

Krishna in Bharatanatyam: Textual, Philosophical and Aesthetic Foundations of Embodied Characterisation: A Theoretical and Interdisciplinary Study

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Abstract: Krishna has a place in the world of Indian classical dance. In Bharatanatyam Krishna is shown in forms: as a child, as a cowherd, as a lover, as a friend, as a protector, as a teacher and as a divine being. Because of these roles the dancer must move in very different emotional, relational and physical ways. This article looks at the texts, ideas and artistic rules that shape how Krishna is made real in Bharatanatyam. It brings together ideas from the Nāṭyaśāstra, Abhinaya Darpana, the Mahābhārata, Bhagavad Gītā, Bhāgavata Purāṇa and Gīta Govinda. It shows how each of these sources gives stories and artistic guidelines for how Krishna is performed. The article says that Krishna is not a fixed character that can be shown with a set of fixed hand signs. Instead Krishna's stage identity comes from the mix of story, rasa, bhava, abhinaya, music, movement, relationships and the dancer's intention. The article puts forward the idea of "portrayal" as a helpful way to study how the written Krishna becomes the lived Krishna on stage. The study is mostly, about ideas and interpretation. It does not provide audience or interview data. It gives a base for later practice-based and repertoire-specific work.

Keywords: Krishna; Bharatanatyam; kinaesthetic portrayal; abhinaya; rasa; bhava; Gīta Govinda; Nāṭyaśāstra; embodied performance

1. Introduction

Krishna has created a range of literary theological musical, visual and performative representations in South Asian cultural traditions. In Bharatanatyam this variety becomes especially clear because the dancer can move quickly between different Krishna identities in one performance. A child may turn into a cowherd; the playful flute-player may become a beloved; the beloved may turn into a protector; and the close human presence may be shown as the divine teacher. These changes are not made only by telling a story. They become visible through the dancer's body.

This article asks a question: what textual and aesthetic ideas let these embodied transformations happen? Of treating Krishna as only one iconographic figure this article looks at Krishna as a layered performative subject whose physical representation is shaped by narrative, emotion and relational context.

2. Research Problem and Objectives

Talk about Krishna in Indian classical dance focuses on mythology, devotional meaning, repertoire or literary interpretation. These ways are essential. They do not fully explain the bodily steps by which a dancer builds Krishna as a stage character. The problem this article tackles is the gap between description and embodied performance.

- To find texts that shape Krishna's representation in Bharatanatyam.
- To see how Krishna's many identities relate to the categories of rasa and bhava.
- To see how abhinaya links narrative meaning with performance.
- To suggest kinaesthetic portrayal as a framework for

study of Krishna in Bharatanatyam.

3. Methodology

The article uses a qualitative, interpretive and text-centred method. Selected primary texts are examined for how they build Krishna's identity, relationships and emotional situations. Classical Indian performance-theory ideas are read together with ideas of embodiment and movement perception. The article is theoretical not empirical; claims about performer or audience reaction are offered as ideas for practice-based research not as proven facts.

Krishna in the Mahābhārata

In the Mahābhārata Krishna appears in a network of friendship, kinship, diplomacy, ethical crisis and divine intervention. Krishna's relationship with Arjuna gives an important model of Krishna as counsellor and teacher. In dance this identity invites a body style that's different from the pastoral or romantic Krishna. The drama shifts toward thoughtfulness, authority and focused connection.

For Bharatanatyam the importance of this Krishna is that it allows the body to change. A performer does not just change the hand gesture of a teacher; the whole body organisation can change. Tempo, gaze, posture, moving direction and how long stillness lasts can join in showing authority.

Krishna in the Bhagavad Gītā

The Bhagavad Gītā makes Krishna's role as teacher and divine speaker stronger. Krishna's words talk about action, knowledge, devotion and the nature of reality. When this material enters dance the performer faces a problem: philosophical talk must be shown through a body medium.

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The kinaesthetic meaning is that the teaching Krishna can be built with economy, not excess. A steady centre, measured gesture, held gaze and controlled movement can give a sense of authority. These ideas are analysis and should be tested against specific choreographies not taken as universal rules.

Krishna in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, its tenth book gives a big story field for Krishna's childhood, pastoral life, relationships and divine play. The text lets a dancer show a range of Krishna identities: the child who plays the cowherd who meets the world the flute-player who attracts attention and the divine figure whose play is both close and beyond.

The Rāsa Līlā is especially important because it mixes the edge between dance, devotion, relationship and divinity. For Bharatanatyam this material lets the dancer explore movement, circularity, invitation, withdrawal, closeness and shared attention.

Krishna in Gīta Govinda

Jayadeva's Gīta Govinda is very important in the history of Krishna-centred performance. Its lyrical treatment of Radha and Krishna gives Bharatanatyam a detailed field for śṛṅgāra-based abhinaya. The poetic Krishna is at once desirable, elusive playful remorseful and divine.

The importance of Gīta Govinda for a study is that it relies on relational nuance. The dancer must show not Krishna as a person but Krishna, in relation: Krishna approaching, Krishna withdrawing, Krishna remembering, Krishna desiring, Krishna regretting and Krishna meeting Radha. Character is made through direction, gaze, distance and pause much as through symbolic gesture.

Nāṭyaśāstra, Rasa, Bhava and Abhinaya

The Nāṭyaśāstra gives a set of words to understand dramatic representation, such as rasa, bhava and abhinaya. Within this framework performance does not simply copy feeling. Performance arranges causes, effects and fleeting states into an aesthetic experience.

This difference is essential for Krishna studies. A performer's personal feeling toward Krishna is not the same as the construction of Krishna on stage. Performance must turn textual knowledge into a coded yet responsive language.

Abhinaya offers the working bridge. Angika in particular highlights the power of the body. Angika should not be reduced to a list of gestures. The meaningful unit is often the action of body, face, eyes, head, rhythm, space and intention.

Abhinaya Darpana and the Body as Expressive Grammar

The Abhinaya Darpana tradition is especially useful for looking at the codification of gestural expression. Head, eye, neck, hand and body movements give a vocabulary through which performer can create meaning. The existence of a coded vocabulary does not mean performance is fixed mechanically. Context decides how a movement works within a dramatic sequence.

For Krishna portrayal this means that a flute gesture, a

butter-stealing action or a blessing gesture gains meaning from the surrounding body. Gaze, torso tilt, footwork, timing and relationship to the imagined or represented other decide the character's quality.

Toward the Concept of Kinaesthetic Portrayal

This article proposes "portrayal" as a term to analyze the intentional organization and perception of bodily movement through which a dramatic character becomes embodied. The term includes posture, gesture, gaze, weight, direction, level, rhythm, tempo, muscle tone, spatial path, stillness and relational orientation.

The concept does not replace rasa, bhava or abhinaya. Instead it asks a question: how do these aesthetic and dramaturgical principles become physically organized in performer's body? This question allows a study of Krishna without separating physical technique from textual meaning.

4. Discussion

Textual evidence shows that there is no kinaesthetic Krishna. Krishna's movement identity changes according to role and emotional circumstance. Bāla Krishna may invite qualities of play, curiosity and rhythmic unpredictability; the pastoral Krishna may be understood through relation; the romantic Krishna through relational proximity and gaze; the teacher Krishna through centered authority; and the divine Krishna through expansion, stillness and symbolic presence.

These categories should not be read as prescriptive movement formulas. They serve as hypotheses. The same choreographic vocabulary may take meanings depending on sahitya, music, performer, lineage and dramatic context. The value of the framework lies in making these relationships available for systematic examination.

5. Conclusion

Krishna's representation in Bharatanatyam rests on a convergence of imagination, aesthetic theory and embodied performance. The Mahābhārata, Bhagavad Gītā, Bhāgavata Purāṇa and Gīta Govinda give different Krishna identities and relational situations while the Nāṭyaśāstra and Abhinaya Darpana give practical tools to turn those identities into performance.

The article therefore suggests that Krishna scholarship in Bharatanatyam would benefit from moving beyond an iconographic or narrative description toward systematic attention to bodily organization. Kinaesthetic portrayal offers one framework. It opens the way for practice-based study in which specific Krishna compositions, performers and audiences can be examined through observable movement structures and recorded embodied experience.

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