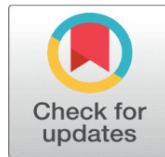


THE IMPORTANCE OF NAYAKAS AND NAYIKAS IN KATHAK DANCE: AN AESTHETIC AND NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Kathak, one of the eight classical dance forms of India, is deeply rooted in storytelling, particularly in expressing themes of love, devotion, and human emotions. Central to Kathak's narrative expression are the figures of the Nayaka (hero) and Nayika (heroine), whose emotional states and interpersonal dynamics offer a rich palette for abhinaya (expressive dance). This paper explores the historical, theoretical, and performative significance of Nayaka and Nayikas in Kathak dance, focusing on their classifications, emotional portrayals, and continued relevance in both traditional and contemporary performances. Through classical theory and performance analysis, the study emphasizes how the Nayaka-Nayika bhava not only enhances the aesthetic value of Kathak but also provides dancers with a profound medium for emotional storytelling.

Keywords: Kathak, Nayaka, Nayika, Abhinaya, Rasa Theory, Aesthetics

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian classical dance traditions are renowned for their emphasis on storytelling, emotion, and spiritual expression. Among these, Kathak stands out for its intricate blend of rhythmic virtuosity and expressive abhinaya. Derived from the Sanskrit word katha, meaning "story," Kathak evolved from the narrative traditions of temple bards and later absorbed courtly influences during the Mughal era. At the heart of Kathak's expressive content lies the dramatization of human relationships—particularly romantic ones—through the portrayal of the Nayaka (male protagonist) and Nayika (female protagonist). These characters are not merely symbolic but deeply human, representing various emotional states and relational dynamics.

This research paper investigates the significance of Nayaka and Nayikas in Kathak dance. It examines their classification in classical Indian aesthetics, their portrayal through the expressive techniques of Kathak, and their enduring relevance in both traditional and modern performances. By exploring how these archetypes are brought to life

on stage, the paper aims to highlight their importance in preserving the emotional and aesthetic richness of the Kathak tradition.

2. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concepts of Nayaka and Nayika are firmly embedded in ancient Indian dramaturgical texts, particularly Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra and later treatises like Keshavdas's Rasikapriya. These texts form the theoretical foundation for the expression of bhāva (emotion) and rasa (aesthetic flavor) in Indian art.

In the Nāṭyaśāstra, Bharata outlines eight (later nine) rasas—emotions that performers aim to evoke in the audience. Among these, śṛṅgāra rasa (the erotic or romantic sentiment) is considered the king of all rasas. The Nayaka and Nayika are central figures in the expression of sringara, embodying various emotional states such as longing, fulfilment, jealousy, and separation.

Later works like Rasikapriya expanded the classification of Nayakas and Nayikas into detailed types, capturing subtle nuances of love and relationship dynamics. These classifications served as blueprints for dancers, poets, and dramatists, guiding them in creating emotionally resonant performances. In Kathak, these character types are integral to abhinaya, allowing dancers to portray layered emotional narratives.

3. CLASSIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTICS

The Nayikas

The most influential classification of Nayikas comes from the Ashta Nayika (Eight Heroines) framework, which categorizes women based on their emotional and situational state in relation to their lovers. These are:

- 1) Vasakasajjā – The adorned one, awaiting her lover's arrival.
- 2) Virahotkaṇṭhita – The anguished one, suffering from separation.
- 3) Svadhinabhartṛka – The self-assured one, confident of her lover's devotion.
- 4) Kalahantarita – The one separated due to a quarrel.
- 5) Khaṇḍita – The angry one, offended by her lover's infidelity.
- 6) Vipralabdha – The deceived one, tricked or stood up by her lover.
- 7) Proṣitabhartṛka – The one whose husband is away on travel.
- 8) Abhisarika – The brave one who goes to meet her lover, defying social norms.

Each Nayika reflects a distinct emotional state (sthayibhava) and has a corresponding rasa, primarily śṛṅgāra. In Kathak, portraying these Nayikas demands intricate facial expressions, body language, and emotional depth.

Here are a few beautiful lines from Rasikapriya (in Hindi with English translation) that relate to Nayikabhāva and Śṛṅgāra rasa: As illustrated in Rasikapriya by Keshavdas, the emotional nuances of Nayikas are depicted through poetic metaphors, such as the Abhisārikā's fearless journey or the Virahotkaṇṭhita's agony in separation."

♦ From Rasikapriya – On Nayika's Emotional States:

"नायकमिलनकीचाहमें, नायिकातड़पतजाए।

बिरहवेदनातन-मनको, दीपकसमजलाए॥"

— Keshavdas, Rasikapriya

Translation:

"In the longing to unite with her beloved, the Nayika withers in pain;

The agony of separation consumes her body and soul like a burning lamp."

♦ On the AbhisārikāNayika:

"जोनडरैजगतकीरीति, रातअंधेरीजाय।

मिलनहेतुप्रियसंगको, अबिसारिकाकहाय॥"

Translation:

"She who defies worldly norms, venturing out into the night,
To meet her beloved in secret—she is the AbhisārikāNayika."

♦ On the Svādhīnabhartṛkā:

"पायोनिजप्रियराजहिय, जेहिकीसबकहाँबात।

स्वाधीनभर्तृकारही, जसमनोहरिसुर-सात॥"

Translation:

"Having won her beloved's unwavering love and rule over his heart,
She lives as the Svādhīnabhartṛkā—more radiant than the celestial deities."

The Nayakas

Although less elaborated than the Nayikas, Nayakas are also categorized based on their personality and behavior:

- Dhirodāṭṭa – Noble, composed, and virtuous.
- Dhiroddhata – Proud, arrogant but heroic.
- Dhirolālita – Gentle, romantic, and graceful.
- Dhirodatta – Balanced, possessing both dignity and emotional depth.

Just like the Nayikas, these male archetypes serve as emotional counterparts in Kathak's storytelling. They are often portrayed through gestures, glances, and occasionally through narrative mime, especially in compositions involving Lord Krishna as the archetypal Nayaka. Keshavdas in Rasikapriya outlines Nayakas with poetic nuance—highlighting their emotional temperament and romantic conduct. For instance, the Dhirodatta is praised for his steadiness and composure, while the Dhirolālita wins hearts with charm and affection."

On the DhirodattaNayaka (the noble and composed hero):

"धीरजोसुख-दुखसमजानै, नबाढ़ैमाननरोवै।

प्रेम-पथकेऐसेनायक, सुगमभावलेसोवै॥"

— Rasikapriya, Keshavdas

Translation:

"He who views joy and sorrow alike, who neither boasts nor grieves—
Such a hero walks the path of love with grace and serenity."

♦ On the DhirolālitaNayaka (the gentle, graceful, and romantic hero):

"सुभगसनेही, मधुरबानी, हासमेंछविजोआवै।

ललितनायककहैउसे, जेहिदेखप्रेमउपजावै॥"

Translation:

"Charming and affectionate, sweet in speech, radiating joy through his smile—
He is called the DhirolālitaNayaka, whose mere presence evokes love."

♦ On the Fickle Nayaka (often shown in conflict with the Nayika):

"नैसनेह, नहींनेहरहै, करैसदाछलभाव।

विविधनायिकासंगरमै, करैनएकैचाव॥"

Translation:

"Devoid of sincere love, full of deceitful emotion,

He pleasures himself with many women, showing no true affection to any."

This last type often becomes the cause of conflict and emotional tension, especially with Khaṇḍitā and VipralabdhāNayikas.

Portrayal in Kathak Dance

Kathak's expressive power lies in abhinaya, where the dancer becomes the character through subtle expressions, mudrās (hand gestures), and body language. Nayaka-Nayika bhāva forms the soul of many thumri, dadra, and bhajan performances, especially those based on Radha-Krishna lore.

In the Radha-Krishna paradigm, Radha is often depicted as the Virahotkaṇṭhitā, Khaṇḍitā, or AbhisārikāNayika, while Krishna embodies the playful, sometimes errant Nayaka. Kathak dancers embody these characters through:

- Netra abhinaya (eye movement)
- Mukha abhinaya (facial expression)
- Angika abhinaya (body movement)
- Sāttvika abhinaya (emotional authenticity)

Dancers like Pt. Birju Maharaj, Saswati Sen, and Shovana Narayan have demonstrated exceptional skill in bringing Nayika bhāvas to life. For example, in a thumri like "Kahe ko byahi bides," the dancer may portray a Virahotkaṇṭhitā Nayika lamenting separation from her beloved, while in "Shyam binā chain naāve," the Abhisārikā sets out to meet her lover.

In duet or solo performances, dancers often shift between Nayaka and Nayika roles fluidly, using body orientation, costume hints (like dupatta changes), and vocal modulation to signal transitions.

Relevance in Contemporary Kathak

Modern Kathak dancers continue to explore Nayaka-Nayika themes, often reinterpreting them for today's audience. While traditional portrayals are still prevalent, many contemporary choreographers use these archetypes to discuss broader themes of gender, identity, and emotional autonomy.

For instance, the AbhisārikāNayikā, once seen as transgressive, is now viewed as an empowered figure who takes charge of her desires. Similarly, the portrayal of conflicted or absent Nayakas can be a metaphor for emotional detachment in modern relationships.

Contemporary performances may also blur the lines of gender, with male dancers portraying Nayikās or adopting both roles in the same piece, thus emphasizing the universality of emotions. These interpretations make Kathak not just a historical art form, but a living, breathing medium of personal and cultural expression.

Here I am giving examples of the great artist of kathak dance who have portraited different types of nayikas beautifully.

1) Pt. Birju Maharaj's Krishna-Radha Compositions

In many of his compositions, Pt. Birju Maharaj portrayed both Krishna and Radha with nuanced transitions. For instance, in a depiction of Radha as a KhaṇḍitāNayikā, the anger and eventual reconciliation are expressed through small yet powerful changes in eyebrow movement and hand gestures.

2) Saswati Sen's Portrayal of Ashta Nayikas

Saswati Sen's solo rendition of all eight Nayikas in a single recital is widely appreciated. Each transition between Nayikas was executed with a change in tempo, music, and emotional tone, showcasing the dancer's ability to embody multiple states of feminine experience.

3) Aditi Mangaldas showcasing Nayika

In her production she does not display a proper named nayika but she portrays nayikas in very different form who is strong and fearless. She expresses nayilkas in the form of panchatatva.

4. CONCLUSION

The concepts of Nayaka and Nayika are vital to the emotive and narrative fabric of Kathak dance. Rooted in classical theory, these archetypes offer a timeless framework through which dancers explore and express human emotions.

Whether rooted in traditional themes of Radha-Krishna love or reimagined for contemporary concerns, Nayaka-Nayika bhāva remains essential to Kathak's expressive depth. Their portrayal allows for artistic versatility, emotional engagement, and cultural continuity, affirming their enduring importance in both classical pedagogy and modern performance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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