

Beauty to Bliss: Philosophical and Spiritual Perspectives on *Nṛtta*

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Abstract

This paper is a philosophical inquiry into the concept of *nṛtta* (non-representational dance) examining its relationship with beauty and the innate joy (*harṣa*) it evokes, drawing from Indian philosophical traditions and aesthetic principles. Building upon my previous research which defined non-representational *nṛtta* as 'the *anubhāva* for the *vyabhicāri* of *harṣa*', this paper investigates the origins of beauty and joy of *nṛtta*. Through an analysis of extracts from the Nāṭyaśāstra, I examine the need for the graceful style of *kaiśiki vṛtti* which gave rise to the use of *nṛtta*. The paper then explores a profound philosophical view on the origin of joy. Drawing from the cosmic dance of Lord Śiva, the study suggests an *ādhyatmic* view that *nṛtta* can lead to *śānta rasa*, transcending fleeting emotions to reveal the eternal bliss of the soul. From the beauty of the body to the bliss of the soul, the paper proposes a paradigm shift in the conception of *nṛtta* – from the *anubhāva* of the *vyabhicāri* of *harṣa* to the *sthāyi* of *ātmajñāna*, reflecting the eternal quest for *ānanda* in life. Through a combination of philosophical analysis and experiential perspectives, this study offers insights into the spiritual dimensions of non-representational *nṛtta*.

Keywords

Nṛtta, Karaṇa, Ānanda, Rasa

Introduction

'According to my conception, the true spirit of Art comes not from a knowledge of Art alone but from a knowledge of Truth and from possessing the true religious spirit' – Rukmini Devi Arundale (Arundale, 1951).

The art form of dance is a peculiar one. At the apparent, the body strides the stage, yet beneath the surface, it is the soul that takes the center stage. 'Dance is the hidden language of the soul'¹ often echoes the world of dance. In the Indian philosophical traditions, the nature of the soul is bliss. Now, *nṛtta* or what is known as abstract or non-representational dance, is able to produce an innate joy within its dancer. This inherent capacity of dance renders it a universally desired art form, pursued for its personal transformative experiences. And this is perhaps the religious spirit of which Rukmini Devi spoke. While the performance of dance must be bound by the *rasa dharmas*² due to the presence of the spectator, the practice of it is capable of a unique and individualistic joy.

In my previous paper as part of my PhD thesis (Hoskere & Navaratna, 2024), I proposed the following definition of non-representational *nṛtta* in an attempt to align it within the framework of the *rasasūtra* (dictum on *rasa*)³ and the aesthetic principles of performance:

¹ A popular statement by a dancer of the American modern dance movement Martha Graham (Lynn, 2004)

² *Rasa* refers to the aesthetic experience in art. It involves the enjoyment of *bhāva* or emotion through sublimation from the personal realm (Mason & Patwardhan, 1970). *Rasa dharma* is the framework of *aucitya* (propriety) outside of which there is no *rasānanda*.

³ The *rasa sūtra* says *vibhāva-anubhāva-vyabhicāri-samyogād-rasa-niṣpattiḥ*. It outlines a structure for the experience of *rasa*. It proposes the identification of the *sthāyi bhāva* - the dominant emotional state of the narrative, the *vibhāvas* - causative factors and their expression - expressed through the *anubhāvas* and further enriched by the *vyabhicāri bhāvas* or transient emotional states. This essence of aesthetic experience constitutes the core and artistic objective of the principles and methodologies suggested in the Nāṭyaśāstra.

“Non-representational *nṛtta* is defined as the *anubhāva* for the *vyabhicāri bhāva* of *harṣa* (joy).”

This idea is further substantiated by a comparative analysis between the discussion on *nṛtta* given by Bharata in the 4th chapter and the description of the *vyabhicāri bhāva* of *harṣa* given in chapter 7. The study stated that non-representational movement and dance in life is a bodily reaction to the fleeting emotion of joy and its reflection in art therefore classifies it as an *anubhāva*⁴ to the *vyabhicāri* of *harṣa* (joy). Along with this was the elucidation of aesthetic frameworks of its use and purpose in performance using canons of *rasa*, *dhvani* and *aucitya*.

Building upon these basic aesthetic principles, we now explore a more *ādhyātmic* view of non-representational *nṛtta*, finding our way into its ethereal realms. The *nṛtta* of the Nāṭyaśāstra consists of the *kaṛaṇas* which are aesthetic movements of the limbs codified as 108 in number and their combinations in *angahāras*, *maṇḍalas* etc. Bharata defines a *kaṛaṇa* as ‘*Hastapāda samayogo nṛttasya kaṛaṇam bhavet*’ or ‘*The coming together of the hands and feet in movement is called a kaṛaṇa*⁵’. If joy is an emotion of beauty, what is this connect between the beauty of the body and the joy of the soul that *nṛtta* brings together? Herein lies our quest in the present discussion: to unveil the depths of the origin of joy woven within the very fabric of *nṛtta*. The study uses a hermeneutic approach to answer these questions by interpreting select extracts from the Nāṭyaśāstra using a subtle layer of *vedāntic* philosophy.

1. Origins of beauty: *Nṛtta* and the *kaiśiki* style

When the first ever play (*nāṭya*) was staged by Bharata using three *vṛttis*⁶, he is asked by lord Brahma to make use of a fourth variety of *vṛtti* called the *Kaiśiki vṛtti*. Sage Bharata then asks Brahma to give him the things required to put into use the *Kaiśiki* style. He then says,

Nṛttāṅgahārasampannā⁷ rasabhāva kriyātmikā ||
Drṣṭā mayā bhagavatō nīlakaṇṭhasya nṛtyatah |
Kaiśikī ślakṣṇaipathyā śṛṅgāra sambhavā||

नृत्ताङ्गहारसम्पन्ना रसभावक्रियात्मिका ||
दृष्टा मया भगवतो नीलकण्ठस्य नृत्यतः |
कैशिकी श्लक्ष्णनैपथ्या शृङ्गाररससम्भवा ||

-Nāṭyaśāstra (NS) Chapter 1, verse 44-45 (Unni, 2019)

This is the first instance of the concept of *nṛtta* in the Nāṭyaśāstra. Bharata says, “I have seen the dance of Nīlakaṇṭha (Śiva) which has *rasa* and *bhāva* as its soul where *nṛtta* and *angahāras* are used. In this I have seen the *kaiśikī* style being used appropriate to *śṛṅgāra rasa*.” Bharata further says that it cannot be adequately portrayed by men and that it could be represented only by women.

In this context, the usage of *nṛtta* and *angahāras* has been very clearly stated to be in the use of the *kaiśikī vṛtti* or graceful style. The instances of *nṛtta* given by Bharata in chapter 4 strongly suggest their alignment with the *kaiśiki* style, particularly evident in

⁴ Anubhāvas refer to the bodily reactions of a *bhāva* (emotion) through *vāk* (speech) and *anga* (gesticulation/movement of limbs)

⁵ In this paper, I use *nṛtta* largely to refer to this *kaṛaṇa-mārga-nāṭyaśāstric* tradition of non-representational dance unless specified otherwise.

⁶ Bhāratī, Sāttvatī, Ārabhaṭī and Kaiśikī are the four *vṛttis* which form the foundation of *nāṭya* (NS 4.25).

⁷ Some versions have it as *mrdvāṅgahārasamyuktā*

the prevalence of *sukumāra prayōga*⁸ examples to be used in *śṛṅgāra rasa*. The sculptural evidence of this is also available from of *karaṇa* sculptures in south Indian temples which mostly have the female figures in the dancing moments of the *karaṇas* (Subrahmanyam, 2003). The practical performance of the *karaṇas* (as reconstructed by Dr. Padma) also elucidate that this layer is inherently present within the movements of most *karaṇas* (Subrahmanyam, 2022).

However, a pertinent query emerges here: What necessitated the inclusion of the graceful style of *kaiśikī vṛtti* and thereby *nṛtta*? Let us examine this philosophically. When we look at the ancient Indian conception of beauty, a pattern emerges. Beauty is often used to surpass the external and enter the internal, for in the embrace of the worldly realm lies the tutor of deeper spiritual truths⁹. The Indian temple stands as the quintessential example of this. It is designed with rich architecture and sculptures full of exquisite beauty in form, craftsmanship and content on the peripheral levels, and the serene oil lamp illuminating the *vigraha* of the deity within the *Garbhagrha*. Philosophically, one enters and surpasses the path of *kāma* (desire) to reach *mokṣa*. Similarly in dance, the beauty brought out by the *kaiśiki vṛtti* is a stepping stone to the internal layers.

The dance being performed by *Śiva* is recollected by sage *Bharata* to whom it appears as though this *kaiśikī vṛtti* would be unsuitable for men to perform. However, when lord *Śiva* himself performs the *angahāras*, he is the one who is beyond gender, and his performance becomes full of beauty and *rasa*. Here not just one, but every external worldly layer has been surpassed and thus what gleams in lord *Śiva*'s dance is his internal brilliance.

Thus, in the concept of *nṛtta*, if the *kaiśikī vṛtti* represents the external, what is the inner realm? In Indian aesthetics, the sole occupant of this inner realm is *rasa*, and so we ask: What is the nectar that dwells in the blossoms of *nṛtta*?

2. Origins of joy in *nṛtta* – a profound philosophical view

It is well established that dance or *nṛtta* came from *Śiva*. He is the lord of dance – *naṭarāja* or *mahānaṭa*. In the *nāṭyaśāstra*, we see *Śiva* himself sharing his dance with *Bharata*. When *Bharata* presents his *samavakāra* of *samudramathana* at the Himalayas in front of lord *Śiva*, *Śiva* is pleased and appreciates the play. He then says,

Mayāpi idam smṛtam nṛttam sandhyākāleṣu nṛtyataa |
Nānā karaṇasamyuktairangahārairvihūṣitam ||

मयापीदं स्मृतं नृत्यं सन्ध्याकालेषु नृत्यता ।
नानाकरणसंयुक्तैरङ्गहारैर्विभूषितम् ॥ NS 4.13

“I remember the dance that I perform in the *sandhyā kāla* (evening). It is ornate with several *karaṇas* and *angahāras*”, says *Maheśvara*. Here, we have *Śiva* himself telling *Bharata* that he has conceived a dance, ‘*nṛtta*’, and he considers it to be beautiful and fit to be used in *nāṭya* whose essence is *rasa*. We know from section (1) above that what *Bharata* had witnessed of *Śiva*'s dance was full of *rasa*. Undoubtedly so. The question

⁸ There are two usages of *nṛtta*. *Sukumāra prayōga* is the delicate usage and *uddhata prayōga* is the vigorous usage of *nṛtta* (Subrahmanyam, 2003).

⁹ See *The Concept of The Beautiful in Sanskrit Literature* (Raghavan, 2008) for more

then arises, from where did *Śiva* create this dance? Why does the one who meditates in stillness and is the enlightened *yogi*, enjoy and perform something so physically dynamic as dance? At this junction of the discussion, I wish to dig deeper into the nature of *Śiva*, *nr̥tta* and *ānanda*. The three concepts are invariably interlinked in *śāstric*, traditional and philosophical traditions. What is this web of mystique around the dance of *Śiva* and the dance of *nr̥tta* (*karaṇas* and *angahāras*) performed till today?

Cidānandarūpaḥ śivōham says a simple line from Adi Sankarācārya's Nirvāṇa śatakam – “*The innate nature of the self is ānanda or eternal conscious bliss*”. This is the most supreme yet basic philosophical foundation of the concepts of *Advaita Vedānta* (Murty, 1959). This eternal bliss is the freedom of the soul from cycles of dualities of life– pain and pleasure, birth and death. In art, through the experience of *rasa*, pains of sorrow are supposed to become pleasurable on account of allowing for a detachment from the personal realm. Abhinavagupta terms *rasānanda* to be a momentary *brahmānanda* (Hiriyanna, 1951). This has been the most widely accepted commentary on the theory of *rasa* in the study of the *rasaśāstra* which is recognized till today.

In the *rasa* theory, one can find eight *sthāyi bhāvas* or dominant emotions (NS 7.6) (Ghosh M, 2002). These lead to eight *rasas* respectively. They are triggered by *vibhāvas* and surface as visible emotions through *anubhāvas* through *vāk* and *anga*. In my previous paper, I argued that *nr̥tta* is the *anubhāva* for the *vyabhicāri bhāva* of *harṣa*. *Harṣa* is joy. In the worldly realm, joy is fleeting, and thus, its usage in performance must reflect this fleeting nature befitting of its usage in *śṛṅgāra* and sometimes *vīra rasas*.

But, if according to Indian philosophy, the true nature of the soul of the *jīva* is bliss or *ānanda* (Hiriyanna, 1993, p.406), then is this *bhāva* of *ānanda* not eternally dormant within us? While this is a deeply spiritual and philosophical question, the likes of *Ānandavardhana* and *Abhinavagupta* have brought up such queries in their discussion of the *śānta rasa*. Even rāja Bhoja, the author of the *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa* brings up the notion of *harṣa* as a *sthāyi bhava* of *ānanda rasa* in his text *Sarasvatīkaṅṭhābharaṇa* (Raghavan, 1978). *Ānandavardhana* argues that the *sthāyi bhāva* of *śānta* is *tr̥ṣṇāksaya sukha* translated as the happiness which is the dissolution of all desires (Raghavan, 1940). This is later commented upon by *Abhinavagupta*. He says that the *sthāyi* of *śānta rasa* is the *sthāyi par excellence* – the *ātman* itself. *Ātmajñāna* is concluded to be the *sthāyi bhāva* of the *śānta rasa* and he says that all other *sthāyi bhāvas* arise from here (Sreekantaiyya, 1953). The dance of *nr̥tta* was created and given by *Śiva*. *Śiva* is the *mahāyōgi* who is eternally in the state of *ānanda*. Thus, the *sthāyi bhāva* that gave rise to his dance is *ānanda* or *ātmajñāna*. Spiritually and philosophically therefore, arising from this eternal conscious state of bliss of *Śiva* was born his dance of *nr̥tta*¹⁰. And it is this dance that was given to Tāṇḍu who then taught it to Bharata who codified it in chapter 4 of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. When portrayed briefly, this *nr̥tta* is indeed a befitting *anubhāva* for the *vyabhicāri* of *harṣa*. If, however, we incorporate it in the depiction of *śānta rasa* it must come from the *sthāyi* of eternal conscious bliss.

If one were to witness *Śiva* dancing non-representational *karaṇas* and *angahāras*, one would experience *śānta rasa*. *Śiva* is the embodiment of *sthiti* and *gati*. He is the static and still in penance and he is *mahanaṭa* or *Naṭarāja*, the dynamic dancer. “Once the

¹⁰ Even in the other kinds of *tāṇḍava* other than the *ānnada tāṇḍava* mentioned by scholars like the *rudra tāṇḍava* etc. (Coomaraswamy, 1957), *Śiva* brings forth anger only when required for the establishment good in the world. It is an anger that is completely in his control and his true state of *ānanda* is never truly disturbed.

citta-vṛtti of a person is peaceful, there is no problem even if he jumps about, dances, or acts. His every action merges into his person” (Ganesh, 2019). The ānanda within him is eternal, thus, such a dance arising from him is capable of *śānta rasa* or simply *rasa*. The *karaṇas* codified in the nāṭyaśāstra embody this philosophical, psychological and physical concept of *sthiti* and *gati*¹¹ and its pedagogy reconstructed by Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam too applies it in a deeply conscious and meticulous manner (Ganesh et al., 2022). Therefore, apart from being used as an *anubhāva* for the *vyabhicāri bhāva* of *harṣa*, *nṛtta* can also become the *anubhāva* for the *sthāyi bhāva* of *ātmajñāna* for in this state, the dance of *nṛtta* can lead to *śānta rasa*. The *ātmajñāna* - the knowledge of the nature of the *ātman* or self in the sense of a *sthāyi bhāva* evokes a freedom of the illusion of attachment of a soul. It is perhaps for this very reason that Dr. Padma redefines *nṛtta karaṇas* as: “*ātma kāya samāyogaḥ nṛttasya karaṇam bhavet – A unison of the ātman (soul) and kāya (body) in dance is a karaṇa*” (Subrahmanyam, 2003). In the depths of her redefinition exists the cosmic lineage of the dance that originates in the *ānanda* of lord Śiva himself illuminating the sublimity of the *nṛtta*.

Discussion

Beauty and bliss are the two essential values in the concept of *rasa* and in this discussion on *nṛtta*, we see a clear and wholehearted welcoming of both these concepts through the dance of śiva – from the perceivable beauty of movement to the imperceivable bliss of the soul. The empirical validation of the theories discussed herein rests solely upon the experiential realm of dance. And as one dances those movements that have embodied in them the Ānanda of Śiva, one is able to experience the freedom of the soul revealing itself in a sublime physiological way through the tranquility of the *Śānta rasa*. While the extent to which the unbroken tradition of Śiva's *nṛtta* has been preserved and transmitted to contemporary generations may be subject to debate, those who have experienced the dance of the *karaṇas* cannot overlook the innate tranquility embodied within the complex movement systems. For the fleeting *harṣa*, the dance of any *nṛtta* like the *deśi* (regional) styles is sufficient. However, based on the discussions of this paper, I argue that it is the movements of the *mārga* technique that truly embody the essence of a divine source of ānanda, thereby possessing the potential to serve as *anubhāvas* in evoking the *śānta rasa*. In other words, this theory describes a plausible upgrade from the ephemeral *harṣa* to the eternal *ānanda*, from tangible beauty to *sublime rasa* and from the worldly *kāma* to the divine *mokṣa* – all while zooming into just the singular aspect of *nṛtta*. While the truths of these theories will be defined and redefined in the specifics of an individual's experience through time, owing to the curious nature of the ancient Indian, there already exists an enormous body of literature philosophizing *adhyātmic* experiences that can assist the modern Indian in their quest of knowledge of intuitive and experiential phenomena in the practice of art.

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¹¹ *Sthiti* refers to the static and *gati* is the dynamic. The two concepts are embedded in the *mārga* tradition of dance (Subrahmanyam, 2010).

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