LAASYA: CONCEPT AND APPLICATION IN MOHINIAATTAM

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Abstract
The ancient Indian texts on dance and dramaturgy go in for a detailed analysis of the two diverse streams of dance namely Laasya (graceful & delicate) and Taandava (vigorous). Naatyashastra speaks of dance as a prelude to drama and uses the terms, laasya, kaisiki and sukumaara in relation to femininity. My attempt, in this essay, is to define Laasya and explore its practical applications in the Nritya (textual dance), Nritta (non-textual dance) and Naatya (acting) segments of Mohiniaattam, the classical female dance heritage of Kerala. An overview of the same, in the two popular and diverse Indian classical dance-forms like Odissi and Bharatanaatyam is furnished besides touching upon its space in the traditional theatre artforms of Kerala. Relevant excerpts from the ancient Indian texts on Performing Arts are quoted to establish the authenticity and significance of the term, Laasya. As a practitioner of Mohiniaattam, I have also analysed a malayala padam from the perspective of Laasya.

Key-words: laasya, taandava, kaisiki, sukumaara, shastra, nritta, nritya and naatya

INTRODUCTION
Laasya – Concept
The word Laasya encompasses several interpretations. In common parlance it means dancing and dance accompanied by vocal and instrumental music. It was a principal segment of drama associated with the sentiment of love expressed dramatically. “The term Laasya is also applied to Naach or nautch dance of the Indian dancing girls consisting chiefly of gesticulations with a shuffling movement of feet forward and backward. It also denotes the dance Goddess Parvati evolved against the animated masculine dance called Taandava” performed by Shiva and his followers. (Williams, 2002, p 899)¹

¹ lasati iti laasya ‘that which is radiant and shining is Laasya.

Laasya differs from Naatya. The latter constitutes the four fold concept of abhinaya namely the Aangika ,Vaachika ,Aaharya and Saattvika while the former depicts the meaning of a song proper mainly through gestures and movements for portraying various sentiments. While Naataka narrating/unfolding a story ends with an objective which the story intends to convey, Laasya focuses on conveying the various moods and expressions that go with it.

Textual Explications of Laasya
Naatya Shastra (NS)
Maheswara created a dance embellishing it with Karanaa-s (a combined movement of hands and feet which culminates into a pose) and Angahaara-s (a collective movement of different Karana-s) which enriched his dancing every evening. Maheswara himself taught the dance to Tandu who was in turn instructed to impart the same to Bharata.

Maayaapiidam smrittam nrittam sandhyaakaaleshu nrityata
Naanaakaranasamyuktair angahaarair vibhushitam (Unni, 2019) According to Bharata, the Sukumaara prayoga came into being when Sankara’s (another name of Shiva) dance with Angahaara-s and Rechaka-s (minor variations in main dance movement) inspired Paarvati to compose and perform dance of a different kind; soft and graceful with delicate, undulating movements. According to Bharata, Kaisiki is the most delicate style which consists of dance, music, erotic sentiments, attractive dresses and expressions replete with Sringaara rasa, most suitable for women characters.

Bharata mentions the four varieties or Bhedaa-s of the Kaisiki vritti as; Narma (Pleasantry), Narmasphinja or Narmasphunja (Beginning of Pleasure), Narmaphota (Unfoldment of Pleasure), and Narma Garbha (Concealed Pleasure). In the chapter I, Bharata explains kaisiki as the charming style.

Bharata through the following sloka or verse explains Kaisiki as the dance performed by Shiva(Neelakantha) with gentle gestural movements of the limbs, that depicted both Rasa and Bhaava.

\[ \text{Drstaa maya bhagavato neelakanthasya nrtyatath/ kaisiki slaksnaapathya sngaararasasambhavall } \] (Unni, 2019)

Bharata ruled out the accompaniment of drums for sequences of dramatic sentiments. This norm is followed in the presentation of dance/theatre even today. While the percussion-music is in full swing for the segments devoted to non-textual dance, for the textual dance technically called Nritya, the mellowed sound of Vina, Violin and Flute form the background in consonance with the layers of abhinaya unfolded by the dancer. Sattva (Emotions from deep within), according to Bharata, is superior to all other modes of expression. He expounds ten natural refinements of ladies: Lila (the sportive imitation of gestures of the beloved), Vicchitti (decorative arrangement of ornaments and attire) Lalita (graceful movements of brows, eyes, lips, hands and feet) and seven forms of unforced graces namely, Shobha, Kaanti D dipti, Maadhurya, Lalita, etc.

Sloka - Shobha kaantisca diptisca tathaa maduryameva ca I

\[ \text{Dhairyam praagalbhyam audaaryamityete syurrayatnajaaha } \] II (Unni, 2019)

In the chapter Dasarupakavidhaanam, rules for the ten types of drama, Bharata explains the ten ancillaries of laasya.

Sloka - gayapadam sthitapathiyan aasinam pushpagandikaa

\[ \text{pracchedakaam trimudham ca saindhavaakhyam dvimudhakaam/ uttammottamakam caiva muktapratyuktamevaca } \]

\[ \text{laasyam dasavidham hyetat anga nirdesalakshanam} \] (Unni, 2019),

Abhinavagupta too elucidates Sukumaarapravaya as exclusively soft and delicate movements. He associates Sukumaara prayoga to graceful movements executed by a woman that appeals to the King.

Sloka – lasanaam krida cittasam\(\text{\textsh{sleshaha striyaha pumsi tasya vaa tasyaam bhaavaha} I} \)

\[ \text{Stripumsetyabhidane tu sringaara eva samgrahiito bhavet tena laasam arahati sadhu laasyam II} \] (Kavi Shastri, 1956)

According to Abhinava Gupta the sportive act that joins the citta or hearts of stri with purusha and likewise purusha with stree can have only include the erotic sentiments or sringaara. In other words laasya cannot be removed away from sringara rasa and so AG relates laasya with Pranaya bhaava or Rati or erotic feeling.

In Vishnudharmottara Puraanaa (VDP), a text written immediately after the NS but ahead of Abhinava Bharati, dance or Nritta relies on Naatya and Laasya. Naatya and Laasya are categorised into two, Aaabhyantarata (bound by rules) and Baahya (not bound by rules). Laasya can be performed inside the mandapa (Temple gathering area) or outside the mandapa while Naatya can only be performed inside the mandapa.

\[ \text{nrriottum tu dvidhidham proktam natyalayaasrayam sada (Shah,1990)} \]

According to the text, the Sukumaara or the delicate movements of the limbs is ‘caari’, while the forceful use of the same is ‘Mahaacaari’. Nritta is of two kinds ‘Viddha’( Uddhata) which uses violent movements is to be performed by men, while Sukumaara or the graceful is to be performed by the women. The text thus makes a clear distinction between the two styles to be performed exclusively by men and women, differing from Naatya Shashtra, which does not specify the genders but relates only to the characters.
The 10th CE text, Abhinayadarpana, of Nandikeswara is an important manual on Indian histrionic art. In it, the reference of the term ‘Laasya’ is restricted to Goddess Parvati performing it. According to Abhinayadarpana. Naatyaam is drama with a story, Nrittam is devoid of Bhaava and Abhinaya and Nritya is an ideal amalgam of Rasa, Bhaava and other rudiments of expression. The association of nritya with rasa and Bhaava conforms to Bharata’s interpretation of Laasya.

Natyam tann naatakam ciava pujyam purva kathayutm Bhavaabhinayahihinantu nrittimityabbhidhityate Rasabhavvyunjaniadiyutamnrittamitiiryaye

The term laasya or Sukumaara prayoga in the Shringaarapraakaasa of Bhoja, is used for expressing Bhaava along with mild and graceful movements. It denoted at first, dance without gestures, Nrittam. It was the graceful Nritta with Angaahara-s of Nartaki-s, devoid of Abhinaya. Later it signified delicate movements that expressed sentiment of love, Sringara Rasa, Nritya. This was followed by the term being used for depicting love in dramatic presentations. Thus it involved Nritta, Nritya and Naatya. (Rag havan, 1978)10

Nrittataratnavali (13th century CE) authored by Jaayasenapati, a momentous text on dance discusses the concept of Laasya and the Laasyanga-s. In it, Laasya is categorized into two, Maarga (based on strict adherence to a schematicized grammar) and the desi (changes in accordance with the taste of the people) The author, Jaaya, defines 46 Laasyanga-s (Rao ,Thakore,2019) exclusive to dance as applicable to Aangikaabhinaya. There are many desi Laasyanga-s in it similar to the movement-dynamics in Mohiniattam.

Desi laasya bhedanaaam, prasidhaanaam samaasataha I
Pravyaktaani vidhaasyaamah, laksaananyadhunaaayam II (Rao, Thakore,2019)12.

The 13th century Sangeeta Ratnaakara of Saarangadeva delineates Laasya as delicate movements capable of arousing erotic sentiments. The author clearly differentiates the three vital aspects of dance: the Nrittta, Nritya and the Naatya. To Saarangadeva, both Nritta and Nritya can embody Taandava, the vigorous as well as laasya, the graceful movements Taandava exemplifies Uddhata (forceful) while Laasya epitomizes Lalita (delicate) movements. Sarangadeva also describes 10 desi Laasyanga-s viz. Chaali, Chalivada, Ladhi, Suuka, Uroongana, Dhasaka, Angahaara, Oyaarakaa, Vhasil and Mana. (Raja, Burnier, 1976).13

Laasya – Dancers’ Discernment

Madhavi Mudgal, condenses her views on Laasya (personal interaction, April, 2020)

Odissi is generally well known for its lyricism stemming from the Laasya component of its movement-vocabulary (Aangika): the Tribhangi as one of its pivotal stance Bhangi or Shhaanaka with its three bends occurring at the knees, the torso and the neck, along with the possibility of fluid torso-movement (Vaksha Sanchalana), form the core of its Lasyang.

The Tribhangi on the right side is formed with Trasya pada- out-turned feet, the right foot placed slightly diagonally in front of the left foot, with ankles a tad overlapping and flexed knees: Vaksha in Yamachala position – the torso deflected to the right side with a curve forming on the left side Griva – the neck tilled so the head is placed diagonally to the left, thereby providing the possibility of Tirascina movement.

: Drishhi - the eyes are in the right Sachi position
: hasta - the right hand is placed on the right thigh, and the left one on the waist in loosely formed Musththi or Shikharra hasta.

There are many Bhangi-s such as the Alasaa and Darpani that are excellent examples of the Laasya ang. The body movements of Odissi follow circular or spiral patterns: be it the feet, legs, arms, wrists or the torso thereby lending it the typical feminine charm.

Rama Vaidyanathan, dwelt upon Laasya in Bharatanayam. (Personal interaction, May, 2020)

In my opinion the word Laasya is genderless and is more of an experience rather than a physical manifestation. It can be experienced by any dancer who is sensitive and is able to translate his or her innermost thoughts into movements. In Bharatanayam, our movements are precise, angular and symmetrical and we are required to have a strong core and a straight spine. Outwardly the movements may look energetic and vivacious, covering immense stage space with dynamic movements. But, as a matter of fact, it is the innermost impressions of the dancer’s soul that are concretized as grace. It is how the dancer approaches the movement which is important than the movement itself. It is the sense of awareness that the dancer has on the movement that is more vital than the physical representation of the movement. In other words the attitude or intent with which the dancer enters into the movement is more relevant than the movement itself. This in depth impression of the soul, the profound sense of awareness, and the very intent of the movement
is what I call laasya. It is more than just graceful movements that are soft and delicate. In fact, lāsya to me translates as control, balance and strength. There can be Laasya in “Taandava” too, because any and every movement requires to have the quality of balance, grace, control and ultimately a smooth transition of the inner-most thoughts into physical movement. Therefore, when I perform a Varnam, I must incorporate the principles of Laasya into my Jati-s, and abhinaya portions, as well as in the Swara-patterns. It is only then can I embrace Laasya in my dance. When my soul becomes one with my dance, or when the dance and the dancer become one, Laasya is fully realized. That state of mind is what I would call Laasya.

**Laasya: Brief history & practice in Kerala’s traditional arts**

The traditional performing arts of Kerala have adopted all the four Virtti-s, the mode of action, namely the Bhaaratii (verbal), Saattvati (grand), Kaisiki (delicate) and the Aarabhatii (energetic) as explained in the Naayta Shaastra. As against the Taandava (frantic and vigorous dance), Laasya is defined as delicately executed dance unfolding the multiple shades of Sringaara rasa. The fourfold concept of acting viz. Aangika, Vaachika, Ahaarya and Saattwika of the female characters in various performing arts mutually contribute to an intense exposition of Laasya. The tastes, obsessions and outlook of a male-dictated society are very much evident in the medieval literary works of Kerala. In the characterization of women, their words, movements and articulations often carry tones of compliance, enticement and grandeur.

After the Cilapaddikaaaram and Manimekhala an important text that throws considerable light on the female dances in Kerala art forms is the 7th CE text ‘ Dasakumara charitam ‘, written by Dandi. The text revels the dancer kundukavati who excelled in the art of laasya dance, especially the kanduka nritta, dancing with the ball, which has been beautifully interwoven into the female dance as Pandaatattam in Krshanaaattam. Kathakali, Nangiar Koothu and Mohinattam.

The sculptural evidences on the walls of temples and other architectural buildings reveal women dancing with ball which again re-emphasises the importance of playing with ball in the life of women and its inclusion in the stree nrityas. Dandi, the author of Dasakumara charitam, was familiar with many stree nrityas (female dances) of even adjoining regions which helped him in describing the Kanduka nritta. The playing technique of Pandaatattam has been described in the Bhagavathy stuti. Dances like Unjaal aattam, Pandaatattam, Ammanattam, Paavai Natanam had a very significant place in the dance of women in Kerala. Besides this the abhinaya was Saattvikam which is adopted in all the kerala dance forms. (Paniker, 2005)

**Krishnanaattam**

Literally Krishnanaattam is dancing the life-story of Lord Krishna. The episodes staged in this dance-heritage range from the Lord’s Avaataaram (birth) to his Swargaaroohanam (flight to heaven). ( Purushotaman .A ,Harindranath,2005) In between comes the striking segment titled Raasakreeda in which the myriad moods of the Gopikaas including Radha in their intimate relationship with Krishna are movingly depicted. Flirtations, dalliance, separation and reunion of the Gopikaas offer tremendous opportunities for the dancers to delve into the gross and subtle components of Laasya. Mullappochuttal (pretification with Jasmine flowers) is a scene imbued with tantalizing and undulating movements of the body and the limbs. Several passages eulogizing Lord Krishna’s physique to legitimize the longings of the Gopikaas add to the distinctive grace of Laasya in Raasakreeda.(Vasudevan , 1965)

**Kathakali**

Kottarakara Thampuran’s Ramanattam which succeeded Krishnanaattam in the 17th century consisted of eight plays from the Ramayana. None of these plays had substantial space for Laasya. But when Kottayath Thampuran, provincial king of deep north Malabar, composed four plays from the Mahabharata, Lalitha-s emerged. Lalitha-s are in fact female-demons disguised as celestial beauties descending to the Earth either in search of a suitable bridegroom for themselves or for their brothers/masters. While Lalitha in the Baakavadhom play is Hiidumbi, the female-demon, in disguise, Lalitha in the play, Kirmeeravadhom, is Simhika, the female-demon, in disguise. (Venugopalan,2017) They first appear on stage in their true form and articulate their primordial lust through crudely executed hand gestures, body movements and facial expressions. In the very next scene, Lalitha appears as a heavenly damsel with slow tempo movements, sophisticated expressions and gentle demeanour. Laasya here is in full swing. Lalitha in the play, Narakaasurasravadhom of king by Karthika Thirunal( Venugopalan,2017) is the disguised form of the female-demon, Nakrathundi. She too appears first in her true form and establishes her ferocity interspersed with her amorous feelings. Seeing the extremely handsome Jayantha, son of Lord Indra, she is overcome with passion. Then she disguises herself into an ethereal damsel and discloses her desire for dalliance with Jayantha.
In the play, Kaalakeyavadhom of Kottayath Thampuran,( Venugopalan,2017)\textsuperscript{19} Urvashi, the celestial damsel, falls for Arjuna who is on a visit to the heaven. She unabashedly describes the gorgeousness of Arjuna in the much acclaimed Padam, Pandavante roopam kandalaho (Amazing is the figure of the Paandava , (the five princeses in the Indian epic Mahabharata). In this slow tempo Padam of 32 beat cycle, there is an Iratti( a gracefully stylised piece of dance) that brings out the Laasya in full measure. Ulachil (gentle swaying of the torso to both sides) and Chuzhippu (swirls) complemented by the facial expression of Sringaara are the determinants of Laasya in this context. The slowed down tempos form the foundation of most of the major Laasya sequences in Kathakali. Lalitha’s Padam, ‘Nallaarakulam’ addressing Paanchaali (the wife of the five paandava-s) in the play Kremeeravadhom is executed in the slow Adantha taala, a rhythm cycle of 56 beats and the following one, Kandaal athimodam in 8 beat cycle but is still slow-paced. Lalitha’s Padam in the Baakavadhom play, Maarasadrusha manjulaakruthe addressing Bhimasena (one of the five paandava princess) is also in the slow-paced 56 beat of Adantha taalal (a 14 beats rhythm cycle ). Lalitha in the play, Narakaasuraswavadhom, enters with a Saari dance followed by the Padam in slow tempo Chempada Taala (a rhythm cycle of 8 beats). “Saari” in Kathakali is a typically choreographed pure dance item meant for some of the major female roles especially Lalitha-s and Mohini. While the lyrics of the Saari is adoration of Gods and Goddesses, the sprightly executed hand-gestures, body-movements and foot-steps do not convey any specific meaning. But there is laasya through and through evident from the fluency of the movement-vocabulary accentuated by the rhythmic cadence.

Irayimman Thampi’s renowned play, Utteradaswayamvaram, has an enticing dance piece soaked in Laasya called Kummi performed by maids of the Viraata Court to entertain Prince Uttaran. Laasya concretized by the leading female characters in Kathakali has had its impact, overtly or covertly, on solo dance forms like Mohiniyattam, Kaikottikkali, a group dance and on Thullal, a solo dance-theatre narrative originated in the 18th century. Since Kathakali has, from its formative period on wards, been performed in the open courtyards of the temples, Mohiniyattam dancers might have had plenty of opportunities to become familiar with it. Same is true with the Kaikottikkali and Thullal artists. In Kaikottikkali, the lyrics of the aforementioned Kummi, is copied fully besides borrowing select Padams from other popular Kathakali plays. While the steps and movements of Kaikottikkali have inherent traits of Laasya, in the Thullal-plays like Kalyaanasaangudhikam and Kiratham, the Thullal artiste does Pakarnnaaattam (one and the same actor enacting multiple roles). He would show beautiful ladies fully immersed in singing and dancing. The timbre of Laasya reflected in the Aangika and Saattwikaabhinaya-s is more along the lines of Lokadharmi (realistic mode of expressions) here.

Kutiyaattam

The concept and application of Lalitha in Kathakali have plausibly been an adaptation from Kutiyaattam, the sole extant form of traditional Sanskrit theatre in India ( personal communication with Kaladharan,2019)
The earliest stage-presentation of Kutiyaattam may be traced back to the period of King Kulasekhara (10th - 11th century AD) who composed two Sanskrit plays, Subhadradhananjayam and Thapathisamvaranam (Nair,1994)\textsuperscript{20}. Dhananjayam\textsuperscript{21} is still very much a part of the current repertoire of Kutiyaattam. In Day II of this play, Arjuna and Subhadra as Nayaka and Nayika see each other for the first time. The Nayaka then does the Panchangamaadal

which is a brief description of the physical appearance of the Nayika viz. hair, eyes, face, breast and the feet. This is followed by Kaamasaramkollal,( Gopalakrishnan,2011)\textsuperscript{22} an act by which the Naayaka, the hero shows the hand-gesture and expression of Kamaadeva ( Cupid), the flower-arrows that hit him hard and his amorous passion fuelled by the breeze. Afterwards the Naayika , heroine does the same. Here the Panchangamaadal consists of Naayaka’s crown, eyes, face, chest and feet. In the scene detailed above, both the Naayaka and the Naayika appear as Laasya incarnate. Through Saattwikaabhinaya (emotive acting), Laasya reaches the crescendo. The actors use the Upanga-s – eye-brows, eyes, cheeks and lips – to the maximum for creating the desired effect. Apart from this, the delineation of the acclaimed sloka, Chalakuvalaya,\textsuperscript{23} through Vaachika (verbal), Aangika (hand-gestures and body-limb movements) and Saattwika (emotive acting), the Naayaka portrays the tender feelings of the Naayika whom the Sakhi’s dress up and decorate. Sheer magic of Pakarnanaattam (One and the same actor enacting multiple roles) makes the Prekshhakaas-s (initiated audience) feel the presence of Subhadra, the Naayika and her maids. The two maids after taking a look at Subhadra from a distance realize with a sense of shame that they forgot to apply kajal in the eyes of the Naayika. The whole subtleties of Laasya find expression in the enactment of the sloka concerned by one and the same actor. In building up the Laasya-sentiment in the Kathakali plays such as Subhadraaharanam (first half) and Nalacharitam Day II, the motivation from Kutiyaattam is clearly discernible.
Nhagavadajjukam,\textsuperscript{24} the farce of Bodhayana, carries several Laasya sequences. Apart from the relatively popular Udyanaavarnana (description of the garden) by the two Ganikaa-s (courtesans), Vasanthisena and Parabrhithika, the Sanyasa in whom attains the soul of the Ganika by means of Parakayapravesham (transmigration of soul) goes in for movements and expressions soaked in Laasya. In the second Act of Sakthibhadra’s play, Ascharyachoodamani \textsuperscript{25} categorized as Soorpanakhangam, the character, Soorpanakha appears in disguise as Lalitha. Laasya-bhava-s find the fullest expression in the words and actions of Lalitha who unabashedly longs for a husband; either Rama or Lakshmana. The role model of the Lalitha-s and Urvashi in Kath kali is ostensibly Lalitha in the Soorpanakhangam play.

Nangiarkutti
Nangiarkutti is the counterpart of Kutiyattam, the sole extant form of traditional Sanskrit Theater in India. Technically it is the ”Nirvahanam” (narration of an earlier story) of the Chedi (Sakhi), Kalpalathika in the Play, Subhadradhananjayam of King Kulasekhara (11th century AD). The Nirvahanam unfolds the story of Lord Krishna.\textsuperscript{26} As a solo theater performance, the Nangiar enacts multiple roles as she narrates through the fourfold concept of acting episodes such as Poothanamoksham (liberation of the demoness); Poothana/Kamsajananam (Birth of Kamsa)\textsuperscript{27}. In Nangiarkutti, the actress has the freedom and scope to enact female and male roles. She therefore covers a gamut of expressions such as love, lasya, heroism, contempt, anger and so on. Unlike as in Kutiyattam, the actress in Nangiarkutti does not enact through Vaachika abhinaya , the medium of speech. While the actress explicates the slokas elaborately through hand-gestures, body-movements and expressions, the Nangiar sitting on the right side of the stage recites the slokas afterwards. Mizhavu is the major percussion-instrument used. Eddayka, a gamaka-laden musical instrument, is played to augment the effect of the lasya-portions in Nangiarkutti. The performance would last for a little less than two hours. Nangiarkutti had been reduced to a ritual in the Kuttambalams of Kerala. In the last quarter century, it has registered considerable progress as a performing art thanks the contributions of a crop of young artists in the field.

Laasya - Mohini in Mohiniaattam
The word Mohini is synonymous with the term lasya. Episodes abound in the Epics and the Puranas in which Mohini appears as a major character. More often it is Lord Vishnu who disguises as Mohini. The movements and expressions of Mohini are invariably Laasya while her ultimate objective is to annihilate evil forces and re-establish order in the cosmos. Mohini, a celestial beauty, is a powerful female character in Rukmaangadacharitam, a popular play in Kathakali.

Features
Mohiniaattam is sole major female classical dance form of Kerala. Laasya forms its basis. The very first standing posture of the Mohiniyattam dancer is with one foot in Sama (Facing the front) and the other in Trayasra (till of the foot to one side). Both the hands are placed on the left side of the hip, a slight tilt of the neck and the body towards the right side, with eyes fixed to the ground and a smile tinted with shyness, depicts the Sukumara or the Laasya. Delicate and elegantly flowing body movements with simple yet gracefully depicted Bhaava-s constitute the essential characteristic of the dance. Swift movements with abrupt jerks/leaps and loud Bhaava-s are not appropriate to Mohiniyattam.

There are five basic stances called Mandalangal which include different bent-positions of the knees. The leg-movements comprise of delicate engaging of the feet with mellowed tapping while performing the Nritta or pure-dance. Every step follows a tender dipping and swaying of the body. The hand-movements include circular and sweeping movements called Valayam and Chuzhippugal of the arms and palms that softly open and close while executing the hand-gestures. The well-coordinated, flowing hand, torso and leg movements can be described in relation to the swaying of the coconut and palm trees and the green paddy fields to the gentle breeze. The eyes (Drishhti) are a salient feature of Mohiniaattam for conveying myriad moods of the Nayika (heroine) either by herself or by her Sakhi (friend). The expressions are subtle and sophisticated. The neck (Griva), eyebrows (Bhrikuti) and lips are used dexterously to complement the eye-movements and the overall expression. Though all the nine rasa-s or sentiments are adopted in Mohiniaattam, there is the predominance of Srngaura rasa (sentiment of love) and Rati bhaava(expression of love) that enhance the Laasya aspect of the dance form. However, with the underlying concept of the Union of the devotee with the Lord through the Naayaka-Naayika (hero- heroine) relationship, the emoting of the Srngaura rasa through Rati bhaava is done with composure and is devoid of any hyperbole. The irritation/discomfort shown by the Naayika towards her Naayaka arises either due to love or sense of dejection. Anger as such does not find any space here. Therefore, the Raudra rasa or the sentiment of fury through Krodha (anger) Bhaava, if necessary, is subtly communicated. So also, the Ashta naayika-s as depicted in the compositions of the Kerala composers find subtle and beautiful expressions in Mohiniaattam. Most of the traditional
Padams and Padavarnams adopted in Mohiniattam give ample scope for depicting srngara bhava through the depiction of different stages of the affliction of Kamadeva’s (Cupid) five Pushpabaana-s, the Cupid’s five arrows with love laden flowers, that cause ecstasy, fatigue, intoxication etc.

Like other dance forms the Ahaarya or the costume of Mohiniattam is in conformity with the regional identity or Pravritti. The traditional off white dress with golden brocade border and gold jewellery with hair tied to a bun on one side of the head adorned with jasmine flowers have a lot to do with the rather simple middle-class lifestyle of Kerala. Loka dharmi or the realistic mode of depicting moods and expressions do have a significant role in Mohiniyattam. The gestures and facial expressions are often closer to the natural (Graamya) and to the realistic (Laukika) than to the dramatic or rigidly conventional (Naatty). Greater emphasis is laid on lyrical expression than on the purely rhythmic aspect of dance. Movements are based on the Kaisiki vritti, the delicate and graceful style with Laasya as its most momentous virtue.

The vocal music of Mohiniaattam has undergone drastic changes over a long period of time. The Sopana-style of singing with its accent on the Gamaka-s and undulations are best suited to the Laasya-laden movements and expressions of Mohiniaattam. Raaga-s like Neelambari, Kurinji, Mukhari, Punnagavarali, Paadi, Purnaneer, Kambhoji adopted in Mohiniattam, provide ample scope for depiction of Vipralambha (love in separation) as well as the sambhoga sringaara(love in union). Consequent upon an irresistible influence of Karnataka Music, the singing style has undergone drastic changes. Instruments like Toppi Maddalam, Mukha vina and harmonium have been replaced with Mridangam, Maddalam, Idakka, Kai mani, Vina, Violin and Flute.

Analysis of Laasya in a Padam(a musical form ideally suited for abhinaya or expressive dance)

(Based on the Author’s video clipping)

link (https://youtu.be/kfdloqxneps)

Padam(lyrics) - Innu mama bhaagya taru, Raaga—Kambhoji
Composer — Swaati Tirunnaal Taala—Khanda chaapu

a Sambhoga srngara (love in Union) composition—depicts the union of the Naayaka and the Naayika

Lyrics

Pallavi (commencing section)
Innu mama bhaagya taru ullaasicchu phalicchu param
Ennu manye bata saampradam II

Anupallavi (intermediary section)
Pannagendra sayana shri padmanaabha bhavan ingu.
Vann adinaal ende savidhe jeevesa II

Charanam (concluding section)
Sarasbaaalyam tudarnu mama sravan kupa yugalam
Tava catura guna sudha atinal bharitamaaka kaaranam II
Mamata bhavaanil mama parinicodu vannudicchu
Dvigunamaayi vilangunu jeevesha II

Meaning

Today the tree of my fortune has borne fruits and fulfilled itself,
Oh! Lord with your sudden appearance at my door step,
Oh! Lord Padmanabha, who rests on the serpent bed,
you who have come to me, have given me overwhelming joy and happiness.
The heartening hearsay about your great virtues,
has been filling my ears from my childhood to my youth
and my affection towards you has grown many folds.
Give me today my Lord, the Nectar hidden bliss
from your lotus like face.

The Padam is preceded by a brief prelude to the actual commencement of the dance with Naayika seated, holding a letter she intends to send to her beloved, on hearing a knock at the door, moves towards the door, opens to find the unexpected appearance of Lord Padmanabha. The splendour of His beauty is absorbed through gradual gazing. This prelude establishes the sentiment of delight and love inherent in the Padam.
The Padam depicts the complete surrender of the bhakta (devotee) to Padmanabha (Lord Vishnu), through the Naayaka – Naayika relationship (the Naayaka is the beloved Lord Vishnu and the Naayika is the bhakta

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or the devotee). A Vaasaka sajjika naayika (one of the eight categories of heroines, she awaits the arrival of her beloved. The tempered sentiment of Sambhoga sringaara or intense love expressed for the ultimate Union depicts her as an Uttama naayika, a virtue of the superior heroine, who does not express her feelings explicitly but mainly through Saattvika abhinaya (external manifestations of internal feelings), with subtle gestures and expressions. Her gestures adopt both Loka dharmi (realistic mode of expressions) and the Naayya dharmi (conventional mode of expressions), with a predominance of the former while doing the Sancara bhaava-s (improvisations). With Rati or love as the Sihaayi bhaava (ending mood), various Sanchaari bhaava-s or Vyabhichaari bhaava-s (transitory expressions) are depicted that begin first with the expression of Vismaya(wonder) at the unexpected appearance of Naayaka, the eyes then admiring his exuberant form, experience Jadata or stupefaction as if in a dream. Jerking herself back to reality on realising his presence and hiding the letter she had intended writing to him, she invites Him, unabatedly. She tries ways to appease by seating Him comfortably, washing His feet, offering a tumbler of milk with a bashful look and finally folding both hands in Anjali mudra, she bows with reverence in Lajjaanvita drishti, eyes expressing shyness.

The dancer now commences the Padam with the mudras that express the Padaarthaabhinayana or word meaning of the line. She moves with backward movement of feet in Naagabandham or Sarpa paadam, the sliding gait of the serpent to finally stand in a static position. The body moves in Valanam (swaying movement) before showing the mudra, the hand gesture, that expresses happiness. The gleaming wide eyes gradually move down in Lajjaanvita drishti or gaze reflecting shyness. The Romance or a thrilling joy at finding her Lord near her is shown through the slight shaking of the shoulder. Graceful movements with enhanced eye expressions and appropriate hand gestures or mudra-s are adopted while addressing Him as Laxmi-s (consort of Vishnu) her beloved husband.

In the Charanam (the last section of the composition), the dancer improvises upon the literary meaning of the section. She first depicts herself as a child who beckons her friends in the Loka dharmi style (natural expression), to play with her, paying no heed to the name of Krishna that falls onto her ears. From a playful childhood into a youthful maiden she, elucidates the Uttama naayika, the heroine who refrains from usage of bold gestures, as she beckons her friends. Her youthful self is now drawn towards the name of Krishna and listens with intent and alertness about His gloriously handsome self and stories of his dalliances with maidens and others amorous pursuits. With deep yearning for Him, she moves forward with eyes that finally depict the expectancy of the fulfilment of the final Union. The entire movement depicts the Sringaara and Laasya bhaava.

Conclusion

An overview of Kerala’s classical performing arts in general and Mohiniyattam in particular reinforces the scope and significance of Laasya. Although Laasya is integral to Sringaara, it is primarily associated with feminine charm and beauty. Jerks, abrupt twists and turns are outside the realms of Laasya. It implies the spontaneous flow of romantic sentiments corresponding to the codified movements of the dancer/actor. Though its outer layer is sophisticated its interiors might be smouldering with inexplicable passion, longing and disillusionment based on the characters and the contexts. In short Laasya is an all pervading phenomenon in the traditional performing arts of Kerala. In a dance-form like Mohiniyattam, its pre-eminence is self-explanatory. While the article touches up on the manifold functions of Laasya in the performing arts of Kerala with special reference to Mohiniyattam, the attached video-clipping of the performance of a select item is intended to establish the interrelation between the theory and practice of Laasya simultaneously highlighting its multiple manifestations.

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