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PAPER 5

DANCE POETS AND POETRY, RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AND INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE



ज्ञान - विज्ञानं विमुक्तये

PAPER 5

MODULE 5

THE CONCEPT OF GANESHA IN DANCE

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Paper 5

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DANCE, POETS AND POETRY,
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MODULE 5 GANESHA IN DANCE

Ask any classical dancer the question “Who is your favorite God?” Invariably they will answer in unison that it is Ganesha or Ganapati. Among the Shanmarga schools of thought, Ganapatiyam deals with the worship of Ganesha as the Nirguna Brahman or the main presiding deity. Similar to other Gods in the Hindu pantheon, Ganapati or Ganesha has multiple forms and probably the most versatile. He is depicted in the most abstract form to the most imaginative. In the most abstract form he is depicted like an inverted cone or pyramidal shape made of turmeric, and there are arrangements of flowers, leaves, etc., that take the form of Ganesha. Keeping with the times, he is the friendliest image as well, where he is sculpted as playing cricket, working on a laptop, so on and so forth. Thus, it is no wonder that a form of Lord Ganesha dancing in full regalia has captivated the philosophers and sculptures of yore.

Compared to Shiva’s dance, which is more cosmic in intent, Ganesha’s dance is, in contrast, more sportive. Lord Ganesha is natural born dancer, as he is the son of Shiva and Parvati; he inherited the balanced mixture of tandava and lasya. His dance is said to be “forceful yet delicate at the same time”. In Ganesha Purana, Ganesha’s dancing skill is mentioned in the Krida-Kanda / क्रीडा-खंड, where Lord Shiva was delighted at the sight of Ganesha dancing. According to Linga Purana / लिंग पुराण, Ganesh started dancing as soon as Shiva created him. ¹

In the Buddhist and Tibetan depictions he is often shown dancing and according to historians the Dancing Ganesha was a popular concept in North India, from where it was adopted in Nepal and then in Tibet.²

In Sanskrit, the dancing Ganesha is called Nritta Ganapati, emphasizing on the dancing aspect of his form. And, indeed there are many forms of Nritta Ganapati that one may witness in India. As Ganesha is a remover of obstacles, it is customary that he is revered first in all classical dances. Although he originates from the Saivaitic pantheon, being the son of Shiva, he is revered at the start of Bhagavatha Mela and Kuchipudi performances that have predominant Vishnu or Krishna based themes.³

Why is Ganesha dancing?

According to the Sodasha Ganapathi (16 forms of Ganesha) philosophy, the first form of Ganesha is the one dancing. Since, he dances below the Kalpavriksha tree, the tree that bestows all wishes, dancers invoke Ganesha to remove hurdles and ask for his blessings to make the performance a success. In some sculptures, he is seen dancing with accompanists and under a mango tree, indicating fertility.^{4,5}

Nritta Ganapati also appears in the compilation of God's images by the King of Mysore in the 19th century. This compilation called Sri tattvanidhi lists the various forms of Hindu gods who are worshipped more frequently in the erstwhile Mysore state.⁶

There is also an interesting story about Nritta Ganapathi. Ganesha once bumped into Lord Brahma on his way and this shocked Brahma and made him angry. He threatened Ganesha with a curse. In order to please Brahma Ganesha started dancing. In spite of Ganesha's

huge body, big belly his dance evoked grace and seeing his swift movements Brahma was pacified, forgave this incident and declared that Ganesha as the master of dance.⁷

Thus, dancers even though depict Ganesha in abhinaya as a pot-bellied and as a dwarf; they are instructed to dance with grace and firm spine while dancing about Ganesha. This will not lead the audience to nitpick on the anatomy of Ganesha.

Attributes of dancing Ganesha

Visit any temple built in ancient India and one could see beautiful images of dancing Ganesha every now and then. The Government museum Jhansi houses the largest number sculptures of dancing Ganesha. In the south, Halebid showcases the pinnacle of Indian sculpture, where a Nritta Ganapati is flanked by musicians and other accompanists.¹

According to Shilpasastra, the dancing Ganesha should conform to some basic tenets. He has eight hands and holds the following seven items: pasha / पाश, ankusha / अंकुश, sweets, danta / दंत (tooth), valaya / वलय (type of bracelet), and anguliya / अंगुलिया (ring). The free eighth hand depicts the movements of the dance. To show the dynamism of dancing, the left leg should be slightly bent and resting on a padmasana (lotus footrest), and the right leg bent and raised above the ground. In some sculptures, such as the one in Mukhteshwar temple, Orissa he holds a cobra with two of his hands above his head.¹

There are some variations in how Ganesha is depicted by our ancient artists. In stone sculptures he is usually accompanied by two or more musicians, and this type of representation is more common in the

North India. In the South Indian bronzes, he is dancing alone. In the Central Indian depictions he is shown as a hefty personality and having a slow gait. He is accompanied by large number of musicians and does two different movements, using his multiple hands.⁸

Also, in sculptures that depict the Matrikas, either seven or eight (Saptamatrika and Ashtamatrika) Ganesha is depicted. He is in the same pose as the Matrikas, thus in most sculptures, where the Matrikas are dancing, Ganesha is also seen dancing. In few Saptamatrika sculptures, Shiva is also seen as part of the group.⁸

According to Abhinaya Darpanam compiled by Dr. P.S.R. Appa Rao, there are samyukta hasta (using both hands) mudras defined in texts other than the Natyasastra and Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikeshwara. In these other texts, the mudra talammukha (talam – Palm, Mukha – Facing) is described as having Vinayaka or Ganesha as its presiding deity. The hasta is denoted by having both hands raised face to face and not touching in front of the chest. Thus, the two palms are facing each other.⁹

Another samyukta hasta that is attributed to Ganesha is Dwirada hasta \ द्विरद हस्त, where the left hand is at shoulder level is in pataka and the right hand is in alapadma and pointing downwards. This hasta denotes the trunk of an elephant and also to the Ganesha.⁹

Iconography and Symbolism of Ganesha

In Maharashtra, the festival of Ganesha was used to hold public meetings during the freedom struggle of India. From then onwards, the Ganesha festival is celebrated in the state for ten days and, on

the final day, the images are immersed in water, be it a lake, river or in the sea.

There are community festivals for the deity wherein the images are made several feet high and are dressed in costumes and surrounded by scenery. The Ganesha may be seated on the snake with the hood as an umbrella, or image made completely of bananas and there are other variations. The sky is the limit! In such instances, the spiritual and religious symbolism gets diminished and the image portrays the populist mood.

The predominant concept that envelops the form of Ganesha is that of OM, which is known as the Pranava or the premier esoteric sound that precedes all creation. The reason for this is the shape of the trunk, which curves in such a manner that it represents the curve of OM in both Sanskrit and Tamil scripts. The Image of Ganesha traditionally has a body with short stature, and the head of an elephant. The trunk may be curved to the left or to the right. In some communities, the image with the trunk curved to the right (Valampuri in Tamil) is rare and the rituals must be followed very strictly for such an image. In some instances, Ganesha is depicted with a third eye on the forehead like Lord Shiva. The third eye symbolizes the higher powers of the Supreme, meaning that even when on earth, Ganesha dwells in eternity.

Ganesha has two tusks, and the right one is broken. The two tusks represent the pairs of opposite forces such as pain and pleasure. The right one is broken, which suggests that with an effort an individual is able to free himself from the trap of the opposites. The right tusk held in the lower right hand as a writing implement symbolizes the creative powers acquired by a man of spiritual wisdom. The figure is generally in the sitting posture and the body is huge like that of an elephant, with a big belly. The large belly of Ganesha shows that he

can hold anything and that the entire universe is in him. Around the waist is tied a serpent that symbolizes the control of serpent power.

Ganesha is depicted with four hands, of which one of the upper hands has a noose or pasha / पाश, which is the symbol of attachment at a sensual level. The noose is also a device by which the Lord controls these attachments because unchecked senses exhaust the energy. The other hand has the parashu / परशु or the battle-axe (mazhu in Tamil) or ankusha (elephant goad) which controls the emotions and passions. Of the lower hands, one has the sweet called modaka and the other is in varada hasta / वरद हस्त or boon giving gesture. Modaka is a special sweet that is must for the puja of Ganesha and it represents the sweetness of living. Modaka / मोदक reminds man that eternal bliss is available to him and it is present in his own hands, and for him to find.

Ganesha's vehicle is a small mouse called Mushika / मूषक, and as a paradox this small animal supports the huge body of the deity. The mouse is an earthy animal and it lives in the holes and crevices of earth. According to Indian philosophy, consciousness is latent in the grains of earth and it emerges in an active state first through the lowest of life forms and intelligence finds its early expression in the lowest vertebrates. Thus the mouse symbolizes the primitive intelligence and state of consciousness. The elephant is a symbol of strength and wisdom. So the elephant head represents expanded consciousness. All these arise from the primary state of thought, which is represented by the mouse.

Ganesha, worshipped as an inverted cone or pyramid made of turmeric is linking to the past where Parvati must have made the image of Ganesha from turmeric, a condiment used by women while bathing. Also turmeric is an auspicious symbol.

In the worship of any deity, one of the common offerings is the coconut, broken in two. However, for Ganesha, the vow to break the coconut is taken for fulfillment of any desire or goal. Human intelligence is confined to environmental knowledge. This conditioning is like a shell, which insulates the mind from gaining higher knowledge. When the coconut is broken on the stone, the shell of conditioning is symbolically destroyed on the stone of spiritual enquiry.

A word to note is that even the symbolic interpretations are not derived from a strictly coded reference. Rather, it is the devotees and the seers who according to their various levels of understanding interpret the symbolic aspects and attributes of Ganesha.¹⁰

In Bharatanatyam

In Bharatanatyam, dancers depict Ganesha with Kapitham mudra / कपिथं मुद्रा on both hands, where the right hand is pointed up and the left is pointed downwards. Both the hands are positioned distantly from the body and the right leg is in Ancitapada, lifted toes with heel placed on the ground. This hand position is part of the Deva hasta as described in the AbhinayaDarpana of Nandikeshwara.

In the Tiruvarur temple, there is documented evidence of devadasis dancing shuddha nrta or pure dance in front of the Ganesha shrine during the Sayaratchai puja, which is from evening 4 to 6 pm. This shuddha nrta was performed as part of the daily rituals. Also, specific to Tiruvarur was that the devadasis performed the Muthuswami Diskhitarkriti on Sodasha Ganapathi. Similarly in the Tirutani temple of Lord Subrahmanya, dance was performed in front of the Uchhi Pillaiyar or Ganesha shrine.¹¹

The Navasandhi Kavuthuvam / नवसंधी कवुठुवं is popular in Bharatanatyam. Nava meaning nine and sandhi meaning junction, represent the nine guardians of the cardinal and spiritual directions. The songs in praise of them are the Navasandhi Kavuthuvam. Although Ganesha is not part of this, he is rightly invoked before performing the Navasandhi Kavuthuvam. However, as part of the Panchamurthi Kavthuvam, Ganesha finds a place.¹²

In this, Ganesha is praised as the nephew of Narayana or Vishnu (According to Hindu mythology Parvati is Vishnu's sister) and remover of obstacles. The Ganesha Kavuthuvam follows the same format of other kavuthuvams, where the sollukattu or rhythmic syllables are recited, followed by the lyrical passage recited and then sung. The kavuthuvam ends with sollukattus that make this a brisk performance. When the lyrical passages are recited the dancer emotes very basic abhinaya. The most popular Ganeshakavuthuvam was written by Gangaimuthu Pillai, where he composed the Panchamurthi Kavuthuvam. This was performed specially on the day of Shiva and Parvati's wedding day. Due to the fast tempo, Bharatanatyam dancers sometimes perform Ganesha Kavuthuvam / गणेश कवुठुवं instead of an alarippu in the margam.¹²

Ananda Narthana Ganapathim is another popular dance composition, a keertanam on Ganesha performed by Bharatanatyam dancers. It is composed by Oothukadu Venkatasubbaiyyar. Set in Nattai raga and Adi tala, it portrays Ganesha as blissfully dancing. What makes this a favorite are the jatis the composer had in the charanam.

Apart from this, Bharatanatyam dancers also dance to Ganeshakritis composed by Muthuswamy Dikshitar and Saint Thyagaraja. The famous violinist and composer Lalgudi Jayaraman's father Lalgudi

Gopala Iyer also composed songs that are frequently used by Bharatanatyam dancers. He has composed songs on Ganesha. Keertanams such as, Pranava Mudalvane / प्रणव मुदाल्वाने in ragam Vacaspati and Rupakamtalam, and Iniyagilum / इनियागिलुम in ragam Manirangu and Aditalam. Also, Lalgudi Jayaraman has composed Tillana on Ganesha in ragam Kadanakudhalam and Aditalam.¹³

While it is common to perform to a Ganesha Stuti or a kavuthuvam at the beginning of a dance performance, it is unusual to have a padavarnam of Ganesha. Two such examples of varnams on Ganesha exist. Dancer V. P. Dhananjayan has composed and choreographed a padavarnam on Pillaiyar or Ganesha as he is called in Tamilnadu. Vinayaka Varnam / विनायक वर्णम set in Nattakurunjiragam was performed as part of a Ganesha temple consecration in 1982, and since then it has remained a favorite among the repertoire of Dhananjayans and his students. The varnam has the story of how Ganesha acquired his elephant head, his intelligence and him winning over his brother Karthikeya or Muruga.¹⁴

Also, dancer Sudharani Raghupathy and her student Aruna Subbaiah have created a margam format with Ganesha and Muruga. In this, the padavarnam on Ganesha Om enumporule in Hamsadhwani raga and Aditala, choreographed by Sudharani Raghupathy, showcases some of the legends related to Vinayaka.

The dancer Krishnakumari Narendran has choreographed group productions on Ganesha in Bharatanatyam; Sri Mahaganapathi and Sodasha Ganapathi.¹⁵ The US based dancer Jayanthi Raman had choreographed a dance drama called Gajamukha / गजमुख that went on a US tour, involved three classical dance styles: Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Mohiniattam.

In Kathak

In Kathak, Ganesha Parans is performed, where the bols or phrases are recited with the percussion instrument, i.e., the pakhawaj instead of the tabla. Parans in general can be of many kinds, e.g. Bol Paran / बोल परण, Jati Paran / जाती परण, Ghungru / घुंगरू (bells) Paran / परण, Pakshi / पक्षी (bird) Paran / परण. However, it has been documented that in some cases, the kathak dancer while performing the Ganesha Paran sketches the outline of an elephant with his/her feet.^{3,5}

In Kuchipudi

As mentioned earlier, Lord Ganesha is invoked and the dancer seeks his blessings before the performance in predominantly vaishnavite dance forms such as Kuchipudi. There are varieties of songs that are employed for this in Kuchipudi, namely, the Ganesha Stuti, the Pushpanjalicomposed by Balamurali Krishna Jhem Jhemtanana / झेम झेमत्तानना in Arabhi Raga.

The Ganesha Pravesa Daruvu / गणेश प्रवेश दरुवु or the entrance song on Ganesha is very specific to Kuchipudi where the dancer opens the performance with this and proceeds to the next composition like the Sabdam. The Ganesha Pravesa Daruvu is set in Raga Hamsadhvani and Aditalam.

Similar to the Kauthuvam in Bharatanatyam, there is Ganesha Kavivam / गणेश कवित्वं or Kautvam in Kuchipudi. Like in Kathak here as well, the dancer creates patterns of birds and animals while

dancing to the particular song. It is said that C. R. Acharyulu, who is responsible for introducing Kuchipudi in Gujarat, had Ganesha Kavutuvam as part of his special and rare repertoire¹⁵

According to Mallika Sarabhai the Ganesha Kautvam in Ragamalika is one of the rarest items in Kuchipudi repertoire. The item used to be performed during Ganesha Chaturthi and is composed in Vinayakatala, which is a difficult one consisting of 72 matras. The lyric of the kautvam describes Ganesha as a child and his dance. The dancer with his feet draws a picture of a Ganesha dancing on a lotus.

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In Contemporary dance

In Indian contemporary dance, dancer Veenapani Chawla's "Ganapati" and Anita Ratnam's "Gajaanana" are mentionable. Veenapani Chawla's production revolved around the various alternate myths surrounding the birth of Ganesha and performed by amalgamation of kodiattam and Contemporary theatre. There are seven episodes in total and there is a parallelism employed between Indian and Greek mythology of Oedipus; while Ganesha is severed by his father, Shiva; Oedipus kills his own father.¹⁷

Anita Ratnam's Gajaanana premiered in 1997, uses Bharatanatyam, Therukoothu of Tamilnadu, Folk elements and Contemporary theatre. It used inspirations from puranas, and employed abstract concepts and symbols associated with Ganesha.¹⁸

Footnotes:

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