Nāṭya, *rasa*, and *abhinaya* as semiotic principles in Classical Indian dance

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Abstract

The concepts of nāṭya, rasa, and abhinaya that were proposed in the context of Classical Indian theatre are invoked by the practitioners and scholars of classical Indian dance even today. They acknowledge and bestow a special status to theatrical communication. The demarcation of the aesthetic function is also one of the premises in the Prague School structural-semiotic theory. We shall examine the inter-relations between the semiotics of theatre elaborated by Keir Elam, and the conceptual base of classical Indian dance. By reading the Indian concepts through the perspectives of modern semiotics, we attempt to show that although the two theories belong to different traditions of scholarship, there are sites of conceptual convergence.

Keywords: *semiotics; theatre; Indian aesthetics; Indian dance*

In dance, all movement is read as significant. The "accidental" or "casual" may be a deliberate gesture or may be interpreted as such. To quote Suzanne Langer, in dance all motion is gesture, or at least, the frame and foil of gesture: "*Gesture* is the basic abstraction whereby the dance illusion is made and organized" (Langer 1983 [1953]: 28). We cannot say conclusively that all movement is dance is deliberate, pre-planned or even self-conscious, as a small part of it is constituted by involuntary acts. Most "art" forms of dance that emphasize long-drawn and rigorous training procedures to imbibe the code with precision seem to suggest that a major part of movements in dance prescribes to a pre-established code. From the perspective of the audience, one can say conclusively that all motion is taken as meaningful. In other words, an interpretive turn marks the departure of the dance movement from movement in most other contexts. This is precisely where a semiotic perspective proves to be fruitful, since in the light of semiotics dance can be treated as a complex of dynamic signs and symbols.

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The "transformation" of ordinary movement into the dance gesture is effected through processes of stylization that makes dance a "derived" system of bodily communication based on the primary system of body language. The concepts of *nāṭya, rasa,* and *nāṭyadharmi,* acknowledge the ontological distinctness of dance and theatre at large. The parallel notion in Western theorizing on theatre that accounts for the transformation of the persons, objects, and actions on stage is that of "semiotization," proposed by the Prague School theorists and elaborated by Keir Elam (1980) in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. We shall examine the ways in which the traditional concepts of *nāṭya, rasa*, and *abhinaya* implicitly recognize the principle of semiotization.

The *rasa* theory, along with the notion of *abhinaya,* forms the conceptual base of classical Indian dance even today. We will attempt to discuss the semiotic aspects of the concepts of *nāṭya, rasa*, and *abhinaya* with the awareness that the correspondences may be far from absolute. The two theories are historically too widely dispersed to promise any close parallels. Nevertheless, the Indian theory continues to be a source of discussion among scholars, dancers, and theatre-practitioners even today. It has also been discussed in the light of modern Western theory, with the work of Richard Schechner (2004) being the most influential (see also Mukhopadhyaya 1998; Puri 1998). We attempt to add a voice to this emerging cross-cultural dialogue.

Across cultures and ages, aesthetic communication has been demarcated as distinct and subject to different norms of understanding. Classical Indian aesthetics that was initially proposed in the context of *nāṭya,* or "theatre," centers on *rasa,* interpreted simultaneously as the whole gamut of aesthetic emotions that form the content of art, and the experience of aesthetic delight shared by the performer and the spectator. In modern aesthetics, several prominent philosophers and schools have advocated a distinct status for art, primarily on the grounds of art being, above all a formal statement rather than instrumental to other ends. In other words, as opposed to other kinds of communication, in aesthetic communication, the form is taken to be the function by those who advocate aesthetic autonomy. Indian aesthetics is derived chiefly from the aesthetics of theatre, whereas the twentieth century Prague School work is founded on the exact science of linguistics and focuses on the form and function of the aesthetic text. However, the distinctness accorded to aesthetic communication remains a commonality.

Jakobson proposes the aesthetic or "poetic" function, which is dominant in a work of art, and which implies that the structuring of the text demands attention (Jakobson 1988 [1960]: 37). Mukarovsky in "Art as a Semiotic Fact," specifies that a work of art is an "autonomous sign" that is "characterized solely by the fact of it serving as an intermediary among members of one community" (Mukarovsky 1976: 5). But it does not refer to a distinct reality. The indistinct reality that a work of art signifies is "the total context of all phenomena

that may be called *social*, for example, philosophy, politics, religion, economics, and so on." Works of art evoke a general reality, rather than a particular one and are taken to be representative of an "age" (Mukarovsky 1976: 5). The notion of the generality of the content of art finds a parallel in Indian aesthetics that maintains that the material drawn from real life is idealized and shorn of its particularity in art. The tenth century commentator on the *rasa* theory, Bhatta Nayaka, proposes the generality or *sādhāraṇya* of aesthetic experience (Gnoli 1968: xxii). However, the generality associated with the Indian philosophy of art is closer to universality of human experience that even transcends ages.

1. The principle of semiotization and Classical Indian dance

Victor Shklovsky remarks that a dance is a walk that is felt (Shklovsky 1973 [1919]: 48). In dance, movement has intrinsic and display values. In life, a walk is intended to reach a particular point. The manner of the walk is relatively unimportant and varies from person to person, with the exception of certain contexts such as a drill or parade. In dance, displaying the manner of walk becomes the very purpose of the walk, the locomotor function being secondary. Shklovsky refers to this as the "defamiliarization" achieved in art that "removes the automatism of perception" (Shklovsky 1988 [1965]: 21). The stylized nature of movement in dance enables a defamiliarized bodily experience of space, time, and energy. The projection or display of the physical form of movement that is structured on the basis of rhythm and spatial patterns is a peculiarity of movement in "art" dances.

1.1. *Ostension in dance communication*

In the theatrical arts, the "how" of communication becomes the overriding criterion, as the themes drawn from Hindu mythology are interpreted and continually re-interpreted. As the performance begins, the emptiness of the stage space bursts into life with the movements, colors, and sounds of theatre. Elam remarks that the stage is a blank space that is potentially "fillable" with visual and acoustic information (1980: 50). In theatrical communication, the events are not described to the audience, but unfold before them. Elam explains: "Theatre is able to draw upon the most 'primitive' form of signification, known in philosophy as *ostension.* In order to refer to, indicate or define an individual object, one simply picks it up and shows it to the receiver of the message in question" (Elam 1980: 29). Elam also notes that it is not necessary to show the actual object, but something that represents its class is sufficient. Elam notes

that in theatre the physical dimensions of the transmitters are "ostended" for their own sake, or in other words, there is a "*semanticization*" of the sign-vehicles (Elam 1980: 37).

The dramatic world is self-reflexive, as it is "embodied" on stage by the performers and the set, and all onstage vehicles are taken as ostensive definitions of the worlds. The dramatic worlds are constituted by the process of transformation of the performers and objects on stage into signs that stand for other people and objects. The dance-text can be conceptualized on the lines of a literary text, as a complete performance that uses visual and acoustic signals codified through multiple semiotic systems. The unity of text also depends on the phenomenon that Elam describes as *transcodification,* "whereby a given bit of semantic information can be translated from one system to another or supplied simultaneously by different kinds of signal" (Elam 1980: 76).

The characteristics of ostension and reflexivity are applicable to dance with *abhinaya* or acting. All classical Indian dance forms demonstrate the two strands of *nṛitta* or abstract dance and *nṛittya,* which is dance that incorporates dramatic exposition. The performance of *nṛitta* does not entail the creation of dramatic worlds, but is nevertheless an instance of ostension of movement, for its own sake. The dramatic aspect of classical Indian dance is present in traditional compositions like the *Padam* or *Varṇam* and the modern form of dance ballet,[1] sometimes known as the dance-drama. In traditional compositions, a single dancer assumes the role of multiple characters and objects, and presents a situation with minimal scenic articles. In a conventional recital, there is an alternation between the presentation of dramatic situations and abstract dance. The modern form of the dance ballet corresponds more closely with the modern form of drama and theatre, and uses multiple dancers to portray different characters.

Most of the classical Indian dances have a dramatic element, wherein the dancer narrates a story and enacts it through role-playing. But the predominance of the dramatic element varies from one form to another. It is especially strong in a form like *mohiniāṭam*, which draws from the *kathakali* theatrical tradition. Nevertheless, all classical Indian dances are composite theatrical arts that use the multiple semiotic systems of language, music, dance, and stage settings. The meaning that takes the form of a mood or an emotion is communicated simultaneously by the different languages of dance, music, and verbal text. There is a translation of the affective information into the different media, leading to an often overwhelming, multi-sensory experience.

1.2. *Signs and semanticization*

Let us consider the phenomenon of "semiotization" of the stage space, stage-vehicles, and performers in classical Indian dance. Petr Bogatyrev in "Cos-

tume as Sign," makes a distinction between two kinds of material objects, namely, those that have an ideological significance and those that don't. In the first instance, a phenomenon of material reality becomes a phenomenon of ideological reality or a sign (Bogatyrev 1976a: 14). A material object has an instrumental value and serves a practical function, and when it is used as a sign, it acquires a semiotic value, over and above its use. For instance, an article of clothing serves the primary function of protecting the body and the secondary functions of displaying the wearer's taste, wealth or social status. While in theatre, the secondary functions become primary and the article becomes a sign of the character's social status, gender, age, and mental state, or a symbol that signifies qualities, abstractions or conditions such as purity, decadence, death, and evil.

Every material object has the potential to be a "sign" or "the bearer of a structure of signs" (Bogatyrev 1976c: 33). When these objects appear on stage, they get initiated into a relay of signification, expressed by Bogatyrev in the following way: ". . . each is a sign of a sign and not a sign of a material thing" (Bogatyrev 1976c: 33). For instance, a particular costume, or a speaker's accent do not merely stand for its counterparts in the actual world, but signify or connote particular social, economic, psychological, and moral overtones of the character. Their presence on stage is not taken to be accidental but intentional. The semiotic function assumed by the components of stage reality leads to a framing that subjects it to different conventions of reception. Elam notes that the objects and persons on stage undergo a transformation, and acquire a set of "metaphorical quotation marks" (Elam 1980: 8). Elam describes this transformation: "In traditional dramatic performance the actor's body acquires its mimetic and representational powers by becoming something other than itself, more and less than individual" (Elam 1980: 9). It is this principle of semiotization, which allows "nonliteral signifiers or sign-vehicles to perform the same semiotic function as literal ones" and endows every object on the stage, the function of being an "intentional sign" (Elam 1980: 8–9).

The principle of semanticization of sign-vehicles can be demonstrated in the classical Indian dances that have conspicuous and sometimes elaborate costumes. In a form like *mohiniāṭam*, the costume consists of a long pleated skirt made of white cotton fabric with silk borders, gold jewelry, ankle bells, and jasmine flowers for the hair (See Figure 1). The costume is a stylized form of the everyday dress worn by the native women of the south Indian state of Kerala. The cotton fabric and the hairdo, in which the hair is bundled on top of the head rather than let down, serve the practical function of keeping the wearer comfortable, given the hot and humid climate of the region. However, the art, along with India's other classical performance traditions are performed globally, and in very different climatic conditions. In these instances, the practical function is overridden by the semiotic function of the costume. The costume

Figure 1. *The costume of a Mohiniāṭam dancer (Photographed by Arun Mohan on February 20, 2012.)*

becomes a sign of Keralite-Indian culture, popularized by the female figures portrayed by the painter-king, Ravi Varma, and connotes nobility associated with the court culture of the rulers of Travancore, and the "divine" feminity of Mohini, a character in Indian mythology.[2] The principle of semiotization of costumes becomes more explicit in the form of *kathakali*, where different types of costumes and colors are used for different characters, that constitute a secondary semiotic system, wherein a particular costume or color stands for a particular type of character.

In a tradition invented by one of the founding figures of modern Bharatanatyam, Rukmini Devi Arundhale, the Bharatanatyam dance recital is often staged against a setting that stands for the architectural structure of the *koothambalam,* or "temple-theatre." Thereby, she intended to corroborate the mysticism and sacredness of the dance, and negate the immorality of which it had been condemned. On account of several constraints, dancers have not used

elaborate or expensive sets, but minimal and portable sets, accompanied by a brass lamp and a figure of *Nataraj*, or the dancing form of the god, *âiva.* These articles are intentional signs that have functioned as symbols of spirituality by metonymically signifying the temple and transforming the stage into a sacred space. By association, the dance itself was reinvented as an idealized art that transcended the body and its realm of the worldly.

1.3. *Transformation of the performer into a sign*

Bogatyrev in "Forms and Functions of Folk Theatre," explains that there is a "transformation" of the person who performs into a dramatic persona and this is either absolute, as in drama or partial as happens in storytelling (Bogatyrev 1976b: 51). In the actor, the duality of the character performed and the person who performs it exists, and is essential to the semiotization of the actor's speech and actions. This "transformation" of the person who acts into the character is essentially not absolute, with the consequence that the audience does not perceive the happenings on stage as reality, but as "theatre" (Bogatyrev 1976b: 52). There may be a series of alternations between belief and disbelief in their perception of a theatrical production as reality and as the dramatic. However, in the end consciousness of the theatricality of stage reality dominates. "Theatricality" is a sign that beckons the audience to perceive the happenings on stage as a framed reality or "as a network of meanings, i.e., as a text (Elam 1980: 12). It is only an awareness of the constructed nature of the reality that leads the spectator to "interpret" all objects and actions therein as a "sign of the sign of the character portrayed" by the actor (Bogatyrev 1976c: 48).

In the classical Indian dances, there is an implicit assumption that the person who dances transforms into a dramatic persona. The inherited texts and the content of the classical Indian dances are reminiscent of a bygone feudal era and does not relate to the realities of contemporary performers. While dedication to patron kings and performance of ritual worship may have been a form of self-expression, it has a purely symbolic value in the modern theatre space. The personal identity of the dancer is masked by the costume that has a transforming function. Accomplished dancers may have individual styles of presentation pertaining to the system of movement, the costume or the use of props, their dance largely adheres to the framework of rules that constitute the particular form. They are not explicit personal statements.

The classical Indian dance-forms use highly stylized body languages that loosely subscribe to the two styles of the *nāṭyadharmī,* or the "dramatic" and the *lokadharmī*, or the "realistic." In the different classical Indian dances, the basic postures of the body vary considerably from the normal except in the case of Kathak, which uses a basic position very close to the normal erect

posture. The change in the body posture effects a change in the performer's body-sense creating a de-habuation of perceptions. Dancers who have mastered the language of a particular form are capable of improvising on stage, but even these spontaneous acts are cultivated responses that do not in most instances deviate from the "grammar" of the dance form. It is not the dancer, but the dance itself, in all its formal and dramatic intensity that occupies the center-stage. This implies the elimination of any personal content. Coomaraswamy and Duggirala observe:

> The perfect actor has the same complete and calm command of gesture that the puppet showman has over the movements of his puppets; the exhibition of his art is altogether independent of his own emotional condition, and if he is moved by what he represents he is moved as a spectator, and not as an actor . . . The more deeply we penetrate the technique of any typical Oriental art, the more we find that what appears to be individual, impulsive and "natural," is actually long-inherited, well-considered, and well-bred. (Coomaraswamy and Guggirala 1970: 4)

The transformation of the person who dances into the dramatic persona or a "sign" happens at multiple levels. In the *nṛitta* segments, the dancer becomes the instrument to sketch and erase formal patterns in space that conveys abstract meanings. Further, in the *nṛittya* segments, the dancer becomes the subject interpreting and re-presenting a dramatic situation through role-playing. The dancer also plays the role of the narrator standing apart from the dramatic world and commenting on it. The versatility of the dancer or the ability to single-handedly conjure dramatic worlds in the absence of other performers or props is a distinctive feature of the classical Indian solo forms.

1.4. *Versatility of the performer-sign*

"Semiotic economy" is a feature of theatrical signs that implies that a few sign-vehicles have the potential to generate multiple cultural units or a polyphony of meanings (Elam 1980: 11). Bogatyrev refers to the "plurisignation" or "great abundance of signs" in theatrical communication (Bogatyrev 1976c: 43). In non-realistic theatres, the use of the arts of song and dance is greater, and all the sign-vehicles including the actors assume multiple significations, achieving what Bogatyrev calls a "conservation of theatrical means" (Bogatyrev 1976c: 44). In addition to this generative capacity of theatrical signs, they are also capable of functional transmutation. Honzl remarks that it is "precisely this changeability, this versatility of the theatrical sign" that is its specific feature (1976: 85). The changes in the different components, including its rejection, are accompanied by a shift in the functions of these components, in such a manner that an overall stability is maintained. The transmutability of the

theatrical sign extends to the entire hierarchy of dramatic components forming the core or unity in terms of which it is possible to conceive of a "theatrical art."

Classical Indian dances are formed by a hierarchy of semiotic systems in which communication by the body occupies the apex. The other components serve to support, complement or reinforce the body's communicative acts. There may be a suspension or absence of all other sign vehicles such as song, music, scenic articles or props; but, dance itself, is nevertheless present, and in these instances, foregrounded. In some compositions, the linguistic element is abandoned, in certain segments, the tune may be absent, and in others movement itself may be suspended. A dancer may assume the function of a stage prop by standing motionless like a tree, or that of the percussionists by creating the rhythm through audible footwork that uses the "instrumental music" of the ankle bells.

Figures 2. *A depiction of Lord Padmanabha in Mangalam, the concluding section of a Mohiniāṭam recital. (Photographed by Keshav at H A L Ayyappa temple, Bangalore, on Nov 18, 2011)*

Theatrical semiosis is characterized by what the Prague theorists call the "mobility," "dynamism" or "transformability" of the theatrical sign. For instance, a fabric may be used to signify a curtain, a garland, a swing or even a person according to the manner of use.[3] In the Indian dance-drama traditions, the semantic scope of the dancer's body and any stage sign-vehicles used, cover a broad spectrum. In the classical traditions that are originally solo-forms, there is, in general, a poverty of stage sign-vehicles with the result that

the solo performer pretends to manipulate absent objects, and interacts with imaginary people. This establishes the centrality of the actor-dancer and the importance given in traditional Indian dance-drama forms to *abhinaya.* If the dancer points to an imaginary flower and describes it, the only inputs the audience gets are from the facial expressions that show its brightness, softness or fragrance and the hand-gestures that iconically symbolize it. As a result, the expressions are sufficiently exaggerated to render them visible as they carry the onus of communicating the meaning to the spectators who may be distantly placed. The dancer also assumes many roles in enacting an episode, and such a change is communicated to the audience through specific meta-gestures that mean "I am assuming the role of." The change is marked not only through differing body orientations, but also through characteristic gestures that distinguish and identify the character.

2. *Nāṭya* and semiotization

The principle of "semiotization" of all the actions and objects that are framed as "theatrical reality" is implicit in the concepts of *Nāṭya* or theatre and *Rūpaka* or drama. *Nāṭya* is defined as *anukaraṇa,* "imitation" and *anukīrtana,* "representation" of people's emotions. These are terms of paramount significance from the semiotic point of view as they have a direct bearing on the notion of semiotization.

2.1. *Representation and imitation in semiotic systems*

Semiotics is concerned primarily with the ways in which people create and comprehend meanings. All semiotic systems are not mere reflections of absent realities, but "re-presentations" of them. Semiotic systems provide the categories through which reality can be cognized. The systems of theatrical communication are specialized languages to the extent that they are meaningful within the frame of the performance. Theatrical communication is a second-order system that draws from and stylizes the primary semiotic systems of speech, gesture, and attire, and imposes its own order of meaning on them. In the process, they bring about novelty through the transformation and re-organization of signs that invite the audience to reconsider the meanings of the signs. Theatrical communication systems are therefore, re-presentations of representational systems. The relation of similarity or iconicity applies to individual elements in theatrical messages and to the global performance text of theatre.

Imitation is yet another dimension of the relation between sign-vehicle and meaning that can be termed as iconicity or a relation based on resemblance.

Linguistic signs are, for the most part, arbitrarily constituted by convention and do not demonstrate any natural relationship. Literary communication taps into the dimension of iconicity of language demonstrated, for instance, by onomatopoeic words. Literary texts manipulate the linguistic system to create specific effects by organizing the acoustic and visual dimensions of words. In theatre, however, the class of icons is not a special case, but constitutes a major part of the repertoire of signs. In the case of several hand-gestures that the uninitiated audience find difficult to comprehend, the manner of performance of the gesture bears a naturalistic (*lokadharmī*) relation with the concept evoked and thereby facilitates understanding.

2.2. *Representation and imitation in nāṭya*

Imitation itself, as Bhat (1975) notes, is not copying or photographic reproduction, but a creative process, whereby certain features of the person, object or action in real life are selected and intensified (1975: xi–xii). There is a resemblance between the real world actions and objects and their theatrical imitations. For instance, when the noted *mohiniāṭam* exponent Sunanda Nair performs the role of Garuda, the eagle, in the composition *Bhāvayāmi*,[4] it is the iconicity of the movements that enables the audience to recognize the flight of the bird and identify the dancer with the eagle. The conventional and non-imitative hand-gesture for king is generally accompanied by a facial expression of pride and valor, and an erect posture to suggest through imitation kingly qualities.

Nāṭya is also defined as "representation" (*anukīrtana*). For instance, in the dance-drama *Maya Ravan* composed by the actor-dancer Shobana, the epic of Rāmayana is retold with a more humane interpretation of the villain, Ravan. Most narratives idolize the image of the Aryan hero, Rāma and the heroine, Sīta. But, in several instances in Shobhana's (2009) composition, the actions of the *Asura* (demon) characters such as Ravan and his sister âūrpanakha question the superiority accorded to the Aryans, who they despise as "scrawny, hairless mortals." The final encounter between Rāma and Ravan does not depict the anti-hero's defeat, but a death he foresees and embraces at the hands of the "hero." This performance-text re-presents the dominant mythical narrative by challenging its biases.

The other term, *rūpaka* or drama, also conveys the semiotization principle explicitly. *Rūpaka* has two cognate terms, *rūpa* and *samāropa*. The first term denotes the spectacle presented by drama, while the second means superimposition. The character and the actor are distinct identities. However, in drama the two are superimposed. The actor identifies with the character for the duration of the performance, and she is perceived as the character. Bhat explains:

> Such a process of identification and acceptance extends to everything that is seen or that happens on the stage: so that even the minimal stage property and props are enough for us to accept that the event is taking place in heaven, or on earth . . . and if the actor shows anger, sorrow, or joy we accept the particular emotion to be quite real, for the time being . . . The concept of *rupaka*, superimposition and purposeful identification, implies the same. (Bhat 1975: xv)

This process of identification and acceptance of the stage sign-vehicles with the things and actions they stand for approximates the semiotization principle, whereby the actions, objects, and people represented are taken to be "real" within the frame of the theatrical performance.

3. Rasa: The semiotics of production and reception

The notion of *Rasa* forms the heart of the classical Indian aesthetic theory. Bharata illustrates the theory through the metaphor of "tasting," the word *rasa* having multiple meanings such as "delight," "juice" or "essence," or "flavor." Jha (2004) notes, the *rasa* theory is a theory of trans*form*ation of the "practical" or "everyday" into the "aesthetic." The theory clearly demarcates between "life" and "art" or the "actual" and the "virtual" as it forges a distinct terminology to explain the creation of aesthetic delight. Vatsyayan (1968) notes that the theory of *rasa* has two aspects, the evoked state (*rasavastha*) and the sentiments, moods, the permanent and transitory states that are the objects of presentation (1968: 6). The *rasa* theory posits the semiotics of production and reception of aesthetic delight, which is defined as the end of all aesthetic experience. The artist and the audience are said to commune through the state of *rasa*. Both the artist and the audience are temporarily transported to a different or liminal plane of experience, which has been likened to transcendental bliss by subsequent Indian philosophers.

Art enables certain extra-ordinary perceptions, according to the *rasa* theory, which is nevertheless rooted in the very sensual and mundane metaphor of tasting food. Going by this metaphor, the theatrical arts are not exclusively visual or spectacle-bound, but are holistic texts, that "engulf" and affect the audience deeply. Schechner remarks: "The rasic performer opens a liminal space to allow further play — improvisation, variation, and self-enjoyment" (Schechner 2004: 334). According to Schechner the rasic performance is more intense as, "The other partakers — the audience — are doubly affected: by the performance and the performer's reaction to her own performance" (Schechner 2004: 334). The two kinds of effects mentioned by Schechner correspond to the two distinct implications of the concept of *rasa*, namely, as the emotions embodied by the performers and inferred by the spectators, and the performer's self-

conscious expressions that make her/him a spectator of the performance, thereby acknowledging the presence of the spectator and initiating an interpersonal communication situation.

3.1. *Bhāva, rasa, and meaning*

Rasa and *bhāva,* roughly, "emotion," are defined relationally and take into account the notion of "meaning" in the poetic and the performance texts. Let us first consider the inter-relation between *rasa* and *bhāva*. Rangacharya (1996) observes that just as many materials combine to produce a distinctive flavor, *rasa* is produced by the *bhāvas* through *abhinaya* or acting (Rangacharya 1996: 55). The *bhāva* leads to the *rasa*. It is quite clear that *bhāva* is the material and *rasa* is the product. However, there can be no *bhāva* without *rasa*, for it is only through the experience of *rasa* that *bhāva* can be inferred. The *bhāvas* lead to the meaning, which includes words, physical gestures, and emotions, and the effective communication of the meaning creates *rasa* (Rangacharya 1996: 64). *Bhāvas* are in turn classified into three types, namely, eight *sthāyī bhāvas* (permanent or abiding mental states), thirty-three *vyabhicāri bhāvas* (fleeting mental states), and eight *sāttvika bhāvas* (psycho-physical states such as *stamba* or stupefaction and *Sveda* or sweating). These forty-nine *bhāvas* are the sources of *rasas*. The eight *rasas* are sentiments inferred by the spectators and are defined in relation to the corresponding *sthāyī bhāvas,* which are the states of mind portrayed in the performance. The *bhāvas* pertain to the performance "text," while the *rasas* result from the inferred meanings and pertain to the response of the spectators.

Shah (2004) notes, "one may attribute both *sthāyi bhāva* and *rasa* to a work of art, the former as belonging to the work of art as such, the latter belonging to it in relation to the spectator" (Shah 2004: 120). Visualized as a process, meaning appears to get actualized between the creation of *bhāva* and the experience of *rasa* in aesthetic communication. The experience of *rasa* is an effect of the successful communication of meaning in theatre. Consider the verse in the *Nāṭyaśastra*, "A meaning which touches the heart creates rasa; the entire body feels the rasa like fire consuming a dry stick" (Rangacharya 1996: 65). The concept of *rasa* idealizes the experience of *nāṭya*, but recognizes the significance of successful communication of dramatic meaning. But, the notion of *rasa* goes beyond the communication of meaning, and takes into account the phatic and performative dimensions of theatrical communication, as the meaning has to "touch the heart." The extra factor of *rasa* is created over time through the performers' acknowledgement and evaluation of the audience's reception of the performance that is a perennial source of information for the performer to adjust and rephrase the acts to take the audience with the performance.

3.2. *The ingredients of rasa*

Rasa, when interpreted as the end of aesthetic experience, has a general nature. Aesthetic delight is a perlocutionary effect intended by the performance. *Rasa* also means the content of the literary and theatrical arts. The eightfold classification of *rasas* and the formula that describes its constituent elements that contribute to the production of *rasa* can be studied systematically as a semiotic of production and reception. Bharata's *rasa sutra* is an aphorism that explains the process by which *rasa* is produced, that is, through the conjunction of the *vibhāvas,* the *anubhāvas*, and the *vyabhicāri bhāvas,* which function as the apparatus for creating the effect. The forging of distinct terminology for the "cause," "effect," and "emotions" in the aesthetic domain recognizes the secondary nature or theatricality of the constituents.

The *sthāyī bhāva* that is evoked in a composition is central, and the other three aspects are the artificial (*krtrima*) means to produce *rasa*. The *vibhāvas* are the determinants, which may be in the form of a conducive atmosphere or the characters themselves, the *anubhāvas* are the consequents or the deliberate bodily expressions of the mental states, and the *vyabhicāri bhāvas* are the fleeting or transient emotions which feed the dominant emotion. For instance, the "emotion" of love (*ṣṛṅgāra*) can be caused by the presence of the beloved, who functions as the primary determinant, and the surroundings, such as a beautiful garden, which functions as the secondary determinant. The character makes his emotion manifest by sighing, trembling, and so on (*anubhāva*). The *rasa* of *ṣṛṅgāra* can comprise the fleeting emotions of jealousy, angst of separation, suspicion, and anxiety, to mention a few. The text mentions eight *rasas*, namely*,* the erotic, the heroic, the pathetic, the comic, the marvelous, the terrible, the odious, and the furious. This eight-fold classification essentially posits a semiotics of reception, whereby the spectator's interpretation of the emotion conveyed is organized. The categorization into eight *rasas*, eight *sthāyī bhāvas,* thirty-three *vyabhicāri bhāvas* and eight *sāttvika bhāvas* serves to organize and give form to the amorphous realm of human sentiments that form the primary objects of representation in classical Indian dances.

Let us consider the description of *vibhāva* and *anubhāva*: "A meaning conveyed by a stimulus (*vibhāva*) is made intelligible by words, physical gestures, and emotions (anubhāva)" (Rangacharya 1996: 64). *Vibhāvas* are not actual the causes of emotions, but the constructed occasions that function as causes that facilitate the understanding or perception of the meaning. The response induced by the causes are manifested in physical form and perceived by the spectators. The following lines in Rangacharya's translation are relevant: "Vibhāva is that which leads to a perception. So vibhāva is a cause. It is the cause of (the use of) words, gestures and facial expressions *vibhāvita* (adj.) means 'understood'" (Rangacharya 1996: 64). It is also explained in the fol-

lowing way: "Many (or different) meanings depend on words, gestures and facial expressions are understood by these, so they are vibhāva-s" (Rangacharya 1996: 64). The *vibhāvas* and *anubhāvas* provide the rationale for the communication of the *bhāvas* that are treated as the primary objects of the text. They establish the semantic logic of the dramatic world that justifies the invocation and representation of the emotions.

The "determinants" are a "functional" category as its gamut covers any sign-vehicle such as a person, object, music or the surroundings that can evoke a response from the character. They also have logical precedence over the other two elements, namely, the fleeting emotions and their manifestations. Along with the "consequents" in the form of the manifestation of the feeling evoked, it forms a binary of cause and effect. This binary can be conceptualized at an elementary level of the break-up of dramatic action. The "fleeting emotion" is a mid-level organizing principle and the *rasa* itself is the supreme unifying principle of the composition. For instance, in the composition known as *Ashtanāyika,* the dancer portrays the heroine in different phases of love. Each segment depicts a specific *vyabhicāri bhāva*. For instance, the *prośitabhartruka* is a situation wherein the heroine is depressed on account of the hero's absence. The *vyabhicāri* or *sancāri* of *nirveda* or depression is part of the composition whose defining *rasa* is *ṣṛṅgāra.* Further, the *anubhāva* in the form of sighs and other gestures depicting the heroine's longing becomes the signifier, or material aspect of the *vyabhicāri,* and the *rasa* itself. The dynamic functionality of these terms becomes evident when the changeability of a *sthāyī* into a *vyabhicāri* or an *anubhāva* into a *vibhāva* is considered.[5]

Rasa is a more elusive term to describe. It is possible to point out the *vibhāva,* the *anubhāva*, and the *vyabhicāri bhāva*, but not the *rasa.* The *rasa* is an effect that is produced in the inter-subjective process of performance, as it is feeling that is inferred and imagined by the spectator-performer and the spectators. These three elements opined in the *rasasutra* constitute the logic that lends credibility to the actions rendered on stage to be perceived as probable impossibilities, or convincing fictions. Only the spectator perceives the totality of these three aspects, which culminates in the experience of *rasa.*

3.3. *Rasas and the technique of abhinaya*

The *rasas* are also the organizing principles for the technique of *abhinaya* in the contemporary training of classical Indian dance forms. *Abhinaya* is taught at two levels, namely, through the learning of the movements of the individual features such as the eyes and the eyebrows, and through learning how to portray the different *rasas.* The training in many of the classical dance forms involves the learning of exercises for different parts and features of the body.

These exercises identify and label certain movements from the continuum of all possible movements of that feature or part of the body. These exercises draw upon, in varying degrees, the specifications in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and other source texts. The texts that specify the *abhinaya* technique in dance describe in great detail the movements of the different parts of the body used.

In the discussion of *abhinaya,* the parts of the body are divided into a threefold scheme of *aṅga* (limbs), *pratyaṅga* (parts of the body), and *upāṅga* (features) in the *Abhinayadarpaṇa,* a text based on the *Nāṭyaśastra.* The *aṅgas* mentioned are the head, hands, armpits, sides, waist, feet, and the neck, the *pratyaṅgas* are the shoulders, shoulder blades, arms, back, stomach, thighs, and calves, and the *upāṅgas* are the eyes, eyelids, pupils, cheeks, nose, jaw, lips, teeth, tongue, chin, and face. The division is hierarchic and can be conceptualized as the major, minor, and constituent features. The *aṅgas* clearly play a prominent role, while the *pratyaṅgas* follow the *aṅgas*. The *upāṅgas* are a further division of the head, which is a major *aṅga.* In practice, however, the training in *abhinaya* does not include the meticulous learning of the exercises of all the constituents identified. In most instances, the teacher makes a selection and teaches some of the significant exercises that facilitate mobility of the facial features, and increased stamina and flexibility of the body. Apart from this, the actual training in *abhinaya* begins with the learning of the use of the facial features to portray the different *rasas*. In this instance, the movement of individual features are not learned in a fragmented fashion, but are learned as a structured unit that becomes the signifier or visual image for a particular *rasa.*

For instance, some of the movements of the head, mentioned as *sirobheda,* enumerated in the *Abhinayadarpaṇa* are the *sama* (level, stable position), *udvahita* (lifting up), *adhomukha* (face inclined or head bent), and *ālolita* (head is moved in a circle. This kind of systematization through classification selects and labels certain characteristic movements and positions out of all the possible head movements. The different uses of these movements have also been mentioned. They relate to actions (the stable position is used to show the act of praying), conventions in dance (the stable position is used for the beginning of a dance recital), and the portrayal of emotions (the stable position is also used to portray anger). They are not always self-sufficient semantic units and assume significance when they combine with other such sub-units. For instance, a sub-unit of head movement, such as the stable position, combines with the *sama* (level) kind of glance, the raising of the eyebrow, and the bulging of the eyeballs to denote astonishment, or wonder as in the *adbhuta rasa* (the marvelous). Each of the *rasas* and *vyabhicāri bhāvas* has corresponding gestures.

The division of the *rasa*-signs into nine categories followed in contemporary practice serve to structure the myriad movements of the individual parts of the body into coherent and meaningful units. As we have illustrated a particular

bend of the head does not necessarily signify anything, by itself. It has to combine with other movements to become a gesture or significant movement. The categorization of human emotions into the eight and later nine broad *rasas* does not imply that all emotion that is depicted in dance can be pigeonholed. On the contrary, every *rasa* has shades of meaning and artists are appreciated for conveying subtleties of emotions.

4. *Abhinaya:* The dramatic mode of communication

In the preceding paragraphs we have attempted to explain the centrality of the concept of *rasa* in two respects, namely, as a framework for the semiotics of production and reception, and as the structuring principle in *abhinaya*. Let us consider *abhinaya* itself more closely: "The root *nī* — [which means to take or carry] with the preposition *abhi*, which means towards (the audience)" (Rangacharya 1996: 78). The metaphor of movement or the idea of transmission is implicit in the concept of *abhinaya.* Bhat describes *Abhinaya* in the following words.

> . . . Only mode of communicating a dramatic experience to the spectators . . . Abhinaya is the means to *carry* the poet's content and its aesthetic and philosophic significance *towards* the spectators; it employs the mode of *direct presentation,* visual and aural perception, in virtue of intoned speeches, gestures and movements, facial expressions and physical poses, make-up and costume etc.; thereby it enables the spectators to be aware of the rich meanings that the poet's words carry and take the experience directly. (Bhat 1975: lxxiv)

Abhinaya is the "mode" of dramatic communication effected through the material of distinct semiotic systems. It is a unifying principle that enables the conception of a performance text that has a global syntax, cutting across the distinct media and semiotic systems that come into play in theatre.

4.1. *The unified theatrical text and abhinaya*

Honzl argues for the conception of drama as a unity, and not merely the sum of other arts. The spectator has a unified perception, albeit through various sensory inputs, of the theatrical reality that is constituted by "a special relation of one kind of perception to the other, of the *polarization of these perceptions*" (Honzl 1976: 88). This is the unifying principle of *transcodification* in the theatrical arts proposed by Elam, where the semantic content is conveyed and reinforced through multiple channels (Elam 1980: 70). The theatrical text is a unity that is more than the sum of its parts, as there is an interaction between

the different semiotic systems that complements, reinforces, and defines the focus at every instant of the performance. Although the two notions of *abhinaya* and transcodification are not exact parallels, they suggest the presence of a performance text in which the different media act in unison to communicate meaning.

Abhinaya is the overarching dramatic mode of communication that subsumes the categorization based on the different media. This mode is defined simultaneously as "histrionic *representation*" and "direct *presentation*" (Bhat 1975: lxxiv). Let us attempt to resolve the obvious disparity between "representation" and "presentation" in the definition of *abhinaya.* In drama, a set of actions or events is represented through the means of literature, song, dance, and actions. Dramatic or theatrical reality is framed or is at one remove from actuality and is not subject to the same conventions of reception as those of real happenings. In being a "representation," it is a creative reproduction of a set of events and is constructed with the specific intent of being interpreted as such. In other words, the aesthetic delight itself ensues from the fact that the happenings on stage are not real, but a representation. However, in theatrical communication, objects and events are not only "represented," but are "showed" or "presented" through ostension.

4.2. *Types of Abhinaya*

Abhinaya has been categorized on the basis of the semiotic systems into *āṅgika,* or "bodily" (See Figure 3), *vāchika,* or "verbal," *āharya,* or "costume," and *sāttvika,* or "emotional." The verbal component in dance can be in the form of literary texts, such as poems or plays, or rhythmic syllables with no semantic value. *Āṅgika abhinaya* is further classified into *sarīra* (involving the limbs of the body), *mukhaja* (involving the face) and *cestākṛta* (effected through actions and movements). The verbal component in dance can be in the form of literary texts, such as poems or plays, or rhythmic syllables with no semantic value. The category of *āṅgika abhinaya* has three sub-divisions: *sākhā abhinaya* is rendered by all the major limbs acting in a sequence, *aṅkura abhinaya* is performed by gestures of the body and preceding a speech, and *sūca abhinaya* is suggestive acting rendered before a dramatic speech. The category of *āṅgika abhinaya* comprises mainly gestures of the hand and the face. The first category of *sākhā abhinaya* is most relevant to dance, while the last two sub-categories are relevant in drama. While the first scheme of classification is invoked in contemporary practice, the second subdivision is no longer invoked. The word *sāttvika* is derived from *sattva*, which means emotion or genuineness, which is the composure of mind essential for a performer (Rangacharya 1996: 76).

Figures 3 and 4. *Abhinaya by Mohiniāṭam exponent, Gopika Varma (Photograph by Mythili Anoop)*

The transcodification of semantic information is of paramount significance in classical Indian dances, where the semantic content is expressed simultaneously by the words, the tonal variations in the song, the instrumental music, the lighting, and the dancer's gestures. The unity ensuing from the combination of the different semiotic systems is articulated in the notion of *sāmānya abhinaya* posited in Chapter XXIV of the *Nāṭyaśastra.* The concept advocates a consonance or harmonious relation between the different kinds of *abhinaya* in the given words: "When words, the tone, and the gestures are suited to the emotion conveyed, it is Sāmānya,(where all three are *sāmāna*, i.e., equal or suited to one another *abhinaya*)" (Rangacharya 1996: 185). In most *abhinaya*-based compositions, the renderings of the literary text support and reinforce the bodily communication of the dancer. The dancer elaborates on a single line of *sāhitya,* "literature," which is repeated several times, through the conjuring up of appropriate dramatic situations or the use of a variety of gestures to convey the meaning.

Janus-faced, *rasa* simultaneously looks toward the minutiae of practice, and toward the philosophical realm that idealizes the aesthetic experience. The *rasa* theory emerges from performance and has been extended to the textual art of literature. However, it retains its performative dimension by emphasizing

the experiential and processual aspects of aesthetic communication. The Prague school structural semiotic, grounded in linguistics, identifies the aesthetic function as essentially autonomous and isolates it in terms of the structure and function of the aesthetic text. The Prague school project is driven by the motive of studying art systematically, as a text comprising organized signs, rather than positing any elevating philosophy of art. The extensions into performative arts enable the conceptualization of "performance-texts." For the Prague semioticians, the "artness" of art emerges from the impersonal and objective text of art. But for the Indian philosophers of art, the essence of art lies in the extraordinary perceptions that unfold in its interactive space of performance.

The notions of *nāṭya* and *rūpaka* propose the constructed and artificial nature of theatrical reality, wherein objects and persons are transformed to acquire a generality of signification. As a consequence, we have found the rudiments of the semiotization principle in them. The concept of *abhinaya* and particularly, *sāmanya abhinaya,* relate to the trans-media communication in a theatrical performance that enables a unified performance-text to emerge. We have applied theatrical semiotics in retrospect to classical Indian aesthetics, which forms the theoretical grounds of the practice of contemporary "classical" Indian dances. To reiterate our note of caution, the two theories vary in their perspectives and methodologies. They nevertheless, recognize and address the common objects of "semiotization" and "aestheticization" of performance-texts. Through this tentative attempt, we hope to have explored a little further the less travelled grounds of global discourse on the aesthetics of Indian dance, while simultaneously keeping the classical aesthetic theory open to comment.

Notes

1. Bannerjee (1983) gives a detailed account of the modern form of the dance ballet introduced in India by pioneering dancers such as Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal.
2. Mohini is an avatar of Vishnu, one among the trinity of Hindu Gods, symbolizing the activity of preservation. The other two major gods are âiva, responsible for the destruction of evil, and Brahma, who has the powers to create the universe. The form of Mohini, or the divine enchantress, is assumed by Vishnu on certain occasions, when other kinds of power don't work, to subdue the demons who threaten the position of the gods. For a discussion of the myth of Mohini, see O'Flaherty (1999: 261–265).
3. Noted Bharatanatyam artist, Anita Ratnam, in her composition based on the lines "Priye Charusheele" from Jayadeva's Gīt Govind, uses a shawl around her neck to depict the character Krishna, and later removes the shawl and strokes it as if it were his beloved, Radha. See Ratnam (2003).
4. The composition *Bhāvayāmi,* based on the epic *Ramayana* was choreographed by Kanak Rele and presented at the Rabindra Natya Mandir (Mumbai) on January 29, 2010.
5. For a detailed study of the inter-relations between the *vibhāva, anuibhāva, vyabhicāri*, and *sthāyi bhāvas*, see Shah (2004).

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