



Rasa, Bhav and Abhinaya: A pathway to ‘Meditation in Motion

Radhika Gowardhan

Research Scholar, Sir J. J. School of Design.

Prof. Dr. Jagdish Khaire

Dean, Sir J. J. School of Design.

Abstract

Dance is one of the earliest and most fundamental modes of human expression, emerging alongside the evolution of humanity as a means of communicating emotion through bhava and expression through rasa and abhinaya. From spontaneous movement to structured forms, dance has developed across countries in different forms and is part of human rituals, celebration and festivals. Rasa – The Sanskrit word for ‘essence’ can directly lead to a meditative state; by engaging deeply with the present moment through emotions, art, or sensory experiences, rasa serves as an entry point to calm the mind and enter a meditative state. Bhava - The Sanskrit word for feeling can naturally lead to meditation. By directing and channelising one’s emotional energies by focussing on mind and transitions your awareness into a state of deep one-pointed concentration. Abhinaya – The art of dramatic expression and acting) can be a profound pathway to meditation both practices require intense present moment awareness breath control and the ability to detach from the ego to fully embody a subject. Thus, a combination of the three pillars of dancing rasa, bhava and abhinaya leads to a complete meditative state of the mind where there is a performer is only in the present and is without self-awareness and ego and had become one with character and the performance just flows though just like soft wind touches the nostril whole breathing.

Keywords - Classical Indian Dance, Storytelling, Rasa, Nav rasas, Bhava, Abhinaya, Meditation.

Abhinaya

Abhinaya is a combination of 2 words “**abhi**” as the prefix which means *towards* and the second part “**nī**” means *to lead*. In short, **Abhinaya** leads the audience toward Rasa that is expressed through various dance movements.

Three Types of Abhinaya Mentioned - Abhinaya can be broadly classified into 3 Three as Mentioned below

- 1 Angika Abhinaya (In Sanskrit word ‘anga’) which means limb or body. In Indian classical dance it is the expression through bodily movements or Bodily Expression. This expression though our body and limbs are further classified into
 - o Expression through the body and limbs

The following is a part of Angika abhinaya.

Elements of Angika Abhinaya

The body is divided into three categories:

- **Anga (Major limbs):** The large and main body parts which one has to move for any step in Dancing

Head, Neck (some traditions do not include neck), Hands, Chest, Sides, Waist, and feet.

- **Pratyang (Secondary limbs):** On moving Anga, upanga will move along with anga Shoulders, Arms, Back, Belly, Thighs, and Knees.

- **Upanga (Minor limbs):** The minor movements and the smallest twitch and glances which are done to capture the emotion or minutest nuances

Eyes, Eyebrows, Eyelids, Nose, Cheeks, Lips, Chin, Jaw, Tongue, Teeth, Facial muscles.

The point to note is that all the aharyas and multiple aharyas working together in tandem with the exact sound beat body angles and facial expressions creating complete impact.

2. **Vācika Abhinaya (Vocal Expression)**

- o Expression through song, singing (very rarely speech or dialogue in dancing), and the full orchestra along with acoustic sounds and its reverb sound.

3. **Āhārya Abhinaya (Costume, Ornamentation and make up)**

- o Expression through costume, makeup, ornaments, and stage appearance.

(The fourth type, **Sāttvika Abhinaya**, is mentioned separately as the pure, passionate, inner emotional expression.) this is the ultimate achievement of all abhinayas, when the three abhinayas are done with perfection.

Abhinaya, Rasa and Bhāva intertwined together:

Abhinaya is the bond between the dancer's internal emotion (Bhāva) and the audience's aesthetic emotional experience (Rasa), further resulting into heightened awareness and potentially to a meditative state!!!

The sequence can be understood as:

Bhāva (inner feeling) leading to → **Abhinaya** (fully expressed via body movements, facial expressions, costume, make-up and voice) which further leads to → **Rasa** (the emotional experience transmitted by the artist and felt in the audience)

In Indian classical dance, **Bhāva** refers to the inner emotional state that the dancer experiences and communicates through performances and Abhinaya. It is the emotional essence that transforms movement from a sequence of steps into expressive storytelling. Or in dance terms, Bhava, a performance from **Nritta (pure dance no Bhav)** to **Nritya (with Bhava)** so as to convey some feeling or rasa as a part of storytelling) Through **abhinaya** (expressive bodily communication), Bhāva enables the audience to connect with the emotion, the character, the situation and sequence being portrayed.

Broadly, Bhāva can be understood in three ways:

- **The emotion felt by the performer** – the dancer internally identifies with the character or mood and accordingly expresses it through Abhinaya and Bhava.
- **The emotion expressed through performance** – conveyed through multiple facial expressions, eye moment, hand gestures (mudras), posture (Sthankas), and movement.
- **The emotion perceived by the audience** – when effectively communicated, it evokes **Rasa** in the audience, the emotional and aesthetic experience or the Satvik abhinaya experienced by the viewer.



Types of Bhāva

According to the Nāṭya Śāstra, bhavas are classified into three main categories:

1. **Sthāyi Bhāva (Permanent emotions)** : These are enduring emotional states such as love, courage, sorrow, anger, or wonder. They form the foundation for the experience of the corresponding rasa.
2. **Vyabhicāri or Sanchārī Bhāva (Transient emotions)**: These are temporary, supporting emotions that enrich the performance. Examples include anxiety, doubt, jealousy, shame, fatigue, excitement, and remembrance. Traditionally, there are 33 such bhavas.
3. **Sattvika Bhāva (Involuntary expressions)** : These arise spontaneously from deep emotional absorption and include:

Tears, Goosebumps, Trembling, Sweating, Change in voice, Change in complexion, Paralysis or stillness, and Fainting.

These are very difficult to portray and apart from practice the dancer cannot be convincing till the dancer experiences and transmits the genuine emotional immersion.

Bhāva and Rasa

Bhāva is the **cause**, while **Rasa** is the **effect**. A well-expressed Bhava results into Rasa.

- The dancer expresses **Bhāva**.
- The audience experiences **Rasa**.

Rasa

The literal meaning of Rasa is 'juice' which also indicates the emotional taste or flavour created by an artist in the hearts of the audience. It is the process of transferring a feeling from a dancer to audience through physical movements and facial expressions

What is Navrasa?

Etymology: Derived from Sanskrit—Nav means "nine" and Rasa means "juice," "taste," or "aesthetic essence."

The Navrasa Theory: The Nine Aesthetic Flavors of Indian Art especially Indian classical dance. An Exploration of Emotion, Drama, and Classical Aesthetics. A traditional Indian classical dance motif or a colourful mandala.

Navrasa Core Concept: A foundational aesthetic theory in Indian classical arts (theatre, dance, music, poetry, and literature).

Ultimate Goal: The objective is not just to display emotion, but to evoke a universalized emotional resonance (Rasa-anubhuti or the experience of the emotion) in the audience, leading to aesthetic delight and catharsis.

Historical Origins & The Natya Shastra

The Roots: Bharata Muni & The Natya Shastra

The Text: Originates from the ancient treatise Natya Shastra, written by sage Bharata Muni between 200 BCE and 200 CE.

The Rasa Sutra: "Rasa is produced from a combination of Determinants (Vibhava), Consequents (Anubhava), and Transitory/Complementary Feelings (Vyabichari Bhava)."

The Anatomy of Emotion - Sthayi Bhava: Permanent, dormant emotions in the human psyche. There is a dormant emotion in each of the 9 rasas which is distinct from each other.

Vibhava: External triggers and environmental settings.

Anubhava: Physical expressions and bodily responses.



1. Shringara Rasa (Love, Romance, & Beauty) - Permanent Emotion (Sthayi Bhava): Rati (Romantic Love, Attraction)

Attributes: Colour: Light Green / Shyam

Deity: Vishnu / Kamadeva

Description: Known as the king (Rasraj) of all rasas. It encompasses beauty, longing, and love. Divided into Sambhoga Shringara (love in union) and Vipralambha Shringara (love in separation). Conveyed through subtle glances (bhava) and graceful postures, a gentle, affectionate smile. Conveys love, beauty, attraction, and harmony.

2. Hasya Rasa (Mirth, Laughter, & Humour) - Permanent Emotion (Sthayi Bhava): Hasa (Mirth, Laughter)

Attributes: Colour: White

Deity: Shiva (Ganas)

Description: Arises from incongruity, absurdity, distortion, or light-hearted mockery. Split into Atmasta (laughing at oneself) and Parasta (laughing at others). Serves as a vital tool for social critique and tension relief. Conveyed through laughter and a cheerful smile. Conveys joy, amusement, humour, and delight.

3. Karuna Rasa (Pathos, Compassion, & Sorrow) - Permanent Emotion (Sthayi Bhava): Shoka (Grief, Sorrow)

Attributes: Colour: Dove Grey

Deity: Yama

Description: Evoked by tragedy, loss, helplessness, or profound misfortune. Unlike real-world grief, experiencing Karuna in art generates empathy, tenderness, and cathartic compassion through drooping postures and slow movements. Conveyed through tears and a sorrowful expression. Conveys sorrow, empathy, kindness, and tenderness.

4. Raudra Rasa (Fury, Anger, & Wrath) - Permanent Emotion (Sthayi Bhava): Krodha (Anger, Wrath)

Attributes: Colour: Red | **Deity:** Rudra / Shiva

Description: Stems from provocation, insult, oppression, or threats to righteousness (dharma). Represents raw, volatile energy. Physically depicted through trembling limbs, widened and reddened eyes, clenched teeth, and heavy breathing. Conveyed through a fierce gaze and a frown. Conveys anger, rage, justice, and righteous indignation.

5. Veera Rasa (Heroism, Valor, & Energy) - Permanent Emotion (Sthayi Bhava): Utsaha (Enthusiasm, Energy, Boldness)

Attributes: Colour: White or Saffron | **Deity:** Indra

Description: The spirit of gallantry, selflessness, and confidence.

Divided into three types: Daya Veera (heroism of compassion), Dhana

Veera (heroism of charity), and Yuddha Veera (heroism in battle). Conveyed via an upright posture and a steady, fearless gaze and a confident expression. Conveys courage, confidence, determination, and nobility.

6. Bhayanaka Rasa (Fear & Terror) - Permanent Emotion (Sthayi Bhava): Bhaya (Fear, Dread)

Attributes: Colour: Black | **Deity:** Yama

Description: Triggered by encountering terrifying entities, dark mysteries, or formidable threats. Evokes a shrinking or paralyzing psychological state. Manifested on stage through trembling bodies, cowering



movements, wide-open terror-struck eyes, and a dry throat. Conveyed through wide eyes and a trembling expression. Conveys fear, anxiety, apprehension, and insecurity.

7. Bibhatsa Rasa (Disgust & Aversion) - Permanent Emotion (Sthayi Bhava): Jugupsa (Disgust, Loathing)

Attributes: Colour: Blue

Deity: Mahakala / Shiva

Description: Arises from exposure to foul sights, rotting decay, or moral depravity. Handled with artistic abstraction so the audience experiences psychological distancing rather than physical sickness. Expressed by turning the face away and curling the lips. Conveyed through a wrinkled nose and a look of revulsion. Conveys aversion, revulsion, disapproval, and loathing.

8. Adbhuta Rasa (Wonder & Amazement) - Permanent Emotion (Sthayi Bhava): Vismaya (Astonishment, Curiosity, Awe)

Attributes: Colour: Yellow

Deity: Brahma

Description: Born from witnessing the miraculous, superhuman feats, majestic architecture, or profound cosmic truths. Conveyed through raised eyebrows and widened eyes and gasps of awe. Conveys amazement, curiosity, awe, and fascination.

9. Shanta Rasa (Peace & Tranquillity) - Permanent Emotion (Sthayi Bhava): Sama (Serenity, Equanimity, detachment)

Attributes: Colour: Transparent / White

Deity: Vishnu / Narayana

Description: Later added by Abhinavagupta, Shanta represents the ultimate state of liberation (moksha) and freedom from worldly desires. It is the stillness underlying all emotional storms. Conveyed through meditative, half-closed eyes and bodily stillness, through a serene smile and calm, steady eyes. Conveys inner tranquillity, contentment, spiritual fulfilment, and equanimity.

Story telling in classical dancing

Storytelling through Indian classical dance is the art of conveying a complete narrative without spoken words. A dancer uses the body(anga), face, rhythm, music, and expressions and emotion to transform movement into a language that the audience can understand and feel.

One of the Indian classical Dance forms Kathak – the name itself originates from storytelling ‘Katha Kahe so kathak kahave’ which is a Hindi phrase denoting that the person telling a story through dance is Kathak

The elements of storytelling

1.Bhava (Emotion)

Bhava is the emotional state expressed by the dancer. It is the foundation of storytelling. Joy, sorrow, devotion, love, anger, courage, wonder, and compassion are conveyed through subtle facial expressions and body language.

2.Abhinaya (Expression)

Abhinaya literally means “to carry the audience toward the emotion.”

It has four dimensions:

- **Angika** – body movements, gestures (mudras), posture, eye movements.
- **Vachika** – music, lyrics, rhythm, and spoken elements (when present).
- **Aharya** – costume, ornaments, makeup, stage setting.



- **Sattvika** – genuine inner emotional experience that naturally radiates outward.

Among these, Sattvika Abhinaya creates the deepest emotional connection because the dancer is not merely acting but inwardly experiencing the emotion.

3.Mudras (Hand Gestures)

Hands become words.

For example: A lotus, A bird flying, rain, stars, moon, King, God.

The audience gradually learns this symbolic language through context.

4.Drishti (Eye Movement)

The eyes guide the audience.

They may: Follow an imaginary butterfly, look upward toward the divine, search for a loved one, show fear or surprise. The eyes often speak before the body moves.

5.Facial Expressions

The face reveals the character's inner world: A slight smile conveys affection, raised eyebrows suggest curiosity, tears express separation, Wide eyes communicate amazement, and a lowered gaze reflects humility.

6.Movement

Every step has meaning. Walking can portray (through gait): A queen, a child, a warrior, an elderly person, a devotee approaching a temple and an animal. The quality of movement changes with each character.

7.Rhythm (Tala)

Rhythm controls the emotional pace.

- Slow rhythms create serenity and devotion.
- Medium rhythms suit conversation and daily life.
- Fast rhythms build excitement, celebration, or conflict.

8.Music and Lyrics

The music provides emotional atmosphere while the dancer visualizes the poetry.

When a lyric says: "The peacock dances before the rain," the dancer becomes: the clouds, the wind, the peacock, the rain, and finally, the joy of nature.

Layers of storytelling

A skilled classical dancer often portrays several roles within seconds. As in a solo dancing performance the dancer must embody multiple characters or contrasting roles to show different characters.

The entire Krishna 'Leela' can be presented by one artist on the stage by taking different characters as per the song or dialogues. Dancers achieve these role shifts through distinct shift in movements and after the new role is established then via significant change in bodily movements and expressions. In most classical dance forms, the character is changed by taking a circle or a rotation movement around himself/herself (also called as *palta* in Kathak).

For example, in a Krishna story: Krishna playing the flute, Radha listening, the flowing Yamuna, the dancing peacock, the curious 'gopis', mother Yashoda searching for Krishna.

Each character is distinguished through changes in posture, gaze, expression, and energy.

The Audience's Experience

Good storytelling progresses through stages:

1. The audience understands the events.
2. They empathize with the characters.

3. They experience the emotions going through them...
4. They forget the dancer and see only the story...
5. They enter a state of aesthetic absorption (*Rasa*).
6. In profound performances, this absorption can become a meditative experience, where both dancer and audience feel a sense of stillness and joy.

Example: A lotus blooming. Without words, a dancer can tell this story: The earth sleeps in darkness, rain nourishes the pond, a tiny bud appears, morning sunlight arrives, the lotus slowly unfolds, a bee circles the flower, a devotee offers the lotus to the Divine, the heart blossoms with devotion.

A simple natural event becomes a metaphor for spiritual awakening.

Why storytelling in Indian classical dance is unique

Unlike theatre, where dialogue explains the plot plus the fact that one person takes one role in a theatre and the entire thing is enhanced by the costume and the makeup. So, in theatre without any performance, Indian classical dance invites the audience to participate imaginatively. Through movement, gesture, music, and expression, too by just looking at the character one can very well place the character that the artist is assuming. In a sharp contrast to theatre a dancer, especially if the dance is a solo performer, then the same person assumes all the roles and depicts all the characters by himself/herself based on the story line and dancer creates an emotional world that each viewer completes within their own mind. This shared creation is what gives classical dance its enduring power and makes it both an artistic and contemplative experience.

Dance doesn't belong to just one rigid category, but it is deeply intertwined with several branches of yoga. In the Indian tradition, classical dance is closely tied to **Natya Yoga** (the yoga of dance), **Bhakti Yoga** (the yoga of devotion and love for the divine), and **Hatha Yoga** (through shared physical postures and breath control).

Here is how dance connects to specific yoga paths:

- **Natya Yoga:** Often stated as the yoga of rhythm and movement, this integrates yogic asanas (or the yogic poses), music, and dance into a single spiritual practice. It is deep rooted in the ancient *Natya Shastra* written by Bharat Muni, which describes the 108 *karanas* (cadences of movement and acrobatic stances) that are shared between yoga and classical dance.]
- **Bhakti Yoga:** Indian Classical dance (such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi) is often considered a form of *Bhakti Yoga*. In this context, the dancer uses physical expression through various mudras (hand gestures), and abhinaya (facial expressions) to tell stories of the divine form and the great learnings from those stories, ultimately with a singular aim to achieve spiritual union or oneness with the ultimate power - God.
- **Hatha Yoga:** Indian classical dance routines heavily utilize breath control, flexibility, and physical alignments that overlap with *Hatha Yoga*. Additionally, traditional yoga has some movements adopted from dance, **Nataraj asana** (Lord of the Dance Pose or Dancer Pose) is one of the most notable asanas.

Dance a pathway to a meditative state?

A meditative state is not usually produced by one single factor or element. It arises when one's attention becomes stable, the mind becomes less reactive, and awareness becomes more absorbed in the present current moment. Mind is not wandering in the past nor thinking of the future but in the present state. Although various traditions describe this differently, but research in psychology and neuroscience

shows several common pathways. In **Indian classical dance**, this is particularly relevant because many of these pathways can occur while dancing as well as during seated meditation.

What leads to a meditative state?

1. **Focused Attention** : Concentrating on one object, such as the breath, a mantra, rhythm (tāla), or a movement sequence. This reduces mental distractions and strengthens sustained attention.
2. **Mindful Awareness** : Observing thoughts, emotions, and sensations without judging them. Instead of trying to stop thoughts, the practitioner simply notices them and lets them pass.
3. **Rhythmic Repetition**: Repeated movements, breathing patterns, chanting, or drumming can synchronize attention. In classical dance, repetitive footwork (tatkar, adavus), rhythmic cycles, and mudras may help induce this state.
4. **Breath Regulation**: Slow, deep, and rhythmic breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system. This reduces stress hormones and promotes calm.
5. **Body–Mind Synchronization**: When posture, movement, breathing, and attention become coordinated, awareness becomes unified. This is one reason practices like yoga, tai chi, and classical dance can become meditative.
6. **Emotional Absorption**: Deep engagement with emotion, especially through artistic expression, can quiet self-conscious thinking. In Indian aesthetics, complete immersion in **Bhāva** can lead both performer and audience toward experiencing **Rasa**. **Reduced Cognitive Load**: As skills become automatic through practice, less conscious effort is required, this allows the performer to experience effortless concentration, often called a “flow state.” **Present-Moment Awareness**: Letting go of worries about the past and future, attention remains fully engaged with the current experience.
7. **Intrinsic Motivation**: Practicing for the joy of the activity rather than external rewards encourages deeper absorption. **Silence and Reduced External Distractions**: A quiet environment or an internal sense of quiet despite external sound supports sustained attention.

Focused attention + rhythmic movement + emotional immersion + synchronized breathing + sustained practice → Flow state → Meditative state

What happens in the brain? Research suggests that meditation often involves:

- Reduced activity in the **default mode network (DMN)**, which is associated with mind-wandering, going back and forth (past/future) and self-referential thinking.
- Increased activity in attention and executive control networks.
- Greater parasympathetic (“rest and digest”) activity.
- Increased alpha and theta brain-wave activity during relaxed, focused states (though patterns vary by meditation type).

In Indian Classical Dance - Rhythm (Tāla) + Movement (Nritta) + Expression (Abhinaya) + Breath + Total Attention → Bhava → Rasa → Flow → Meditative Awareness. This progression aligns well with classical Indian aesthetic theory:

- **Ekagrata** (one-pointed concentration)
- **Bhāva** (embodied emotion)
- **Rasa** (aesthetic experience)
- **Meditative State** (blissful state of nothingness)

A perfectly rehearsed Indian classical dance practice and the performance of the same can produce a distinctive **state of mind** that many performing dancers describe as being both intensely focused and



deeply peaceful. It is not merely concentration—it is an integration of body, mind, soul, emotion, rhythm, and awareness.

The experience can be understood through several complementary perspectives:

1. Total Absorption (The entire being in a complete Flow State) Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described this as **flow**, where:

- Self-consciousness fades.
- Movement feels effortless.
- Time seems to slow down or disappear.
- Every gesture follows naturally from the previous one.
- There is complete immersion in the present moment.

In classical dance, years of rehearsal allow complex movements to become automatic, free flowing and perfectly synchronised with the orchestra/music, freeing the mind for artistic expression.

2. One-Pointed Concentration (Ekagrata)

Indian philosophy calls this **Ekagrata** – a Sanskrit word that means -single-pointed attention or singular focus. The dancer’s awareness simultaneously embraces:

- Tala (rhythm)
- Laya (tempo which speeds up and down)
- Raga or music – different ragas for different pieces
- Footwork – intricate foot works including Chakkars (or rotation)
- Sthankas (poses – including poses in one foot, where balance is required)
- Hasta mudras – Single hand gestures and double hand gestures.
- Facial expressions (Abhinaya, grivha bheda, netra bheda, Shiro bheda, and bhru bheda etc)
- Spatial alignment (ensure to cover the entire stage)
- Breath (control and systemically releasing before or after a movement)
- Audience (emotional connect during performance)

Although many elements are happening simultaneously, they merge into one unified awareness seamlessly.

3. Meditation in Motion

Repeated practice synchronizes: Breath, Movement, Attention and Emotion.

The dance itself becomes a moving meditation. Thoughts unrelated to the performance naturally recede or stop completely in a way.

4. Emotional Transformation through Rasa

The dancer no longer merely “acts” an emotion. Instead, the performer enters the emotional world of the character while remaining technically aware. This dual awareness—feeling deeply while maintaining artistic control—is a hallmark of refined Abhinaya.

5. Embodied Intelligence

Instead of consciously remembering each movement, the body begins to “know.” Motor memory takes over, allowing: effortless transitions, refined timing, spontaneous expressiveness, subtle corrections without conscious effort.

6. Quiet Mind with Heightened Awareness

Interestingly, the mind is both: extremely active in perception, remarkably quiet internally.



Many dancers describe: absence of mental chatter, heightened sensory awareness, calm confidence, feeling “carried” by the music.

7. Aesthetic Bliss

Indian aesthetic theory suggests that when technique, emotion, and concentration unite, both performer and audience may experience—a profound sense of joy or bliss that transcends ordinary pleasure thus leading to a meditative state.

This is closely connected with the experience of Rasa described in the Natya Shastra, where the highest artistic experience elevates both the performer and the spectator.

A Cognitive View

During a perfectly rehearsed performance:

- Working memory is used efficiently rather than being overloaded.
- Procedural memory guides the movements.
- Selective attention filters distractions.
- Emotional regulation remains stable.
- Motor, auditory, and visual systems operate in harmony.

The result is a highly integrated state despite performing complex choreography.

Conclusion

A perfectly rehearsed Indian classical dance performance induces an integrated state of embodied awareness characterized by one-pointed concentration (Ekagrata), effortless execution through procedural memory, emotional immersion via Abhinaya, and meditative absorption akin to flow. This unified psychophysical state reduces self-consciousness, synchronizes cognition, emotion, and movement, and culminates in the aesthetic experience of the body mind and soul leading to a state that is parallel to meditation as if it is “**Meditation in Motion**” as the dancer is one with himself/herself and the art and the cosmic energy and the artist cannot sway in any direction mentally physically emotionally and is a strong bridge between neuroscience, psychology, and Indian aesthetic philosophy.

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