

BHARATANATYAM: THE CRESCENDO OF NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Human beings have been expressing their complex and abstract feelings or emotions through non verbal forms of communication. Dance is one of the greatest and special forms of non verbal communication. In dance, the human body is used as a medium or instrument which transforms itself from the realm of movement to the realm of meaning. This paper is an attempt to focus on dance as not only a tool of non verbal communication but also a tool of conveying a wide range of stories, emotions, feelings, etc. symbolically and didactically.

KEYWORDS: Dance, Angika, Mudras, Gestures, Postures, Non Verbal Aspects of Communication in Dance

INTRODUCTION

Bharatanatyam: The Crescendo of Non Verbal Communication

Besides verbal form of communication, human beings use many behavioral patterns to make others understand messages more clearly. These behavioral patterns can be visual, aural or gestural which speak more directly and clearly than words because words have their own limitations:

“Words stain
Crack and sometimes break,
Under the burden; under the tension,
Slip slide, perish, decay with impression.” (T.S. Eliot. 207)

Therefore, most of the times we rely on pitch, tone, gestures, postures, facial expressions or eye contacts, i.e. non verbal form of communication, to convey what we want to. We receive a lot of information intentionally or unintentionally just by looking at whatever happens around us.

Fine Arts: One of the Greatest Forms of Non Verbal Communication

There are various forms of non verbal communication. A fine art is one of the greatest forms of communication in the world through which many abstract, invisible or complex feelings and emotions can be expressed easily. The artists symbolize the intended messages and codify them and allow the spectator or viewer to decode and interpret the hidden messages or meanings. The vehicle they use to convey reaches simultaneously to the mind and the heart of the beholders and the language they use is the language of imagery, symbolism, gesture or body movements.

Dance: Representative of All Arts

Many artists and scholars believe that among various forms of fine arts, dance art was the very first fine art.

As we all know, the impulse of dance is inborn, and is capable of solving many purposes. It serves communication as a common language of signs and movements through which one is not only able to express one's sentiments, emotions or feelings but can also release, elevate or understand inner conflicts, tensions, fears, aspirations,

hopes or ideals. According to Krishna Sahai dance is, "... a harmonious expression that reveals the inner nature of things, regardless of the subject, where the theme, expression, content and form are in balance." (12)

Being the very first visual commentary on concrete manifestations of thought and composite form of all arts, dance can be regarded as a representative of all arts to understand the culture of a society as it has been used as an important medium to preserve, perpetuate and develop the experiences, knowledge, culture or customs of society from one generation to another.

Dance in India

In India, dance has been an integral part of every performing art and the very essence of cultural performances. Laban has rightly said,

"The dance is the mother of the art. Music and poetry exist in time, painting and architecture in space. The creator and the thing created, the artist and the work are still one and the same thing. Rhythmical pattern of movement, the plastic sense of space, the vivid representation of a world seen and imagined, and these things man creates in his own body in the dance, before he uses substance and stone and word to give expression to his inner experiences." (Bruce 1)

In India, the panorama of Indian classical dances provides an answer to the unique, yet diverse cultural heritages of the different regions. It seems to uphold the truth behind the statement of 'unity in diversity' and the saying from the Upanishad i.e. 'the ultimate Truth is one but the paths leading to it are many' (ekam sat viprah bahube vadanti)'.

Evolution of Indian Dance

As far as the evolution of dance is concerned, traditional Indian studies and scholars accept that human beings have always been overwhelmed by the beauty of creation, which had infused the feeling of humility before the unknown 'power' behind all creations on this earth and inspired them to express themselves before the unknown power. This urge to express or communicate their beliefs, emotions or beautiful feelings gave birth to dance form. This unshakable faith and urge to worship the divine power found expression through dance. So, Indian classical dances are, by and large, a vivid narration of the moods, passions, tales, legends and exposition of philosophies and above all, a devotional offering which uplifts both the spectators and the performer.

Bharatanatyam Dance

The art of Indian classical dances like Kathak, Manipuri, Kathakali, and Bharatanatyam and so on is believed to be originated in heaven, and later on took different shapes. Although first two are the reflections of Hindustani music and other two are of Karnatic music, yet all of them are governed more or less by the principles and techniques enunciated in the Natya Shastra written by Bharata Muni.



Figure 1

Bharatanatyam: The Dance of Bharata

Although Bharata Muni's Natya Shastra is a source of all Indian classical dances, yet Bharatanatyam dance has an important place because it is considered as the dance of Bharata and a harmonious blending of 'bhava', 'raga', and 'tala'. Bharatanatyam dance is not only a dance form but also a source of expression of the greatest joy and fulfillment. It is the superlative form of the Indian classical dances involving all the aspects of dance, drama and music in it. In the words of Krishna Sahai,

"A Bharatanatyam performance is not just the culmination of years of practice and training, nor yet a symbol of tradition that fades into mythology. It is a visual interpretation of all the arts of India, of music and rhythm, literature, poetry, sculpture and painting. It is a mirror of universe, reflected through a series of emotional states. It is the final worship." (147)

This explanation shows that Bharatanatyam is the most sophisticated dance form with the intricacies of facial expression, gestures, footwork and costume. Therefore, it touches every possible aspect of non verbal form of communication. When Bharatanatyam is performed, it appears as if

"The dancer disappears and only the dance remains.

Then the dancer is the dance.

There is no dancer separate from the dance,

No dance separate from the dancer.

This is unio mystica." (Osho, Acharya Rajneesh) (Sahai 147)

Non Verbal Aspects of Communication in Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam is a classic blend of *Nritta* (rhythmic elements), *Nritya* (combination of rhythm with expression) and *Natya* (dramatic elements). This blend is known as 'Abhinaya'.

Abhinaya is the rhythmic expression of moods, emotions and a narrative through the use of mudra (hand gestures), *rasa* (facial expression) and *Bhanga* (postures of the body). It literally means the 'representation or exposition of a certain theme'. *Abhinaya* is derived from the Sanskrit root 'NI' meaning 'to convey' or 'to lead'. So *Abhinaya* is a state of being or feeling'. *Abhinaya* has four means of communication:

- *Angika* i.e the language of expression through the medium of the body, the face and movements;
- *Vacika*, i.e. the expression through words, literature or drama and their delivery;
- *Aaharya*, i.e. the expression through decoration such as proper costume, ornaments and make up; and
- *Sattvika*, i.e. the expression through acting out and manifesting the different states of mind and feelings or internal emotions.

So we can surmise here that *abhinaya* is not only an art of acting, but also an artistic process by which sentiments (*bhavas*) of a feeling or emotions are produced. In its rendering, the dancer has to follow one basic principle, i.e. every action of one side of the body must have equilibrium of other side of the body.

Among these four aspects of nonverbal communication, the *angika abhinaya* is the visible form of communication through bodily gestures and facial expression that is why it is primarily considered to be a nonverbal

communication mode. 'Angika abhinaya is the use of artistic gestures. Its rules regulate the actors' bearing, walk and movements of features and limbs'. (Natya Shastra. Viii. 11-15.)

As *Angika* means 'of the limbs', i.e. every part of the body capable of movement; that is why it is normally known as mime with a comprehensive sign language-a language of gesture' Petronius Arbiter rightly said,

"From a man's face, I can read his character, if I see him walk, I know his thoughts." (Burnaby 76)

The dance of Bharatanatyam depicts each and every object or emotion through gestures and body language. It is a gestural language reflecting a thorough knowledge of whole universe. The dancer uses her body as a language to express most mundane to the most abstract concepts or the most common to the uncommon emotions and feelings.

Head Gestures as Important Aspect of Communication in Bharatanatyam

The head gestures according to Natya Shastra (Chapter: viii) are of thirteen kinds while Nandikeshwara in *Abhinayadarpanam* mentioned only nine kinds. The *Sama* (level) is the head gesture, when the head is motionless but not bent or raised up, denotes not only the beginning of *nrtya* but also anger, pride, satisfaction and cessation of action. The nodding head (*Kampita* movement) is assigned to the head shaken up and down slowly denoting assert, direct perception, conversation, enquiry, asking a question or innocence, etc. *Alolita*, i.e. rolling movement of the head indicates distress, intoxication, frenzy or unwillingness, hesitation, obsession or sleeplessness, etc., whereas *Adhomukha* when the head is bent down denotes salutation, shame, grief and modesty. These head gestures can even be found in ordinary body language.

Neck Movements as Important Aspect of Communication in Bharatanatyam

Besides the head, neck movements are also peculiar in Bharatanatyam dance. In Natya Shastra, Bharata Muni mentions that, 'gestures of the neck are to follow the gestures of the head, and the head gestures are also reflected in those of the neck.' (165-66) Nandikeshwara in his book *Abhinayadarpanam* includes neck in *Anga's* while in other treatises it is included in *Pratyanga*. *Sundari*, *Tiraschina*, *Parivartita* and *Prakampita* are mentioned in *Abhinayadarpanam*. The *Sundari* movement, where the neck is moved horizontally, denotes the beginning of affection, effort, completion, width and approval with pleasure while *Tiraschina*, upward movement of the neck on both sides, is indicative of brandishing of a sword and the gliding of the serpent. The third neck gesture is *Paivartita* where the neck moves from right to left like a half moon, communicates kissing the cheeks and erotic dances, whereas the fourth kind, i.e. *Prakampita*, like a pigeon's neck, moves forward and backward, denotes you and I, swings, murmuring and counting.

Chest Movements as Important Aspect of Communication in Bharatanatyam

In the Natya Shastra, Bharata describes five chest movements 'the natural pose of equipoise: drawn in, in sorrow, fear, shame and modesty; heaved up in pride, courage and anger; raised, in viewing lofty objects, in yawning, and high purposes; shaken or flexed back and forth in weeping or laughter, or flexed rhythmically in the dance.' (Ragini Devi 36)

In Natya Shastra, 'in the exposition of sentiments the movements of the eyelids, lips, cheeks, nose or nostrils and chine' are classified and concisely defined.

Facial and Eye Movements as Important Aspect of Communication in Bharatanatyam

Among these parts of the face, eyes are given much importance in many treatises on dance and drama. The reason behind this is that in order to collect information, we normally look at the face of another person particularly in eyes as they are a window to the soul. Shakespeare wrote: "thou tallest me there is murder in mine eyes" (Lee Act 3, Scene V)

In Indian classical dances, the movement of the eyes along with eyebrows and eyelids play a very significant role and thereby serve two purposes: the one is that they focus on the attention of the spectators on the dancer and the second is that it enables the dancer to communicate her inner life. For example when Lord Shiva in His *Raudra* form opens His third eye on the forehead out of anger, it annihilates anything and everything. Therefore, eyes are one of the most reliable and dominant features of body language which helps in conveying the emotions like hate, fear, guilt, love, support and confidence etc.

In Natya Shastra, thirty six different glances and in *Abhinayadarpanam*, a variety of glance movements are described. For an instance, the *Avalokita* glance, i.e. looking down, is used to look at a shadow, bed, study, reflection, exercise, fatigue, etc. whereas *Nimilita*, i.e. closed eyes, denotes a snake, meditation, salutation, lunacy, muttering, being under another man's power or keen observation.

In the same way other eye glances also communicate specific messages or sentiments. Like eye glances, eye balls are also significant in the Bharatanatyam. Their circular movement expresses passion, fury or valor while the vertical and horizontal movements are indicative of wonder, emphasis, divine matters and heroism, fear, direction, mystery respectively. So it is very clear that the rhythmic movements of the eyes either semicircular or horizontal help in beautifying pure dance.

Hand Gestures as Important Aspect of Communication in Bharatanatyam

Hands or *Hasta Mudras* constitutes one of the most important topics in the practice and theory of Bharatanatyam. Although being highly complicated part of *angika abhinaya*, the *hasta mudras* of Bharatanatyam are a very highly developed aspect of art and are a means of communication with the Divine. Nandikeshwara emphasizes its importance in the following way, "Where the hand goes, the eye follows, where the eye goes, the mind follows and where the mind goes, *rasa* is born." (Ragini Devi 43)

Therefore, hand gestures play a very significant role in producing *Rasa*. They are a kind of sign language which is used for a variety of reasons such as to bring out inherent qualities, to convey deeper feelings, to mime the meaning of songs or to invoke the myriad forms of the Divine. So, *hasta mudras* help to describe elaborately any topic, idea or the mental state of the dancer. Natya Shastra and *Abhinayadarpanam* list numerous *mudras* with their meanings. In the Bharatanatyam dance there are two kinds of *Hasta mudras*: 1: *Asamyutha hasta* i.e single hands and 2: *Samyutha hasta* i.e. combined hands and sometimes *Nritta hasta* i.e. hands used only in *nritta* or pure dance. In Natya Shastra²⁸ and in *Abhinayadarpanam*²⁴ *Asamyutha hasta mudras* are described:

Pataka Tripatakordhapataka Kartareemukhaha

Mayurakyordhachandrashcha Arala Shukatundakaha

Mushtishta Shikarakyashcha Kapitha Katakamukhaha

Suchee Chandrakala Padmakosham Sarpashirastata

Mrugasheersha Simhamukho Langulasolapadmakaha

Chaturo Bramarashchiva Hamsasyo Hamsapakshakaha

Samdamsho Mukulashchiva Tamrachooda Trishoolakaha

Ashtavimshatihastha Naam Evam Naamaanivikramat. (M. Ghosh 93)

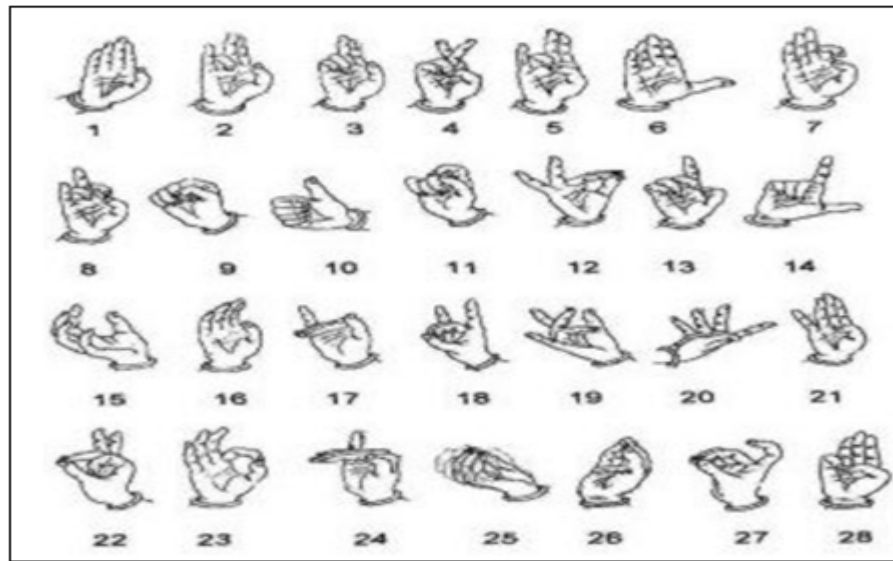


Figure 2

As mentioned in connection with 'Asamyuta hasta', *Samyuta hastas* are listed which again vary from one dance treatise to another. *Natya Shastra* and *Lasya Ranjana* mention thirteen and *Abhinayadarpanam* mentions twenty three *Samyuta hastas* which are as follows:

Anjalishcha Kapotashcha Karkata Swastikastatha

Dolahastha Pushpaputaha Utsanga Shivalingakaha

Katakavardhanashchiva Kartaree Swatikastata

Shakata Shankha Chakrecha Samputa Pasha Keelakau

Matsya Koorma Varahashcha Garudonagabandakaha

Khatwa Bherundakakhyashcha Avahitastathivacha

Chaturvimshatisankhyakaha Samyuta Katithakaraha. (M. Ghosh 104)

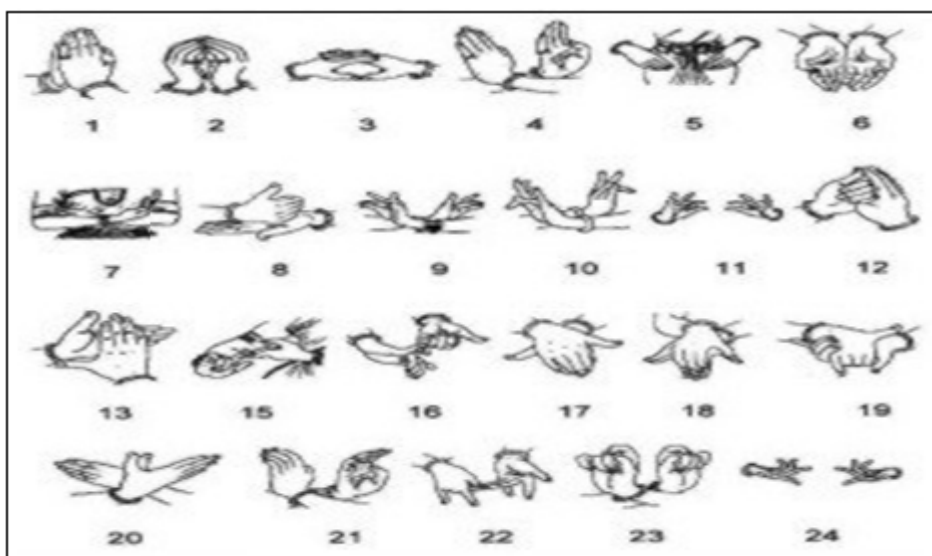


Figure 3

These numbers do not matter at all. What matters is this idea that the hand gestures communicate the ideas clearly and along with the facial expression, they play a very significant role in delineates particular meaning or information of the dancers. For an instance, the *alapadma* hand gesture, when held high above the head in the left hand, is symbolic of sun:



Figure 4

When a little lower with the right in *suchi mukha* towards it, then it signifies a palace or city:



Figure 5



Figure 6

Another famous hasta mudra is *Shikhara hasta mudra*, a closed fist with the thumb up, is used to symbolize the manifestations of the Divine power. It also symbolizes success, triumph, a pillar, making offering to manes, the upper lip, a tooth, questioning, something entered, saying no, recollection or the act of embrace and sounding a bell.

Nandikeshwara in *Abhinayadarpanam* describes the variety of hasta mudras and their uses. *Pataka mudra* in which the thumb is bent to touch the fingers, and the fingers extends, is indicative of “the beginning of a *natya* and denotes

the clouds, a forest, forbidding things, bosom, night, a river, region of gods, the horse, cutting, wind, lying down, attempt at going, prowess, favour, moonlight, strong sunlight, forcing open doors, meaning of seven case-endings, wave, entering a street, equality, anointing the body of one's oneself, taking an oath, silence, palmyra leaf, shield, touching things, benediction, the ideal king, saying 'such a such place', the sea, succession of good deeds, addressing a person, going forward, holding a sword, a month, a year, a rainy day and cleaning with broom." (Ghosh 52-53)

Through hand gestures the dancers form a language and through the words of this language they can depict the whole universe.

Postures as Important Aspect of Communication in Bharatanatyam

Besides these kinds of gestures, another area of importance is the postures or stances. In *Shilpa Shastra* the ideal posture of the body is depicted which are four in number. The postures are normally called *Bhargas* in Indian culture as it shows the deviation of the body from the central erect position. The first posture is *Abhanga* which signifies 'off-centre' or the body slight bend with one hip raised gracefully and the weight of the body is supported by one leg only. The second posture is *sambhanga* where the equal bend of equipoise is assigned. *Atibhanga*, the third posture, is the great bend with the torso diagonally inclined and the knees are bent whereas the fourth and the last posture is *Tribhanga* which means the triple bend with one hip raised while the torso curved the opposite side and the head is tilted at an angle.

The emotions are shown through bodily movements and gestures, as they are universal signs or symbols and it is not very difficult for spectators to understand the symbolic representation of dancer 'using the body with hand gestures to convey ideas... the language of body and hand gesture can be approached in three ways. One way is to describe a situation as narrator. Another is to become the various characters. In the third approach, the dancer becomes an object or a natural phenomenon- say, a tree, a creeper, a breeze, a storm, rain, a river, etc.' (The Hindu 2).

So it can be said here that the above mentioned all movements of *angika abhinaya*, when combined with each other from head to toe, evolve into a further unit of movements i.e. '*nritta*'.

CONCLUSIONS

In this way the exploitation of the modes of nonverbal communication is clearly seen through the concept of *Abhinaya*, revealing the Indian classical dances as a heightened sense of communication. This also realizes that what a human body is capable of doing when with the help of bodily organs, it shows the expressive movements. So it can be surmised here that Indian classical dances like *Bharatanatyam* are the crescendo of nonverbal communication. It is relevant to quote *Bharata Muni* here, who said,

"There is no wisdom, nor knowledge; no art nor craft; no device, nor action that is not found in *Natya*."

Bharatanatyam, in the most refined, enjoyable, pleasing, joyful and beautiful manner attains the highest form of communication without words. Here both what and how are not different things but one and the same thing and 'what is said' is said via 'how it is said'.

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