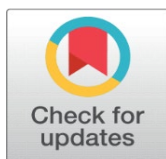


# THE FACETS OF DANCE REVISITED IN THE *NĀṬYAŚĀSTRA* AND THE *ABHINAYA DARPANA*

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, an attempt has been made to contextualize the differences and similarities that could be gauged in the two iconic texts related to the performing tradition in early India, namely, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana*. The paper first explores the kind of works that surround the two works, the questions that have been asked pertaining to the two texts and the way the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana* have been used to reconstruct aspects of dance in the early Indian context.

**Keywords:** *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, Dance, Drama, Codify, Gesture, Performance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper an attempt has been made to contextualize how the texts under study codify the rules around dance and drama by seeking a divine origin; for instance, the *Nāṭyas'āstra* being referred to as the fifth *Veda* has multiple connotations. The next section of the paper shall deal with the stress on this metaphorical claim to legitimacy by bringing in elements of the divine and in the case of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*; the author refers to the text as the fifth *Veda* (the *Nāṭyaveda*) in order to highlight the authenticity of the text. Some of the other sections of the paper shall explore the codification of dance in the two texts and shall further elaborate on the overlap that could be viewed in the case of dance and ritual. The

final section of the paper reflects on the significance of the gestural language which still persists to be a significant tool for communication between the performer and the audience.

## 2. THE NĀṬYAŚĀSTRA AND THE ABHINAYA DARPANA

Theoretical treatises and other literary sources (dramas and plays) in early Indian history is vast. It has been rightly argued by Bose that the literary sources related to dance has a comprehensive list of manuals and treatises written in Sanskrit Bose (2001). However, what is significant is the recent critical engagement with them in recent times where systematic research in the discipline of performance studies is being carried out globally and has gained currency in India as well. In early Indian History (c.2<sup>nd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century CE), Sanskrit had a significant role to play in the codification of all arts and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was one such example which codified dance, drama, and music Vatsyayan (1977). The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, being the earliest text on the dance literature has a unique significance in this genre whereby it is almost assumed to be a direct source of the classical dancing tradition. However, Bose suggests that when one takes a closer look at the technical details of the individual dance styles prevalent today, it becomes evident that they have closer relationships to texts other than the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Significant among such works is the *Abhinaya Darpana* by Nandikeśvara.

As far as the text the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is concerned the issues that have been of prime concern are those of authorship, dating the text, the theory and practice dichotomy that exists in the *śāstric* codification of a text. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is possibly one of the earliest and the most comprehensive treatises on dramaturgy in terms of the Indian context. The treatise in its present form has, however, has been dated to as late as the fifth or the sixth centuries CE. Rangacharya has correctly asserted that what makes the *Nāṭyaśāstra* special is not that it was the first treatise on dramaturgy but that it was the first one to comprehensively codify dance, drama, and music.

The significance of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is universally accepted. However, little is known of the author and the very first issue one faces is that of identity of the author and that of the period of composition of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The questions asked are: by whom, when and where did the creation take place? Vatsyayan argues that the exploration of identity, date, and personal history of Bharata would not manifest anything crucial in regard to the theory of aesthetics which was propounded in the one and only text attributed to him, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ibid.). However, one cannot completely agree with this stand considering the significance of the writer/ school of writers in choosing what goes into the compilation of the text and simultaneously silencing the aspects that were regarded insignificant or which did not suit their interests.

Rangacharya commenting on the authorship of the text points out that the authorship of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (traditionally ascribed to Bharata) is subject to debate. As with other Sanskrit treatises, mythical origins have been pointed at in terms of authorship where it was believed to have been composed by Brahmā for the celestial immortals and in the last chapter, the text ascribes the authorship of the text in the 'terrestrial world' to sages- Vātsya, Kohala, Śaṇḍilya and Dattila, who are referred to as sons and disciples of Bharata. Lidova also suggests that there is no complete consensus on whether the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a cohesive text of a single author or is a composite compilation?

Some scholars have examined certain chapters on aesthetics; others have concentrated on chapters relating to the construction of theatre. The text has a long

and complex history of commentaries, interpretations and what Vatsyayan points out is how the dialogue between dramaturgy, music, and dance, emanating from a single source makes the text particularly significant and an 'exception rather than rule'. She tries to raise questions on the problems of authorship, the relationship of the oral and the written, context, text, the implicit and the explicit text, and to look at the history of discourse (Vatsyayan op.cit: ix).

It is interesting how link with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is sought whereby there is a conscious attempt at shaping the history of dance. The fourth chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* deals specifically with dance and describes the 108 *karaṇas*, the dance of Śiva (*tāṇḍava*), and the combinations of the *aṅgahāras* Royo (2004). The central argument being that for any form of dance to be able to qualify as 'Indian' had to have an added characterization such as 'pure' and/or 'traditional'. While the text deals with the origins of dramaturgy and its techniques, dance and music are discussed in terms of elevating the performance (Bose op.cit: 9). In the *Nāṭyaśāstra* dance is part of dramaturgy and to be employed as an ornamental overlay upon drama. Bose further argues that the aesthetic concepts of dance and its technical aspects formed a central component in all the subsequent deliberations on dance (ibid.).

Nandikeśvara (dated variously between sixth and eleventh centuries), author of the *Abhinayadarpana* gives dance the status of an autonomous art. The prelude of the text contains a verse in which Indra pleads Nandikeśvara for a discussion on the art of dancing; however, looking at the great length of 4000 *slokas*, he requests for a precise discourse where Nandikeśvara delivers the *Abhinaya Darpana* for Indra. Important to note is the mythical origins that are usually ascribed to these texts on the performing traditions. *Abhinaya Darpana*, translated by A.K. Coomaraswamy, as 'Mirror of Gestures' is concerned exclusively with *abhinaya*. Nandikeśvara does not define the term *abhinaya* but follows Bharata in describing the four forms of *abhinaya*. It is said that *abhinaya* is significant in *nṛtya*. The text *Abhinaya Darpana* is significant because it is the only text that concentrates on *āṅgikābhinaya* (acting by means of body movements) Bose (2001). For Nandikeśvara now there is a generic category *naṭanam* which he classifies into *nṛtta*, *nṛtya* and *nāṭya* Vatsyayan (1977). For Bharata, *nāṭya* was a generic term category. For Nandikeśvara, it becomes a subcategory, although the larger rubric of the form *abhinaya* is maintained. Vatsyayan argues that these changes are of significance as also his division of dance into *tāṇḍava* and *lāsya* and attributing one to the male and the other to female (ibid.).

The *Abhinaya Darpana* begins with a benedictory verse followed by a brief account of the origins of drama, the different kinds of dance such as— *nāṭya*, *nṛtta* and *nṛtya*, the prayers to be offered, audiences and the stage and the artiste, and the *kinkinī* (ankle bells) are all discussed consequently. It is after this discussion that the author instructs the performer to start the performance incorporating the various stylized bodily movements. The discussion then progresses to describing the importance of *abhinaya* and the four types of *abhinaya* whereas the rest of the verses are devoted to movements of individual parts of the body, which is a very crucial element of a performance Bose (2001).

Squire argues that the aesthetic aim of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana* was to fuse together the elements of gesture, music, and time, into one perfect harmony Squire (1948). In the recent decades, the interest of scholars in the 108 *karaṇas* of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* has been confined to certain aspects that Royo discusses in her work. The significant one being the narrative of "recovery" in keeping with the idea of restoring an ancient past where an attempt is made to

engage in this “recovery” in the Bharatnatyam performative space through the 108 *karaṇas* Royo (2004). She links this with the Sanskritization of Bharatnatyam by its reformers, where a reengagement with the Sanskrit literary sources led to research into lesser-known aspects of the performance tradition described in these texts. Performer- researcher Padma Subrahmanyam (1978; 1979) proposed such an initiative of practice-based recovery of the 108 *karaṇas* through textual and iconographic research that sought to bring them back to life (ibid.).

In terms of classical dance as well as literature, the *Abhinayadarpana* occupies a special position. It has been pointed out that this text is certainly used in one of the classical dances of India— Bharatnatyam. The *Abhinayadarpana* focuses exclusively on *āṅgika abhinaya* which means expression of emotions through the movement of body. The particular strength of the text lay in the emphasis on the mode of *abhinaya* that a dancer must use. The gurus say that by practicing the movements prescribed in the *Abhinayadarpana* a dancer learns the basic movements Bose (2001). According to the gurus this practice has been prevalent since time immemorial. How far this historical claim is true is however uncertain, but Bose points out that a Bharatnatyam dancer today is required to know the text of *Abhinayadarpana* and perform accordingly. The relevance of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* holds good in the sense that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides details that are essential in composing a sequence of dance movements, such as a *karaṇa* or an *aṅgahāra*.

Thus, the studies that have taken into consideration the two texts to reconstruct the ‘history of dance’ have primarily focused on the claim to legitimacy whereby these texts form the grammar of the ‘Indian classical dance’ and thereby elevate the status of the dance by going back to an ancient/early medieval text highlighting the process of sanskritization. The term “sanskritization” originally designated a sociological process described by M.N. Srinivas in 1956, whereby lower castes emulated the customs and culture of upper castes in order to upgrade their social status Srinivas 1956 Raghavan 1956 Coorlawala (2004). The term “Sanskritization” implicitly signified a return to the Brahmanical values and Vedic traditions. Since Sanskrit was restrictive in the sense that it was accessible primarily to the male brahmanas, the term “Sanskritization” came to be synonymously used with brahmanization, some of the other studies focus on dance and iconography where iconography provides a useful key to understanding the descriptive portions of dance. One finds a similarity in the nature of symbolism between the two art forms whereby the dancer employing hand signs to suggest an attribute, while the icon is depicting holding the attribute (Gaston 1982). Vatsyayan’s works (2007, 2011) have been significant in terms of discussions on the close intersection between dance and sculpture. Others who have attempted this are Venkata Narayanaswami Naidu, Sunil Kothari, Shaivani Pandya, and Padma Subramanyam.<sup>1</sup>

The attempt to contextualize the texts in order to see how facets of social history could be examined by reading carefully into the texts is limited in the corpus of academic works related to dance scholarship. The works of Saskia C. Kersenboom Story, Appfel-Marglin Frederique, Leslie.C. Orr and Daves Soneji on the devadasis is significant in this context. While Kersenboom Story and Leslie C. Orr have gone into the history of the *devadāsīs* in Tamil Nadu, Soneji focuses on the marginalization of *devadāsīs* of South India in the whole ambit of performance; Marglin has looked at the historical sources relating to the life of the *devadāsīs* in Orissa. The works highlight how at one level, dance had divine connections (in terms of its origin) and

<sup>1</sup> Sunil Kothari attempted this in relation to the Jain temples of Mt. Abu, Shaivani Pandya has done this in relation to the temples in Gujarat in Modhera and Padma Subramanyam tried to reconstruct in her movements the dance sculpture of temples in Tamil Nadu (Vatsyayan 2011: 9).

on the other hand the dancer (the Devadāsis) who performed it and who was probably the mediator between the audience and divine, due to their lack of 'chastity', was morally condemned.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. AUTHORITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Regarding the tradition of '*śāstra*' associated with the *Nāṭyas'āstra*, Vatsyayan discusses what constitutes a *śāstra* in the Indian tradition generally. Why is a category of writing called *śāstra* Vatsyayan (1977) There have been countless equivalents of the word *śāstra* in English, of 'theory', 'code', 'manual', 'treatise', 'scientific treatise'. What is interesting in Vatsyayan's argument is that according to her the *Nāṭyaśāstra* does not consider *śāstra* and *prayoga* as antonyms or in opposition. Bharata asserts right at the beginning that he is writing a *śāstra prayoga* Vatsyayan (1977). The *Nāṭyaśāstra* like other texts has several implicit and explicit layers and this can be gained by penetrating through the language of myth, legends, and anecdotes in which it is couched. The primacy of the word is asserted in unambiguous terms as Vatsyayan points out that words are extremely significant, and nothing is beyond words and the *śāstras* are made up of words.<sup>3</sup>

By referring to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as the fifth *Veda* the aspect of legitimacy and authenticity is also implied. Such claim to supremacy by the brāhmins could also be traced in other texts of the high tradition. For instance, in The *Mahābhārata*, (which had also been called the fifth *Veda*) Vyāsa informed the god Brahmā that he had composed a great poem comprising all valuable knowledge and surpassing all previous expressions of knowledge Fitzgerald (1985). Thus, calling a text the fifth *Veda* was a metaphoric claim to stress on the fact that the text was an authoritative source of important knowledge (ibid: 135). It has been suggested that brāhmin intellectuals did not require the *Veda* metaphor to be persuaded that a text was an authoritative one; however, it seems likely that this was a potent theme of authority for the kings who were the first audience in the imagination of the text (ibid.: 136).

Pollock argues that *śāstra* is a significant phenomenon due to the impact it exercised or sought to exercise on the reproduction of culture in traditional India. *Śāstric* tradition was viewed in the context of cultural hegemony and/or authoritarianism where cultural aspects was constrained by rules (especially in the cultural sphere of "art-making") which varied in terms of strictness Pollock (1985).

In the discussion on the relationship of *śāstra* to its object what is undertaken is an attempt to define the *śāstra* and it has been suggested that among its more common significations earlier, in the grammatical tradition is "authoritative" rule (ibid: 501). Pollock points out that according to Patanjali's definition *s'āstra* is that from which there derives regulation and outside the grammatical tradition, the term embraced the notion of "system of ideas". The common thread that binds the interpretation of the term *s'āstra* in the grammatical tradition and outside the ambit of the grammatical tradition is the aspect of *śāstra* as "regulating" or "codifying" (ibid.). It is important to keep in mind that such convergence hints at the aspect of legitimacy.

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<sup>2</sup> This theme has been discussed at great length in Kersenboom-Story, Saskia C. *Nityasumangali Devadasi Tradition in South India*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1987 (First Edition), Leslie. C. Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God, Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu*; Oxford University Press, New York 2000; and Soneji, Davesh, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, and London, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> 'In this world the *s'āstras* are made up of words, rests on words: hence there is nothing beyond words, and words are the source of everything'. Ch XV, verse 3, NS, M.M. Ghosh's translation cited in Vatsyayana *Op.cit.*, 1996, p.70.

The implications of practice of such codified 'theory' were that all activity that conforms maximum to the *śāstric* norms would succeed in relation to the amount of attention that is paid to the *śāstric* norms. Bharata states that 'this *śāstra* has been established in heaven and has been brought down to earth by his sons, especially Kohala, Vātsya, Śaṅḍilya and Dhruvīla. They put into practice the *śāstra* which expands man's intellect and is a specimen of all the other' *śāstras*. [Vatsyayan \(1977\)](#) What can be seen is how Bharata elevates the *śāstra* by giving such references. He further goes on to state the benefits and implications of studying the *śāstras*.

Such mythic origins of knowledge have a number of connotations such as the creation of such knowledge is portrayed as a divine activity and knowledge is of every variety, from those whose purposes are unrecognizable to that of social relations, music, medicine etc and is viewed as fixed in its dimensions [Pollock \(1985\)](#). Donatowicz points out that as tradition has it, dance reflects amazing abundance of imagined forms through which people everywhere sought to relate themselves to the wonder of existence. In this context she talks about the divine revelation whereby Brahmā, the creator himself, is regarded as being the author of the original treatise- the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, revealed to Bharata [Donatowicz \(1996\)](#). Such a divine creation of the law of dance can be traced in the *Abhinaya Darpana* which also seeks authenticity by referring to divine origins of the whole process of codification of dance. The other repercussion being that the Indian intellectual history demonstrates that there can be no conception of progress, on the basis of innovations in practice. However, this could be taken to imply a rather stereotypical assertion. The example that one could immediately think of is the *Nāṭyaśāstra* itself. Though, it still has a very significant position when it comes to discussing the theoretical aspect of dramaturgy which includes music and dance; with time, innovations and diversification could be seen in the later texts of a rather later time period in the fields of music and dance such as the *Abhinayadarpana* and the *Saṅgītaratnākara*. The most significant aspect that stays is that the theoretical discourse of *śāstra* becomes in essence a practical discourse of power [Pollock \(1985\)](#)

#### 4. SEEKING A DIVINE ORIGIN

In terms of the foundation of musical theory in India, Venkatasubramanian suggests, has to be understood as a synthesis of a number of ideas like divine origin, notion of a transpersonal soul, the breath as a living substance, the nature of the medium, the efficacy of ritual action, utterance as an aspect of worship, means of knowledge, metaphoric identification of thought, breath, sound, and semen as means of acting upon the world, the mythical association of sound and speech, all are significant [Venkatasubramanian \(2010\)](#) One can postulate the same argument in the context of dance theory. The dramatic treatises *the Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana* were both composed by Brahma at the behest of the lesser gods. This event is described as follows in the first chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* Indra and the other gods pleaded Brahma to create a form of pastime that could both be heard and seen and subsequently Brahma obliges. Important to note here is the request to create a fifth Veda that could be heard by all castes (including the śudras) (the *Nāṭyaśāstra* cited in [Coomaraswamy and Duggirala \(1970\)](#) Brahma thus obliges them and creates the fifth Veda which was to be called the *Nāṭyaveda* and what strikes one is the component of this fifth Veda which was framed from the four *Vedas*, as desired. What seems interesting is the usage of the notion of fifth *Veda* in the sense of inclusion and not exclusion. As discussed earlier, *Śudras* who were otherwise prohibited from even hearing the *Veda* were supposed to be included in

the treatise. However, the difference between precept and practice needs to be thought of in this context.

This treatise was thus communicated by Brahmā to Bharata and his hundred sons. The treatise was first used at Indra's Flag Festival to commemorate the victory of the gods (*devas*) over the *asuras* (ibid.). Interestingly, when the *asuras* recognized that the performance depicted their defeat, they registered their objection with Brahma, and it is in this context that the purpose of dramatic arts to reflect and represent the "true" ways of the world is described (ibid.). Thus, by seeking a divine origin the author was trying to give the text a flavour of social reality and to highlight the point that the codification of drama was supposed to represent the 'truth' and not merely for the pleasure of its audiences, having a purpose beyond the realms of performance.

The *Abhinaya Darpana* also starts with the whole notion of divine origin of the dramatic treatise whereby Indra, asks Nandikeśvara for a favour to narrate to him in a concise form, the laws of dancing. Indra said to Nandikeśvara, to narrate to him the laws of dancing albeit concisely [Coomaraswamy and Duggirala \(1970\)](#). Replying to Indra, Nandikeśvara thus 'reveals' accordingly an abridgement of the laws of dancing and asks Indra to receive this simple 'mirror' attentively (ibid).

What is significant is not only the divine origin of these treatises but also the importance that is implicitly assigned to the theoretical knowledge of dance highlighting the significance of the 'right', 'codified' way of dancing. This could be suggestive of the significance of dance in the society and thereby the need to go back to the prescribed form of dance as available in the treatises.

## 5. CODIFICATION OF DANCE IN THE NĀṬYAŚĀSTRA AND THE ABHINAYA DARPANA

Abhinavagupta's commentary (Abhinavagupta Cf. NS. Vol. I, pp. 182-183 cited in [Tarlekar \(1975\)](#) gives seven divisions of *Nṛtta*; *Śuddha*- in which *recakas* and *aṅgahāras* are present; *gitakadyābhinayomukha*- in which there is the gesticulation of a song in a general manner; *gaṇakriyamatrāsūnari-vādyatālanusari*- that following the song and the rhythm of the instruments accompanying it, having the various movements of the body; *uddhata*- forceful; *sukumāra*- gentle; *uddhata-sukumāra*- forceful-gentle; and *sukumāroddhata*- gentle-forceful. The first three movements are supposed to be incorporated in independent *laukika* (popular dances) and to imply the satisfaction of the deities. The last four are incorporated in the preliminary rituals and performances [Tarlekar \(1975\)](#).

In dance, the representation of gestures, bodily movements, and postures such as the *aṅgahāras* (limb movements), *karaṇas* (postures);<sup>4</sup> and *recakas* (gestures)<sup>5</sup> are employed. The thirty-two *aṅgahāras*<sup>6</sup>, hundred and eight *karaṇas* and four *recakas* (the *Nāṭyaśāstra* IV: 59) do not just imply numbers but the diversity in a dance form and its representation using these components. Padma Subrahmanyam's monograph on the *karaṇas* describe the five temples in Tamilnadu

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<sup>4</sup> A *Karaṇa* is defined as the simultaneous movements of the hands and feet, The *Nāṭyaśāstra* IV: 59, Volume II, Dr. Unni, N.P. Text with Introduction, English Translation, and Indices in Four Volumes), Nag Publishers, Delhi, Second Edition, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. *Recakas* involve *pada* (feet), *kati* (waist), *Kara* (hands) and *Kantha* (neck), The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, IV: 101.

<sup>6</sup> The movement of the limbs from one place to another is literally called *Aṅgahāra*, ibid. p.192.

where the sculptural representation of the hundred and eight *karaṇas* can be seen portrayed.<sup>7</sup>

The word *Karaṇa* has its root in the Sanskrit word 'krin' which means to act (Unni 2003:194). The term *karaṇa* is supposed to denote action which includes and is not limited to the graceful positioning of the limbs. According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, three elements constitute *karaṇa*— the posture of the body (*sthāna*), hand pose (*nṛttahasta*), and the feet movement (*kari*) (ibid.). It is in this context that *karaṇa* is viewed as a unit of dance.

The one hundred and eight *karaṇas* that have been listed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* could be employed in the course of dance, fight, personal combats and in other movements such as strolling, and it was up to the actor to use his talents in employing various movements (ibid: 62). The distinction between dance and drama is yet again blurred because the movements of individuals in a particular fight sequence were also governed by the *karaṇas*. The synchronization of the movements of the hands and feet while dancing in relation to the movements of the hips, sides, and thigh and also their relation to the breast, back and belly have been regarded as particularly important in a performance (ibid).

What is interesting is that the *karaṇas* are of diverse qualities and secondly, these are gender neutral in terms of applicability, in that these are performed both by women and men. The dance based on *karaṇas* is further classified broadly as flowing gracefully (*laghu*), acrobatic (*visama*), and as hilarious (*vikata*).<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is important to note that dance cannot just be seen as a movement of the body at a physical level but the connection between the mental and the physical that is exemplified, needs to be kept in mind. For instance, in one of the *karaṇas*, *vartita*, how the hand pose varies according to emotions like envy, anger etc. illustrate the point that I am trying to make. The fact that these *karna*s are common for both the sexes can be seen as a kind of blurring of distinction in terms of gender relations, at least in the performative spaces?

Dance, therefore, combines these technical concepts of *aṅgahāras*, *karaṇas* and *recakas*. The simultaneous movements of the limbs like feet, shanks, thighs, and lips have been referred to as *cāri* (ibid: 318). A dance is initiated by *cāri* movements, and all movements proceed from *cāris*. In the discharge of weapons, *cāri* is involved and *cāris* are necessary for the representation of fight. The dramatic performance as a whole is dependent on *cāri*, and Bharat points out that without *cāri* nothing can be done in a performance (ibid: 319).

Thus, these features of dance formed an integral part of the dramatic set up on the whole. Every movement seems to have been choreographed along the lines of the various *karaṇas*, *aṅgahāras*, *recakas* and the gait movements that have been enlisted in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

The term *nṛtya* is not mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and it appears in the *Abhinaya Darpana* (Iyer 1993: 5-6). So, when one is looking at the changes per say in the codification of dance, the term *nṛtya* has a significant role to play. Dance according to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* has two aspects: *nāṭya* and *nṛtta*. The original meaning of *nāṭya* was mime, not acting in the modern sense. The *Abhinayadarpana* mentions a third form of dance, *nṛtya*. Iyer argues that in Indian classical dance *nṛtta*, defined

<sup>7</sup>The five temples mentioned are Bṛhadīśvara temple, Tanjore, 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Sarngapani Temple, Kumbhakonam, 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Naṭarāja temple, Chidambaram, 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Arunacalesvara temple, Tiruvannamalai, 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Vrddhagirīśvara temple, Vrddhacalam, 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam cited in ibid. p.195.

<sup>8</sup> They are beautified through *Recakas* which are responsible for the artistry of these movements, The *Nāṭyas'āstra*, Ibid. p.194.



as pure dance, is the opposite of *nṛtya*, which is mimetic dance. A blend of both *nṛtta* and *nṛtya* makes up most of the Indian classical styles as known in the 1990s (ibid: 3). Thus, the structure of dance in the *Abhinaya Darpana* is different whereby the text discusses the *nāṭya*, *nṛtta* and *nṛtya*. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* uses the term *nāṭya* as a generic form for dance and drama and does not differentiate between *nṛtta* and *nāṭya*. In the *Abhinaya Darpana*, the term *nāṭya* is used in drama in conjunction with the original plot. *Nṛtta* implies the dance form that is devoid of flavour (*rasa*) and *nṛtya* is that form of dance which consists of flavours and moods (*bhāvas*). These three are further divided broadly into—*Lāsya* and *Tāṇḍava*. *Lāsya* dancing is devoid of violence and full of grace whereas the *Tāṇḍava* dancing is violent [Coomaraswamy and Duggirala \(1970\)](#). *Tāṇḍava* is the second well-known dance of Śiva. This form of dance has the representation of Śiva usually in ten-armed form. He dances passionately with Devi and is accompanied by dancing imps [Coomaraswamy and Duggirala \(1970\)](#). Bose suggests that the use of the term *tāṇḍava* has no gendered connotation in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and only when *tāṇḍava* came to be paired with the term *lāsya*, the gendered connotation was more obvious. *Tāṇḍava* was related to the dance of men whereas *lāsya* was related to the dance of women [Bose \(2001\)](#).

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the occasions for introducing dance in a play are suggested. When it should be introduced and when it should not be introduced. The lovers in union mark the former occasion whereas their separation denotes the latter (Unni 2003: 44). It has been suggested that on the occasion of the success of the hero, in order to heighten the pleasure of the married couple when they were in an amorous mood, on occasions when the lover was near, dance may be employed (ibid: 112). However, when the heroine of the piece is *khandita*-enraged, *vipralabha*-deceived, or *kalahantrita*-keeping aloof due to huff; dance should not be employed preferably (ibid). Bose also discusses the purpose of *Tāṇḍava* which was primarily religious and involved propitiating the deities and praise-offerings (*devastuti*) whereas Parvati's dance has the function of human communication as against the exclusive religious function of *tāṇḍava*.<sup>9</sup> The functions of *nāṭya* and *nṛtya* have also been suggested in the *Abhinaya Darpana* where they should be seen at festivals. *Nṛtya* was performed at celebrations and coronations as well as in processions of the heavenly and humanly realms and this was supposed to bring good fortune [Coomaraswamy and Duggirala \(1970\)](#). Thus, the occasions of social significance is where *nṛtya* is supposed to be included. It is specifically enlisted that should be seen in the courts of kings by royal audiences (ibid.). Hence, the last point also denotes the exclusions and inclusions in terms of audiences of such courtly performances.

The text in fact goes on to highlight the ideal spectator like in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 'An ideal spectator was one who was pure with unruffled senses, skilful in weighing the pros and cons, disposed not to find faults alone, but to be sympathetic and susceptible to the feelings like pleasure, sorrow, anger, and fear, delineated in the dramatic presentation. But all these qualities could not have been expected in every member of the audience' (Unni 2003: 190). The *Abhinaya Darpana* mentions that the audiences shine like wishing trees that signifies the Vedas and its branches; honoured by the royals and thus an important component in the "royal splendour" [Coomaraswamy and Duggirala \(1970\)](#). The categories of audiences listed include 'men of learning', leaders, poets, the *vidūṣaka*, and then a wide category of men who were familiar with 'history and mythology' (ibid.). The hierarchy that one finds in the description of the audience where in terms of seating, the chief of audience

<sup>9</sup> "Whatever part (of a play) is praising gods, (one) should perform with vigorous *aṅgahāras* (created by) Maheśvara while a song related to erotic sentiment man and woman (is sung) it should be performed by *aṅgahāras* created by Devi." The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 4.312 cited in Bose, Op.cit., p.16.

should sit east facing, and the ministers, court poets and other courtiers should sit by his sides is something that is not that elaborate in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. However, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* does implicitly denote hierarchies in the kinds of seating that are offered to the audiences based on their social location. The audiences, however, seem more inclusive in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* than in the *Abhinaya Darpana* whereby the performance seems to be directed more towards the royal court.

If one tries to compare the situations for the introduction of dance in the two texts respectively, the difference that stands out is the wider implication of the role of dance in society in the *Abhinaya Darpana* whereby it transgresses the ambit of dramaturgy and crawls into the events of social and political significance.

## 6. RITUALS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN THE NĀṬYAŚĀSTRA AND THE ABHINAYA DARPANA

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra* the *purvāraṅgavidhāna* (preliminary rituals before the play is staged) has been regarded as very significant in the whole set up of the dramatic performance. It has been mentioned that this *Nāṭya* depicting the stories and incidents relating to *Devas*, *Asuras*, Kings, noble men and *brāhmin* sages was very much educative and all the Gods requested Brahmā, “You should ordain that a proper worship is to be performed on the stage. Offerings, sacrifices on sacred fire, food stuffs and drinks should be the ingredients of that worship” (Unni 2003: 21).<sup>10</sup> The ill effects of not adhering to the worship have been enlisted and so have been the good consequences.<sup>11</sup> The ‘aim’ of such worship is the protection of the performers, the success of the performance, and the welfare of the king.

The rituals were roughly separated on account of those that were to be carried out behind the curtain and others that were to be performed in front of audiences after the curtains were raised. There were nine elements to be performed behind the curtain which included *Pratyahara*- arranging the seats for the instrumentalists in their proper place on stage; *Avatarana*- seating of the singers and musicians on stage; *Ārambha*- beginnings of the recital of music or songs; *As’ravana*- sounding of the various percussion instruments; *Vaktrapani*- sounding of the wind instruments; *Parighattana*- tuning the strings of the lute; *Samghotana*- beginning of the playing of musical instruments; *Margasarita*- playing together of the lute and percussion instruments and *Asaritakriya*- systemization of Tala (rhythmic beats). After this the curtain is removed to announce the performance that is visible to the audience (Unni 2003:44).

After raising the curtain the rituals that had to be performed included *Gitaka*- song in praise of a deity as invocation; *Vardhamanaka*- entrance of the dancing girls up to four in number, one after the other with dancing steps; *Utthapana*- recitation of the benedictory stanza which contains reference to the plot; *Parivarttana*- bowing to the lords of the four quarters by turning round to the respective regions; *Suskavakrsta-nandi*- praising of Gods, Brāhmins and kings (ibid.). The last rite that has been pointed out is very interesting whereby along with the Gods and Kings, Brāhmins are also supposed to be praised. The Gods, kings and Brahmins have been consciously distinguished by Bharata in the *Natyasastra*. Thus, a hierarchy that is couched in these performances (at least in terms of them being laid down in the form of norms) is noticeable.

<sup>10</sup> The element of sacrifice itself reflects the Brahmanization of the rituals involved in the dramatic performances.

<sup>11</sup> “The learning of he who initiates such a performance without the worship is of no use and that he will be born as a beast in his subsequent birth. The worship of the Gods on the stage is equivalent to a sacrifice. Hence by all means one should perform the worship on the stage.....on the other hand; he who causes such worship will reap good consequences and will attain the world of heaven”, ibid.

In the *Abhinaya Darpana*, it has been suggested that dancers have to first touch the ankle-bells with her forehead and eyes followed by a brief prayer and only then should she tie the bells on her ankles Coomaraswamy and Duggirala (1970). In fact, the text goes on to suggest that dancing in which the actress does not begin with prayer, is vulgar (ibid: 17). After these rituals are performed, the dance may be performed (ibid.). What is interesting is that the preliminary rituals have not been emphasized as extensively as in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Also, the aspect of keeping in view what had been laid down by the ancestors could be suggestive of the preliminary rituals laid down in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. What is similar is how ritual and dance overlap and occupy such a significant place in both these texts.

## 7. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GESTURAL LANGUAGE AS THE TOOL FOR COMMUNICATION

The gestural language never lost its significance especially in the performative world. In dramaturgy, the hand poses and other movements are essential and are made use of to give expression to ideas (Unni 2003:244). Different poses of the hands were used to suggest different ideas and Bharata assigns a lot of significance to the mudras for according to him there was nothing that could not be shown by the poses of hand. How different gestures used in dance by way of hand can be used to symbolize a wide range of things such as winds, floods, beating of drums and so on and so forth is interesting; what has also been pointed out is that the rules for the performance of the hand were not gender exclusive and applied to women and men similarly (Unni 2003: 269).

The gestural representations is of three kinds; *śarira*-related to the limbs, *mukhaja*-facial, and *ceṣṭakṛta*- by the movements of the body. This is in combination with hand poses, poses of the major limbs (like the head, hands, hip, chest, sides, and the feet) and those of the minor limbs (such as the eyes, nose, lips, eyebrows and so forth) (Unni 2003: 232).

The dramatic performance had its basis on three *vrittis* (literary styles) *bharati* (verbal utterance), *sattvati* (grand conception of the mind) and *arabhati* (the violent one connected with physical activity). What has also been added is the charming style that is *Kais'iki* which involved dancing with gentle gesticulation and movement of limbs suggesting the different aesthetic emotions like *Rasa* (sentiment) and *Bhāva* (permanent mood). In the case of *Kais'iki*, the use of simple and a charming dress had been mentioned. Thus, the use of particular clothes to symbolize particular emotions is significant. It has also been added that this type of dance was unsuitable for men and that it could only be represented by women (Unni 2003: 9). Even though the rules of dance might have been similar for women and men but there was a gendering of performance whereby certain sections within a performance were expected to be performed by women. What is also contradictory is that Bharata mentions that he had seen the *Kaisiki* style in the performance of lord Nilkaṇṭha and not in the performance of any Goddess and still the charming style has been associated with women.<sup>12</sup>

The gestural mode of representation also includes *Citrābhinaya*. By raising both the hands, one should lift up the head and look upwards employing different kinds of glances to show things like morning, sky, seasons, clouds, and other objects of the

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<sup>12</sup> Here it has been noted by some that the word *drsta*- meaning seen is to be explained as 'I have seen the god dancing with his consort Uma when she exemplified the Kaisiki style. However, Abhinavgupta's commentary on the *Nāṭyas'āstra* rejects this explanation quoting a stanza of the text (NS. XX- 13 OF Kavyamala edn.) where the God is described as performing it. Ibid. p.10.

sky (Unni 2003: 704). With the same poses of hands and with the head turned downwards objects of the earth should be represented. By covering the head with a piece of cloth one should represent sun, dust, smoke, and air (ibid: 710).

As far as the representation of emotions is concerned, all emotions depicted by women should involve ease and grace while men should portray their emotions with courage and sweetness (ibid: 720). The mood love is represented by the smiling face, agreeable and sweet words, movement of the brows, side long glances and by graceful movements of the limbs (Unni 2003: 193). Sorrow should be represented by trembling of limbs, falling on the ground etc. (ibid: 191). Anger is symbolized by swelling of nostrils, rolling of eyes, biting of lips, and throbbing of the cheeks (ibid: 192).

Representation of birds were shown by using both hands and accordingly with the movement of fingers. The bigger birds and animals are represented by appropriate *recakas* and *aṅgahāras*. The same hand in combination with the *karaṇa* could be used to represent beating of drums, winds, floods, and other such actions (Unni 2003: 269).

Thus, use of particular gaits and gestures in performance to symbolize a wide range of animate and inanimate objects and to signify emotional disposition is of great significance. Bharata had taken the composition of the audience very seriously. He was conscious of the fact that the performance was watched by a composite audience and that only some of them could follow technicalities involved in a production such as gestures (Unni 2003:189). The member of the audience that consisted of persons of the average and the 'low' levels would not have possibly understood the significance of the more nuanced gestures. Thus, the codification of gestures was also such that it was meant for the 'ideal' audience.

The *Abhinaya Darpana* assigns a lot of importance to gestures, and it forms the principal theme of the text. The root word *ni* and its prefix *abhi* imply exposition; the word *abhinaya* is used in this sense and the gestural expression as such is considered (Coomaraswamy 1970: 17). There are three kinds of gestures: bodily, verbal, and ornamental and the *Abhinaya Darpana* is only concerned with the *āṅgikābhinaya* (expressions by means of limbs and bodily movements) (ibid.).

Only those gestures which are useful in dancing are described. Nandikeśvara begins by describing the nine movements of the head which were: *Sama* (denotes anger, indifference, or inaction), *udvāhita* (suggests anything tall- mountains, flags, moon etc.), *adhomukha* (sorrow, modesty, bowing, things on the ground), *ālolita* (sleeping, obsession, dizziness, laughter, etc.), *Dhuta* (denial, impatience, cold, fire, fear, rejection, preparing for battle etc.), *kampita* (enquiry, summoning, threatening), *parāvṛtta* (modesty, relaxing the features, hair, etc.), *utkṣipta* (indication, cherishing, assent), *parivāhita* (denotes longing for the beloved, being in love, pleasure, gratification, reflection) (ibid. :18). These gestures of the head were supposed to connote a range of expressions which re iterates the significance of gestures in dance.

The glances such as *sama*, *ālokita*, *sāci*, *pralokita*, *nimīlata*, *ullokita*, *anuvṛtta*, *avalokita* reflect the significance of glances and movements of eyes and brows without moving the head. These eight glances are found in the *Bharatasastra* (ibid. :21). Then the text goes on to describe numerous other glances which are mentioned elsewhere. However, it has not been suggested exactly where the other glances are mentioned. It is not the aim of this paper to enlist all the gestures that have been mentioned in the text. The point of the matter being the significance that gestural language holds in all performative arts and the nuances of which could be understood by a select few. However, I would like to discuss one particular glance,

the *malina*, which was executed by the lashes partly closed, the pupils are supposed to be sunken, and the unclean eye is supposed to signify women (i.e., dissipation) (ibid: 23). The gestural language was also supposed to be gendered; for instance, this particular glance not only signified women but also the attribute of debauchery that was associated with women.

Further, four movements of the neck and twelve movements of the hands are mentioned that signify a plethora of emotions and symbols.

What is also interesting in the classification of hands is the divine origin of some of these hand gestures. However, what might unsettle the readers is that the text that it is cited from has not been mentioned clearly. For instance, the hand gesture *patāka* (flag) which Nandikeśvara describes was used at the beginning of dance, as also to denote a plethora of objects such as the forest, clouds, 'forbidden things', bosom, world of gods and so on (ibid: 27). One more example of this is the description of the *tripatāka* hand gesture (three parts of the flag) which symbolizes a crown tree, *vajra* weapon, the union of man and woman among other things (ibid.). The text goes on to suggest that according to another such 'book', *tripatāka* hand gesture is so called since Indra and others held the *vajra* weapon with three parts of the flag. The red colour of the "*kṣattriya* race", its patron deity Siva and its use ranges from invocation, descent, lifting or bending down the face, to the flight of certain birds, tongues of flame, "*Kṣattriya* caste", and red colour (ibid: 28).

What is interesting is not just the caste that could be gestured by the hand but also the relationships which are suggested by the eleven hand movements. The *dampati* (husband and wife), *mṛga śirsa*, indicating female and male could be indicated using hand gestures (ibid: 44). *Mātṛ* (mother) is denoted by gesture *ardha-candra* and right hand *saṃdamṣa*, the left hand then placed on the stomach, showing the *strī* hand, indicating the mother or daughter (ibid.). Similarly, gestures denoting other familial relations are noted in the text (ibid.: 44-45). It also goes on to indicate the depictions of the heavenly realm- such as actions of Brahmā and other devas as well as those to indicate lions and other animals; signifying the wide range of representation that the multitude of hand gestures could suggest (ibid: 45).

One factor that immediately strikes one is the significance of such nuanced gestures on the one hand as also the evolution of dance over a significant period of time where variations can definitely be located in the two texts. However, what binds the two is the importance of gestural language in dance where gestures become the language of communication between the performer and the recipient of the performance.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The comparison of the two texts reflects similarities and differences on various planes, some of which have been highlighted in the paper. However, the fact that one was able to create common sections by way of which the two texts could be compared reflects the significance of themes such as the Sanskrit codification of dance, the importance of rituals, gestures, every movement of every limb, in the ambit of performing arts. However, this is not to suggest that one cannot talk of evolution in the context of the *Abhinaya Darpana*. The point being that as one percolates into the fundamentals that govern the codification of dance, there are numerous differences. For instance, the structure that is given to dance itself, *nṛtya*, is a later addition and is nowhere mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. What needs to be acknowledged is that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* goes down as the first treatise to codify dance, drama, and music. However, the first treatise to treat dance as an autonomous art

was the *Abhinaya Darpana*. The comparison of the two texts reflects on some of the social aspects which have been highlighted in the paper and how the gestures of the hands could by the time of the *Abhinaya Darpana* suggest the gender that was being represented, a particular caste and the stereotypes associated with the female gender, as also the societal relationships that could be suggested by a mere gesture of the hand. Thus, in the light of similarities and dissimilarities, the way some of the aforementioned issues could be touched by using the *Nāṭyas'āstra*. and the *Abhinaya Darpana* suggests that there is possibility to go beyond the use of these texts just as 'authentic' and 'legitimate' and an attempt has been made to highlight the same in the paper.

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### **Author's Bio**

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I am Dr. Aditi Singh, Ph.D. Candidate (2014-July 2019), Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi. Currently Research Professor at the Institute of Indian Studies, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. I submitted my Ph.D. thesis in July 2019 and have recently defended my Doctoral thesis in August 2020. I have a keen interest in performance studies; which was also the broad area of my Doctoral thesis. I have received the Indian Council for Historical Research, Junior Research Fellowship Award (September 2016-2018) and the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund Doctoral Scholarship Award (Jan2019-July2019) that supported my Doctoral Studies. Very recently, I won the Best Paper Award on Gender History at the Indian History Congress (79th Session, IHC). My specialization is in Ancient Indian History and I primarily work on the textual tradition in Early India (c.3rd-6th centuries CE). As part of my Ph.D. Thesis, I have examined issues of society through performing arts (dramas and plays) as represented in the texts of the corresponding period; the central theme of the dissertation being performance and in general a socio-cultural understanding of Early India.