of mimetic and expressive elements into the abstract movements seen in the *Uparūpakas* enabled dance to acquire narrative and emotional depth, ultimately leading to the emergence of a distinct category identified as *nṛtya*.

The conceptual ambiguities that existed during the medieval period appear to have prompted theoreticians to formulate clearer distinctions between terms such as *nāṭya*, *nṛtta*, and *nṛtya*. In works such as *Daśarūpaka* (10th century), *Saṅgīta Ratnākara* (13th century), and *Abhinaya Darpana*, we encounter broadly similar definitions of these three categories, although with slight variations. Drawing from the *Abhinaya Darpana*: (Ghosh)

Bhāvābhinaya-hīnaṃ tu nṛttaṃ ityabhidhīyate

“That which is devoid of *bhāva* and *abhinaya* is called *nṛtta*,” referring to pure rhythmic dance without emotional expression.

Rasa-bhāvābhinayādi-yuktaṃ nṛtyam ityabhidhīyate

“That which is endowed with *rasa*, *bhāva*, and *abhinaya* is called *nṛtya*.”

Nāṭyaṃ tannāṭakaṃ caiva pūjyaṃ pūrvakathānvitam

“*Nāṭya*, also known as *nāṭaka* (drama), is a sacred art form enriched with traditional narratives drawn from the epics and *Purāṇas*.”

Furthermore, it is evident that dance gained significant emphasis and prominence during the medieval period, as many treatises included dedicated chapters on dance, while others were composed exclusively on the subject. Notable examples include *Nṛtta Ratnāvalī* (13th century), *Abhinaya Darpana* (13th century), and the *Nṛtyādhyāya* of Ashoka Malla (14th century). These works reflect the growing autonomy of dance and its theoretical consolidation as a distinct discipline (Bose).

From Mārga to Deśī: Regionalisation of Dance Traditions

During this period, *nṛtya* flourished in diverse regional (*deśī*) forms, marking a clear shift from the earlier *mārga*-based framework and reflecting the cultural ethos, language, and social milieu of different regions. Medieval theoreticians broadly classified dance into two categories: *mārga* and *deśī*. The *mārga* tradition adhered strictly to the principles of the *Natyasastra* and was therefore regarded as the “established path.” In contrast, *deśī* referred to regional practices that evolved in response to local cultural contexts.

¹ In *Natyasastra*, *karaṇas* and *aṅgahāras* are identified as the fundamental units of abstract dance (*nṛtta*). A *karaṇa* is defined as a coordinated movement involving the integration of the hands, feet, and body, while an *aṅgahāra* refers to a structured sequence or combination of such *karaṇas*.

While the *mārga* tradition remained prominent until around the 10th century, the subsequent development of regional languages and literary cultures led to the proliferation of *deśī* forms, resulting in multiple variations and reinterpretations of the earlier *mārga* framework (Bose). Over time, particularly by the 20th century, these diverse traditions were systematised and refined, culminating in the formation of the classical dance forms as they are recognised today. Each of these forms embodies the cultural identity and aesthetic sensibilities of the region from which it emerged.

Conceptual Continuity: Nṛtta and Abhinaya

Despite these regional and stylistic diversifications, a fundamental structural continuity underlies all Indian classical dance traditions. Irrespective of classification, they comprise two interrelated components: the abstract (*nṛtta*) and the expressive (*abhinaya*). While *nṛtta* establishes the kinetic and rhythmic framework, *abhinaya* imbues the performance with emotional and narrative depth. The manner in which these two elements are rendered within each tradition contributes to its distinctive aesthetic identity. It is within this expressive dimension that the concept of *abhinaya* assumes central importance.

The term *abhinaya*, first articulated in the *Natyasastra*, is derived from *abhi* (“towards”) and *ni* (“to lead”), meaning “to lead towards” (Unni). It refers to the process by which the performer guides the spectator toward the experience of *rasa*—the aesthetic relish. *Rasa* arises through *bhāva*. Bharata defines *bhāva* as that which generates *rasa* (*bhāvayati iti bhāvaḥ*). Importantly, *bhāva* is not a personal emotion but a consciously enacted emotional state associated with a character. Through *abhinaya*, the performer renders these *bhāvas* using codified techniques of gesture, expression, and movement. The transformation of *bhāva* into *rasa* occurs through *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* (universalisation), a process whereby individual emotions transcend personal specificity to become aesthetically experienced. This aesthetic experience emerges through the dynamic interaction of three entities: the performer, the character, and the spectator (*sahṛdaya*) (Venu). The performance thus functions as a bridge, transporting the spectator into an altered experiential state.

Bharata Muni identifies four modes of expression, known as *caturvidha abhinaya* for *natyam*. These include *āṅgika abhinaya*, which pertains to bodily expression through gestures, posture, and facial movements; *vācika abhinaya*, which involves verbal and vocal expression; *āhārya abhinaya*, referring to costume, makeup, and other visual elements; and *sāttvika abhinaya*, which denotes the inner, psychological expression that manifests as genuine emotional experience. Together, these four modes constitute the comprehensive framework through which meaning and emotion are communicated in *Natyam*.

Transformation of Abhinaya in Classical Dance Practice

The integrated *caturvidha* (the four fold) *abhinaya* of *nāṭya*, as outlined in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, underwent significant transformation during the medieval and modern periods. When *nṛtta* gradually evolved into *nṛtya* by incorporating expressive elements, spoken dialogue (*vācika abhinaya*) was largely replaced by lyrical and musical renderings delivered by accompanying musicians. The performer interpreted the *sāhitya* (text) through stylized bodily movement.

Simultaneously, *āhārya abhinaya* underwent simplification. The group-oriented *nāṭya* tradition, with its character-specific costumes and makeup, gave way to solo performance formats. In these solo presentations, the dancer adopted a single unified costume (*ekāhārya*) and portrayed multiple characters through rapid shifts in gesture, facial expression, and posture—a technique known as *pakarnattam* (role

transformation or “exchanging roles”). Consequently, *abhinaya* in classical dance evolved into a primarily non-verbal, highly codified mode of acting. It became rooted in the seamless integration of āṅgika abhinaya and sāttvika abhinaya, combining technical precision with expressive mimesis.

While the theoretical framework of abhinaya remained consistent, its modes of practice underwent significant transformation. The practice of *abhinaya* varies significantly across dance forms. Kathakali employs a highly stylised, exaggerated mode of expression, whereas Kuchipudi tends towards a more naturalistic approach. Differences in gesture usage, body language, tempo, and expressive intensity demonstrate that while emotions may be universal, their modes of representation are culturally and stylistically distinct.

In conclusion, the continued reliance of Indian classical dance on the Natyasastra can be understood not as a contradiction, but as a reflection of its adaptive continuity. Although dance originated as an integral component of *nāṭya*, its gradual evolution through *nṛtta* and *nṛtya* enabled it to emerge as an autonomous art form. This transformation was further shaped by the shift from *mārga* to *deśī* traditions and the subsequent regional diversification that gave rise to the classical forms we recognise today.

Yet, despite these historical and stylistic changes, the fundamental objective of performance—*rasānubhava*—remains unchanged. It is through *abhinaya*, in its evolving forms, that this aesthetic experience is realised. The enduring relevance of the Natyasastra lies precisely in this continuity: it provides not only the origin of Indian dance, but also the conceptual framework through which its evolving forms can be understood.

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