

FACETS OF SRNGARA

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Any ideas expressed by a performing artiste of contemporary Bharatanatyam who sees her work in the foreground of a wide perspective which includes theory and sastras on the one hand and the gurusishya parampara on the other would have to be governed by her individual attitude to an ancient art in the modern context.

Attitudes towards the aesthetics of art are very subjective and personal. They are ruled by personal preferences, innate sensibilities, and consciously cultivated taste.

My personal approach to bhava-abhinaya is dependent on my taste in music and poetry, and my reaction to arts such as painting and sculpture. I see dance as the classical scholars would describe it: *drśya kavya*-visual poetry. The soul of poetry is dhvani, just as the soul of music is melody. Poetry and music have been inspiring forces in my exposition of abhinaya. With this in mind let us view the role of vyabhicari bhava in abhinaya.

The art of expression in general is denoted by the term abhinaya. Bharata and the Natyasastra define the 4 types of abhinaya - angika, vacika, aharya and sattvika. Through abhinaya the artistic manifestation of human nature is effected in art. It is the catalyst that is indispensable to the realisation of rasa.

Emotions portrayed in dance are easily identifiable by the rasika. But the artiste uses her skill in expression to put a distance between mundane emotional perspectives and artistic evocation of feeling. The artiste's imagination infuses emotions with facets and dimensions for which her inspiration comes from two sources - poetry and music.

A poet views life-situations and incidents with a different eye. The artiste can transmute those ideas into the poetry of histrionics. In the case of traditional Bharatanatyam-the dance form that has come down to us through gurus - the second source is undeniably music. To be more precise—melody. The slow but yet sparking variation in melody which etches the outline of bhava in a raga provokes histrionic variety. The variations of melodic patterns in a padavarnam or a padam inspire changes in mood-interpretations which the dancer can exploit.

It is these changes in mood which are called transient mental states-vyabhicari or sancari bhavas which come and go, and leave their impress on the flowering of rasa. The Natyasastra lists, thirty three vyabhaicari bhavas as being accessory and temporary, which are fleeting moments of expressed emotion and which aid the manifestation of the principal rasas. Bharata's list is not

exhaustive because the Natyasastra goes on to add variations and later writers have considerably enlarged the list. Furthermore, scholars from Abhinavagupta to the present day have spoken at length on the interchangeability of bhava wherein sthayi bhavas can become vyabhicari bhavas making the realisation of rasa a very intricate process.

From the oral tradition that has come to us, one point emerges clear. Srngara rasa reigns supreme. I use the present tense because it is so to a large extent in contemporary practice also. There may be deep rooted socio-cultural and historic reasons for this but that is not our concern here. The music specifically composed for dance dwells on srngara - this is largely true of contemporary practice. The classical padavarnams, padams and javalis are dominated by srngara imagery. They form the major part of our repertoire. "New" compositions have been taken up for dance, with the ostensible motive of promoting bhakti as a rasa. In the practical treatment of bhakti, dancers have been known to resort to the narrative element to captivate their audience. Elaborate storytelling, which requires very quick and provocative role changes generally tends to veer away from what I understand to be the basis of bhava-abhinaya. Particularly, there is little or no detailed development of vyabhicari bhavas. Song lines are repeated to build up the narrative, and such a delineation dispenses with variation in melody, finding mere repetition adequate for progressing with the story. However these "new" compositions which are being popularised have not completely replaced the old

padavarnams in their majestic raga outlines, the padams with their depth of raga bhava and the javalis with their delicate sangatis. They may have an occasional impact with slick handling by an artiste well-versed in showmanship. These expositions do find appropriate rasikas in modern India.

However, if one were to take Bharata, Abhinavagupta, Bhoja *et al* seriously, we must understand the role of vyabhicari bhavas in the realisation of rase. The sastras- and this aspect of the sstras is hardly even aired in the contemporary cultural boom-speak of the cultivated, keen and highly sensitive sahrdaya. The rasika should earn the title "sahrdaya" by cultivating his capabilities of experiencing rasa. His responsibility in the process of realising rasa is no less than that of the artiste. To experience the ananda (bliss) of rasa, a slow, almost imperceptible flowering process should evolve wherein the vyabhicari bhavas should play a major role in making not only the product but also the process delectable.

In this context it is not inappropriate to bring to the attention of dance-lovers the alarming decline of subtlety in contemporary practice. The cultivated aesthete who should be the core of the audience which seeks rasa, would do well to give the performing artist a helping hand in encouraging alternative venues. Smaller, well appointed theatres, more suitable for Indian art than the colonial proscenium stage would contribute towards this idea. An intimate atmosphere would kindle a keen interest in the concept

of bhava. This would be the starting point for the renaissance of vyabhicari bhava in Bharatanatyam. Until a conscious effort is made to get such a movement to take root in our modern cultural milieu, rasa for all the text-book eloquence it enjoys among dancer-orators and pundit-writers will become a more elusive ideal !

Let us now examine the possibilities in practice. The dominant rasa in dance compositions is, as mentioned earlier, srngara. Bhakti is not absent in these compositions which extol the love of a devotee towards Tyagesa of Tiruvarur or Gopala of Muvva. The poet follows the path of *madhura* bhakti. The nayika is portrayed in all her sensuous glory. Poetry such as that from the pen of an Annamacharya or a Kshetrappa, is undeniably erotic. But they were penned in another age, by another people who adorned their temples with *mithuna* sculpture. The aesthetic allure of such poetry needs a sensitive rasika who can see its beauty. The imaginative analogies in situations or delicate intrigue between man and woman form the core of the poets' expression of srngara towards his Lord. The erotic is a suitable ornamentation. The spirit is devotional. The expression is sensuous. A poetic idealism pervades these compositions making srngara and bhakti complement each other. Srngara has been accepted as the king of rasas. It has the command of the largest number of vyabhicari bhavas. This is obviously due to the duality of srngara-love in union (*sambhoga*) and love in separation (*vipralambha*).

Let us now consider *vipralambha srngara* as seen in the popular *padavarnam* in Tamil in the raga *Bhairavi*: "*Mohamana enmeedil nee inda velyil*".

As I do with all dance compositions, I never divorce the individual lines or stanzas from the context of the *varnam* in its entirety. Going through the lyrics one realises that the nayika is suffering from separation.

She has not been altogether abandoned. It seems like a temporary condition wherein she entertains a great deal of hope for union with her beloved. The text does not give scope for indignation (*mana*) towards her beloved.

Perhaps the nayaka is dwelling abroad (*pravasa*) However there is no curse (*sapa*) that has caused this separation. So, my focus here on a nayika who is hopeful. She does not, although she address her beloved, seem to be facing him. One can perhaps deduce that since the nayaka is Tyagesa, His presence is everywhere, and therefore the nayika, like Sri Andal in her *pasurams*, speaks to her beloved with an immediate intimacy.

The nayika describes her own condition in a simple and direct manner. The gist of it being, "I am in love.... and I cannot bear this separation. There is an anxiety (*cinta*) which she can indicate with actions of fatigue, sighing and trembling. She displays a condition of being discouraged (*nirveda*). She suffers from harbouring doubts. "Will he come? won't he come?"

She looks with anticipation into the distance. There is apprehension in her glance (sanka) She is restless indicating agitation in her mind (avega). She fidgets, unable to put her mind to any normal activity. On the contrary even those activities which she is supposed to enjoy such as music, the company of her friends, etc. she now abhors.

She is distracted. She becomes impatient. Her state — disliking all activity and every thing around her is called *kriyadvesa*. Indications of her restlessness are in fitful dream-filled sleep (supti) or in complete sleeplessness.

There is a sense of exhaustion (glani). She is tormented (tapa). She is dejected (dainya). Tears fill her eyes, and her breathing is heavy with sighs. All this is a result of sankalpa (longing for her beloved). A veil of despair clouds her (visada). She is unaware of her surroundings, unaware of her own actions, and oblivious of others. She is weary (srama).

This love-lorn nayika finds solace only in smrti (recollection). She speaks aloud of her beloved. His qualities, His love for her, hers for him. Of His greatness. At the moment she is forthright, at another, shy. As her condition worsens, she becomes, so it seems, physically ill and although even this is a passing phase, she imagines her condition approaching what the sastras call unmada (insanity), and finally marana (death).

Thus we see that the nayika is in a state of great confusion before her anticipated meeting with her beloved. Only

her imagination which recreates times gone by brings a smile to her lips lighting up her face and eyes. But in her cinta she reverts back to restlessness, trembling and sighing.

In this varnam, her tormented state is further accentuated by Manmatha and his arrows of flowers. The awakening of Rati by these flowers creates a more poignant situation. Rati when it is not fulfilled causes sickness, and provokes desire.

An artiste who has evolved to understand the implications of this gamut of emotions should also know that translating them into the poetry of dance cannot be done by following prescribed movements or mudras. A guru can guide only. But to portray vyabhicari bhavas an artiste has to seek resources from within herself and exercise her imagination and individuality. The technique, no doubt, has to be mastered. But the goal of rasa is reached by being unconscious of technique! Improvisation would make each performance different. Inspiration can make new ideas flower spontaneously.

Innovation in this context is guided by tradition. It can neither be obvious nor melodramatic. There is a strength in the subtlety with which one vyabhicari bhava literally flowers into the next, painting a delicate picture of transient colours.

Let us now take another facet of vipralambha srngara as seen in a khandita nayika. The nayika could be the one in the surati padam "*Indendu vachitivi ra*".

Here the vipralambha srngara is the very interesting situation called Mana Vipralambha — (indignation directed towards the beloved).

The nayika has perhaps gone through the trepidation of separation and all its attendant effects on her. Now her beloved returns but she wants to teach him a lesson. She deliberately indulges in anger. It is an anger far removed from krodha (raudra). It is a situation called Pranaya Mana—A lover's quarrel. It is mingled with Irsya Mana — which displays jealousy.

The vyabharis which contribute to this mana vipralambha srngara can be sankha (apprehension) asuya (jealousy), capalata (inconstancy), amarsa (indignation), avahittha (dissimulation) and ugrata (anger).

Further this is an ideal situation for certain sthayi bhavas to get transformed into vyabharis. First a sense of humour (hasya).

Smiling, jesting (smita-hasita), laughing (vihasita) and ridiculing (upahasita) are the different fleeting shades of hasya in its garb as vyabharis bhava. These contribute towards the establishing of mana vipralambha srngara in a khandita nayika.

Secondly, there is mock sympathy (karuna).

She seems to say : "My beloved You must be tired after a sleepless night. It is a pity you cannot find your way by the light of the full moon."

She appears agitated in her display of sympathy. Her behaviour is perplexing.

She can become more explicit in her disappointment by being peevish. She wants to show her disapproval by displaying disgust (bibhatsa). There is sarcasm in her display of disgust. She implies that she is displeased—even revolted at the sight of her lover. She is averse to speaking to him, to his touching her. In fact all his advances are bound to be rebuffed in no uncertain terms.

Another ploy she might use is adbhuta (wonder): her wonder, her disbelief at his actions: her surprise at his waywardness; her shock at his ill-founded confidence in seeking her affection; her stupefaction at his nonchalance. Yet she is in full control of her own position of strength in the brief that she is right and he is the wrong-doer. These are traits of a sviyanayika. She chides and mocks her beloved and enacts a series of changing moods which range from mild anger to an uncontrolled state of indignation.

She is however still in love! Her humour is sardonic. Her sympathy contrived. Her disgust exaggerated. Her anger petulant. She looks as if she wants to be subdued. And that power is held by the affection of the nayika. She acts a dhiradhira—one who alternates between constancy and prudence on the one hand, and on the other vexes her beloved by hurting him with her sarcasm and putting him to shame.

It is obvious that portraying such a nayika requires subtlety. The vyabharis

should come and go enhancing the strength of srngara rasa. Any exaggeration which does not fit into the pattern would become rasabhasa. There is simply no room for melodrama. That would lower the situation to the level of the ludicrous.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasise that in contemporary practice, if artistes and rasikas feel a strong commitment towards rasa, then a close examination of texts in relation to performance should be undertaken. The role of vyabhicari bhavas should be understood. Secondly to

perceive bhava and to help an artiste to fulfill the norms of tradition, a proper environment should be created for performance. Finally a new generation of aesthetes should be educated to keep the river of tradition flowing.

Bhava is the soul of our dance forms. It is bhava that makes our dance stand apart from Western dance. It is the responsibility of the leaders of our cultural renaissance to ensure that the intricacies of bhava abhinaya which has very ancient roots in our soil are not lost in zealous modern patronage. □

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