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Concepts Of Āhwānā And Āvāhanā

‘Inviting’ and ‘Being’ in Nātya

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The fact that Bhāratīya Nātya (classical dances and theatre of India) grew in the precincts of temple spaces, has given them a particular quality both in content and presentation where it is beyond just an audio visual presentation or entertainment. There are so many beliefs that are further than tangible, physical and logical understanding of things due to this connection.

The Universe and the human body

Siddar poems (poems of mystical saints in Tamil) have a saying,

‘aNDattil uLLatu piNDattil AmE..’,

which compares the universe and the human body. This verse means, ‘whatever is present in the universe is found in the human body’. Further connection is to the ‘pañca bhūta’, the five prime elements of nature.

The five prime elements are believed to have taken a physical being in a particular order. That is:

Space – Air – Fire – Water – Earth

The five elements also connect with five senses in the human body. Space is for hearing; Air is for touch; fire is for sight; water is for taste and earth is for smell. The awareness of the surrounding gives human existence a connect to the vast universe.

Sciences like Ayurveda, mention about the presence of the pañca bhūta in the human body. Due to this presence, the body is active and the man who is alive is able to activate the physical body as desired by him. The senses and activities together facilitates human life in various planes: physical, mental, emotional, evolutionary and spiritual.

Temple and Human Body

Humans have been given the senses of touch, sight, smell, feel and sound to understand things around them. Beyond mere understanding, philosophical & aesthetical schools indicate the possibility and necessity to travel beyond the senses, to understand the absolute truth, ‘Brahman’ which is also known as bliss or ‘ānanda’.

Amidst the various parts of the body, like the head, hand, leg, etc., the life force or ‘ātman’ (soul) is the one which keeps the body alive. Similarly the manmade structure of a temple becomes alive when the deity installed becomes ‘live’. The temple space includes different parts of the structure: kalasa (crest), gōpura (tower), prakāra (circumambulatory path), garbha-griha (literally means womb place; here refers to the sanctum sanctorum where the main deity is installed) etc. The space and the building structure earn a value only when the main ‘vigraha’ or icon of God is installed. The human body is often compared to a temple structure.

The Indian philosophical systems point out the connection of the soul to the absolute. The human soul is understood as a fragment of the Divine soul. The soul that gets 'enshrined' in the human body therefore instinctively becomes aware of the aspects 'separation' and 'unison'. There is forever a longing to 'go back' or 'to unite' with the absolute.

Dancer's Body as a Temple Structure

Many of our scriptures mention the body as a house and the soul resides in the 'house' for a given time. The Ātman (soul) is a fragment from the Supreme soul and if there is enough divine grace, it turns to be a seeker, realises and makes all attempts to go back to its origin, the Supreme. It is told that this merger gives supreme bliss and the seeker constantly looks forward to this happening.

Aim of Natya is 'rasa', making the bliss happen. The angika (movements and gestures), vacika (audible) and Aharya (decorative) aspects come together and trigger the satvika (emotional) element both in the Dancer and Rasika (who needs to be a Sahrdaya. Sahrdaya is one who is empathetic to a performance). In Natya, the (classical) dancer decorates herself with ornaments like sun, moon, stars that are symbolic of the cosmic energy. There are also motifs like serpent, peacock, swan, etc which represent various beings and energies.

Natya is called pañcama veda and has the extract of chosen elements from all the other four vedas. A sahrdaya, without any attempt to know or soak in vedic knowledge, can still derive the 'ānanda' – just by watching natya.

The 'Live' Factor

What is the connection between the deity in the temple and atma in a being? In this connection, philosophical thought operates in two levels. The 'Doer' and the 'Done'. The two sides of operation perhaps complete a cycle.

There is a superpower and there is equipment that needs or uses the superpower. To make an electrical equipment work, we need to connect with electricity. To make our cellphones respond to network, our phone battery and the network need to be alive.

In philosophic terms, the paramātma and jeevāthma are understood as 'one' and wish to be connected with each other. Anytime the bond splits, the circle is understood as incomplete. As much as the Bhakta (devotee/jeevathma/nāyika) has the longing, so much so, the Universal Power (God/ Paramatma/ Nayaka) also awaits the return or merger. This cosmic truth in our belief is reflected in various aspects of culture, rituals and also arts.

The Connection

There jeeva or bhakta should be blessed, to realise that he is part of the whole and not a solitary entity. When that blessing happens, the doer or a bhakta would realise that he/she needs to raise himself/herself beyond the five senses to a higher level of consciousness. When that happens, good thoughts and actions will be the life style of the jeeva. A state of attached detachment happens and all actions are directed towards duty, taking life as duty bound and trying to find the purpose of having been born as a human and to accomplish that duty.

Manifestation

Anything abstract or potential is not understood unless it manifests into a tangible or kinetic form. The earliest of our spiritual practices have been oriented towards 'thought' or 'meditation'. Meditating upon the cosmic truth or the cosmic power, was taught and practised. Later the need for an object, a form was found useful for such meditation. Instead of abstract or formless great power that is beyond one's understanding, a 'form' for such divine manifestation was thought of and icons and sculptures were made on those ideas.

Agama sastras came up, temple structures were built and the deity was installed. The design of such space and the activity of interaction of cosmic power and human belief were organised and followed. One such is the Sodasa Upacara, the 16 types of services that were done in temples. While small temples did not always do the 16 services, huge temples built on the lines of agama sastra followed them meticulously, wherein it is believed that the divine energy manifests in such created spaces.

Āhvāna & Āvāhana

These are two concepts in the idea of manifestation.

- Āhwāna: This includes - inviting, calling, making everything ready for the manifestation
- Āvāhana: This includes - invoking, happening, entering, being manifested

The process between āhvāna and āvāhana

In the agama sāstrās, we find mention of 16 types of upacāras (often known as services) between these two states of ‘inviting for manifestation’ and ‘being manifested’. The rituals of the upacāra-s make the manifestation complete. The belief is that, the super power that conducts the entire cosmos, has transcended into the space or idol making it live (alive)

The Sōdasa (16) upacāra-s

Sōdasa upacāras have been mentioned in various texts that connect with temple structures and temple rituals. They are:

Dhyāna	Meditating or invoking the Deity
Āvāhana	Inviting the deity into the sacred space, the ‘altar’
Āsana	Offering a seat to the deity to be seated
Pātya	Washing the feet of the deity
Arghya	Offering water to the deity to wash hands
Ācamana	Giving water to drink
Snāna	Bathing the deity with water and various other special things
Vasthra	Adorning the deity with clothes
Yagnopavīta	Adorning the deity with ornaments and the sacred thread
Gandha	Adorning the deity with fresh sandalwood paste
Pushpa	Offering, adorning the deity with various fresh flowers and chants
Dhūpa	Offering of incense smoke
Dīpa	Waving the lamp along with adulations
Naivēdya	Offering of food
Tāmbūla	Offering of betel nut and leaves
Pradakshina	Circumambulating and prostrating with due respect

There are minor variations in the 16 upacaras. In many practices, during the sāyarakasha time (evening service in temple) ‘geetam, vadhya and nr̥ttam’ are done when the Deity is brought to ‘sabha’ and where He gives audience to his devotees.

When we visit a friend's place or a new place, we feel comforted with words of welcome, fan, water, food and relaxing space. Similarly, the *bhakta* considers God as a very special guest and tries to make a space of ease - invites the deity, offers all comforts - so that, the guest feels special and is happy to stay in that space and resonates grace to everyone.

Performer – Narrator or Narrative?

A priest in a temple, who is in close communion with the divine energy, serves as a link between the Superpower and the seeker. Similarly the practitioner of nātya serves as the link between the concept/subject and the audience. The intention and final goal are the same – ‘Rasa’

Similar to the manifestation of divine energy in temples, ‘rasa’ has to happen in a performance. There is a transfer of ‘creative idea’ from the creator to performer and then to the sahrīdaya and thus it is a process. In this process a communication, translation (thought to poetry; poetry to music; music to natya; natya to

audience's understanding) is taken up by the performer who presents natya on stage. The performer uses abhinaya (with four limbs – āngika, vācika, āhārya and sāvika) to make this communication complete. The concept or idea is translated using sound, lyric, music, rhythm, gestures and facial expressions to make the communication seamless and effective.

In this process there are two dimensions. One, the performer can choose to **indicate** or narrate the concept. Two, the performer can **transform** or become the concept itself. The indication-transformation can also be called as 'narrator-narrative' concept.

Bliss and Rasa

'Rasa' / 'rasa-anubhava' is often referred as akin to 'brahmānanda'. This is like Supreme bliss, similar to a spiritual experience, past physicality of this world. A rasika (audience, spectator) can watch and enjoy a performance or get involved in the story or merge (by the activity of mind and not the physical body) into all that is happening on stage. In such cases, there is a possibility that the rasika could go past the real self, or the artist, or artistry and travel beyond mere understanding or entertainment and finally arrive at 'ananda'. There is nothing that cannot be represented in Natya. It is a world by itself. A created world, represented world with all its complexities. In this world of complexities, if the rasika identifies it with himself, then a mental transportation takes place from the audience seat, to the presentation space. Thereafter the possibility and probability to happening of rasa, bliss, ananda is definite.

Āhvāna and the Rasa happening

To make rasa happen, the *sādhaka* (sincere practitioner), should travel past the plane of 'āhvāna' and move to the plane of 'āvāhana'. In Natya terms, it can also be cited as, travel past nritya and move into the realm of natya. In nritya the dancer can stay away from the core substance and inform the sahrdaya, the idea of the piece that is being presented. In natya, the dancer moves in to the substance itself and makes it available directly to the sahrdaya.

When the presence of a character is seen and felt by the sahrdaya, it is beyond the physicality of the dancer. It crosses gender, colour, height, weight, age of the dancer and only the character portrayed, is sensed. This is beyond the mundane five senses and happens when the sahrdaya allows the mind to actively participate. Thereby, creating a space for rasa *nispattih* (the rasa happening).

The line dividing āhvāna and āvāhana is subtle and but definite, but the effects are way different. Here is how they can be identified

Āhvāna	Āvāhana
Calling	Manifesting
Indication	Transformation/becoming
Nritya	Natya
Simple communication	Multilayered communication
Imitation	Experienced presentation
Operating with āngika, vācika, āhārya	Operating with sāvika aided by āngika, vācika and āhārya
Narrator, Narration	Narrative, Narrated
Making audience understand	Making audience feel
Observing, observation	Participating, participation

Āhvāna and Āvāhana in Temple ritual:

In temple rituals, the divine energy is invited/invoked (āhvāna) and made to reside in the icon enshrined in the sanctum sanctorum.

The priest or purōhit has certain preliminaries to follow, before such invocation. They are called nyāsa vidhi-s. This also include certain 'purification' processes. The devatā-s cannot be invoked unless the body of the worshipper is endowed with divinity itself. The purōhit displays various mudras and gestures which

supposedly invoke different deities in various parts of the body. They sway or wave their hands over and around the body. A snap is also done with the fingers which is supposed to create mantric shields. This is a protection to the 'doer' which guards him against any malevolent entities in the physical and metaphysical realm disturbing the process.

After the rituals of āhvāna, the āvāhana follows. The divine energy is believed to now reside or manifest in the 'idol' and thus becomes 'God', where it is believed to be 'alive' with the divine energy. Thereafter there is no 'idol' it is only 'God'.

Āhvāna and Āvāhana in Natya presentation:

Nrta, Nrtya and Natya are three important facets of presentation, in a Bharatanatyam performance. Nrta is mostly with the body and movements. A nrta presentation brings to the eye, the joy of watching co-ordinated movements of the body, and communicates aesthetics of movement and punctuate rhythmic aspects and fluency and grace of the body. Nrtya is about simple communication through the face along with the hand gestures. In nrtya it is mostly word and sentence meaning that is taken forward by the dancer.

Natya on the other hand includes stories and characters. In such character play on the layers of situation, moods and emotions, the intensity of the communication is more than the word or sentence meaning. It has the capacity to draw the attention of the audience towards the feelings of the character, which they could identify with their own from past experiences.

While nrta and nrtya are oriented towards āhvāna, natya travels further to make āvāhana possible. The challenge of presentation increases step by step from nrta which is only body, to nrtya which connects hand gestures and facial expression and natya which connects further to inner being of a person. At such level, there is an extraordinary mind to mind communication that happens, where the physicality of the presenter merges with the qualitative aspect of the character and after a point, the physicality of the presenter is forgotten and only the character is perceived by a sahridaya.

With sustained sādhana (focussed practice) the performer can present mature abhinaya from āhvāna to āvāhana, from mere indication to elevating oneself to attain 'ānanda'. For this, the method of communication of the core concept should be channelized at the satvika plane. After all, sāvika is the core of one's being, the ātman itself.