

# *PHYSIO-SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE IN THE PERFORMANCE OF DEVOTIONAL DANCE- THEATRE IN INDIA*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is a discussion on the training and practice of devotional dance-theatre in India which emerged between the 16<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as a result of wide spread devotional movements that swept the country. Largely led by devotional saints, theologians and religious reformers, the dramatic art of role-playing was employed as a religious technique with an aim of achieving a physio-spiritual transcendence into the higher states of being within an eternal proximity to one's personal god.

**Keywords:** India. Dance-theatre. Devotion. Vaishnavism. Religion.

**RESUMO:** O presente artigo refere-se à formação e à prática devocional da dança-teatro na Índia, a qual surgiu entre os séculos XVI e XIX como resultado de

movimentos devocionais que assolaram o país naquela época. Em grande parte liderada por santos devocionais, teólogos e reformadores religiosos, a arte dramática de *role-playing* foi utilizada como técnica religiosa para atingir transcendência físico-espiritual em estados elevados do próprio ser e proximidade infinita com o deus interior.

**Palavras-chave:** Índia. Dança-teatro. Devoção. Vaishnavism. Religião

**RÉSUMÉ:** Cette publication est une discussion sur la formation et la pratique de la danse-théâtre religieuse en Inde qui emergea entre les 16<sup>ème</sup> et le 19<sup>ème</sup> siècles et resulta d'un vaste mouvement de dévotion qui balaya le pays. Conduit en grande partie par des saints, des théologiens, et des réformateurs religieux, l'art dramatique du jeu de rôles fut utilisé comme une technique religieuse dans le but d'accomplir une transcendence physio-spirituelle vers l'état sublime d'être dans une proximité éternelle de son dieu individuel.

**Mots-clés:** L'Inde. Danse-théâtre. Dévouement. Vaishnavism. Religion.

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The *Natyasastra*, oldest treatise of dramaturgy (compiled approximately around 200 CE), mythologizes the origins of Indian drama as a gift from Lord Brahma, the Creator, and hence imbued with great religious value. In it, sacred drama is symbolized as a *yagna* or a ritual sacrifice, an offering to the Gods (Ghosh, 1950). In this sense, dramatic experience in terms of initiation, training, performance presentation and artistic maturity becomes the driving force and the pathway to spiritual realization. This essay focuses on the process through which physio-spiritual transcendence was aimed or achieved by the actor-devotees through the practice of devotional dance-theatre in India.

Hinduism conceives Ultimate Reality as a cosmic drama (Haberman, 1988, p. 53) unfolding its illusive elements of joys and sorrows, of humor and tragedy and of beauty and repulse, much in the way that worldly drama encompasses all the elements of Reality in which the gods, the demons and the inhabitants of all the three worlds (spirit-world, physical world and netherworld) come to play. Because reality is culturally constructed, we, as human beings, are faced with multiple realities which generate multiple worlds of meanings, and thus, the manifestation of an immense arena of reality construction.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Vaishnavism<sup>2</sup> gained immense popularity all over India, due to which dramatic art was institutionalized in the form of numerous regional all-male troupes generally headed by a devotional saint or a theologian, a brahmin religious leader or an educator. New forms of regional dance-theatre namely, Natya Mela, Bhagwata Mela, Chakiar Kutthoo, Kathakali, Kathak, Ras-lila, Rama-lila, Gotipua dance, Sankirtan, Sattriya, Ankiya Nat, Jatra, and several others emerged in the wake of the devotional movements that swept the entire country. During this period, these dramatic forms were practiced by the devotees as a mode of devotional expression, religious and spiritual realization, and most

particularly, the physio-spiritual transcendence of the self. Ecstatic devotional performance of theatrical acting, dancing and singing as a way of spiritual transcendence empowered the participants with creative ways of communicating with their personal god. Followers of several Vishnu sects believed that their devotional pursuit was not necessarily to become one with the divinity or to merge with the universal force but to relish eternally, the blissful “oneness” through service of their personal god – dramatic enactment being an offering to their deity.

Patronized by kings and local landlords, these emerging troupes traveled from village to village performing and propagating the religious ideologies through the enactment of mythological and divine character roles. Devotee members within each of these devotional troupes were inculcated in a shared world of meaning, and of subjectified devotional experience, which defined and delineated their socio-religious world. The ultimate goal of the training and continuous practice of the dramatic art was aimed at a physio-spiritual transcendence in deriving a matured state of ‘becoming’ the character. Practitioner and scholar Phillip Zarrilli (1990) states that, “it is only when the fundamental techniques of practice which constitute the given discipline have been so well embedded into a the neophyte’s body that such techniques are a part of his body-consciousness, ready at hand to be used at any moment, that the student is ready for higher stages of development” (p. 132).

### **Training process and immersion into the cosmic world of being:**

Traditional gurus believed that the art of dramatic expression could not be taught; it had to emerge naturally from the actor-dancer through his keen sense of observation, imitation of his teacher, repeated practice, his creative imagination and his intense drive for religious realization. Actor-dancers also believed that it was imperative that they felt the intensity of their devotional emotion in their own lives in order to accurately portray it on stage. It took a lifetime pursuit of meditative learning and devotional acting for actor-dancers to be able to synthesize their external environment and their

<sup>2</sup> Vaishnavism is a sect of Hinduism in which Lord Vishnu is the main deity of worship. Lord Krishna as one of Vishnu’s ten incarnations.



internal self, in what Zarrilli calls a “psycho-physical gestalt” (1984); “the immediate psycho-physical process of engaging in performing (doing) the acts which constitute a performance in any given occasion . . . each act in each moment resonates with psycho-spiritual implications in personal, social and cosmological spheres of being” (1990, p. 131-132).

By daily practice all physical and mental obstacles in the way of correct practice are gradually eliminated. The goal of such virtuosic systems is reaching a state of “accomplishment” (Sanskrit, *siddhi*) in which the doer and the done are one. Through such actualized practice comes both control and transcendence of “self” (Zarrilli, 1990, p. 131).

Following the teachings of the Bengali saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (b. 1486 CE), Krishna devotee and theologian Rupa Goswami (1489-1564 CE) founded a religio-dramatic practice, Gaudiya Vaishnavism, in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, for devotees aspiring spiritual realization. His practice was based on the theory of *rasa* (classical Indian aesthetic theory) originally propagated in Chapter VI of the *Natyasastra*. His practice was primarily and conceptually immersed in *bhaktirasa*, the sentiment of absolute devotion in relation to all the eight *rasas*<sup>3</sup> or sentiments prescribed in the *Natyasastra*. Devotees ‘entered’ into the religious reality through role playing. In his study, *Acting as a way of salvation*, Haberman (1988) states that,

One enters into religious reality by assuming, via *role-taking*, an identity located within that reality. The new identity is a vehicle to that new reality. Close attention, then, should be given to role systems and the ritual structures devised by religious traditions to construct new identities for concerned individuals, thereby transporting them to a new concomitant reality (p. 7).

Through the study of his phenomenal treatises, *Bhaktirasmtasindhu* (1965) and *Ujjvalanilamani* (1954),

<sup>3</sup> *Natyasastra* mentions eight *rasas* or sentiments: love, laughter, anger, sorrow, wonder, fear, disgust and horripilation. Sentiment of peace was a later addition.

one observes that Rupa Goswami and his devotees were concerned with realizing the true identity of the self – one’s eternal form manifest in the cosmic drama. Dramatic acting was used to initiate a change or transformation of one’s social identity into a religious identity.<sup>4</sup> Rupa based his theories on the Hindu Upanishadic teachings in which god is perceived in the three-fold form of Truth, Consciousness and Bliss: the power of existence through which the universe is preserved, the power of consciousness through which knowledge is achieved and power of bliss through which the godhead experiences the bliss and causes others to experience it through the cosmic enactment or ‘play’ of divine love. Rupa conceptualized the emotion of love, more specifically, the emotion of amorous love as the primary or dominant emotion in his aesthetics of devotion to the godhead. This theory promulgated that Lord Krishna plays the lead male role in the cosmic drama; the devotees enter into that play through meditation and relate with him through role playing (either as his beloved or as close companions of his beloved devotee, Radha), becoming vessels of his divine love. Religious role playing thus becomes transformative, leading to a blissful state of being.

In his devotional dramatic practice, Rupa Goswami (1965) proposed that in the early stages of training, the actor-devotee be initiated into constant reminiscence of the scriptures, mythological stories, understanding of character roles, analyzing the personality and nature of each of the roles, singing eulogies to Krishna and meditating upon him. This process creates in the devotee, a familiarity and to some extent, an affinity with the cosmic world of Krishna. Observation of devotional dramas is key, as it leads one to grasp the nuances of role-playing. Such an immersion into the cosmic world of Krishna inspires in the devotee a desire to assume a character role which interacts closely with Krishna – in the form of

<sup>4</sup> Russian director and philosopher, Constantin Stanislavsky derived an elaborate actor training method in which he drew attention to the powerful effect of dramatic role-playing in the transformation of one’s identity (Wiles, 1980). He believed that true acting and identification with the role led to a transformation of the actor into a new being.

his beloved devotee, Radha or *sakhi*, her close companion. As the devotee matures in the art of role playing through meditation, imitation and analysis, the personality and the innate qualities of the character become internalized in him and merge within his ever evolving new identity.

Physical actions based on imitation, observation and analysis lead the devotee-actor to penetrate into the inner world of the character. Such osmosis between the identity of the devotee and that of the role played will induce certain mental states of transformation at a point where the devotee actor feels unified with the character. For a committed devotee, devotional role-playing (almost like a yogic exercise) becomes a mode of transformation from the mundane to the higher states of being. The practitioner-actor now achieves a *siddha* or 'perfected' body which is capable to migrating into the higher spheres of the spiritual world as and when desired.

### **Religious realization through dramatic role playing:**

Medieval religious literature in India abounds with examples of Vaishnava devotees who sought relationship with god through different modes of metaphoric sentiments and relationships: adoration of god through meditation; perceiving god as one's best friend or in the form of a divine child; offering lifelong servitude to god in the form of a master; and more typically, reveling in the blissful state of his divine love, that is, devotion to god in the form of a divine lover – the eternal 'male' principle. Consequently, the devotees sought an aesthetic devotional communication with god through enactment of 'female' character roles such as those of Radha (Krishna's beloved devotee) or Satyabhama (Krishna's queen). This relationship entails a two-way communication in that the devotee is not the only one suffering the pangs of longing for the god but god too is just as curiously longing for the devotee whose pure heart seeks none other than him alone. Metaphoric forms of mystic eroticism emerged during this devotional period in which god is perceived as the divine lover, accrediting the dramatic practice of physio-spiritual transcendence through the enactment

of the devoted 'female' as the highest form of worship.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Tirthnarayan Sastri, a brahmin devotee of Krishna based in the southeastern region of Andhra Pradesh founded the dramatic art of Natya Mela and Kuchipudi centered around the performance of Krishna's life-episodes drawn from the literature of *Bhagavad Purana*. He wrote a musical opera, the participation and enactment of which was a mode of devotional service to god. One of his disciples, Sidhyendra Yogi, further enriched this art form with the dramatization of a love poem centering on Krishna's queen, Satyabhama. Sidhyendra Yogi professed that a devout performance of the female role of Satyabhama in her devoted relationship to Lord Krishna would be a transformative experience leading to the blissful liberation of one's soul. The unique art of 'female impersonation' in the elaboration of the character roles of Krishna's beloved queen, Satyabhama, became central to the dramatic performance of Natya Mela and Kuchipudi. The goal for the actor-devotees was to transcend from their mundane physical being into the higher spheres of devotional experience; interaction with god was sought through role playing in the form of his beloved queen Satyabhama.

Sankaradeva (1449-1568 CE), a religious reformer and teacher, popularized Vaishnavism in Assam through the performance of dance-drama. He established religious institutions called *sattra*, formed exclusively of celibate male brahmin monks who were given a systematic training in religious texts, dance and music performance identified as Sattriya. He produced the Chinna Yatra depicting seven abodes of Vishnu, with himself presiding in the role of the god, against the backdrop of a series of painted images. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Gotipua dance of Orissa emerged as a form of devotional dance-theatre, in which, young boy actor-dancers performed Krishna stories dressed in female bridal attire. Like Kuchipudi, the aim was to worship Krishna through 'female' role-playing.

Kathak dance, also a product of the devotional movements, was performed all over northern India by actor-dancer-story tellers, who rendered in dramatic form, mythological stories inherent with different facets of the divine-human interactions.



Traditionally, Kathak was a solo performance in which the actor-dancer solely portrayed all the characters within the selected episode, effortlessly switching from one to another as they appeared in the narrative. I have discussed elsewhere that in the performance of traditional Kathak too, one observes a close similarity to the prevailing concepts of devotion with relation to the Hindu philosophy of achieving *siddhi* or perfection through role-playing:

The life-long process of training and practice of a dedicated Kathak's artistic solo portrayal of various characters through abhinaya and the fluidity of the switch over from one character to another, attunes the performer to a unique experience of spiritual transcendence of gender and offers a possible apperception and the feeling of "oneness" (Shah, 1998, pp. 3).

Through life-time practice in devotional role-playing, a devoted Kathak dancer may become receptive to certain ecstatic experiences, elevating him in an ecstatic moment within a given performance to experience emotional transcendence of his physical being. Continuous involvement with various divine character roles enables the performer to recognize that they are all, inherently, different facets of the prism of the soul or reflections of the universal omnipresence in the cycle of existence.

Devotion in the medieval literature exemplified intense emotionalism. In *Bhagavad Purana* (possibly compiled during 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century CE), absolute devotion is described as an "overpowering, even suffocating emotion, which causes tears to flow and the voice to falter, stimulating hysterical laughter, loss of consciousness, or a state of trance" (Hardy, 1983, p. 38). Devotion in the Krishna myth is expressed in the enactment of the emotions related to union and separation: 'Union' deals with the episodes concerning Krishna's childhood life in Vrindavan and Vraja, the childhood pranks he played and the stylized aspects of the *maharaas*, a divine circle dance he performed with the devotee maidens (*gopis*) on the night of the Autumn full moon. Medieval literature abounds in the amorous devotion Radha has for Krishna: she is described

as the ideal devotee who worships him selflessly; rather than aspiring for salvation, she longs for an eternal service through devotion for the god. Likewise, Krishna too is depicted as equally longing for his ardent devotee, Radha. 'Separation' in Krishna myth deals with the intense emotion of sorrow experienced by his devotees in Vraja after he moved to Mathura and assumed the role of the king. As a supreme model of devotion, Radha is depicted as being in a perpetual longing for the god. These themes of union and separation are at the heart of devotional theatre and define role playing as an eternal communication with god, as a mode of transcendence to higher spheres of being and as a way of attaining blissful oneness with the god.

The concept of 'separation' is clearly depicted by a 9<sup>th</sup> century devotional poet from south India, Namalvar, while expressing his longing to have a vision of the god. As was the tradition at this time, he composed his devotional poems in a female voice complaining that god implants a desire of him and a longing to envision his true nature, and then, he vanishes: He is "a cloud that does not rain and recedes – this is indeed truthful of him who abandoned me and went away back to the ocean!" (Hardy, 1983, p. 313). Namalvar uses different aspects of nature to express unbearable agony of the devotee longing for the union with god: She pleads to the crane, to the dark clouds and to the sweet voiced maina bird to carry her messages to her lord; she tries to lure the bees to take her message to him in gardens full of flowers where they can suck honey (Hardy, 1983, p. 341). Such metaphors and similes abound in the subtle expressions of union and separation in devotional poetry, dance and theatrical role playing.

Radha is the focal figure in Jayadeva's 12<sup>th</sup> century epic love-poem, *Gitagovinda*, portrayed as a devotee who has achieved passionate triumph over Krishna, enjoying dominance in this divine relationship (Miller 1977). Krishna is rendered vulnerable to the pure devotion exemplified by Radha's perpetual longing for him. Radha, as the embodiment of devotional love is perceived to be the supreme model for religious realization. Verses eulogizing the devotional aspects of the divine union and separation of Radha and Krishna, as

delineated in the *Gitagovinda*, are sung and danced in Odissi, Kathak dance, Kuchipudi, Bharatanatyam, and other forms of performance all over India. Female role-playing as a mode of physio-spiritual transcendence of the self, therefore, achieved centrality in the performance of the devotional dance-theatre. Dimock (1966) asserts that, when the devotee's heart is purified through continuous devotional practice, worldly desires no longer remain (p. 160-61).

The 16<sup>th</sup> century Bengal Vaishnava sects propagated that divine bliss can be sought by “a kind of erotic mysticism, which seeks to express religious ideas in the intimate language of earthly passion, for it conceives divine love as a reflex of human emotion” (De, 1961. p. 281). Radha, as the absolute devotee, assumes the form of the energizing force of Krishna; she “not only bears the world-seed as his *sakti* [creative power], she also activates his desire to create, . . . for she is his *iccha-sakti* (power of desire)” (Brown, 1982, p. 68). For the Vaishnava devotee, identifying with the role of Radha, Satyabhama or even a close female companion of Radha, allows for an entry into the inner world of these divine characters and their intimate relationship to Lord Krishna. Immersing oneself into the ocean of devotion through role-playing allows one to explore the vast ocean of possibilities for transformation and transcendence to higher states of being.

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