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Abhinaya



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Abhinaya in Sanskrit dramaturgy denotes different efforts of an actor on stage to communicate different layers of intention and plot to the audience. In the act of *abhinaya*, the Sanskrit books of drama theory prescribe the blend of physical activities, the spectacle, and even the thought process during the performance of the play. Bharata's the *Natyasastra* and Nandikeshvara's *Abhinayadarpana* are the authentic works on Indian tradition of Abhinaya. The *Natyasastra* available in 36 (at some places mention of 37) chapters describes various aspects related with *Abhinaya*, and generally recorded as the first source book on the subject.

Sanskrit word, *Natya*, is a comprehensive term and covers the patterns of acting, dancing, and music dancing. Coomaraswamy finds it "a deliberate art" where

nothing is left to chance; the actor no more yields to the impulse of the moment in gesture than in the spoken word. When the curtain rises, indeed, it is too late to begin the making of a new work of art. Precisely as the text of the play remains the same whoever the actor may be, precisely as the score of a musical composition is not varied by whomsoever it may be performed, so there is no reason why an

accepted gesture-language (*angikabhinaya*) should be varied with a view to set off advantageously the actor's personality. It is the action, not the actor, which is essential to dramatic art. Under these conditions, of course, there is no room for any amateur upon the stage; in fact, the amateur does not exist in Oriental art. [1]

In Indian tradition of drama, *Abhinaya* is a kind of pious act, and all the *abhinayas* or performances are suggested to begin with proper invocation and Puja (worship). Neglecting this trend may bring disastrous ruin to the act.

The markers of Abhinaya are categorically mentioned in the *Natyasastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana*. The *Natyasastra* gives the details on various issues of dramature like the origin of *Natya* or drama, the *Natya grha* (the theatre house), worship of the stage and of the gods, *Tandava Nrtya*, the *Purvaranga*, supplement, *Rasa*, *Bhavas*, acting of the subordinate part of the body, *abhinayas* of the hands and the major limbs, performance of the emotions, the stage walk of characters, the regional style and nature of plays, verbal representation and parody, the poetic concept and its projections in acting, rules on the use of language, the plot, the characteristics of the characters—the men and women, the success of production, different kind of music and the rules associated with it, types of characters and their acting, the distribution of roles and even the story of the descent of drama on earth. Nandikeśvara's *Abhinaya Darpana* (fifth century to fourteenth century B.C.) mentions different

requirements for Abhinaya and theater. It is a code on Abhinaya, dance and related activities like Natya, Nrta, and Nrtya, and even the micro details associated with them. Various aspects of theater like the audience, the stage, the danseuse, the bells, the dancer and their inner and outer life, the vulgar dancing, the course of the dance, gesture, 9 movements of the head associated with 24 more specific movements of the head, 8 glances associated with 44 specific glances, movements of the brows, and 24 lives of the hands (28 single hands, 24 combined hands) are described in detail in *Abhinaya Darpana*. Further Nandikeśvara mentions the gestures of hands denoting relationship and other indicators like hands denoting relationships, denoting deva(s), denoting the nine planets, denoting the Avatars of Vishnu, denoting the four Varnas, etc. It offers very keen analysis and subsequent details on the gestures and movements of hands like hands denoting famous emperors, denoting seven oceans, denoting famous rivers, denoting upper and lower world, denoting trees, animals, flying creatures, water creatures, and many more objects and action.

Rasa is considered the object of *abhinaya*, and for the realization of *rasa*, the *abhinaya* focuses on the creations of *vibhava-s* and *anubhava-s*. There are eight *Rasas*, namely, *Hasya* (laughter), *Karuna* (sorrow), *Raudra* (anger), *Vira* (heroism, courage), *Bhayanaka* (terror or fear), *Bibhatsa* (disgust), and *Adbhuta* (surprise/wonder). *Shantha* (peace or tranquility) is considered as the ninth *Rasa*. The *Bhavas* are of two types – the *Sanchari* and the *Sthayi*. “Love, humor, compassion, horror, the heroic, fear, repulsion, and wonder are the eight *Sthayi Bhavas*. Dejection, lassitude, suspicion, jealousy, infatuation, fatigue, laziness, helplessness, anxiety, confusion, remembrance, boldness, bashfulness, fickleness, pleasure, excitement, heaviness, pride, sorrow, impatience, sleep, forgetfulness, dream, awakening, intolerance, dissimulation, ferocity, desire, disease, insanity, death, fear and guessing, these are the thirty three *vyabhichari* or *sanchari bhava-s*” [2]. The *Bhavas* give meaning to any expression. The tone and tenor get molded under the impression of the *Bhava*. Any meaning expressed by a *Vibhava* (stimulus) is made

intelligible by “words, physical gestures, and *Anubhavas* (emotions). *Anubhavas* are the expressed emotions. The visual characteristics of any feeling are their *Anubhavas*. These are realistic qualities. The eight *Anubhavas* or *Sattvika Bhavas* are mentioned as below:

1. *Stambha* (stupefaction): The actor performs this *Anubhava* by standing still. The body remains static and unmoved. The eyes remain unseeing and limbs seem almost dead.
2. *Sveda* (sweating): It is performed by showing the lack of breath or air. Different actions showing the use or urge for fan, state of perspiration, and aspiring for breath are shown on the stage.
3. *Romancha* (feeling thrilled): It is the representation of thrill. *Romancha* is portrayed by “showing frequently as if the hair is on end, by plucking movements and touching the limbs” [3].
4. *Svarabheda* (break in voice): “This is to be acted by stuttering in different voices” [4].
5. *Vepathu* (trembling): “This is to be acted by quivering, throbbing and shaking movements” [5].
6. *Vaivaranya* (pallor): “This is to be acted by pressure on the pulse and changing the coloring of the face” [6].
7. *Ashru* (tears): The actor wipes the eyes again and again and shows as if the tears are coming out of the eyes.
8. *Pralaya* (swoon or death): The actor is shown breaking up on the ground.

In Indian tradition “dance and drama are so intimately fused that in texts like *Harivansha* and *Karpuramanjari* the expression used is ‘dance a drama’ to mean perform a play” [7].

The performer creates *Bhava*, *Vibhava*, and *Anubhava* on stage by his/her *Abhinaya* which culminates into the *Rasa*. Performing these *Anubhavas* in *Abhinaya* (acting) is not a very easy task because it warrants a perfect blend of physical and psychic capability in the performer. They cannot be performed until the act finds emotional involvement of the performer. *Abhinaya*, therefore, in Indian aesthetics and dramaturgy is very scientific and systematic.

See Also

- [Anubhava, Theater \(Hinduism\)](#)

References

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