

Somaesthetics of *Bharatanāṭyam*: The Dancer as Yogi

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Abstract: *This interview contains insights into the journey of an artist as a practitioner, and a performer of the Indian classical dance Bharatanāṭyam. Discussing the philosophical, spiritual and somatic dimensions of the dance, the artist elaborates on the role of the performing soma as the medium of communication in the classical dance form, and the importance of practice in preparing the soma for the effective embodiment of emotions.*

Smt. Vrinda Ramanan is a Bharatanāṭyam Dancer, Mountaineer and Author. Shaped by a rich lineage of distinguished gurus, she also specialised in Nattuvangam and the Indian classical dance Kuchipudi. With over four decades of experience, she is currently the Artistic Director of Bala Kala Vidhanam, founded by her husband, Ramanan and herself. A trained mountaineer who has been trekking extensively in the Himalayas and the Western Ghats for the past 45 years, she regularly contributes articles to many leading newspapers and magazines, and has authored several books including Srirangam, Bhooloka Vaikuntam, Tirumala, Kaliyuga Vaikuntam, The Art and Architecture of the Srirangam Temple, The Mountains of our Destiny – The Indian Himalayas and Samayapuram- The Sacred Seat of Shakti. Her forthcoming books are The Evolution of Temple Architecture in Tamilnadu and The Western Ghats.

The following interview has been edited for continuity and clarity.

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Introduction

Somaesthetics considers the body as the living, sentient soma. Performative somaesthetics analyses dance as an artform in which the body acts as the medium of expression for a vast range of emotions. Studying the dancer's body helps us understand how the cultivated and self-reflexive soma lives through the performance.

In *Bharatanāṭyam*, the performer's body or soma is the most important medium for communication. Through physical gestures, dialogue modulation, costume and makeup, as well as an emotionally immersed representation, the performing soma efficiently embodies the *bhāvas* of the performance so that the spectator can effectively relish the *rasa*. The performer's

soma undergoes years of preparation through constant practice and discipline to reach this stage. The artist's experience gives valuable insights into preparation, practice and performance of the soma in *Bharatanāṭyam*.

V. B. & V.S.: Smt. Vrinda, How would you describe your journey with *Bharatanāṭyam* as a practitioner and a performer?

Vrinda: I started dancing at the age of four. My mother identified my potential and upon my insistence, we went searching for teachers in Trichy. I found great joy in the process of learning. Just like any beginner, I started with the strong desire to perform onstage, to be appreciated and acknowledged and later understood that even when nobody was appreciating me, I felt happy inside because I enjoyed dancing onstage. When we love the art so much, we delight even in practice.

At first, I wasn't interested in the theory of dance, I only wanted to perform. My first *guru*, Sri Radhakrishnan of the Pandanainallur School of Dance, gave me a fantastic foundation, and my second *guru*, Bhaskar from *Kalāmaṇḍalam*¹, introduced me to the divinity in this art. He would make me stand in the *Naṭarāja*² pose and he would talk to me about the theory of dance and help me correct my stances and poses. That was when I discovered that there was another dimension to dance.

When you perform as a God, you identify with the God and you become that God inside of you. *Devo bhūtvā devaṃ yajet*. When you dance like *Viṣṇu*, you identify with *Viṣṇu* or you become *Viṣṇu*. Likewise, you become *Kṛṣṇa*, *Śiva*, or *Pārvatī*. It is the union of the devotee and the divine. In fact, after every performance, you are unable to sleep at night because you will feel a fire inside. In spite of being exhausted, you will not be able to close your eyes because of the heat generated inside the system caused by the number of emotions that you have created. The identification of the performer with the performance happens due to *sāttvika abhinaya*³, one of the four types of *abhinaya*⁴. The other three are *āṅgika abhinaya*⁵, *vācika abhinaya*⁶, *āhārya abhinaya*⁷ and *sāttvika abhinaya*.

1 Founded in 1930 by the Malayalam poet Vallathol Narayana Menon, the Kerala Kalāmaṇḍalam is a prestigious institution for the learning of traditional performing arts.

2 The iconographic representation of Śiva as the Lord of Dance performing the cosmic dance or the *tāṇḍavam*.

3 The performer's internalization of the feelings and temperament of the character for an ideal portrayal.

4 The Sanskrit word for the different types of histrionic representation.

5 The body language of the actors including the physical gestures and facial expressions.

6 The speech in a performance; in the context of *Bharatanāṭyam*, it could refer to the musical text of the performance.

7 The makeup, costume, the external stage settings and additional factors including the musical instruments, used in a performance.



Fig.1.1. Sahana Aanand: A *Bharatanāṭyam* dancer demonstrating the *āṅgika abhinaya*.

V. B. & V.S.: Can you tell us more about the *sāttvika abhinaya*? And how does the audience react to it?

Vrinda: *Sāttvika abhinaya* helps you to momentarily identify with the gods you present onstage. You become *Viṣṇu*, *Kṛṣṇa*, *Śiva*, or an *Asuraḥ* and come back to yourself, maintaining a sense of calmness inside. The audience also resonates with the emotions of the performer. The spectator feels the artist, their emotions and moods. When you return home agitated, happy, sad, or calm after watching a performance, the emotions experienced are triggered by the performer through the performance.

In the beginning, when you perform, you look for appreciation. After years of practice, you sense the insignificance of appreciation. People commending you is just part of an evolutionary process. Dance is a spiritual practice which comes from your teachers.

During practice, there will be four or five dancers and each would mirror the other. On occasion, my teacher, Smt. Indra Rajan would ask us to dance in front of the mirror, and when we spend too much time looking in the mirror, she would reprimand us. Now I realise that she was indirectly telling us to maintain a balance.

V. B. & V.S.: As a dancer and performer, do you think *Bharatanāṭyam* is meant only for the stage?

Vrinda: After going on so many stages, I recognised that *Bharatanāṭyam* was not an art meant for just the stage. It was meant to be performed in a temple. The *Nāṭyaśāstra*⁸ speaks of *Bharatanāṭyam* being brought to earth by the *apsarā*⁹ *Urvaśī*¹⁰. Dance brings us closer to divinity. The learning progresses step by step, until you reach the sanctum sanctorum of the God. At the end of the *Bharatanāṭyam* performance, we have the concluding *tillānā*¹¹, which is the exuberant happiness at being with God embodied in a graceful and energetic dance. You also experience

8 The ancient text on dramaturgy and performing arts, attributed to sage Bharata.

9 Celestial maidens of heaven born out of the churning of the cosmic Ocean of Milk. They are celebrated as exceptional dancers in the court of Indra, the king of gods.

10 A celestial maiden born from the thigh of sage *Nārāyaṇa*, often regarded as the most prominent of *apsarās*.

11 The energetic finale of a *Bharatanāṭyam* performance.

the glory, the ecstasy, the happiness, the joy, the bliss that you get by dancing. By reaching that goal that you are working towards, we attain a spiritual height, and thus, with time, dance becomes a meditative practice. That's why we tell our students that all of us cannot become big performers. It's okay if they do not want to dance on stage. Instead, dance for the joy of dancing. *Bharatanāṭyam* is a discipline which lets you bloom into a beautiful and wholesome personality. It helps to improve physical fitness, health and posture. It also increases one's confidence and teaches you how to appreciate literature, fine arts and aesthetics.

V. B. & V.S.: I believe that the faculty for appreciating classical performances must be cultivated.

Vrinda: Exactly. My teacher, Smt. Ranganayaki Amma, used to encourage us to point out the merits of other performances. Whenever we failed to come up with a single word of compliment, she would get annoyed and remind us that the child had gone up on stage in front of ten thousand people. That in itself was a feat worth appreciating. She taught us humility, kindness and trained us to see the good in every performance. I try to impart the same lessons to my students. I tell them to be appreciative of others and to offer constructive criticism only when invited.

V. B. & V.S.: You have spoken about the performer as the spectator. What about the layman's experience as the spectator? How does the spectator go through these stages of appreciation?

Vrinda: The art of dance was created with the dual purpose of entertaining and educating the *pāmara makka!*¹² or the common folk. The common man would be happy to see a *kāvaṭi*¹³ or an *agni caṭṭi*¹⁴ or nice folk dance on *Murukaṇ*. The spectator who knows the stories will be able to relate with the performance and narrate the stories to the succeeding generation. The enlightened ones or the sages, the seers who are seeing the dance, are able to become one with the divine. They do not see the performer or the performance; instead, they see God, his greatness, his *līlās*¹⁵. The dancer should be able to forge a deep connection with the audience or the *sahṛdaya*¹⁶. The spectator must be impressed with the aesthetic beauty in the performance and not with the physical beauty of the dancer. The beauty which brings us closer to the divine.

V. B. & V.S.: What are the philosophical dimensions of *Bharatanāṭyam*? Does the form of performance provide a world-view?

Vrinda: *Nāṭyaśāstra* speaks of quarrels between the *devas* and the *asuraḥs*. All of us have the conflict between the good and the evil within us. It is believed that the *Nāṭya Veda*¹⁷ or the Fifth *Veda* was created by *Brahmā* when the gods beseeched him to create a proper line of entertainment, which would also provide us with a code of conduct to live our lives. The *Nāṭya Veda* is where you have music, dance, drama, and literature coming together. Bharata created the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and imparted its wisdom to his successors, who then propagated it. Dance, just like every other form of art, was meant to give people a code of conduct for living a good life.

All the classical arts of India move towards spiritual ecstasy and ultimately, finding the

12 The common people.

13 The ritualistic dance performed for appeasing Lord *Murukaṇ* as part of the *Taiṭṭya* festival in the Tamil month of *Tai*. The devotees dance with a *kāvaṭi*, a semi-circular structure made of wood and decorated with peacock feathers or flowers, on their shoulders.

14 Literally meaning 'Fire Pot', it is a temple ritual in Tamil Nadu where devotees dance with clay pots containing fire or burning coal.

15 The divine play. This philosophy views reality as a cosmic play or performance.

16 The empathetic or perceptive spectator.

17 The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is often described as the fifth veda or the *Nāṭya Veda*, a sacred text on dance.

truth within us. That's why, whenever we dance a *Thōduḍaiya Ceviyān*¹⁸, or a *Tēvāram*¹⁹, or a *Tiruppukal*²⁰, we see the divinity in art. When the words are reiterated and the dance recreated repeatedly, it becomes one with you. The word becomes your own reality. It's not just about speaking the truth, but about living it and thus making it a part of one's life. You live the word, making the meaning of the word come alive in you.

For example, while practising the *saralī varisai*²¹, the *jaṅtai varisai*²², we sing what the poet has put into words. He has “*sa ri ga ma pa da ni sa, sa ni da pa ma ga ri sa. Uṇmai tēḍum uḷḷam kōvil, undan uḷḷē vāḷum teyvam*”. The notes are for the musician. The dancers perform by adding various actions and *mudrās* to the music. After repeating it systematically ten or twenty times, you get the music, the *tāḷam*²³ and the timing right, but you also start to embody the essence of the words, loosely translated as *the one whose heart searches for truth, becomes a temple, inside which, the God resides*. When the child dances to this thought for a hundred times, the message that one should live a truthful life is unconsciously internalised by the child.

V. B. & V.S.: How does the body communicate in a *Bharatanāṭyam* performance?

Vrinda: The entire body becomes an instrument of communication through *bhāvas*²⁴ and *mudrās*²⁵. The whole body, including the face and the limbs, undergoes repeated rigorous practice and exercises, to effectively communicate with the spectator. A well trained body is an important vehicle essential for communication. Even the thoughts put into the body are part of it. One must be *sāttvik* or pure inside which brings balance to the performance.

18 The opening verse of the *Tēvāram* hymn composed by the Tamil child-poet *Tirūñāṇacampantar* which describes Lord Śiva as the one who wears a *Thōdu*, a type of earring, on his ears.

19 A collection of Tamil hymns in praise of Lord Śiva composed by *Campantar*, *Appar*, and *Sundarar*. It forms the first seven volumes of the twelve-volume text *Tirumurai*, of Tamil Saivite tradition.

20 A collection of Tamil devotional poems composed by *Aruṇakirinātar* praising Lord *Muruga*.

21 The first set of lessons for beginners in Carnatic Music in which the basic notes *sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, da, ni* are practised in *Māyāmālavagauḷa rāgam*.

22 The second lesson in Carnatic Music following the *saralī varisai*, in which the notes are doubled or tripled.

23 Rhythm

24 The emotional states or moods expressed in dance.

25 Symbolic hand gestures which function as the diction of dance.



Fig.1.2. The *Bharatanāṭyam* dancer performing a *mudrā*.

V. B. & V.S.: From your words, it is clear that dance presents a special kind of instruction, where you do not listen to an instruction, nor is somebody instructed. It is about living the word which consists of a beautiful thought, and slowly letting that thought reshape your reality. But it is not just about hearing something and interpreting it. You are interpreting it through your body, by which, the meaning and the spirit of those sentences seep into every cell of your being, until you are able to feel the divinity that has descended on you.

Vrinda: Exactly. *Devo bhūtvā devaṁ yajet*. That's it. You become a god to show god or to live that part of god.

Dance and the sense of divinity you experience through it impart a great deal of discipline to the performer and makes them quite adaptable. Wherever they go, they are able to adjust themselves. And we receive rigorous training, even abstaining from having water at times.

Dance increases one's focus and helps children to progress in their studies. From a young age, they understand how to balance the hours between school and dance practice. If they could not complete their lessons before coming for training, they bring their textbooks here to study as time allows. Today's parents also might wish to keep their children inside their comfort zones, but such sheltering will not prepare them to face life's challenges. A beautiful sculpture emerges only when it is hammered.

V. B. & V.S.: Chiseled and hammered. You take off a few parts until it gets the right shape and symmetry.

Vrinda: True. Especially in the case of dance, you have to work at perfecting every *aḍavu*²⁶, every step diligently and persistently.

V. B. & V.S.: How does the dancer prepare for *Bharatanāṭyam*? How important is practice or *abhyāsa*²⁷?

26 The fundamental unit of *Bharatanāṭyam* performance. In each *aḍavu*, various stances, leg movements, hand gestures, and postures are aligned to the rhythmic *Sollukaṭṭu* (syllable sequences or musical notes recited by the guru which guides the dancers' feet). It is of many types including *Taṭṭa aḍavu*, *Nāṭṭa aḍavu*, *Vīśāru aḍavu*, etc. Several *aḍavus* together form a *jati*.

27 The Sanskrit word for repeated and consistent practice.

Vrinda: The *abhyāsa* or *riyāz*²⁸ is a lifelong process. It is not like preparing for an exam for five years and then stopping altogether once you have written the exam. *abhyāsa* is for life. It is said that if you don't practise for one day, you will be aware of it. But if you don't practise for two days, your accompanying artist will notice it. And then on the third day, everybody else will know about your lack of practice. To be a performer, you must practise every day. But otherwise, it is also the joy of dancing. So when you find pleasure in that, it becomes significantly meditative.

It is an evolutionary process. Even going on stage is *abhyāsa* for a dancer. Every time she performs, whether it is on the stage, or in front of the teacher, or by herself, it is an *abhyāsa*. When you are dancing onstage, for the audience, it is a performance, but for you, it is an *abhyāsa*. The *abhyāsa* is part of a continuum where you try to do it better, and the spectator is only an instrument for your improvement. The teacher will teach you one *varṇam*²⁹ and we have to perform it on several stages before beginning the next one. When I asked my teacher to teach me a second *varṇam*, she told me to first perfect the one I was taught. I later found the truth in her words. Every time I performed it, I found a new aspect to express which I would have missed if I had started learning another *varṇam*. When I came back home after performing it on several stages, my teacher taught me the next one. That was *abhyāsa* or continuous strenuous practice which would test our limits and open up new possibilities for us.

V. B. & V.S.: Can you tell us about the physical demands of *Bharatanāṭyam* as far as the learner is concerned? If you can recall your days as a student and practitioner, how did you confront these difficult routines?

Vrinda: It was an arduous journey. But looking back at the initial struggle, it seems I've forgotten all that pain. It is indeed physically demanding. But I have children with asthmatic problems who come with dreams of dancing. They might find the initial classes challenging, and we would sit them down, rub their chests, rub their backs and make them come back to practice. I have seen them show great perseverance. When your body is exhausted, the mind would come up with excuses to rest. A *Bharatanāṭyam* practitioner masters resilience with time. I've seen children who have to perform their *Taṭṭa Aḍavu*³⁰ in *Araimaṇḍi*³¹. I know how difficult it is. Still, they keep their hands in position as they sit through the pain. I've seen kids who continue to practise with their eyes wet in strain. The parents, particularly the fathers, would request for their kids to rest upon seeing their aching feet. But the struggle is all part of the learning process. No pain, no gain in life.

V. B. & V.S.: How close is dance to yoga? Do you learn yoga to train the body for *Bharatanāṭyam*?

Vrinda: Yoga, music and dance all go together. Yoga strengthens the muscles, makes you more flexible, and helps with controlling your breath. It is especially useful for *Bharatanāṭyam* practitioners. *Haṭha Yoga*³² can be practised to prepare the body for dance. I give different *prāṇāyāma*³³ exercises to my children everyday. The older students know the importance of breathing exercises before a performance. The younger students imitate the older students and practise along with them.

My teacher used to remind me to breathe properly. My teachers did not teach us yoga,

28 The Urdu word used for practice in Hindustani classical music.

29 The most important and central part of a *Bharatanāṭyam* performance, a *varṇam* combines Nṛtta (pure dance) and Nṛtya (expressive dance).

30 An *aḍavu* in *Bharatanāṭyam* in which the performer sits in the *Araimaṇḍi* position and alternates between tapping the left and right feet rhythmically on the ground.

31 *Arai* means 'half' and *maṇḍi* means 'to sit' and, together, it refers to the half-sitting posture in *Bharatanāṭyam*.

32 The type of Yoga practice which involves body postures and breathing techniques.

33 Controlled breathing techniques used in Yoga for the regulation of *prāṇa* or life force.

instead they would tell us to do particular exercises which would help with certain movements. For instance, they would make us do splits and breathing exercises.

V. B. & V.S.: How does a *Bharatanāṭyam* dancer master these splits? Can you elaborate on it?

Vrinda: Before we start dancing, we do a whole set of exercises for about 25 minutes. The warm up exercises help to relax the stiff leg muscles and prepare them for dance. With time and repeated preparation, even young children get used to it. Certain schools do not give this much emphasis to exercises or practice and their students are sent straight to the stage. Initially, the younger students might be discontent with the exercises and compare themselves with students from other dance schools who directly appear onstage without being subjected to tedious hours of exercises. Nevertheless, they continue doing it, partly because of the teacher's insistence, and partly because they see the older and more experienced students doing their splits, their *cakrāsanas*³⁴, and their *prāṇāyāmas* despite going onstage. They understand that in order to reach that state of expertise, they must do the exercises. There's no alternative. So they choose to go through it.

It's a tremendously difficult process. I try to make it more interesting by adding a little music to their exercises. I call it *Kṛṣṇa Zumba* or *Śiva Zumba* so that they will be more enthusiastic to participate.

V. B. & V.S.: How does a *Kṛṣṇa Zumba* or *Śiva Zumba* work?

Vrinda: I incorporate energetic and exciting Zumba movements with *bhajans*³⁵ to show the interactions between *Kṛṣṇa* and the *Gopikas*, or *Kṛṣṇa* playing his flute or eating butter. The students are free to improvise and do what they like. It is relaxing and they love it because they think they're dancing.

But when I was a student, there was nothing like improvisation. My teacher would say, "this is it, *ippati tāṇ āṭaṇum* (this is how one must dance)". She was extremely strict with the process. Your smile can neither be excessively wide, nor too restrained. The expressions have to be limited. You have to identify those limits, which would only come with constant practice and years of experience.

Whereas now, you have to teach the children everything. It might be an effect of the contemporary education system where everything is spoon fed to them. I also volunteer at a village school where the students are slightly more responsive in comparison. The children from Ram Krishna Vidyalaya in Iyyampatti are incredibly excited to dance. Even when dancing on a hungry stomach, they never complain of leg pain. In the beginning, they did not have their postures right, but today I can see them all standing erect. They have also learnt to recite all the dance *ślokāḥs*³⁶.

V. B. & V.S.: So they learn it on their own. It's like a self-instructed way of improving. Being able to analyze themselves to understand how their bodies move and make the first move without waiting for the teacher to do it.

Vrinda: They are so engrossed in dance and once they grasp something, they will never forget it. They make an effort to remember. It's very, very, very sweet. I often share their videos in the dance school group to inspire my kids.

V. B. & V.S.: How would you compare today's learning process with the traditional *Gurū-Śiṣhya paramparā*³⁷? You were trained in a *paramparā*, right?

34 Literally meaning the 'wheel pose', it is a Yoga posture for the strengthening of the limbs, spine and abdominal muscles in which the practitioner bends backwards to form a semi-circular arch.

35 Devotional songs.

36 Aphoristic Sanskrit verses.

37 The long tradition of transfer of knowledge from the guru or the mentor to the *śiṣhya*, or the disciple.

Vrinda: Yes, I was fortunate enough to be part of the *gurukula sampradāya*³⁸, of being able to stay with my *guru* and learn the art directly from her. I remember my *guru* waking me up at midnight to compose *tīrmāṇams*³⁹ she had newly composed. Those are the *tīrmāṇams* that I use even today.

V. B. & V.S.: It must be a way of paying tribute to your teacher.

Vrinda: So holistic is the *gurukula sampradāya*. When you are staying with the *guru*, there will be days when you will not be taught anything. You'll be sitting and the teacher will be dancing and you'll be tapping time for her. In those days, I used to be impatient to dance. Your *guru* will even ask you to prepare spinach for lunch. Nowadays, we cannot imagine any student doing it.

Today, the older students will instruct the younger ones to do *namaskāram*⁴⁰ for the teacher. So the *paramparā* is slowly fading. Before the COVID pandemic, we used to celebrate Mother's Day during *Navrātri*⁴¹, when each kid would bring their mother, make her sit down and do *pāda pūjā*⁴², like the Chinmaya mission. The Swamiji from Dayananda Ashram used to conduct it, and it was such a nice gesture.

I would encourage the fathers to plan surprise gifts for the mothers. Some of them might find it strange, others would think I'm overdoing it, but many of them will be happy. They would get gifts and make the child give it to the mother. The mothers are often overwhelmed with happiness. They say they've never felt so important in their lives.

Teaching *Bharatanāṭyam* is not just about teaching my students the classical art. It's about teaching them to lead better lives as better people. It's about improving oneself in several aspects of one's everyday life.

V. B. & V.S.: Just living everyday life.

Vrinda: You can't teach any art in isolation. As a teacher, you become involved in the students' lives. Occasionally, you even act as a liaison between the child and the parent. It's your duty to teach them as much as possible within the short period of time you get to spend with them. Earlier, there used to be moral education so that values will be inculcated in children from the school level. But that is not the case today.

When I take my children to dance performances, I happen to witness a kind of selfishness. Schools encourage us to compete with each other and the same sentiment can be seen reflected on stage, which is detrimental to the overall performance because dance is all about teamwork.

V. B. & V.S.: So how do you overcome this challenge?

Vrinda: I give them twenty minutes to prepare for a dance sequence and leave them alone so that they can work together. After the initial hesitation, one child will take the lead to communicate, and gradually, they will learn to cooperate and coordinate. Once they start working together, they forge lasting friendships, helping and supporting one another both onstage and offstage.

V. B. & V.S.: You've spoken about the spiritual, physical and moral aspects of *Bharatanāṭyam*. What are the somaesthetic aspects that you identify in *Bharatanāṭyam*, specifically on the connection between the body and the mind?

Vrinda: *Bharatanāṭyam* is the union of the body, mind and breath. The three have to be in consonance with each other, otherwise, you cannot perform well. When the breathing is at a

38 The ancient system of residential education in which the *śiṣhya* learns directly from the *guru* by staying at the *gurukula*, or the *guru's* residence.

39 The fast-paced and rhythmic composition of *jatīs*, usually performed thrice as a concluding sequence.

40 The traditional Indian greeting of bowing the head with palms joined together, signifying "I bow to the divine in you".

41 Literally meaning 'nine nights', it is an Indian nine-day festival observed in honour of the Goddess Durgā.

42 The sacred ritual of washing someone else's feet, signifying respect, devotion and gratitude. It is done to honour parents, teachers or elders.

comfortable pace, the mind becomes calm and the relaxed body starts performing effortlessly. Everything shown onstage will be equally relaxed. The state of the mind reflected in the body decides the beauty of the performance. That is the *sāttvika bhāvam*, the steadfastness of your mind and breath, which helps to produce a good performance.



Fig.1.3. The *sāttvika abhinaya*.

V. B. & V.S.: Most dancers train under a number of learned *gurus* and go onstage to perform more or less the same routines. How can we tell the difference in their performances?

Vrinda: You can tell the difference very well. The difference lies in the way they perform. It's in the rendition of the *aḍavu*s, in the different combinations of *tālam* or rhythm. All of it matters. When you put everything together, it's like good writing. How can we say one person is a better writer than the other? It's in the way each writer presents ideas. But it is true that having a really good teacher will certainly influence the outcome.

V. B. & V.S.: What does a great teacher do? Let us say for example, Padma Subramanyam, will you call her a good teacher?

Vrinda: Of course, she's a legend. I have seen her perform and I've always aspired to be like her.

V. B. & V.S.: But I must ask, her body is different from conventional physical expectations usually associated with dancers. She might be able to perform on stage, but will her body be agile enough to demonstrate the complicated steps to a child? How does the aging body affect instruction?

Vrinda: A dancer like Padma Subramanyam is still able to move so gracefully in spite of being in her eighties. But the kind of performance that Padma Subramanyam does is much different from what, say, for example, Hemamalini does. Padma Subramanyam or Chitra Visveswaran or Sudharani Raghupathy, are all still actively dancing on the stage. Today, I see several dance teachers whose bodies do not fit into the traditional expectations. They do not perform onstage, but they still train students. I do feel performers should take good care of their

bodies. They should build an awareness. We teach the child by precept, guiding them through demonstrations and examples. Since it is a performance art, mere instruction will not suffice to improve the child.

V. B. & V.S.: What kind of formation can the great teachers build in the student?

Vrinda: Like Adyar Lakshman, he was an excellent teacher. There are several ways of teaching. One of my teachers used to give me a portion and would expect me to reach a certain level of expertise. I would keep practising until she was satisfied with my performance.

Today, there are exceptional dancers like Vyjayanthi Mala. I once saw her dance in Chennai. It was so beautiful. Even at her age, she danced so gracefully, with precision and control. She was also trained in the *sampradāya*. I remember one of my teachers was teaching her at one point in time. He used to say that even when she had shooting till twelve or one at night, she would wake up precisely at 5 o'clock, bring him his coffee and promptly begin her practice in the morning.

My teacher, Indra Rajan, has also taught Jayalalitha, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. She used to say that Jayalalitha was a highly disciplined person who'll be ready for practice sessions at 4 o'clock in the morning. You must have that kind of dedication, devotion, and passion for the art in order to master it.

One of my teachers was a *Devadāsī*⁴³. As dancers who have performed in numerous sacred temples and holy places, they were once considered to be so pure and respected that people would roll around on the sand where *Devdasis* have danced. Balasaraswati, and my teacher, Pudukottai Ranganayaki Amma are a few of the notable Bharatanāṭyam dancers from the *Devadāsī* community.

When I first started teaching children, I used to scold them. But now, I have evolved as a teacher. Now, instead of scolding the student, I would make her practise ten times, twenty times, or even a hundred times, until the hands start aching. I make the child repeat the steps until it becomes a part of her and she can do it without even thinking about it. Once she reaches that stage, it will stay with her for life.

I have students who make time to practise and perfect their steps despite being busy with their studies or jobs. Almost every week, they will make time to dance. When they are nervous about going onstage, they even train for extra hours. We have online classes at 9 o'clock in the night. When they are unable to come together in person, everyone will connect virtually from different places and rehearse together before stage programmes. That's the kind of dedication necessary to fulfil one's aspirations.

V. B. & V.S.: A dancer needs to understand the *sāhityam*⁴⁴ or the literature, its meaning, the emotions conveyed and transform the body into those emotions. How does the corrections from a teacher help the dancer to do that?

Vrinda: In a performance, time, tone, tune and text needs to be in harmony. As far as the *aḍavus* are concerned, it is taught to them methodically. With two days of class a week, it takes nearly three to four years to finish all the *aḍavus*. Once they finish their *aḍavus*, they develop a uniformity.

V. B. & V.S.: So, the *aḍavu* is the basic vocabulary of dance.

Vrinda: Yes, Afterwards, we combine different *aḍavu* to make it into small *tīrmāṇams*. Then we add sentences and words to it. That's how we teach them to communicate in the language of dance. We also teach them the *bhāvam*.

43 A female dancer part of the traditional *Devadāsī* system, which dedicated young girls to the temple as 'servants of God'. Well-versed in the sacred scriptures, literature, music, and dance, the *Devadāsīs* were highly revered in the society and even patronised by the kings. They were considered to be the custodians of several performance art forms including *Bharatanāṭyam*. But over the centuries, they were exploited and the practice came to be associated with prostitution.

44 The literature or the lyrics of the performance.

V. B. & V.S.: Are there only nine *bhāvas* or are there more?

Vrinda: They are everything. They are the life of a performance.

V. B. & V.S.: And the *bhāvas* develop into the *rasās*⁴⁵.

Vrinda: The nine *rasās*.

V. B. & V.S.: But additionally, aren't there other *bhāvas* that must be evoked to get to the final culmination of *rasa*?

Vrinda: To get the final one, you have to combine everything.

V. B. & V.S.: So, how can the nuances of the emotions and their embodiment be taught? Do you specifically instruct them or do they pick that up with experience? What exactly happens?

Vrinda: Actually, we do instruct them, we teach them the basics of expressing emotions through the body. For example, when you are sad, all your lines should be down. You should also feel that droop in your shoulders.

We tell them the basics of posture and body language that can be used to convey emotions. But the evocation of emotions should come from within and that can be done only with practice. They start by imitating the older students. Though most of them get it with time, a few are not able to do it at all, even after a lot of training.

V. B. & V.S.: What could be the reason for that?

Vrinda: It could be because they're not able to feel the *bhāvas*. Emotions come from real life experiences. We usually ask the dancers to associate the *bhāvas* with similar personal experiences and emotions that resonate within them. For example, if the dancer is married, we tell them to think of the way they felt upon meeting their spouse for the first time or the emotions you experienced upon looking at your baby. So, when a person is married, they are able to express *bhāvas* like *śṛṅgāra*⁴⁶ remarkably well.

We keep it simple for the little ones. They are given *bhāvas* to perform according to their age. I give them *bhakti*⁴⁷ when they're young. In it, they also get to know a bit of *duḥkham*⁴⁸, and a bit of *vātsalyam*⁴⁹. But we only give the *śṛṅgāra rasa* to the older girls because it is unsuitable for the child.

V. B. & V.S.: So, you have to grow into the emotion in the first place. Normally, when will they be in a position to understand and perform these emotions?

Vrinda: At fifteen or sixteen years of age, they are able to catch the emotions.

V. B. & V.S.: And what about the music that accompanies the dance? Are the young dancers able to follow its *sāhityam* or the text?

Vrinda: We make them understand the text, write it, memorise it, and internalize it. It's a whole process.

45 In poetry or dramaturgy, *rasa* is the aesthetic emotion relished by the spectator during a performance.

46 The erotic *rasa*.

47 The *rasa* of devotion.

48 Sorrow.

49 The *rasa* of parental affection.



Fig.1.4. The orchestra presents the text of the performance accompanied by musical instruments.

V. B. & V.S.: You mentioned the seeking of the truth in *Bharatanāṭyam*. What is the truth that you are seeking?

Vrinda: *Bharatanāṭyam* leads you to the path of seeking the truth. A dancer is also a philosopher who has to read the epics, the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads. Immersive knowledge is necessary when you are doing a production. That subtle information adds to the richness of your performance. Understanding helps you embody the emotions better, enhancing the beauty of your performance, and bringing it closer to the divine.

Knowing the Upanishads helps you prepare for that chapter in our journey as dancers where we will have to step down from the stage, leaving it for the next generation.

V. B. & V.S.: What is the next stage of evolution?

Vrinda: It is the path towards self-realization attained by going into meditation, going into yourself, trying to leave behind everything. Do you know Chinmaya Swamiji?

V. B. & V.S.: I used to attend his Gita Gyan Egnan.

Vrinda: There was one Swamini who used to sing *bhajans* well. When Swamiji told another Swamini to lead the *bhajans*, this lady was really hurt because she was the one who was leading them even before becoming a *sannyāsini*⁵⁰. Swamiji then made her comprehend that in order to walk the path of self-realization, she has to leave behind everything and learn to sing without her tambur without the accompanying harmonium.

V. B. & V.S.: Oh, this is a great concept. So *Bharatanāṭyam* also takes you towards self-realization.

Vrinda: Eventually, we have to step down and let the students take the stage. It is not an easy change. Everyone will be smitten by the stage, not wanting to leave it behind. But you learn to let go of the stage and start to enjoy watching your students perform. Then you hand over your mantle to someone else and let them take care of the dance class. Once you've done your duty, you leave everything behind and go into your own meditation.

50 A female ascetic.

V. B. & V.S.: This is beautiful. Letting go of everything leads to the rediscovery of the self. It shows renunciation as a renewal of purpose. You've illustrated how *Bharatanāṭyam* takes you through different stages including the ardent learner, who meticulously and methodically prepares the body for dance; the refined performer, whose skilled movements on stage evokes the divine; the expert teacher, who imparts not only the aesthetic and embodied complexities of the classical art to the children, but also inculcates life values in them; and the wise renouncer, who, having fulfilled their duties as a student and teacher, gracefully leaves the stage in pursuit of self-actualization.