

SUB: PERFORMING ARTS (DANCE/THEATER)

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- Content for Post Graduate Courses

PAPER 15 DANCE DESIGN – NRITTA OF BHARATANATYAM (CHOREOGRAPHY AND COMPOSITION)



PAPER 15

MODULE 1 CHOREOGRAPHY

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Paper 15

Module 1

Choreography



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MODULE 1 CHOREOGRAPHY

Introduction

The performing arts of India has had such an unbroken tradition of continuity, that has no parallel anywhere else in the world. It has been a living tradition in the history of world arts, a tradition that never became obsolete or went into oblivion, because of its capability to adapt, change and evolve. It prides itself of its origin from the Vedas. Albeit, it has assimilated various elements in its journey through the centuries, enriching, expanding and enhancing itself, thereby making itself relevant for every period of history as well as its own history of evolution. This was possible because of the innate talent of the Indian masters of performing arts to create new concepts and patterns of presentation to please the mental make-up of various types of societies in the different periods of history. This great art of weaving several patterns for representing various ideas can be identified as the art of 'CHOREOGRAPHY', in the Indian perspective.

Etymology of 'choreography'

The word 'choreography' belongs to the terminology used in western dance, particularly the classical ballet, gymnastics and figure skating. The etymological meaning of 'choreography', is derived from the Greek khoreia 'dancing in unison' (from khoros 'chorus' meaning group, 'choral' circular dance). Graphy literally means writing. Hence

‘choreography’ meant dance writing; it was taken to represent the art of notating the dance movements planned for a sequence to be performed by a group of artistes, accompanied by music. This music was also notated and rendered by an equally big, if not bigger, group of musicians.

A brief history of the western concept of ‘choreography’.

The notation of dance or music, was generally created by the choreographer with thoughtful analysis which was meticulously written out, and generally performed by artistes other than the choreographer.

“During the Renaissance, dance masters in Italy, such as Domenico da Piacenza, taught social dances at court and probably began to invent new ones or arrange variants of known dances, thus combining a creative function with their educational ones. Staged ballet employed the same steps and movements as social dances and differed from it principally in floor arrangement and visual projection.

In the 16th century, dance masters at the French court so organized the floor patterns and theatrical and artistic contexts of their social dances as to initiate a choreographic form, the ‘ballet de cour’. In the two centuries that followed, the gap between social dance and theatrical dance widened until ballet in the 19th century achieved a basically independent vocabulary.

The ballet master of this era, the choreographer, was an arranger of dance as a theatrical art. The giant of late 18th-century choreographic art was Jean-Georges Noverre, whose work and writings made the dramatic ballet, or ballet d’ action, celebrated. In this, ballet incorporated mime as well as academic dances, giving expression to the dance by narrative and histrionic context. After Noverre and his contemporary Gasparo Angiolini,, others developed

this trend in various ways—especially Jean Dauberval in the realistic depiction of contemporary country folk, Charles Didelot in moving toward Romantic stage illusion and fantasy, and Salvatore Viganò in the dramatic use of the ensemble (choreodrama) and naturalness of tragic gesture.

The choreographers of the Romantic movement employed ballet, as codified by such masters as Carlo Blasis, chiefly in the ballet d'action theatrical forms of Noverre's day or in opera divertissements (balletic interludes). The ballerina, her role heightened by the newly invented pointework (position of balance on extreme tip of toe), and the female corps de ballet both acquired new prominence. The choreographers who best developed the art of theatrical dance narrative were August Bournonville in Copenhagen; Jules Perrot, particularly in London and St. Petersburg; and Marius Petipa, who in St. Petersburg brought the spectacular classical ballet d'action to its peak in such works as *The Sleeping Beauty*, in which extended and complex suites of classical dance brought poetic and metaphorical expression to the plot.

Early modern dance in the United States introduced new elements of movement and expression; and in ballet the work of Michel Fokine emphasized more naturalistic styles and a more potent theatrical image than had Petipa's ballet classicism. Since then, choreographic forms have varied between the poles of representation and abstraction.

Dance notation in the 20th century came to be concerned with basic movement as well as formal dance and was assisted by the invention of new systems of abstract symbols—those of Rudolf von Laban and Rudolf Benesh being the most influential. Labanotation was the first to indicate duration, fluency, or intensity of movement. Today, these systems and others continue to evolve rapidly, amplified by film and videotape.

Choreography evolved no less rapidly. Methods of composition vary radically—some choreographers using their dancers’ improvisations as raw material, others devising every movement prior to rehearsal. Merce Cunningham radically changed the context for choreography in his attitude to music and decor as coincidental (rather than collaborative or supportive) to dance, in his employment of chance methods in dance composition and organization, and in his use of nontheatrical performance space. He, George Balanchine, and Sir Frederick Ashton became the leading exponents of classical or abstract dance; but the latter two—like Martha Graham, Leonide Massine, Jerome Robbins, and others—also produced major representational works of choreography. The only absolute rules in choreography today are that it should impose order upon dance beyond the level of pure improvisation and that it should shape dance in the three dimensions of space and the fourth dimension of time, as well as according to the potential of the human body.”¹

In the 17th and 18th centuries, it did indeed mean the written record of dances, that is, dance notation. However, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the meaning changed a bit, and came to be universally accepted to represent the visual aspect of the designed patterns of dance, gymnastics, and figure skating. Choreography came to be understood as the art of creating and arranging dances, the practice of designing sequences of movements, planning and arranging movements, steps, and pattern of dancers. Today, fashion shows, launch of products and such other presentations are referred to as being ‘choreographed’, the word itself assuming a wider range of interpretation.

¹www.britannica.com/art/choreography (visited in Oct.2015)

'Choreography' in Ancient Indian texts on Performing Arts.

The Natyasastra/नाट्यशास्त्र ascribed to Bharata Muni is the earliest extant literature in the world on the art of dramaturgy. This compendious treatise is the fountainhead for all arts. Bharata has given an exhaustive structure of grammar for the language of artistic communication through theatrical presentation of the world, which is in its holistic version he terms as Natya/नाट्य. Under this canopy is brought drama, dance, music (both vocal and instrumental), theatre building, linguistics, handicrafts, and above all, the whole gamut of human emotions –experienced by the performer and the spectator.

By following Bharata's instructions on Natya, one is constantly applying the technique of 'choreography' according to its present meaning of visual patterns of movements with music. In the sixth chapter of Natyasastra which expounds the theory of Rasa, Bharata encapsulates the eleven basic elements governing the art of choreography in Natya thus:

"Rasa bhaavah abhinayaaha dharmi vritti pravrttayaha siddhi svarastathatodhyam gana rangasca sangrahaha//"²

**“रस भावः अभिनया : धर्मी वृत्ति प्रवर्तय : सिद्धि स्वरस्तथातोध्यम
गान रंगश्च संग्रहाः ॥**

Among these, Abhinaya can be described as the art of communication. This has been classified under four heads. These are:

Angika abhinaya/आंगिक अभिनय – communication through the physical movements of the body, from the subtlest like batting an eye-lid to the grossest like leaping in space.

² NS, Chap 6, verse 10, (Dvitiya bhagah, Sanskrit text & Hindi translation by Dr. Parsanath Dvivedi, Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, Varanasi, 1996):

Vachika abhinaya/**वाचिक अभिनय** – verbal communication through articulated words, dialogues, verses, songs, syllables and even sounds emanating from the throat.

Satvika abhinaya/**सात्विक अभिनय** – communication of intense emotions through facial expressions and also through certain natural reaction like actually shedding tears.

Aharya abhinaya/**आहार्य अभिनय** – communication through the external elements of costume, make-up, jewelry and stage props and décor.

A judicious combination of all these will create a total theatrical presentation, which is what Bharata describes under Samanya Abhinaya and Chitra Abhinaya/ **सामान्य अभिनय एवं चित्र अभिनय**.

Among these, Angika abhinaya becomes more important than others as far as choreography of body movements is concerned. Bharata has analyzed the body from head to toe under Angas/**अंग** or major limbs and Upangas/**उपांग** or minor limbs. The major limbs are head, hands, chest, sides, hip and feet. The Mukhaja upangas/**मुखजा उपांग** are eyes, eye-brow, nostrils, lips, cheeks, chin, eye-lid and eye balls. The Sharira upangas **शरीर उपांग** are neck, shoulders, belly, thighs and shanks. He has prescribed movements for every limb to be practiced as exercises.

The basic unit of dance movement is the Nritta Karana. There are 108 Karanas codified in the fourth chapter of Natyasastra. These are made up of Sthanas/**स्थान**, Charis and Nritta hastas. The static postures of the body are referred to as Sthanas. The movements of the legs involving the entire leg are referred to as Charis/**चारी**, which

may be Bhū chari where both feet are constantly on the ground and Akasha chari/आकाश चारी where one foot is constantly lifted in the air. The Nritta hastas/नृत्त हस्त are movements of the entire arm which are often used for Vakyartha abhinaya/वाक्यार्थ अभिनय . These Nritta Karanas नृत्त करण are embellished with such subtle movements known as Rechakas/रेचक which give graceful fluidity to the movements.

Bharata gives an insight into the concept of choreography when he states that a combination of two Karanas makes a Nritta Matrika/नृत्त मात्रिका, combination of three Karanas a Kalapaka/करण कलापक, four a Shandaka/शंडक, five Karanas a Sanghatika/संघटिक and six or more Karanas an Angahara/अन्गाहार. These Angaharas are used to create Pindibandhas or group formations.³

Pindibandhas/पिंडीबंध reveal tremendous scope for choreography. A group formation like a chain is termed Shrinkala/श्रिंखला, a group cluster like a lump, bringing out a theme is called Pindi/पिंडी, like a Mayura pindi for Kartikeya, a net like formation is termed Jalaka and when two different types of group formations are used to represent a concept, it is Bhedaka/भेद्यक. Though this kind of structure is given, he stresses the importance of creativity and originality in presentation. It is very clear that tremendous scope was given for manodharma/मनोधर्म or expression of one's own perspective of the subject.⁴

³Natyasastra Vol I, ch.4, Parimal Publications, New Delhi, 1981.

Several charis are used to depict fight sequences where the arrangement of movements is entirely left to the imagination of the choreographer.⁵ Mandalas/**मंडला** are units of body movements prescribed for the choreography of fight sequences in a theatrical presentation. There are ten Bhu Mandalas/**भू-मंडल** and ten Akasha Mandalas/**आकाश-मंडला**. Here again he gives a basic framework, which has to be deftly manipulated by the choreographer according to the situation, using the right kind of music and rhythm to create the desired effect.

Again, in the creation of a Purvaranga/**पूर्वरंग**, it is indeed amazing the variety in choreography that he suggests. He has even specified what kind of music and tala/**ताल** should be used to present a Chitrapurvaranga/**चित्रपूर्वरंग**. One by one the 'nati/**नटी**' or female dancers are to perform and exit, and thereafter when all four come in they are to perform movements choreographed with Pindibandhas/**पिंडीबंध**, that is group formations. Specific Lasyangas/**लास्यांग** and Angaharas/**अंगहारा** are also suggested for female artistes, and Charis/**चारी** for the Sutradhar/**सूत्रधार** and other male performers. The Sushkaksharas/**सुष्काक्षार** or syllables are to be used for the Nritta formations. He even advices the interspersing of syllables and verses to enhance the effect of the dance.

Apart from the Natyasastra/**नाट्यशास्त्र**, several texts on performing arts, that followed it, have codified many more concepts of choreography prevalent during their own time period.

Choreography in Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam, the deshi/देशी or regional dance nurtured, perfected and practiced in Tamil Nadu, had the privilege of becoming the most well-known classical dance of India in the world, in early nineteenth centuries. Though it has its roots in the Natyasastra, it has acquired a distinct identity and form quite unique to itself. Just like the Karanas of Natyasastra, the Adavus/आडवु form the basic unit of dance movements in Bharatanatyam. These are brought under thirteen or fourteen heads of classification, having about eight to ten in each group. The judicious linking of the Adavus becomes the basic foundation for choreography in Bharatanatyam.

Creativity is the most important innate qualification that a good choreographer has to be endowed with. In Bharatanatyam, the following should be taken into consideration to create a well-designed and successfully choreographed presentation:

1. Whether it has to be a solo or group presentation.
2. The theme or topic to be chosen should have enough scope for elaboration through Sanchari/संचारी Bhavas
3. The lyrics chosen should be poetical and succinct, but powerful enough to establish the desired effect and evoke the intended Rasa.
4. The music should be composed in keeping with the emotion to be portrayed in such a way that it not only enhances the effect but leaves a lingering impact.
5. The rhythm should also follow the music, movement and emotion.
6. A well balanced use of Nritta, Nrtya and Natya should be employed.

7. There should be a good blend of Natyadharmi/नाट्यधर्मी and Lokadharmi/लोकधर्मी elements.

8. Finally, the body movements should be planned to bring out the text, theme and emotions with grace and precision that it leaves the spectator in total Rasanubhava/रसानुभाव or aesthetic experience of immense pleasure.

The costume, lighting, and back drop should also be thought out when the choreography is being planned.

The Practical Application of Choreography in Dance:

Once the topic is decided, music and rhythm set, then we arrive at the actual act of choreography - planning and visualizing the movements. For this, there is an apparatus that is generally applied by most classical dancers.

The chosen words are first presented through Padartha Abhinaya/पदार्थ अभिनय, that is, every word is enacted with the relevant hand gestures to bring out the word to word meaning. This helps establish the exact meaning of the lyrics in the minds of the viewers.

Thereafter, the use of Sanchari Bhava/संचारी भाव brings out all possible interpretations of the lyrics and also pictorially presents several stories before our eyes. Sanchari literally means moving. Sanchari Bhava is the portrayal of ideas where the gesticulation brings out various meanings of the lyrics by moving around the words and a little away too, so that more dimensions to the meaning of the words are portrayed. Here we apply the principle of Ankura/अंकुर and Suchi/सूचि. Ankura literally means a 'sprout'. When

an idea slowly sprouts in the mind, it is referred to as Ankura. This is developed through various hand gestures and made to point towards a particular meaning, which is referred to as Suchi. Thus, for instance, two kapitta hands at the shoulder level can be recognized as Devi Lakshmi, based on Natyadharmi. This will be applicable for Padartha Abhinaya. Lakshmi/लक्ष्मी can also be portrayed as Vishnu's consort, or shown as emerging from the sea when it is being churned by the asuras/असुर and devas/देव. In these two actions we establish the fact that she is the consort of Vishnu and is born from the sea. These actions move in and around Lakshmi, but every action brings out a different aspect of Lakshmi. If we use the karana 'Garudapluta'/गरुड़प्लुता and then move in 'Vaishakharechita/वैशाखरेचित' karana with Vishnu and Lakshmi hastas, then through vakyartha abhinaya we can portray Lakshmi and Vishnu on their vahana/वाहन.

An entire story can be unfurled in the same way showing the episode of the Samudramanthana/समुद्रमंथन, at the end of which can be shown Lakshmi emerging seated on a lotus. The choreography of the Samavakara Rupakacan/समवकार रूपक be brought out through this episode.

These can be achieved only if there is a thorough knowledge of all Angas and Upangas and their application. Most of what has been explained here can be used for solo or group choreography.

Choreography of Group Ensemble based on Rhythm:

The most sort after and appealing are group presentations based only on rhythm. These may be performed for recited or sung syllables, only instrumental music or even just the percussion instruments. The choreographer's strength lies in the thorough

understanding of Laya and Tala, and all its ramifications, permutation and combination. The way the floor patterns are created by the group can enhance the presentation to such an extent that the rhythmic patterns become visual. The various Jaatis/**जाति** can be shown by the number of artistes representing the Aksharas/**अक्षर** of the Jaati while doing the footwork of that particular Jaati.

Even the costumes should be so designed as to represent certain rhythmic groups. Even the lighting can follow the rhythm.

Choreography in Dance Dramas:

Basically the theme, the storyline to follow and its duration, play an important part in the presentation of dance dramas. All the points mentioned for general choreography have to be followed. Planning the music- both vocal and instrumental, rhythm- variations for the different moods, body movements both the Lasya and Tandava aspect with a balanced blend of Lokadharmi and Natyadharmi, brief interludes of dialogue, appropriate costumes and stage décor, and sophisticated use of lighting become the greatest responsibility of the choreographer for total success of the production. The ultimate goal should be to establish the right Rasa in the spectator in such a way that it is not only entertaining but also educative and enlightening.

Conclusion:

The art of 'choreography', so to say, is inbuilt in the techniques given in our ancient treatises. It has been tried, tested, added on, enhanced and has reached its zenith by adapting many variants as it moved along through the centuries. The Indian artist has assimilated

all that appealed as beautiful from other cultures too, there- by enriching our own cultural heritage. The word 'choreography', though borrowed from western culture, has come to stay, universally identified as the art of creating neatly patterned, well-planned visual presentations. One who is on the threshold of a dance carrier, should be conscious of the need to know the art of choreography, its importance in sustaining the spectator's interest and making the performance a success.

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