

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 *Taanḍava* (vigorous). *Naatyashastra* speaks of dance as 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 *Mohiniattam*, 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 *Mohiniattam*, I have also analysed a *malayala padam* from the perspective of *Laasya*.

Key-words: *laasya*, *taanḍava*, *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 *Taanḍava*’ performed by Shiva and his followers. (Williams, 2002, p 899)¹

The word is derived from the root ‘*las*’ meaning to play or frolic and is also a mutual state of attraction between a man and a woman. Abhinava gupta explains ‘*lasna*’ as ‘*krida*’ or a dance which is sportive in nature. (Tarlekar)²

‘*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 Shaastra (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.

Maayapiidam smritam nrittam sandhyaakaaleshu nrityata

Naanaakaranasamyuktair angahaarair vibhushitam (Unni ,2019)³ 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 vrutti* as; *Narma* (Pleasantry), *Narmasphinja* or *Narmasphunja* (Beginning of Pleasure), *Narmasphota* (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*.

*drstaa mayaa bhagavato neelakanthasya nrtyatah/
kaisiki slaksnanaipathya srngaararasasambhava//* (Unni,2019)⁴

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 Dipti* , *Maadhurya* , *Lalita* , etc

Sloka – Shobha kaantisca diptisca tathaa maduryameva ca I

Dhairyam praagalbhyam audaaryamityete syurayatnajaaha II⁵ (Unni ,2019)

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

Sloka - geyapadam sthitapaathyam aasinam pushpagandikaa

pracchedakam trimudham ca saindhavaakhyam dvimudhakam

uttamottamakam caiva muktapratyuktamevaca

laasyam dasavidham hyetat anga nirdesalakshanam⁶ (Unni , 2019),

Abhinavagupta too elucidates *Sukumaaraprayoga* 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 cittasamsaleshaha striyaha pumsi

tasya vaa tasyaam bhaavaha I

Stripumsetyabhidaane tu sringaara eva samgrahiito bhavet

tena laasam arahati sadhu laasyam II⁷ (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 Puraana*(VDP), a text written immediately after the NS but ahead of *Abhinava Bharati*, dance or *Nritya* relies on *Naatya* and *Laasya*. *Naatya* and *Laasya* are categorised into two, *Aabhyantara* (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*.

nrittam tu dvividham proktam natyalaasyaasrayam sada (Shah.1990)⁸

According to the text , the *Sukumaara* or the delicate movements of the limbs is '*caari*', while the forceful use of the same is '*Mahaacaari*' . *Nritya* 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 Shastra* ,which does not specify the genders but relates only to the characters.

The 10th CE text, *Abhinayadarpana*, of Nandikeshwara 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*. *Naatyam* 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 pujiyam purva kathayutam

Bhavaabhinayahiinantu nrittamityabhidhiyate

*Rasabhavvynjanadiyuktamnrittamitiiryate*⁹

The term *laasya* or *Sukumaara prayoga* in the *Shringaaraprakaasa* of Bhoja, is used for expressing *Bhaava* along with mild and graceful movements. It denoted at first, dance without gestures, *Nritta*. 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*. (Raghavan, 1978)¹⁰

Nrittaratnavali (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 schematized grammar) and the *desi* (changes in accordance with the taste of the people) The author, Jaaya, defines 46 *Laasyanga*-s¹¹ (Rao, Thakore, 2019) exclusive to dance as applicable to *Aangikaabhinaya*. There are many *desi Laasyanga*-s in it similar to the movement-dynamics in *Mohiniaattam*.

Desi laasasya bhedaanaam ,prasidhaanaam samaasataha I

Pravyaktaani vidhaasyaamah ,laksanaanyadhunaa vayam 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 *Nritta*, *Nritya* and the *Naatya*. To Saarangadeva, both *Nritta* and *Nritya* can embody *Taanadava*, the vigorous as well as *laasya*, the graceful movements *Taanadava* exemplifies *Uddhata* (forceful) while *Laasya* epitomizes *Lalita* (delicate) movements. Saarangadeva also describes 10 *desi Laasyanga*-s viz. *Chaali*, *Chalivaada*, *Ladhi*, *Suuka*, *Uroongana*, *Dhasaka*, *Angahaara*, *Oyaaraka*, *Vihasi* and *Mana*. (Raja, Burnier, 1976).¹³

Laasya – Dancers' Discernments

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 *Sthaanaka* 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 *Laasyang*.

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 Vamachala* position – the torso deflected to the right side with a curve forming on the left side

Griva – the neck tilted so the head is placed diagonally to the left, thereby providing the possibility of *Tiraschina* movement

: *Drishti* - 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 *Mushthi* or *Shikhara 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 *Bharatanatyam*, 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, *lāsyā* 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 *Bhaarati* (verbal), *Saattvati* (grand), *Kaisiki* (delicate) and the *Aarabhathi* (energetic) as explained in the *Naatyā Shāstra*. As against the *Taandava* (frantic and vigorous dance), *Laasya* is defined as delicately executed dance unfolding the multiple shades of *Sringāra 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 *Cilapaddikaaram* and *Manimekhalai* 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 reveals the dancer *kandukavati* who excelled in the art of *laasya* dance, especially the *kanduka nritya*, dancing with the ball, which has been beautifully interwoven into the female dance as *Pandaattam* in *Krshanaattam*, *Kathakali*, *Nangiaar 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 nrityams*. Dandi, the author of *Dasakumara charitam*, was familiar with many *stree nrityam-s* (female dances) of even adjoining regions which helped him in describing the *Kanduka nrityam*. The playing technique of *Pandaattam* has been described in the *Bhagavathy stuti*. Dances like *Unjaal aattam*, *Pandaattam*, *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)¹⁴

Krishnanaattam

Literally *Krishnanaattam* is dancing the life-story of Lord Krishna. The episodes staged in this dance-heritage range from the Lord’s *Avataaram* (birth) to his *Swargaarohanam* (flight to heaven). (Purushotaman .A, Harindranath, 2005)¹⁵. 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* (prettification 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)¹⁶

Kathakali

Kottarakkara 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 *Hidumbi*, the female-demon, in disguise, *Lalitha* in the play, *Kirmeeravadhom*, is *Simhika*, the female-demon, in disguise. (Venugopalan, 2017)¹⁷ 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, *Narakaasuravadhom* of king by Karthika Thirunal (Venugopalan, 2017)¹⁸ 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)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 princesses 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*, 'Nallaarkulam' addressing *Paanchaali* (the wife of the five paandava-s) in the play *Krimeeravadhom* 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 taala*(a 14 beats rhythm cycle). *Lalitha* in the play, *Narakaasuravadhom*, 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, *Uttaraaswayamvaram*, has an enticing dance piece soaked in *Laasya* called *Kummi* performed by maidens 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 *Kalyaanasaugandhikam* and *Kiraatham*, the *Thullal* artiste does *Pakarnnaattam* (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)²⁰. *Dhananjayam*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)²² an act by which the *Naayaka*, the hero shows the hand-gesture and expression of *Kaamadeva* (*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*,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. The sheer magic of *Pakarnanaattam* (One and the same actor enacting multiple roles) makes the *Prekshakaa-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 *Nalacharitham* Day II, the motivation from *Kutiyaattam* is clearly discernible.

Bhagavadajjukam,²⁴ the farce of *Bodhayana*, carries several *Laasya* sequences. Apart from the relatively popular *Udyaanavarnana* (description of the garden) by the two *Ganika*-s (courtesans), *Vasanthasena* and *Parabhrithika*, the *Sanyaasin* who 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*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 the *Lalitha* in the *Soorpanakhangam* play.

Nangiaar Kuthu

Nangiarkuttu 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.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)²⁷. In Nangiarkuttu, 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 Nangiarkuttu 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 Nangiarkuttu. The performance would last for a little less than two hours. Nangiarkuttu 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 Mohiniattam

The word Mohini is synonymous with the term *laasya*. 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

Mohiniattam is sole major female classical dance form of Kerala. *Laasya* forms its basis. The very first standing posture of the Mohiniattam dancer is with one foot in *Sama* (facing the front) and the other in *Trayasra* (tilt 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 *Sukumaara* 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 Mohiniattam.

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 (*Drishti*) are a salient feature of Mohiniattam 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 Mohiniattam , there is the predominance of *Sringaara 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 *Sringaara 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 Mohiniattam. 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 (*Graamy*) and to the realistic (*Laukika*) than to the dramatic or rigidly conventional (*Naatya*). 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 Mohiniattam underwent tremendous changes over a long period of time. The Sopaana-style of singing with its accent on the *Gamaka*-s and undulations are best suited to the *Laasya*-laden movements and expressions of Mohiniattam. *Raaga*-s like *Neelamabari*, *Kurinji*, *Mukhari*, *Punnagavarali*, *Paadi*, *Purnaneer*, *Kambhoji* adopted in Mohiniattam, provide ample scope for depiction of *Vipralambha* (love in separation) as well as the *sambhoga srngaara* (love in union). Consequent upon an irresistible influence of Karnaatak 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*,
Composer - Swaati Tirunaal

Raaga - *Kaambhoji*
Taala - *Khandha chaapu*

a *Sambhoga srngaara* (love in Union) composition - depicts the union of the *Naayaka* and the *Naayika*

Lyrics

Pallavi (commencing section)

innu mama bhaagya taru ullasicchu 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)

sarasa baalyam tudarnu mama sravan kupa yugalam
tava catura guna sudha atinaal bharitamaaka kaaranam II
mamata bhavaanil mama paricinodu vannudicchu
dvigunamaayi vilangunnu 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

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 *Naaty dharmi* (conventional mode of expressions), with a predominance of the former while doing the *Sancaari bhaava-s*(improvisations) . With *Rati* or love as the *Sthaayi bhaava* (enduring mood), various *Sancaari 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 *Padaarthaabhinaya* 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 *Romanca* 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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