

## **A reflection of Krishna's kaleidoscopic presence in dance**

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**Abstract:** *The Indian legend, Krishna is a name that resonates in every heart. One of the most popular themes for all types of dances over many a thousand years has been Krishna. Krishna in dance has been perceived from the point of view of Chaturvidhaabhinaya being the broadest approach, along with the Ashta/Nava rasas and Krishna as seen in different dance forms. In Angika we see various postures, in Vachika the literary compositions, in Aharya the effervescent shades and in Sattvika the Krishna concept. One can also visualize Krishna in any of the ashta/navarasas. Krishna's story is replete with highly emotive sequences through which it is possible to experience every rasa. Krishna's influence over the classical as well as folk dance forms of India is truly unparalleled. There is no possibility of imagining dance without this Krishna. Be it the themes or styles or stories or emotions, Krishna is omnipresent.*

**Key words:** *Krishna, Dance and dance forms, Abhinaya, Rasa*

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### **I. Introduction**

The flamboyant hero of Indian history, mythology and arts, Krishna is a name that resonates in every heart. The legend of Krishna has developed with manifold layers of stories over the centuries and stood the test of time. Krishna is a popular theme for artists, scholars and common man alike.

It is for this reason that plenty of work has been done keeping Krishna at the nucleus. This evergreen hero, figures foremost in Indian scriptures and heading off from there in prose, poetry, painting, music, dance and the list goes on. His influence over the art forms is truly unparalleled.

Some speak of him as a butter thief, some as the supreme being and some believe he is a passionate lover. Krishna has forever been a part of Indian art and has a multifaceted influence over them.

Of the multitude of art forms that India proudly showcases, dance is of particular interest to us. An art form that combines both aural and visual techniques, coupled with interplay of many emotions is the bedrock of dance. Dance as a term has a very broad scope. Right from simple movements to intricate choreography, the term "dance" is able to blend itself. It can be safely said that one of the most popular themes for all types of dances over many a thousand years has been Krishna. There are many aspects of Krishna that have been beautifully adapted to dance. The ability to dance for/to a theme like Krishna is very high. His stories, his character, his postures etc. find ample scope to be portrayed through dance.

The most dynamic exploration and elucidation of Krishna came during and post the Bhakti movement. The Vaishnava Bhakti movement initiated the inclusion of the Krishna themes and stories in the dance forms being practiced then and the tradition continued.

In India one cannot conceive of the cosmos, in an eternal rhythm of creation, evolution and destruction without Shiva the Nataraja, and Krishna – the Natavara. (Vatsyayan 1982:170)

There are many ways of looking at Krishna in dance; from the point of view of Chaturvidhaabhinaya<sup>1</sup> being the broadest approach, along with themes and stories of Krishna, Krishna as seen in different dance forms, the Ashta/Navarasas so on and so forth.

### **II. Krishna And Chaturvidhaabhinaya**

The presentation of any feeling or emotion or idea happens in four different yet integrated ways.

Angikaabhinaya: refers to the movement of the body through the angas or limbs. Some of the basic stances and poses of the various dance forms have been influenced by Krishna, especially those of Manipuri and Kathak. There are also specific postures and gestures to depict Krishna in every dance form.

Vachikaabhinaya: refers to the rendition of the subject through verbal communication. The melodic tunes and rhythm depend on the style of music and hence it is in the literary element that we see Krishna. Countless number of poets from all parts of the country have time and again added color and flavor to the Krishna stories in their very picturesque poetry. A plethora of literary compositions on Krishna are found in almost all languages, some of them being Ashtapadis, Krishnatandava, Raas, Thumris, Bhamakalapam,

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<sup>1</sup>Refers to the 4 kinds of representation or communication pertaining to the art of drama and dance

Krishnanattam, Kritis, Bhajans, Devaranamas etc. All the dance forms have generously adapted these compositions in their respective genres. Truly, this element forms the heart of the dance content.

Aharyaabhinaya: refers to the embellishments of the actors and the theatre. Any dance with Krishna as the theme is bound to find some elements such as peacock feathered headgears, flute, painted face and body, yellow dhotis(garment) and more.

Sattvikaabhinaya: refer to the emotions that churn inside an artiste and are expressed through the above media. The theme of Krishna has plenty of scope for all kinds of emotions mentioned in the treatises. Krishna having unique place in the hearts and minds of the artistes, the intensity of the experience is also high. The fulfillment of every discussion on Krishna in dance lies in this element of Satva/Sattvikaabhinaya.

### **III. Krishna And Rasas**

Expanding on the Sattvikaabhinaya, we can speak of Rasa – the joy and bliss experienced by the artiste and connoisseur. Bharata in the *Natyasastra*<sup>2</sup> has given eight sentiments or the Ashtarasas. In the later centuries the ninth rasa was added and the concept of Navarasas developed. They are Shringara, Hasya, Karuna, Raudra, Virā, Bhayanaka, Bhibatsa, Adbhuta and Shanta.

Every dance form depicts many emotions that stir the desired sentiments in the spectators. Krishna's story is replete with highly emotive sequences. One can experience the rasa while hearing or reading the stories as well as when they are appropriately rendered.

- Shringara: the rasa of love – Rukmini-Krishna, Radha-Krishna, Raslila etc. are very popular themes for this rasa and evoke love. Every artiste has taken refuge in Krishna stories for depicting shringara.
- Hasya: the comic sentiment – his childhood tales of stealing butter, playing pranks on his friends are instances where hasya is the prominent rasa.
- Karuna: the pathetic sentiment – stories of Draupadivastrapaharana and Sudhama-Krishna are those which evoke the karunarasa.
- Raudra: the furious sentiment – one experiences anger when Shishupala insults Krishna, also when he takes up arms to kill Bhishma at the Kurukshetra war Krishna's anger is seen.
- Virā: the heroic sentiment – Narakasuravadha, Mallayuddha etc. show Krishna as a valorous hero and evoke in the spectator powerful heroism
- Bhayanaka: the terrible sentiment – fear of his mother Yashoda when he jumped into the waters of Yamuna to find Kalinga, or when she sees the huge form of Putana etc. are instances where the element of fear can be depicted in dance.
- Bhibatsa: the odious sentiment – Krishna's fellow yadavas giving in to all the vices and they fighting and killing each other are some rare instances that kindle bhibatsa.
- Adbhuta: the marvelous sentiment – Yashoda seeing the universe in little Krishna's mouth, when Krishna lifts the Govardhana etc. are all awe inspiring.
- Shanta: rasa of tranquility and peace – his yogic form inspires peace. His ascent to the heavens at the banks of Prabhasa was in a state of peace. In one sense, all the stories of Krishna leave the connoisseur in a serene state.

These are just a few examples of how Krishna can be adapted to the navarasas concept in dance. Apart from these, artistes are free to imagine and express many other situations that can evoke the rasas, like – Krishna's reaction when his beloved girl spots him with another gopi. It can cause fear to him and evoke the hasyarasa in the connoisseur depending on how it is portrayed. Emotion-driven sequences are plentiful in Krishna and find the most vibrant expressions through dance.

### **IV. Krishna And Dance Forms**

True to its diversity, the country has an abundance of dance forms which are formally categorized into Classical dances and Folk dances.

Folk dances are ones which do not have a specific codified system of learning or teaching. A wide range of themes such as, festivals, birth, death, harvest, war and many more form a part of the folk dances. Yet, the influence of the Krishna theme can be found in these dances as well. For example, a popular folk dance Kolaata of Karnataka (called by different names in different parts of the country) could have been derived from the Ras dance of the Krishna story. Similarly, the Dindi dance of Maharashtra describes the playful pastimes of Krishna.

On the other hand, the classical dances have a systematic pattern of learning and performance. It is easier to identify and adapt Krishna in these dances. The 8 classical dances include, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Mohiniattam, Kathakali, Odissi, Manipuri, and Sathriya Classical dances like Kathak, Manipuri, and

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<sup>2</sup>The foremost treatise on Indian dramaturgy authored by Bharatamuni

Sathriya all have predominantly Krishna themes in their repertoire. All the classical dance forms branched off from the main style which followed the *Natyasastra*.

The style of Bharatanatyam hailed from the southern region of India. Krishna is an extremely popular figure here. We find many literary works on the child Krishna-as a butter thief, killing of various demons etc., love stories of Krishna, his preaching and so on. Krishna dancing on the snake Kalinga is another famous episode which offers scope for many movements of the limbs. There are also the *Devaranamas* in which the relationship of a devotee with the lord and social lessons are hinted at; these too have Krishna as the central theme. In the case of Kuchipudi which originated in Andhra Pradesh, it is the older Krishna who becomes more popular. Over the years it has shifted from being a dance drama to a solo recital. The *Krishnaleelatarangini* which deals with the life of Krishna and *Bhamakalapam* which tells the story of his principal wife, *Satyabhama* are an essential part of the Kuchipudi repertoire. Kathak is the dance form that grew in Northern India. Its themes are largely dominated by Krishna. It began as an art of story-telling where the Krishna legend was prevalent. His childhood pranks and divine dalliances were crucial to this art form. Many of the syllables which are used in the *vachika* of Kathak are said to be inspired by the sound of Krishna's anklets. *Mohiniattam* and *Kathakali* are two art forms originating from Kerala. While *Mohiniattam* is embedded with graceful and elegant movements, *Kathakali* has valorous and intense emotional elucidations. Both of which have been inspired with many Krishna themes. The *shringara* and *bhaktipadams* of *Mohiniattam* revolve around Krishna, his devotees and *nayikas* on one hand and the stories of *Rukminiapaharanam*, *Pootanamoksham*, *Kuchelopakhyanamin* *Kathakali* indicate the heroism of Krishna. The *Odissi* dance form which grew in Orissa is one of the oldest art forms. Their basic stances as well as other postures symbolize Lord *Jagannath* of Puri who is none other than Krishna.

The famous *GitaGovinda* of poet *Jayadeva* was pioneered in this style. It is brimming with the love episodes of Krishna and *Radha*. The dance forms of *Manipuri* and *Sathriya* belonging to *Manipur* and *Assam* are an embodiment of the Krishna theme. The history and development of these dance forms is based the Krishna lore; the nucleus of it being *Raslila*. The pieces performed, the basic postures and stances, the costumes – each and every element of these dances are inspired by Krishna; the approach being devotional and spiritual.

Krishna is seen to be a many sided man who lived a rich and varied life. (Rajaram 2006:35)

There is no possibility of imagining dance without this Krishna. Be it the themes or styles or stories or emotions, Krishna is truly omnipresent. It was and is this variety that adds flavors to our arts. If there was no Krishna legend, the art form of dance would never have witnessed such richness and vastness of subject. He is the most significant and colorful personality. Apart from stories of his own life and deeds, saints, poets and artistes alike have had their own understanding of Krishna and thus a variety of expressions can be found for this evergreen hero of Indian Art.

In this effort, only a tip of the iceberg has been touched upon. An inexhaustible resource for dancers lies in this charismatic hero – Krishna. Krishna is a legend who shines on the stage of India!

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