



Kathak and the tradition of ancient text on dance

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Abstract

The ancient *mārgī* tradition codified in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* fused with the *deśī* tradition giving rise to the seven classical dance styles of India. Kathak is the dance style developed in this process in the North India. That the dance style underwent changes is evident from the *śāstra-s* written by the scholars in various time eras. Kathak which was under royal patronage since medieval period, has adapted many *deśī* varieties in the course of its development. Among the various treatises the treatise *Nartananirṇaya* describes certain new trends which have strong influence on the technique of Kathak. Over the period these concepts and techniques have become the characteristic features of Kathak. Thus the Kathak dance which is practiced today is a beautiful blend of the ancient *mārgī* tradition and the *deśī* trends emerging since medieval period.

Keywords: *mārgi*, *deśī*, *śāstra*, royal patronage, change, trends, *bandha-anubandha*, improvisation, *bol-s*

Introduction

India has the ancient tradition of classical dance. The grammar and vocabulary of the dance prevalent in ancient times were codified in the treatise – *Nāṭyaśāstra*, ascribed to Bharata *munī* (4th C.B.C.E.). The norms written in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* were followed by the art of dance and these rules stated by Bharata were known as *mārga*. In that context the dance that followed the *mārga* was known as *mārgī*. During the evolutionary stages of Indian dance, it is seen that the *śāstra-s* and *prayoga* both have constantly undergone changes resulting in the well-developed art of dance.

The period from 11th Century onwards is significant in bringing new techniques in the form of *deśī* variety. The *deśī* varieties belonged to the different provinces in which the dance form emerged. These regional varieties existed since Bharata's period but got prominence in the later centuries. These were based on the norms of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* but had the regional influence on their technique. The *deśī* varieties are mentioned in the texts like *Mānasollāsa*, *Saṅgītaratnākara*, *Nṛttaratnāvalī*, *Nartananirṇaya*, and many more, beginning from the 11th C.C.E. The *deśī* techniques include various *sthānaka-s*, *cārī-s*, *bhramarī-s* etc. The emergence of *deśī* varieties in various provinces has given rise to the different classical dance forms of India. The seven dance styles which developed in various regions of India are the *deśī* varieties of the *mārga* tradition. In the course of time the *deśī* and *mārga* trends fused to develop as the classical dances of India. On these grounds the dance form Kathak is the *deśī* variety which developed as the classical dance of North India.

Among the various texts which mention the *deśī* techniques, the text *Nartananirṇaya*, by *Paṇḍarīka Viṭṭhala*, bears many traits which bear semblance with the contemporary form of Kathak. This text belongs to the 16th C.C.E. and was written by the author who was a scholar in the court of Emperor Akbar.

“*lakṣyalakṣaṇasandigdham paramparāndhasaṅgatam |
tannartanam viṭṭhalena nihsandigdhamkari hi ||
akbaranṇparucyartham bhūloke saralasaṅgītam |
Kṛtamidam bahutarbhedam surhdām ḥṛdaye sukham
bhūyāt ||*”^[1].

“Dance which has become ambiguous in both practice and theory and had shrunk <*saṅgata*> because of blind tradition, has been now made unambiguous by [Paṇḍarīka] Viṭṭhala. I have composed this *saṅgīta* [treatise] which is much varied [in both theory and practice] and is [made] simple for the world, in order to please, <*rucyartham*> King Akbar. May this afford profuse joy to the hearts of [you, my] friends.”^[2]

Among the various *deśī* techniques and new concepts described in *Nartananirṇaya*, many of them are mentioned in the previous treatises like *Mānasollāsa* and *Saṅgītaratnākara* to name a few. For example, the concept of ‘*rekḥā*’ (alignment), ‘*śauṣṭhava*’ (basic posture), *deśī sthānaka-s*, (various types of postures), *deśī cārī-s* (types of gaits), *deśī bhramarī-s* (pirouettes), ‘*gharghara*’ (dancing with *ghuṅgarū-s*), and many more. Apart from these, the *deśī* variety of ‘*bandha nṛtta*’ and ‘*anibandha nṛtta*’ is mentioned by *Paṇḍarīka Viṭṭhala* for the first time in the text *Nartananirṇaya*.

“*kārya tatra dvidhā nṛttam bandhakam cānibandhakam |
gatyādiniyarmayuktam bandhakam nṛttamucyate ||
anibandham tvaniyamadathoddesakramo yathā |...*”^[3]

“There [on such a stage] should be performed two kinds of dance viz. *bandha* and *anibandha*. That which is regulated by rules of *gati* etc. is said to be *bandha* dance. On the other hand *anibandha* is [performed] without *abhinaya* (such) rules.”^[4] *Paṇḍarīka* describes the *bandha nṛtta* as a set piece with every movement in the structured sequence clearly specified. The

dancer has to follow the set of movements without any alteration. In this context the term 'bandha' signifies a closed composition without any scope for improvisation. The *anibandha nṛtta* is described as that which has a framework in which the dancer can choreograph the composition creatively. Thus the term 'anibandha' suggests the flexibility of both form and content within broadly specified frameworks of aesthetic purpose. *Nartananirṇaya* does not discuss 'anibandha nṛtta' in great detail but only discusses the movements in broad general terms which were flexible, and were used by the dancer in her choreography.

The design of *anibandha nṛtta* as described above, shows close semblance to the characteristics of Kathak today. The prime characteristic of Kathak is that although like other forms it follows the same basic norms set by *śāstra-s*, it offers freedom to the dancer to innovate and create various combinations of the movements within the aesthetic frame of Kathak. Secondly unlike the other styles, Kathak does not prescribe in detail the movements it employs. It employs all the major and minor movements prescribed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, but it does not have a fixed set of movements to be used in a particular composition. For example, the *toḍā-s*, and *ṭukaḍā-s* of Kathak are not rigidly composed with the same set of movements. The framework depends upon the type of *ṭukaḍā*, whether it is a *nṛtta bol*, or a *paraṇ*, or a *paramelū* etc. The choreography of the *ṭukaḍā* depends upon the type of the composition. Within that framework the dancer can employ the movements of his or her own choice, suitable to the syllables used in the composition. Thus there can be number of variations of the same type of *bol*, within its aesthetic framework.

The flexibility offered by the *anibandha nṛtta-s* also incorporates the concept of improvisation. An artiste has to have the freedom of improvisation through which he or she can create multiple designs in a choreography. The concept of improvisation is inherent in Kathak. For example, the *tatkār* or footwork is a significant feature of Kathak. A Kathak dancer creates myriad designs through improvisation in footwork. The framework of *tatkār* is the fixed metrical cycle (*āvartan*) of the particular *tāla*. Within this framework the Kathak dancer is free to create variety of patterns and sound effects in the footwork. This concept of improvisation is called as 'upaj' in the colloquial language of Kathak.

On these same grounds, the dance compositions like *thāṭh* and *gat-nikās* are also close to the character of *anibandha nṛtta-s*. In *thāṭh*, within the frame of a metrical cycle the artiste employs variety of movements and arrives on *sam* (the focal point of a metrical cycle) in an attractive stance. In *gat-nikās* the variety of *cāl-s* (gaits), are designed within the set structure of *gat-nikas*. Not only the *cāl* but the *palṭā*, *nikās* and the conclusion part can also be improvised and innovated by the artiste.

In this context one can find a close connection between the concept of *anibandha nṛtta* and Kathak. Since the text *Nartananirṇaya* was written in the 16th C.C.E. it can be said that some new trends had started emerging in the medieval period, which were appreciated in the royal courts. As Kathak was under royal patronage, it has assimilated these trends during the stages of its development.

With the changing times and changing political and social

scene, the dance underwent many changes. These new trends are codified in the *śāstra-s*, which are the backbone of the performing aspect of dance. The *śāstra-s* not only guide the performers, but also shed light on the process of development of the ancient arts. Kathak dance which developed from the art of storytelling in temples underwent many changes including the space, technique as well as content. The gradual change in its development and the foundation of its technique can be traced in the treatises belonging to the ancient and medieval times. Among these the *Nartananirṇaya* is the significant source to trace the shastric tradition in Kathak.

References

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2. Ibid, p, 169.
3. Ibid, Sl, 423, p, 116.
4. Ibid. p, 117.