

An Indian-Aesthetics Approach to Non-Representational Dance – Interpreting *Nṛtta* in the Frameworks of *Rasa*, *Aucitya* and *Dhvani*

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Abstract

Rasa, the aesthetic experience, stands as the highest purpose of art according to Indian Aesthetics. In this paper we explore the concept of non-representational dance or *nṛtta* with the aim of integrating an answerability to *rasa* into the structure of Bharatanāṭyam, a present-day classical dance of India. Drawing from sage Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra and supplemented by insights from Anandavardhana's Dhvanyāloka, the study provides a *śāstric* (analytical and philosophical) framework for non-representational dance (*nṛtta*) using three overarching canons of Indian Aesthetics – *Rasa*, *Aucitya*, and *Dhvani*. We present a significant advancement in the field of Indian dance aesthetics by offering a refined definition of non-representational dance or *nṛtta* by aligning it within the framework of the *rasa sūtra* (dictum on *rasa*). The definition is substantiated by a nuanced analysis and interpretation of Bharata's delineation of *nṛtta*, and cross-examination with related concepts in the Nāṭyaśāstra. Furthermore, we explore non-representational dance within the frameworks of *aucitya* and *dhvani*, enhancing fundamental concepts established by this definition.

Keywords: *Nṛtta*, *Rasa*, Nāṭyaśāstra, Indian Aesthetics, Non-representational dance, Bharatanāṭyam

INTRODUCTION

The branch of philosophy termed as aesthetics involves the unravelling of the experience of one's encounter with art. In the Indian context, studies in the field of aesthetics were first documented several thousands of years ago in the earliest and most authoritative treatise on the science and practice of art – the *Nāṭyaśāstra* ascribed to sage Bharata (Lidova, 2012). The *Nāṭyaśāstra* describes a type of composite performing art '*Nāṭya*' that comprises several artistic disciplines including, but not restricted to, drama, dance, music and poetry. To explain this term *nāṭya*, Bharata incorporates the ancient Indian methodology of providing *lakṣaṇas*¹ (characteristics) as opposed to relying solely on singular definitions (Shringy, 1983). As a rudimentary *lakṣaṇa*, Bharata says, '*trailokasyāsya sarvasya nāṭyam bhāvānukīrtanam*²' (Nāṭyaśāstra (NS) 1.107)– *Nāṭya* is

¹ The term *lakṣaṇa-grantha* is used to describe the *Nāṭyaśāstra* which refers to 'a treatise defining or describing the nature, characteristics etc. of a subject as poetics, grammar, etc.' (Alar Dictionary, s.v.

"लक्षणाग्रन्थः", accessed Feb 2, 2024, <http://surl.li/raiks>

² त्रैलोक्यास्यास्य सर्वस्य नाट्यं भावानुकीर्तनम् || NS 6.31

the *anukīrtana* (exalted imitation) of *bhāvas* (emotions) to transcend the spatiotemporal bounds of the three worlds³. In-keeping with this fundamental characteristic of *nāṭya* as the artistic mimesis of emotions, all suggestions of techniques, conventions and practices mentioned in the text converge toward a single purpose of evoking *rasa* in performance. *Rasa* is roughly translated as the ‘aesthetic experience’. Sage Bharata encapsulates the essence of the concept of *Rasa* in the analogy of savouring food⁴.

“Just as ‘flavour’ is a mixture of spices, herbs and other substances, *rasa* is a mixture of many *bhāvas* (emotions), and *rasa* is called so because it can be relished (*āsvādyatvat*).” (NS 6.32) (Mason & Patwardhan, 1970)

Rasa is therefore understood as the enjoyment of emotions⁵. The phenomenology of *Rasa* is captured in the *rasa sūtra* (dictum on *rasa*) as given by sage Bharata - *vibhāva-anubhāva-vyabhicāri-samyogād-rasa-niṣpattiḥ* (NS 6.31). This *rasa sūtra* provides a framework for how *rasa* could be experienced in performance by both connoisseurs and performers. It suggests the delineation of the *sthāyi bhāva*⁶ (primary emotion of the context/story that results in a particular *rasa*) that is triggered by the *vibhāvas* (cause/determinant), expressed by the *anubhāvas* (reaction/expression through *vāk* (aural) and *aṅga* (gestural/bodily)), and enhanced by the *vyabhicāri bhāvas* (other fleeting emotions)⁷. This *rasa* is the soul and artistic purpose of the body of principles or techniques suggested in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*⁸.

For the success of this ‘*rasa* formula’, the most basic requirement is the sustained presence of the *sthāyi bhāva*⁹ or central emotion in the performance of a piece which is

³ Bharata later also gives a *sangraha śloka* or summary verse and states the 11 essential elements that make-up *nāṭya* – *rasa, bhāva, abhinaya, dharmi, vr̥tti, pravṛtti, svāra, gāna, ātodya, siddhi and raṅga* (NS 6.10).

⁴ In this context, Abhinavagupta, the foremost commentator of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* says that the use of an analogy rather than a definition is imperative here as the matter of discussion is transcendental (*alaukika*) and can only be understood metaphorically (Mason & Patwardhan, 1970) p.46.

⁵ V.K Chari translates *rasa* as ‘aesthetic relish’ and says, “*rasa* is the relishable quality inherent in an artistic work, which, according to Bharata, is its emotive content.” (Chari, 1993) p.10. “An actor mimics emotion and the audience tastes this emotion as it watches his performance”, says Dace (Dace, 1963) summarizing the word *rasa* to be the difference between tasting the emotion and experiencing it in real life.

⁶ The *sthāyi bhāvas* given in the *nāṭyaśāstra* are 8 in number – *rati* (love), *hāsah* (mirth), *śokah* (sorrow), *krōdha* (anger), *utsāha* (courage), *bhaya* (fear), *jugupsa* (disgust) and *vismaya* (wonder). These when sustained and delineated with the help of *vibhāvas, anubhāvas* and *vyabhicāri bhāvas* can lead to the experience of corresponding *rasas* – *śṛṅgāra, hāsya, karuṇa, Raudra, vīra, bhayānaka, bhībatsa* and *Adbhuta*. However, Abhinavagupta gives the 9th *rasa* – *śānta* *rasa*. See (Raghavan, 1940)

⁷ It was Abhinavagupta, a scholar of the 10th century, who, based on the findings and discussions of previous scholars, successfully clarified, defended and explained the precise essence and meaning of the macrocosm of Sage Bharata’s *rasasūtra*, and it is this understanding that completes the framework to study art and aesthetics (Ganser, 2022).

⁸ To understand the importance of *rasa*, Bharata says – *na hi rasād ṛte kaścid arthaḥ pravartate* (without *rasa*, no topic (of *nāṭya*) can appeal to the mind of the spectator; for without *rasa* there can be no true meaning) (Mason & Patwardhan, 1970) p.46.

⁹ The *Nāṭyaśāstra* prioritizes the presentation of *sthāyibhāva* and the facilitation of *rasa* experience over practical performance details and play construction specifics. To achieve this objective, the text outlines the ideal sequence situations within a narrative and provides guidance on how actors should depict the

achieved in two ways. First, is by actually sustaining the *sthāyi bhāva* as an undercurrent to the whole performance piece. Second, is by ensuring that any other auxiliary elements such as the *vibhāvas* or *vyabhicāri bhavas* that are used and expressed do not interfere with or disrupt the *sthāyi*. Fundamentally, it is the structure of a presentation that assists this flow of the *sthāyi bhāva*.

The present study revolves around the structure of a present-day offshoot of *Nāṭya* – the Indian classical dance of Bharatanāṭyam. Despite its ancient roots, the current Bharatanāṭyam dance tradition was never preserved as a monolith, but rather as a genre that endured various socio-political realities in India for over a century¹⁰. From the street dancing of the *bhakti* movement, to the temple and court dancing of *sadir*, the art form experienced changes in context and purpose which led it to deviate from the canon of *Rasa*. Continuing its evolutionary journey, Bharatanāṭyam transitioned to the modern proscenium stage in the 1930s (Meduri, 1988), coincidentally reclaiming a space once occupied by the ancient *nāṭya* of Bharata¹¹. And thus, a need for a re-alignment of this dance with *rasa*, the original purport of *nāṭya*, slowly began to become the direction of its evolution¹².

However, as a consequence of its deviation from principles of *rasa*, the structure of pieces within the Bharatanāṭyam repertoire performed today, frequently struggles to align with the requirements of the *Rasa* process¹³. This lack of alignment presents challenges in maintaining the continuity of the *sthāyi* – the foremost requirement of the *rasa sūtra*. The Bharatanāṭyam dance structure today is dictated by two key aspects – the representational (*abhinaya*) and non-representational (*nṛtta*) aspects and the two are treated largely as distinct in practice¹⁴. *Nṛtta* refers to non-representational dance, i.e. dance when no particular concept, meaning or emotion is intended to be communicated (NS 4.265). In Bharatanāṭyam, *Nṛtta* mainly involves the stringing together of *aḍavus* or basic steps, to create movement patterns that are set to rhythm. *Abhinaya*¹⁵ refers to the

unfolding of emotional context, drawing from observations of daily life. See (Higgins, 2007) for more about the underlying concepts of the *rasa sūtra*.

¹⁰ See (Bharadwaj A, 2018) for more about evolution of Bharatanāṭyam.

¹¹ Bharata emphasizes the significance of the stage as the primary space for Nāṭya performances. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, he delineates eleven fundamental components of Nāṭya, with the stage, or "Ranga," being one of them (NS 6.10). The *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s second chapter, *Maṇḍapavidhānam*, extensively elaborates on the design and construction of the auditorium and stage, indicating the meticulous attention given to this aspect of performance space (NS Chapter 2 (Unni 2019)).

¹² The concerted effort to realign with the fundamental principles of *rasa* has been a focal point for both practitioners and scholars, markedly enhancing the advancement of dance aesthetics across practical and theoretical spheres. Rukmini Devi Arundale, a pioneer in the revival of Bharatanāṭyam speaks about the true spirit of Indian Art and it is this re-alignment that she hints at (Arundale, 1951). Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam who has reconstructed the *karāṇas* (dance movements given in the *nāṭyaśāstra*) (Subrahmanyam, 2010) has been a pivotal figure in this endeavor, dedicating herself to the exploration and integration of *rasa* within the domain of Indian classical dance.

¹³ See (Sathyanarayana, 1969) p.253

¹⁴ See (Raghavan, 2004)

¹⁵ The miming aspect of *nāṭya* termed as *āṅgikābhinaya* in the *nāṭyaśāstra* is also an integral part of present-day Bharatanāṭyam. The principles that govern *āṅgikābhinaya* of *nāṭya* also govern techniques of *abhinaya* in Bharatanāṭyam

outwardly expression that draws the audience towards the inwardly emotion. It involves the enactment of characters, stories or emotional situations employing a codified language of gestures and facial or bodily expressions. Bharatanāṭyam dance, in its format today is a blend of *nṛtta* and *abhinaya* in undefined ratios¹⁶. This vague combination of contrasting representational and non-representational elements gives rise to two fundamental questions–1) What are the aesthetic principles that must guide the performance of non-representational *nṛtta* and its integration with *abhinaya* which is inherently representational? 2) What is the nature of the artistic experience of non-representational *nṛtta*?

To answer these, we analyse structure of *nṛtta* and *abhinaya* from the frameworks of (I) *Rasa*, (II) *Aucitya* (*propriety*) and (III) *Dhvani* (*suggestion*) – the three major canons of Indian Aesthetics. The paper aims to provide an analytical framework aimed at integrating *rasa* answerability into the Bharatanāṭyam structure. By examining the depths of aesthetic principles drawn from the Nāṭyaśāstra and adapting them to the contemporary context of this art form, it seeks to illuminate pathways toward an enriched experience of *rasa*.

Why analyse the Nāṭyaśāstra?

As we embark on the study of *nṛtta* in the ancient Nāṭyaśāstra, it is crucial to grasp the significance of a '*śāstra*' and why its examination remains pertinent even in contemporary discussions. The Indian civilization, recognized as one of the world's oldest living civilizations, boasts of an uninterrupted tradition of knowledge transmission. The Ṛg Veda, identified as the oldest surviving body of work (Feuerstein et al., 2005) stands as a testament to this rich legacy. Such antiquity of documenting intrinsic teachings of lived experiences among ancient Indians provides the foundational context for comprehending the concept and relevance of '*śāstra*¹⁷' in the contemporary era. While *śāstras* in the Indian tradition are scientific texts, they do not merely refer to 'theoretical' or 'academic' knowledge of empirical phenomena (Ganesh, 2022). They are also based on introspective thought, observation, experience and documented discourse by *rṣis* (realised souls) about phenomena over several thousand years. So firstly, when such time and effort has been invested in the understanding of concepts, problems and techniques, it becomes both inefficient and impractical to start from scratch or turn a blind eye the enormous body of work that is already available. Secondly, *śāstras* do not merely dictate rules or address isolated issues; rather, they provide guidance for sustenance and success in their respective fields by addressing a comprehensive array of problems. This adaptability renders them relevant beyond the periods in which they were originally

¹⁶ Bharatanāṭyam may also incorporate the usage of representational *nṛtta* often termed as *nṛtya*. *Nṛtya* involves movements of dance that intend to convey a particular emotion or meaning. The current discussion however focuses only on the concept of non-representational *nṛtta* where no meaning is intended to be conveyed.

¹⁷ The Sanskrit dictionary translates *śāstra* as 'a system of thoughts giving a scientific treatment of any subject' (Abhyankar & Shukla, 1961)

formulated. Therefore, when a practicing tradition or pedagogy does not answer why something in the tradition occurs, instead of asking 'why not' and starting a new practice from scratch, a more efficient and systematic approach would be to ask 'why' and first search for answers and relevance in the *śāstras* that have documented millennia of practice and then further evolve from there. It is for these reasons that we look into *śāstric* contexts in the present study.

Alankāraśāstra or Indian aesthetics is one such *śāstra*. With its roots in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, it has grown to become a vast and distinct branch of philosophy that is recognized to find its grounding in three realms - *Veda*, *lōka* and *adhyātma*¹⁸. And therefore, we contact sage Bharata and ask him all our questions and confusions regarding structure of non-representational *nṛtta* and *abhinaya* in *Bharatanāṭyam* with the vision of *rasa*. Before we go into this, it must be understood that when non-representational *nṛtta* is referred to in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, it includes *Karaṇas* and *Angahāras*¹⁹. However, for the current discussion, the usage of the term can be extended to also include any non-representational *nṛtta* in *Bharatanāṭyam* like *aḍavus*.

A nuanced analysis of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

Chapter four of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* titled "Tāṇḍavalakṣaṇam", documents inquiries regarding the role and position of *nṛtta* in a *nāṭya* performance through a question-and-answer format²⁰, with students posing queries to Bharata. Bharata approaches these inquiries with unwavering diligence, placing importance on the pursuit of understanding the concept of *rasa* itself.

I. Locating *Nṛtta* in the framework of the *rasa-sūtra*:

The students ask Bharata, "If for communicating meaning, the learned use *abhinaya*, what led to the making of dance (*nṛtta*), and what is its nature?"²¹. As a reply to this, Bharata gives us an understanding of *nṛtta*. He says, "*nṛtta* has no meaning (*artham*), it is used simply because it creates beauty²² (*shobhām prajāyate*). Inherently (*svabhāvataha*), *nṛtta* is loved by all and is said to be auspicious (*Maṅgalam*). It is a source of pleasure and amusement (*vinodakāraṇam*) during weddings, childbirth and other festivities."²³

¹⁸ Bharata gives in the *nāṭyaśāstra* the *pramāṇas* (means of valid knowledge) of all that is contained in the treatise – the world (*loka*), *veda* (knowledge) and *adhyātma* (soul) - *loko vedastathādhyātmam pramāṇam trividham smṛtam* (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 25.119) (Ghosh M, 2002)

¹⁹ *Hastapāda samāyogo nṛttasya karaṇam bhavet* (NS 4.30) – The *nāṭyaśāstra* defines *karaṇa* as a movement formed by the coming together of *hasta* (hand) and *pāda* (feet). There are 108 such movements mentioned in the text. A set of *karaṇas* is termed as *aṅgahāra* (Unni, 2019).

²⁰ This format runs throughout the text of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* where Bharata teaches the knowledge of *nāṭya* to his 100 disciples (referred to as sons) in the text.

²¹ NS 4.265

²² Keeping in mind this beautifying nature of *nṛtta*, Bharata develops a complex vocabulary of *nṛtta* in chapters 8-13 of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, delineating the technique for mastering movement in every major and minor limb of the body.

²³ NS 4.268-271

अत्रोच्यते न खल्वर्थं कञ्चिन्नृत्तमपेक्षते ॥

Analysis and interpretation:

What this tells us is that dance is within the innate nature of human beings and human life. Just like the *sthāyi bhāva* within us is triggered by a *vibhāva*, an auspicious moment or a celebratory festival triggers the need for *nṛtta*. For example, a *Sangeet*²⁴ ceremony is today an inseparable part of wedding celebrations in India. It is in a wedding that there is celebration like none other and the *svabhāva* (inherent nature) of a human being to rejoice through movement is noticed. Similarly, when one receives good news, it is but natural to jump up in happiness. It is the occurrence of this impulse to dance at the most joyous moments of life that also makes it auspicious or *maṅgalam*. Sage Bharata is not one to overlook the slightest nature of human beings and is therefore welcoming of this non-representational *nṛtta* into his all-encompassing *nāṭya*. He even develops a magnificent vocabulary for *nṛtta* (seen in NS chapters 4, 8-13), delineating the technique for mastering movements of every major and minor limb of the body. But the instruction of most of these ends in melting this technique into its application to suit *bhāva* and *rasa*. This vision suggests that non-representational *nṛtta* can indeed be effectively aligned with the framework of *rasa*. Let us attempt to re-cognize our perception of *nṛtta* with this vision.

Since in life, non-representational *nṛtta* manifests as a bodily reaction to joy, we attempt to redefine *nṛtta* using elements of the *rasasūtra* as follows:

Non-representational *nṛtta* in the framework of *rasa* can be described as an *anubhāva* to the *vyabhicāri bhāva* of joy (harṣa).

Here we use two elements of the *rasa sūtra* – (1) *anubhāva* which refers to the reaction to an emotion manifested through aural and bodily expression and (2) *vyabhicāri bhāva* which refers to the fleeting or transient emotions that help to support the *sthāyi*. Our definition thus implies that non-representational *nṛtta* is a joyous physical expression, that must be used fleetingly with the purpose of strengthening the central emotion or *sthāyi bhāva*. Its technique is practiced to support this application of *nṛtta* along with its inherently enjoyable and beautifying nature as given by Bharata.

In order to substantiate our definition, we compare sage Bharata's suggestions of usage of *nṛtta* (NS Chapter 4) to the usage of the *vyabhicāri bhāva* of joy (NS Chapter 7).

किं तु शोभां प्रजनयेदिति नृत्तं प्रवर्तितम् ।
 प्रायेण सर्वलोकस्य नृत्तमिष्टं स्वभावतः ॥
 मङ्गलमिति कृत्वा च नृत्तमेतत्प्रकीर्तितम् ।
 विवाहप्रसवावाहप्रमोदाभ्युदयादिषु ॥
 विनोदकारणं चेति नृत्तमेतत्प्रवर्तितम् ।

²⁴ The Sangeet ceremony is an event in Indian weddings where there is celebration through dance and music.

1) Bharata's usage of *harṣa*²⁵ (joy)

Bharata gives the *vyabhicari* termed as *harṣa* or joy and gives the following *vibhāvas* (causes):

“Joy (*harṣa*) is caused by *vibhāvas* such as (A) attainment of a desired object, (B) union with a beloved person, (C) mental satisfaction, (D) receiving favour of gods, gurus, king, and master, (E) receiving food, clothing and money and enjoying them, and the like. (NS 7.92-93)

Bharata also gives the ‘delicate movement of limbs’ as one of the *anubhāvas* of *harṣa* (NS 7.94).

2) Bharata's situational usage of *nṛtta*

Bharata gives the following suggestions on when the use of *nṛtta* is suitable:

“(A) In adoring gods, *nṛtta* is used. (B) In dialogue between man and woman in love, the *sukumāra prayoga*²⁶ (delicate form) of *nṛtta* is used where there is the exposition of *śṛṅgāra rasa*. (C) When a character attains success or good fortune (*abhyudayasthāne*) *nṛtta* can be used. (D) When a married couple is depicted in love, *nṛtta* can be used as it will be a source of joy. (E) When the lover is near and the season is pleasing, there too, *nṛtta* used along with songs (*gitakāṛthābhi sambaddham*) is often wanted.” (NS 4.309 – 4.315)

Bharata in these guidelines on usage of *nṛtta* puts into perspective the very nature of *nṛtta* which is joyous. The instances he gives as examples, are suggestions that these movements should be used within the scope of their innate joyous nature. Comparing these situations with the *vibhāvas* of the *vyabhicāri* of *harṣa*, patterns of similarity emerge.

1A and 1B are very evidently comparable to 2D, 2E and 2D. The coming together of a couple, conversations in love, the beauty of nature at this time and the celebration of marriage – instances of *sambhoga śṛṅgāra* (love in union) are all instances of extreme joy in real life. 1A, 1D and 1E are actual examples of a character attaining good fortune and success and are directly comparable to 2C. While this is a literal comparison, **we can conclude that general instances that bring joy to a character in performance allow for a deviation to non-representational *sukumara prayōga nṛtta* on stage without *rasabhanga* (breaking away from *rasa*).**

²⁵ One can also connect *nṛtta* and *harṣa* or joy through the understanding that the cosmic lineage of the *karaṇas* and *angahāras* comes from the *tāṇḍava* (dance) of lord Śiva (NS 4.17) which is the ecstatic dance of the lord in a perpetual state of bliss (*ānanda*) – an extension or persistence of the *vyabhicāri* of *harṣa* into a *sthāyi bhāva*.

²⁶ *Sukumāra prayoga* and *uddhata prayoga* are the two types of usage of *nṛtta* which refer to delicate and rigorous dance respectively (Subrahmanyam, 2003)

The above situations given by Bharata speak only of the *sukumāra prayōga* (delicate usage) of *nṛtta*. We can also infer that the *uddhata/āviddha prayōga* (rigorous usage) will follow similar rules based on the context and mood of the piece. In Bharata's description of the *sthāyi bhāva* of *utsāha* (energy), a *vibhāva* mentioned by him is the 'absence of sadness (*aviśāda*)' (NS 7.21). In this context as well, a link to cheerfulness and confidence can be established. When *utsāha* occurs as a *vyabhicāri bhāva*, non-representational *uddhata prayōga nṛtta* can be suitable. For example, Bharata says that when a character attains good fortune (*abhyudayasthāne*), *nṛtta* can be used (NS 4.312). If we interpret good fortune to refer to episodes with a hero/heroine's valorous conquests or victories pertaining to *vīra* and *adbhuta* *rasa*, the *uddhata* type of *nṛtta* would be suitable²⁷. In any circumstance, non-representational *nṛtta* can be employed when portraying the *vyabhicāri bhāva* of joy.

II. *Aucitya* of *nṛtta* – drawing from Bharata and Anandavardhana

Aucitya refers to propriety. Dr. Ganesh defines *aucitya* as the highest logical concept in the whole process of art creation and appreciation (Ganesh et al., 2022). It is the boundary beyond which *rasa* ceases to exist. Anandavardhana the author of the 10th century treatise *Dhvanyaloka*, says that there is no other cause for a breach of *rasa* except *anaucitya* or impropriety and that the greatest secret to the success of *rasa* is *aucitya* (Anandavardhana, *Dhvanyaloka* 2.14). The preceding section of the paper explored the *rasa* framework, and its counterpart can be viewed as the *aucitya* framework. To clarify this concept, we refer back to the teachings of sage Bharata and integrate some principles articulated by Anandavardhana.

Analysis and interpretation:

In Indian poetics, there exists the concept of an *alankāra* which refers to beautification. In poetry, poetic devices and figures of speech (like metaphors) are called *alankāras*. *Alankāras* have been mentioned by Bharata in chapter 17 of the *nāṭyaśāstra*. This concept has been developed vastly in the field of *Alankāraśāstra* or Indian aesthetics. *Alankāras* hold significance in our present discourse due to the role of *nṛtta* as a beautifying element in performance (Ganesh et al., 2022). As noted in the preceding section of this paper, Bharata asserts that *nṛtta* imparts beauty (*śobhām prajanayet*). Given that *nṛtta* is inherently beautifying, we can extend certain principles of the *aucitya* of *alankāras* to *nṛtta* as well.

Ānandavardhana says that *alankāras* gain validation as a source of beauty and charm only when employed in subservience to the *rasa* and *bhāva* of the situation (*Dhvanyaloka* 2.5) (Krishnamoorthy, 1999, p.44). He further says that something can be called an *alankāra*

²⁷ In this context, Abhinavagupta says that *nṛtta* can be used for combat and conquest. While this is the *uddhata* type of *nṛtta*, it is not non-representational and will therefore be required to embody a *bhāva* of *vīra* or *roudra* as suitable to the war scenario. This would be a *nāṭyadharmi* usage of *nṛtta* (that is in post medieval literature termed as *nṛtya* – representational dance movements). (Ganser 2022, pp. 253)

only if its usage is an *apṛthag-yatna* – a non-different effort (Ganesh & Bharadwaj, 2023). Thus, any embellishment that looks efforted takes away from its beautifying nature. This essentially means that any *alaṅkāra* including *ṅṛtta* must naturally occur in the flow of the ongoing *bhāvas* and the situations of their occurrence must be cognized logically to suit the context.

Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* goes on to tell us where the usage of *ṅṛtta* is unsuitable:

He says, “in cases of the *khaṇḍita nāyika*²⁸, the *vipralabdha nāyika*²⁹ or the *Kalahāntarita nayika*³⁰, *ṅṛtta* is not to be used” (NS 4.315). In this context, we can apply a meta-principle of *aucitya* given by Anandavardhana. He says that stopping the delineation of a *rasa* abruptly or over-elaborating it is considered *anaucitya* and an impediment (*virodhi*) to *rasānanda* (Dhvanyaloka 3.19). While *ṅṛtta* finds its place predominantly in situations of love in union (*sambhoga śṛṅgāra*), it is unsuitable in circumstances of love in separation (*vipralambha śṛṅgāra*). In the midst of love's turmoil—whether fuelled by anger, deception, or conflict with her beloved—a woman is unlikely to break into spontaneous dance. In such emotionally charged moments, even the slightest movement becomes arduous; the notion of engaging in *ṅṛtta* seems unnecessary and inappropriate.

Bharata further says, “When the hero is not near the *nāyika* (heroine) or has gone abroad and she is talking to her *sakhi* (friend), *ṅṛtta* is not to be used (NS 4.316). When she is with her *sakhi*, if perhaps the *nayika* experiences *vyabhicāris* like *autsukhya* (impatience) and *cintā* (anxiety) evoked due to separation from the beloved, remembering them and looking at seasons changing while awaiting them, *ṅṛtta* is not to be used (NS 4.317). But if during the performance of any part of the play, the *nāyikā* is gradually pacified, then *ṅṛtta* can be used in the remaining parts of the play (NS 4.318).”

Here Bharata gives two *vyabhicāris* for which the *anubhāva* of *ṅṛtta* is not suitable – *autsukhya* and *cinta*, both of which are opposing to the *vyabhicāri* of *harṣa*. In this context, we can relate to the impediments or *virodhis* to *rasa* given by Anandavardhana (Dhvanyaloka 3.18). He says that when a *vibhāva*, *anubhāva* or *vyabhicāri bhāva* of an opposing *rasa*³¹ is used in a conflicting way in the delineation of one *rasa*, then it is considered a *virodhi* (impediment) to *rasānanda*. If we apply this logic to the current example, we can state that using non-representational *ṅṛtta* for *vyabhicāri bhāvas* that are largely opposing to *harṣa* like *autsukhya* and *cinta*, can be a hindrance to *rasa*. This principle shows once again the dependence of *ṅṛtta* on the *bhāva*, (to be precise, the *vyabhicāri bhāva*), and therefore *rasa*, as for very few *vyabhicāris* other than that of *harṣa* (joy) can non-representational *ṅṛtta* become an *anubhāva*. If at all *ṅṛtta* is to be used another *bhāva* must be introduced to transition back to *harṣa*. Only then, will the usage of *ṅṛtta* achieve *aucitya*, ensuring that it does not disrupt the flow of *rasa*.

²⁸ Heroine who is angered by her lover (NS 24.216)

²⁹ Heroine who is deceived by her lover (NS 24.217)

³⁰ Heroine who is separated due to quarrel with her lover (NS 24.215)

³¹ See (Ingalls et al., 1990)p. 478-479 for abhinavagupta's commentary on (Virodhi) *rasas*

When Bharata gives the 11 elements that make-up *nāṭya*, he refrains from naming *ṅṛtta* as one of them. Instead, he classifies *ṅṛtta* under *āṅgika abhinaya* (bodily/gestural expression). If such is true, *ṅṛtta* must 1) embody a *bhāva* and 2) communicate. The first criterion is clarified by our classification of non-representational *ṅṛtta* as an *anubhāva* of the *vyabhicāri bhava* of *harṣa*. If *ṅṛtta* is intended to be non-representational, how does it communicate as *abhinaya*? Its communication of joy extends beyond mere expression and is intricately tied to the context in which it unfolds. This implies that the contextual use of *ṅṛtta* is as crucial as its expression for it to be encompassed within the realm of *rasa*, underscoring the importance not only of its expression but also of its situational relevance or *aucitya*. If *ṅṛtta* falls within the realm of *abhinaya* and is essentially considered as *āṅgikābhinaya*, what then distinguishes between the performance and experience of the two? To address this, we can explore the nuances of both through the lens of *dhvani*.

III. Analysing *ṅṛtta* in the framework of *dhvani*

To unravel the essence of a "superior art experience," we explore the canon of *Dhvani*. The canon of *dhvani* given by Ānandavardhana tells us that the suggestion of beauty is the soul of poetry³². *Rasa* is experienced when the poem is able to expand beyond the literal meaning of a word or *vācyārtha*³³ to the suggested sense of *dhvani*. The literal is the tangible perceivable beauty and its underlying suggested sense becomes the intangible experiential beauty (Sreekantaiyya 1953/2001). Let us look at *dhvani* in Bharatanāṭyam which is essentially classified under visual poetry (*dṛśya kāvya*).

Abhinaya in Bharatanāṭyam is perceived by the audience at an emotional and cognitive level. Which means that not only is the visual of the dance being observed and enjoyed, a story or a thought is being unfolded which draws the mind of the connoisseur into the journey of the performance beyond the physical sense of sight. This sort of enjoyment, where what is viewed in the performance leads to each individual's deep imagination and cognition being ignited, is what allows for an experience of *rasa*. This is what Abhinavagupta terms as *pratyabhijñāna* or re-cognition³⁴. Re-cognizing the beauty experienced is what leads to *rasa*. The participative nature of the connoisseur is large in this scenario. The enjoyment here is intangible – it is not one that is seen by the eye but one that is unravelled in the mind's eye. Such is the nature of a superior art experience according to Indian Aesthetics (Hiriyanna, 1951).

³² *kāvyaśāstra* dhvanih (Dhvanyaloka 1.1)

³³ *Alankāraśāstra* gives three meanings in poetry – abidha or literal word, lakṣaṇa or connotation and *vyañjana* or suggestion (Sreekantaiyya 1953/2001).

³⁴ When we are emotionally touched by art, there is a flash of cognition. This cognition is not a recollection of experience from memory but a re-cognition of such a situation. If one is to recall with memory, it is coloured by the personal (Ganesh, 2022). Re-cognizing a suggestion produced by the oblique expression of the artist, although momentary, unfurls a world of impersonal emotion – *rasa* and its enjoyment is *rasānanda*. Such art is eternally fresh and is enjoyable over and over again.

Unlike the experience of *abhinaya*, the experience of non-representational *nṛtta* is one that is highly tangible to the spectator. While for the dancer, it may entail enjoyment in intangible or spiritual dimensions akin to the practice of *yoga* (Subrahmanyam, 2003), for the observer, the enjoyment remains tangible, as the beauty experienced in non-representational *nṛtta* is largely visual – directly perceived through sight. Empirical studies on this tangible aspect of dance suggest that kinaesthetic responses are a key source of pleasure among spectators of dance (Reason & Reynolds, 2010; Carroll & Seeley, 2013). Even one uninitiated into the vocabulary of *nṛtta* is naturally able to enjoy it on account of its visual beauty. However, non-representational *nṛtta* does not have a strong footing in an introspective art experience (Ganesh R 2020, p.39) and fails to unravel imagination and *dhvani* due to its non-representational nature.

Bharata too in the fifth chapter hints at the proportion of non-representational elements to be used in a presentation, aptly aligning with our current discussion in Bharatanāṭyam. Bharata says that in the preliminaries³⁵ of *nāṭya*, there should not be too much *nṛtta*. Because if at all there is, then both the performer as well as the *prekṣaka* (viewer) are tired out. And then, they will not have clarity of *rasa* and *bhāvas*. And so, the rest of the performance will not be enjoyable (NS 5.163-165). In *nṛtta* therefore, despite its characteristics of beauty, auspiciousness and inherently being loved and enjoyed by all, too much of a good thing can be bad. **As it must express the fleeting *vyabhicāri* of joy, prolonged dwelling in non-representational *nṛtta* is both unnecessary and inappropriate.**

A brief look into *dharmī* and *nṛtta*

Since *nṛtta* is classified under *abhinaya*, it must be able to take on the qualities of *dharmī*. *Dharmī* refers to the nature or mode of the presentation. According to Bharata, there are two modes in which *abhinaya* can be presented – *lōkadharmī* and *nāṭyadharmī*. The *abhinaya* which imitates the realistic behaviour seen in the *lōka* (world) in a natural way is called *lōkadharmī* (NS 14.72). The *abhinaya* that uses stylized representation and dramatic conventions by superseding the natural course of the world (for either convenience, beauty or both) is called *nāṭyadharmī* (NS 14.74). Bharata's *nāṭya* is supposed to be perfect blend of the realistic and stylized aspects.

How does *dharmī* apply to *nṛtta* in the context of Bharatanāṭyam³⁶? According to our above analysis, non-representational *nṛtta* is inherently linked to the *vyabhicāri bhāva* of *harṣa*. Further, the context of its use must be cognized and must reflect the world. As

³⁵ Preliminaries refer to the *pūrvaraṅgavidhānam* given by Bharata in chapter 5. They include the worship of the stage and deities performed on stage before the main story of the play begins. The above point is included in discussion of the *citra pūrvaraṅga* which includes *nṛtta*.

³⁶ *Dharmī* is relative and is defined within each art form. The *lokadharmī* of *Nāṭya* (theatre/dramas/plays) is different from the *lōkadharmī* of *Nṛtya* (dance) which is again different from that of theatre or music (Raghavan, 1993). The current discussion is looking at *dharmī* in the genre of *nṛtya* or dance.

stated earlier, there are two dimensions to *abhinaya* – communication and context. Therefore, based on these conclusions, we argue that **in terms of the context in which it is used, non-representational *nṛtta* must be rooted in *lokadharmī* (contextual and based on *lōka*) and must adhere to the above frameworks of principles given by Bharata to prevent *rasabhanga*.**

However, according to both common practice and theory, there are instances when *nṛtta* is used to depict meaning and is a medium of creative expression of the context. This can be termed as representational *nṛtta*³⁷. Representational *nṛtta* is that *nṛtta* where meaning is intended to be conveyed through the aesthetic movement of limbs (known as *angavikṣepa* according to Abhinavagupta (Mohan, 2015)). This can also be termed as *nāṭyadharmī āṅgikābhianaya* as the use of codified conventions is essential to communication here. Here, amongst the characteristics of *nṛtta* given by Bharata (discussed in section I of this paper), that which defines *nṛtta* to be ‘without meaning’ (*na khalu artham* (NS 4.268)) does not hold good. However, all other characteristics of *nṛtta* such as imparting beauty (*śobhām prajanayet*), auspicious (*Maṅgalam*), entertaining (*vinodakaraṇam*) and being inherently loved by all (*iṣṭam svabhāvataḥ*) continue to be defining features of representational *nṛtta*. It can be argued that this representational usage of *nṛtta* became prevalent in practice post the Nāṭyaśāstric era as seen by the several references to representational *nṛtta* given by Abhinavagupta which have been clarified by Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam to be *Bhāvāśrayam* and *Rasāśrayam* (Subrahmanyam, 2003). The *karaṇas* and *angahāras* allow for this practice of *nṛtta*, i.e. one that allows for *vākyārthābhinaya* – expressing a larger sense as opposed to a literal one. She demonstrates how *karaṇas* can easily be given the quality of *anukīrtana* (exalted imitation) (Subrahmanyam, 2010), (Subrahmanyam, 2022). Hence, the use of representational *nṛtta* is rooted in *nāṭyadharmī*. It may not consistently adhere to the frameworks defined in this paper in sections I, II and III, as other emotive elements (*bhāvas*) are intentionally embodied in representational *nṛtta* by the choreographer, that allow for contextualisation and *aucitya* thereby organically falling within the *vibhāva-anubhāva-vyabhicāri* framework of *rasa*. Therefore, *nṛtta* (*karaṇas*, *aḍavus*, *jatis* etc.) used with intended meaning and *bhāva* as representational *nṛtta* is classified as *Nāṭyadharmī*.

Therefore, in recognising the concept of *dharmī* in *nṛtta*, we can fulfil two important fundamental aspects of flow or a narrative structure in dance – 1. Sustaining the *sthāyi* and 2. Avoiding the disruption of the *sthāyi*.

DISCUSSION

The journey through the specific principles of *nṛtta*, suggested by the time-tested guidelines of the Nāṭyaśāstra and enriched by the insights of Anandavardhana, has paved way for a deeper understanding of its nature, application and aesthetic possibilities. By

³⁷ See (Subrahmanyam, 2003) for details on representational usage of *nṛtta*

examining the concept of non-representational dance through the lenses of *rasa*, *dhvani*, and *aucitya*, we uncover several fundamental principles of *nṛtta*.

Firstly, through a nuanced analysis of Bharata's description of *nṛtta*, we recognize that such a concept of non-representational dance can be observed in joyous moments of life. However, such joyous moments of life are never perpetual but are only fleeting. These two points serve as the cornerstone guiding the definition of *nṛtta* and its usage in performance. In art too, non-representational movements are bodily reactions to the fleeting *vyabhicāri bhāva* of *harṣa* or joy. The paper presents a significant advancement in the field of dance aesthetics by providing the definition of non-representational *nṛtta*: **“Non-representational *nṛtta* can be defined as an *anubhāva* to the *vyabhicāri bhāva* of *harṣa*”**. This reformulation therefore brings the non-representational *nṛtta* into the framework of *rasa*. We further substantiate our definition with a comparative analysis of the situational usages of *nṛtta* given by Bharata in chapter 4 and the *vibhāvas* of *harṣa* in chapter 7 of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

Our analysis of non-representational *nṛtta* in the *dhvani* framework further tells us that the notion of non-representational dance cannot exist in isolation; rather, it must be understood as a brief element within the broader context of aesthetic canons. Hence, it is essential to cognize, choreograph and perform non-representational *nṛtta* always as a part of a whole. This whole must involve representational elements of *abhinaya* that allow for the deeper artistic experiences that *nṛtta* independently cannot provide for the spectator.

Following the canon of *aucitya* as the guardian of propriety provides important principles into the appropriate usage of *nṛtta* with *abhinaya*. *Nṛtta* being a beautifying element, must align with the ongoing and underlying emotions and situations, ensuring that it remains supportive to the *rasa* rather than being conflicting. Further, classifying the usage of *nṛtta* into *lōkadharmī* and *nāṭyadharmī* provides clarity regarding its representational and non-representational applications.

In conclusion, when such is the intent and design in the usage of non-representational *nṛtta* with *abhinaya*, the structure of Bharatanāṭyam is able to find a re-alignment with the aesthetic canon of *rasa*. Ultimately, this paper serves as a guide to practitioners and choreographers by providing a *śāstric* or analytical framework to re-examine and recognize the role and application of non-representational *nṛtta* in the Bharatanāṭyam performance and repertoire.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare in relation to this article.

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Abbreviations

NS – Nāṭyaśāstra

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