

# **Abhinaya items in Bharata Natyam and Sattriya: A Comparison**

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**Dr Smita Lahkar**

## **Introduction:**

Abhinaya (acting) is an integral part of Indian classical dance tradition. Like other Indian classical dance styles, Bharata Natyam, one of the oldest Indian classical dance styles practiced in South India region and Sattriya, belonging to Assam, the most beautiful state of North-east India, have both Nritta (pure dance) and Nritya (expressive dance) aspects. There is ample scope of application of Abhinaya in Bharata Natyam and Sattriya with respect to rich treasure of content. Yet the application of Abhinaya is different in both styles.

In this research paper, it is tried to throw some light on the similarities, and the dissimilarities of the structure of the Abhinaya items, unique features of the repertoire of both dance styles.

## **4.1 Structure of the Items**

One of the unique features of Sattriya repertoire is all of items are categorized into two broad sections: Masculine and Feminine. No doubt, in all classical dance styles, Tāṇḍava and Lāsya aspects are available. It means each dance styles consist of masculine i.e., bold and vigorous and feminine i.e., soft and graceful form. Bharata Natyam and Sattriya are no exception to it. But in Sattriya, each item is distinctly classified into either Tāṇḍava or Lāsya. The movements, steps and speed are fixed separately

for each category. For example, in Lāsya item, the jump of the ‘Jalak’, an Māṭi Ākharā is less high than in Tāṇḍava. The gestures are done in a graceful manner in Lāsya while the same gestures are done in the vigorous way in Tāṇḍava. Even the Bhramarīs, known as Pāk in Sattriya tradition are specified for each aspect viz. Puruṣ Pāk for Tāṇḍava and Prakṛti Pāk for Lāsya form. One cannot just use Prakṛti Pāk in Bāhār Nāch of Tāṇḍava style. Cāli Nāch, Gopī, Nāch, Rāsar Nāch etc are of Lāsya form whereas Sūtradhārī, Nādubhangī, Jhumurā, Bāhār, Bar Praveśar Nāch are of Tāṇḍava variety.

Again, instead of one, there are two basic stances of Sattriya. One is for Tāṇḍava items, and another is for Lāsya items. The stance for Tāṇḍava items is known as Puruṣ Orā whereas the stance decided for Lāsya item is called as Prakṛti Orā. Both look quite similar though there is little difference in their feet positions and hand. In Puruṣ Orā, the hands are kept as Patāka Hasta near shoulder level stretching it out towards side while in Prakṛti Orā, The Patāka hands are placed in front of the body near chest level.



Puruṣ Orā



Prakṛti Orā

Fig. 1

In Bharata Natyam, it is just the opposite. No step is specified for Tāṇḍava or Lāsya aspect. A dancer has the freedom to use the same step in both aspects in the same way. Moreover, any item of Bharata Natyam cannot be identified only as Tāṇḍava or Lāsya. Most of the items are the blend of Tāṇḍava and Lāsya. For example, if the head and neck movements of Tillana are considered as graceful i.e., Lāsya, then one can see the finale part of this item as vigorous i.e., Tāṇḍava.

It is quite interesting that Sattriya does not have items like Jatiswaram, Tillana, Pushpanjali etc. of Bharatanatyam where only Swaras or syllables are throughout the item. Though in Pushpanjali and Tillana, a short piece of Sahitya or Śloka is sung, Jatiswaram is completely based on Swaras and syllables. Even in Varnam also, Swaras are used. But in Sattriya, nowhere in any item, swaras are not used. Though the syllables are there in most of the items to recite, no syllables are sung like Tillana of Bharata Natyam.

Again, Bharata Natyam has only one basic stance, popularly known as Araimaṇḍī. The position of the feet of Araimaṇḍī and Prakṛti Orā is same except the gap between the two feet. In Araimaṇḍī, the gap is made of 2-3 fingers. On the other hand, in Prakṛti Orā, the gap between the two feet is almost one foot.



Araimaṇḍī



Feet position of Prakṛti Orā

Fig. 2 (a) & (b)

Since each of the items is clearly categorized into either Tāṇḍava or Lāsya form, costumes-ornaments worn in each item is also clearly specified. For each item, specific costume is directed. For example, the costume used in Cāli is quite different from the costume used in Nādubhangī Nāch. It means item wise costume differs in Sattriya.



Costume of Krishna Nritya

Fig. 3



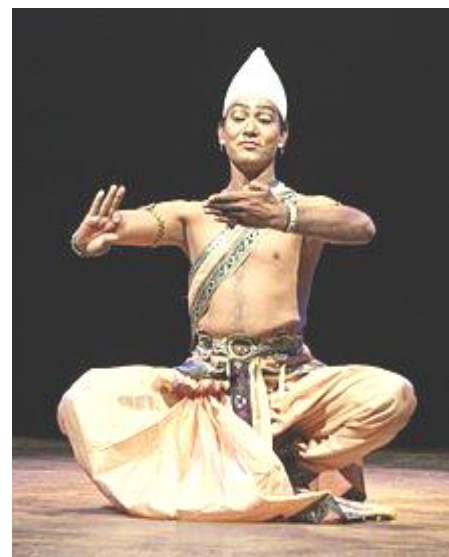
Costumes of Nādubhangī

Fig.4



Costumes for Jhumurā

Fig. 5



Costumes of Cāli for Female and Male performer

Fig. 6 (a) & (b)



Costume of Rajāgharīyā Cālī

Fig. 7



Costume for Bāhār Nāch

Fig. 8



Costume for Sūtradhārī Nāch

Fig. 9



Costume of Gāyan Bāyanar Nāch

Fig. 10



Costume of Mṛdangīyā Dal

Fig. 11



Naṭuwā Nritya

Fig. 12



Bhortāl Nritya (Creative)

Fig. 13

There is no such feature in Bharata Natyam dance style. In Bharata Natyam, there is no specific costume for each of the item. One can wear



single costume in the entire Margam be it Abhinaya or be it Nritya item. But of course, as mentioned in 1<sup>st</sup> chapter, there are two varieties of costumes viz. Pyjama and Skirt costume. A performer can choose either of it for the performance of whole item.

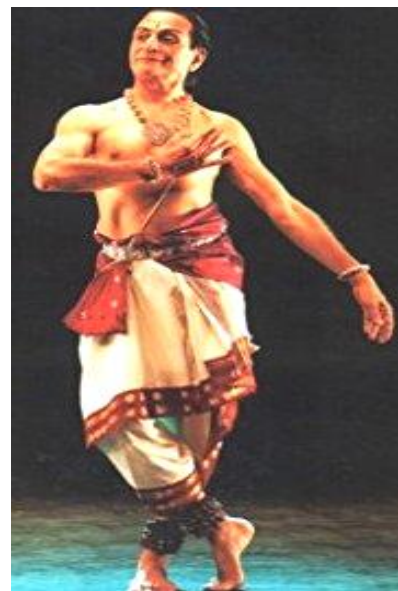


Skirt Costume



Pyjama Costume

Fig. 14



Costumes are same for Nritya and Nritya in Bharata Natyam

Fig. 15

Earlier, in Bharata Natyam Devadasis used to wear heavy gorgeous Sarees. They also did put on heavy ornaments during the performance. But these costumes and ornaments were not attractive and the get up did not give the visually soothing impact. But the present costumes of Bharata Natyam give aesthetically beautiful and stunning look which enhance the richness of the performance of Abhinaya items.

But since like other Indian classical dance styles, Bharata Natyam and Sattriya are considered as pure art forms dedicated to Gods and Goddesses, male performers were not allowed with beard and mustache. Though Sattriya still follow this rule, many Bharata Natyam male performers ignore this.

Another unique feature of Abhinaya repertoire of Sattriya is that no item is purely based on Nritya. Any item where the scope of Abhinaya is available, starts with a piece of Nritya which is known as Rāmdāni. Then Abhinaya is performed. Again, after finishing the Abhinaya part, the item ends with another Nritya piece, known as Melā Nāch. Most of the items like Jhumurā, Cāli Nāch, Rajāgharīyā Cāli etc follow the same structure. No doubt, Sattriya has the items based on pure Nritya. There is no scope of Abhinaya in such items. But as far as Nritya item is concerned, application of Nritya aspect is obvious. But now a day, many performers have started to perform 'Gītar Nāch' of dramatic representation as solo item, where the portion of Rāmdāni and Melā Nāch are not needed to perform. But still, while the performer moves from one passage to another of the song, he or she must perform a piece of Nritya on a very short cycle of tala syllables. It is like interlude between two passages. It is known as 'Ghāt'. So, the structure of this item can be compared with the

structure of 'Śabdam' of Bharata Natyam. Śabdam of Bharata Natyam is performed in the same manner.

Though the structure of 'Varnam' of Bharata Natyam is different from the structure of 'Bāhār Nāch' of Sattriya, still viewing the performance style, uses of complicated movements, one can compare Bāhār Nāch with Varnam. Both items test the dancer's ability to perform, steadiness and maturity. Both items have Nritya and Nritya aspects.

In Bharata Natyam, whereas items like Śabdam is performed with Nritya and Nritya aspects alternately, there are dance pieces like Kīrtanam, Kṛti where Nritya and Nritya go simultaneously. Again, pure Abhinaya pieces are also performed such as Padam, Javeli, Śloka etc. Such item is not available in Sattriya; though many of the performers perform pure Abhinaya pieces during the presentation of theme.

Now a day, the performance of both styles starts with invocatory items. Usually, performers of both styles prefer Śloka or Stuti to begin with. Again, the performance ends with Mangalam.

## **4.2 Features of the Repertoire**

Sattriya has three major sections in its repertoire: items of dramatic representation, items of non-dramatic representation and Ojāpāli. Whereas the Abhinaya of first two sections is portrayed in stylized and sophisticated manner, the Abhinaya of Ojāpāli is portrayed in more natural way. It means both Nrityabhinaya and Natyabhinaya elements are applied in Sattriya dance styles. In broader sense, both Lokadharmi and Natyadharmi are available in a wide manner.

On the contrary, Bharata Natyam is always presented as solo dance form. Though there is a connection with traditional Dance-dramas like Bhagavata Mela Natakam and Kuravanji, it was always projected as solo form since its inception. The dance has always adopted the stylized form of presentation i.e., Natyadharmi. It has mainly Nrityabhinaya aspect.

As Sattriya has both Nrityabhinaya and Natyabhinaya, and as it has also repertoire of dramatic representation, application of Mukhā i.e., mask is used while an actor dances Sattriya in Ankiyā Nāṭ. In the Bhaonas or Ankiya Nat, masks are must, especially for those playing the roles of mythological characters like Hanuman, Ravana, Garuda, Jatayu etc. Ankiya Nat by Sankardeva is based on the stories of the Mythologies. So, existence of Gods, Goddesses, and different kinds of animals, birds and demons are obvious. To give the mythological flavor to the Nat and to those characters, the use of mask is necessary. Therefore, such masks are an integral part of Ankiya Nat.

The dances used in the Ankiya Nat are with basics of Sattriya dance and masks remain in use while the characters dance. The best example of application of mask in Ankiya Nat and Sattriya Nritya is “Keli Gopal”. Keli means playing, Gopal is another name of Krishna, and so Keli Gopal means playing of Krishna. The Great Sankardeva’s “Keli Gopal” may be called a dance-drama. Vast application of mask in entire drama can be observed both in Sattriya and in acting portion.

Another good example is “Bali Badh” (assassination of Bali). In the entire play, masks are used for each character. In addition, the Sattriya is an inherent part of this play. Each character must make his entry doing Sattriya dance.

The actors, wearing masks are also bound to do the dance while they fight each other in battle scene with Sword, Bow and Arrow, Mace etc in their hands which gives the flavor of Lokdharmi style of presentation.

On the contrary, the performance of Bharata Natyam does not contain any masks, headgear like Sattriya. It is fully presented in a sophisticated manner.

### **4.3 Theme of Abhinaya**

Vaishnavism as well as Shaivism and Shaktism and other religious philosophies equally have their influences in the Abhinaya repertoire of Bharata Natyam. The items Bharata Natyam can be classified based on its offering to Vishnu, Shiva, Krishna, Rama, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Parvati, other Devis, Ganesha, Kartikeya etc. There are numerous songs to be enacted on each god and goddesses.

On the contrary, Sattriya is a neo-Vaishnavite classical dance form. Sattriya was evolved only to propagate neo-Vaishnavism as medium. So, the theme of Sattriya is only based on Krishna Bhakti. But of course, there are a few songs, written on Lord Rama by the great Sankardeva and his ardent disciple Madhavdeva.

It is quite interesting to notice that the Abhinaya repertoire of Bharata Natyam is Nayaka-Nayika based. There are equally large number of items attributed to both Nayaka and Nayika theme. But the Abhinaya portion of Sattriya is mainly Nayaka based. The Vaishnavism of Assam, popularly known as Neo-Vaishnavism, is based on Dāsya Bhava or Dāsya Bhakti i.e., total self-submission or surrender before God. Here,

Krishna is the god solely to be worshipped. So, the character of Radha or any other Nayika is not strongly visible.

Still there is a lot of scope to portray Nayika while enacting Abhinaya part in Sattriya. But as the Abhinaya context of Sattriya is Dāsya Bhakti based, the Nayikas of Sattriya are never seen to express the emotion of eroticism in an intense manner.<sup>i</sup>

This gives another conclusion that only Bhaktism has its influence on Abhinaya repertoire of Sattriya. On the other hand, Bhakti and Shringar, i.e., devotion and eroticism both have an important place in the context of Abhinaya of Bharata Natyam. For example, Tamil poet Gopala Krishna Bharati's famous Kīrtanam "Yennai rāmum undan" is portraying sense of devotion or Bhakti. Again, Javelis are the finest examples of Shringara Abhinaya. Both Kīrtanam and Javeli are the rich jewels of Abhinaya repertoire of Bharata Natyam.

It is worth noting that despite of Nayaka based theme of Abhinaya context of Sattriya, all the Ashta Nayika mentioned in Nāṭya Śāstra are seen in this dance style. An example of Sankardeva's drama "Pārijāta Haraṇa" is:

Raga: **Sri Gandhar**|| Tala: **Jouti tala**

Keśavahe bujhalahu tuhu |

Jānaloho tuhu byavahāra ||

Atave cāturi codī calahu bahuri hari e |

Jāhā priya ramaṇī tohārā ||<sup>ii</sup>

Meaning: Oh Keshava, now I have understood you. Now I know your character and conduct. So, leave aside your flattery and go back to your other beloved woman.<sup>iii</sup>

So, it is the clear example of Khandita Nayika. Recently, Guru Jatin Goswami and renowned exponent Mallika Kandali have composed their individual dance-ballets on Ashtanayika adopting the songs from the dramas of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva which has added a new dimension to the Abhinaya repertoire of Sattriya.

## Conclusion

It is not possible to make a complete comparative discussion of such highly enriched Indian Classical Dance styles like Bharata Natyam and Sattriya in one paper. Each day, new thing is being experimented in Indian classical dance styles. Nothing is stagnant. Abhinaya component of Bharata Natyam and Sattriya is no exception to it. New research and experiments are applied constantly to these forms.

**Dr Smita Lahkar**  
Head & Assistant Professor,  
Department of Dance,  
S.D. Barman Memorial Govt. Music College  
Agartala, Tripura  
799006

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<sup>i</sup> (Kandali 2009), p.66

<sup>ii</sup> (Bora 1989), p. 69

<sup>iii</sup> (Kandali 2009), p. 67

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