

# Indian Classical Dance Forms (ICDs): Three Dimensions of Analysing Their Unity and Diversity

Mrs Ojasi Sukhatankar

Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Kendra, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India

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## Abstract

This article studies eight Indian classical dance forms (ICDs) with the help of ancient Indian theory of performing art comprised of the *Natyashastra* and *Abhinaya-Darpana*. The analysis shows how all ICDs enjoy the feature of 'unity in diversity', how all are united in theory and yet are diversified in practice. Each of the two attributes, 'unity' and 'diversity', are analysed in terms of three dimensions or aspects that stand as building-blocks for the art of dance (*nritya*). The three dimensions discussed are namely, technical (*nritta*), expressional (*natya*) and musical aspect (*geetam* and *vadyam*). The article gives illustrations and diagrammatic representations at appropriate places. It also reveals the interdependency of these three aspects and their inseparability from dance, throwing light on the huge scope for further analysis under this topic which is technically endless.

**Keywords:** Abhinaya-Darpana, Indian Classical Dance, Natya, Natyashastra, Nritta, Shastra

## Introduction:

Sangeet Natak Akademi (also called as the National Academy for Music, Dance and Drama) set up by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, has recognised India has eight classical dance forms. They come under a single umbrella term: Indian Classical Dance (henceforth referred as ICD). The eight ICDs originate from different states and communities of the nation and are named as follows.

1. Kathak from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan
2. Manipuri from Manipur
3. Odissi from Orissa
4. Kuchipudi from Andhra Pradesh
5. Bharatanatyam from Tamil Nadu
6. Kathakali from Kerala
7. Mohiniyattam from the borders of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and
8. Sattriya from Assam (Ministry of Culture, 2016)

Each of these dances has a uniqueness of its own. Each is vividly distinguishable from the rest all in terms of its traditional repertoire of dance-movements, dancing-style, conventional structure of performance, traditionally choreographed repertoire of dance-items, musical

accompaniment, and so on. And yet all the eight have strong commonalities among each other. That is, they all are thoroughly 'Indian' and 'classical' in their artistic spirit, their nature and culture, and their roots are founded in ancient Indian theory of performing arts (Massey, 1999; Garg 1996; Coomaraswamy, Duggirala, 1917). This theory is comprised of two treatises namely the *Natyashastra* and *Abhinaya-Darpana* [i].

In other words, all eight ICDs are like sister-dance-forms that originated from the lands of the same Mother India and yet are individual entities. They inherit from their motherland one of her prominent features; the feature of 'unity in diversity'. This article analyses this wonderful co-existence of unity and diversity of ICDs. Analysis of each, 'unity' and 'diversity', is done in regard with three dimensions or aspects which are the building blocks for the performing-art of dance (*Nritya*). They are;

1. Technical Aspect (*Nritta*)
2. Expressional Aspect (*Natya*), and
3. Musical Aspect (*Geetam* and *Vadyam*) [ii] (Nagar, 2011).

### Why are ICDs called *Shastriya Nritya*?

The original Sanskrit name for ICD is *Bharatiya shastriya nritya*. *Bharat* is the original name of India. *Bharatiya nritya* means Indian dance. However the word *shastriya* does not mean classical.

A classical art literally means a traditional art of a great quality, or, art which is historically well-established and cherished within a given community or society at large (Merriam Webster, 2016; Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). The term *shastriya* on the other hand comes from Sanskrit word *shastra* which means science. *Shastriya* then refers to that which is scientific in its nature. Considering India's centuries-old religious and cultural tradition of dance, ICDs are truly classical. However, when we look at them closely, one comes to know about their *shastriyattwa* or their scientific nature.

The *shastra* or science which is applied in all ICDs today comes from epics *Natyashastra* and *Abhinaya-Darpana*. The theory mentioned in these epics is truly scientific because it expounds all the three branches of performing art (dance, music and drama) in the manner of a logical, technical and methodical analysis. It studies all the three branches independently as well as interdependently. Although written thousands of years ago, this ancient theory of performing art is still found to be intrinsic to the practice of every ICD even today. This is because, it touches its subject-matter in the widest range and also analyses it in minutest detail. It coins numerous technical terms and ideas that are used by an individual artist or a group to express their art and communicate it to audience. It studies all the variety of elements that are required for successfully creating and performing an art-work in a theatrical environment. It studies dance from its technical aspect of mere bodily gestures (*nritta*), and at the same time it explains how drama (*natya*) and music (*geetam* and *vadyam*) are inseparably present in dance. What is pursued by dancers as their classical tradition is indeed this scientific nature of dance.

As already mentioned, all ICDs are rooted in this *shastriyattwa* or the scientific nature. This is now discussed in regard with all the three dimensions one by one.

### Technical Aspect (*Nritta Theory*) of ICDs:

*Nritta* is the technical aspect of dance that looks at dancer's bodily gestures without looking at its dramatic aspect (Bhate, 2004). It also does not focus on the musical aspect of bodily gestures such as tempo, rhythm et cetera. It rather focuses on, mainly, two things:

1. The actual gestures or movements that are danced, and
2. The dancer's body which executes those movements.

This study includes classification and nomenclature of various co-ordinated hands- and feet-gestures (*karanas*), walking manners (*chaari* and *gati*), pirouettes or spins (*bhramari*), and jumps (*utplawan*) that are used in dance (Bhagyalekshmy, 2005; Bhate, 2004). In connection to these movements, the *nritta* theory classifies human body into various major and minor body-parts (*ang*, *pratyang*, *upang*). This classification is done according to their overall usage in dance-movements. For example, in any dance-movement that is done by using arms, the use of arms themselves becomes primary, whereas shoulders, elbows and wrists move only in coordination with arms. Hence arms are classified as major body-parts (*ang*), whereas shoulders and wrists are categorised as secondary body-parts (*pratyang*). Lastly, fingers always contribute to the movement in a furthermore minute fashion and hence they are put under the category of minor body-parts (*upang*). (Bhate, 2004). In this way, this approach of analysis departs from the study of dance-movements and then gets linked with the study of human body.

Furthermore, the *nritta* theory elaborates in how many various ways each of such *ang*, *pratyang* and *upang* can be utilised in dance. Accordingly, each such manner of movement is given an appropriate nomenclature and description such as types of head-movement (*shiro-bhed*), eye-movement (*drushti-bhed*), usages of palms and fingers (*hasta-bhed* or *mudra*), and so on (Bhagyalekshmy, 2005; Bhate, 2004). This approach of study travels in opposite direction. It starts with the analysis of various body-parts and then joins the analysis with a variety of dance-movements.

This logical, methodical analysis of dance-movements and human body makes the nature of *nritta* truly scientific.

### **Expressional Aspect (Natya Theory) of ICDs:**

Whereas *nritta* includes the study of human body and gestures, *natya* includes the study of human emotions and personalities. It classifies emotions (*rasa*) or moods (*bhaav*) of a human being into eight states each [iii]. It intricately classifies male and female personalities based on various factors (*nayak-nayika-bhed*). This classification shows how persons of different type, age, nature and life-experience relate with others, and respond differently in different situations of life. (Rangacharya, 2010; Massey, 2004). This theory thus reveals its deeper understanding of human psychology, society, culture and life in general. It forms the aesthetic and expressional underpinning of all the themes and stories that are expressed in a performance.

The *natya* theory further deepens with the analysis of various ways by which the themes or stories can be effectively communicated to audience (*rasa-bhaav-vichar*). Under this study of effective communication, it classifies *abhinaya* (the art of expressing) into four parts namely bodily expressions (*angik*), spoken expressions (*vachik*), expressions through clothing and attire (*aharya*) and fourth, the inner state of moods and emotions which are held by the dancer during a performance (*sattwik abhinaya*) (Rangacharya, 2010).

In this way the *natya* theory of ICDs meticulously analyses both:

1. Critical study of man's individual and social psychology, and
2. Effective performance of themes or stories (*abhinaya*), and their successful communication to audience, through dance.

Finally, this scientific analysis of *natya* does not remain separate from the anatomical aspect of bodily movements (*nritta*). For example, the *Natyashastra* explains which type of bodily movement can be used to express what type of emotion. Some illustrations are: eyeballs moved

up and down rapidly (*anuvrutta drushti*) can be used to express anger towards another person, head bent downward (*adhomukha shira*) can be used to show sorrow, and so on (Dadhich, 2010; Bhate, 2004).

### **Musical Aspect (*Geetam* and *Vadyam* Theory) of ICDs:**

The Natyashastra gives a broad theory about both vocal / lyrical music (*geetam*) and instrumental music (*vadyam*). Under each, it provides numerous technical terms and explains their usage. All ICDs intricately adhere to a musical accompaniment that is rooted in these theoretical terms, such as *taal*, *laya*, *jaati*, *raga*, *swara*, *shruti*, *naad*, *dhwani* and so on. This study is so huge and intricate that most of these elements comprise a complete *shastra* or a theory in itself. Such theories are referred to as *taal-shastra* (science of *taal*), *swara-shastra* (science of musical notes) and so on (Ranjangaokar, 2005).

In case of dance, this musical aspect is inseparable from both other aspects: *nritta* and *natya*. That is, in any ICD performance, a dancer's gestures are always intricately synchronised with accompanying music. These gestures are choreographed on particular syllables. These syllables (*bols*) are pronounced vocally by an accompanying vocalist and are in a melodious harmony with the chief accompanying musical instrument. In cases where *natya* is to be expressed more predominantly than *nritta*, syllables are often replaced by lyrics which are often sung by an accompanying singer. In this way every traditional ICD-gesture remains inseparable from its music.

### **Practice of *Shastra* as Found in ICDs:**

As seen above, the science of ICDs is comprehensive. It studies all its aspects independently as well as interdependently, in its theoretical as well as practical detail of a dance-performance. Question arises at this junction; how could a variety of distinct dance-forms emerge whereas this theory is one and the same? In other words, how could diversity emerge from unity? Or, how is it that unity and diversity co-exist in all ICDs? The answer lies largely in the history of ICDs and, in the way they have been practised since their individual origins.

The birth and development of ICDs took place in different communities which were spread across the nation. The socio-cultural, religious, geographical, political, economic and linguistic settings of all these states or communities have been largely diversified. This in turn affected the way in which various ICDs developed in various states. Moreover, this development involved creative contributions from innumerable artists. This continued for many centuries. (Sardana, 2016; Anon, 2015; Venkataraman, Pasricha, 2002). Finally today, each ICD holds a unique identity of its own. That is, if all eight ICDs are performed on stage one after the other, the audience finds each ICD to be distinctly unique than all others in terms of dance-movements, dancing-style, structure of performance, choreography of dance-items, musical accompaniment, and so on. In view of this history and practice of ICDs, it sounds logical that a common theory practiced differently by different communities over a span of thousands of years could culminate into dance-forms that are totally unique in themselves and vividly distinguishable from one another.

These distinctions are found in all three aspects of ICDs: technical (*nritta*), expressional (*natya*) and musical (*geetam* and *vadyam*). It is not possible to list all distinctions as they are innumerable. Hence few samples are given below.

### **Illustrations from *Nritta***

1. *Greeva-Bhed*

The *nritta* theory identifies four types of neck-movements (*greeva-bhed*) in dance. One type is *sundari-greeva* which is to move neck sideways along the shoulder-line without turning head towards right or left (Anjali, 2010). This *greeva-bhed* is popular in both Bharatanatyam and Kathak. However in Bharatanatyam it is done with jerks, and eye-balls follow the neck-movement to look towards right and left corners as the neck shifts to extreme ends of the shoulder-line. In Kathak the same *greeva-bhed* is done as smoothly as possible, without any jerks, and eyes remain focussed in front. Both kinds of neck-movements, with and without jerk and eye-movement, are given a high aesthetic value in respective ICDs, although both ICDs use the same *sundari-greeva* in theory.

## 2. *Mudras*

The *nritta* theory lists numerous *mudras* or palm-poses that are used in dance (Anon-i, 2016). One can even say that, at any particular moment in a dance-item, whatever be the positioning of fingers done by a dancer, there exists a corresponding *mudra* already mentioned in the theory. This is true with all ICDs. Whereas *mudras* are theoretically common to all ICDs, their usage in each ICD is diversified. For example, the *alapadma mudra* is used in Bharatanatyam very often. It is rarely used in Kathak. *Pataka mudra* used in Bharatanatyam has a stiff palm unlike the same *mudra* used in Kathak. *Mrugasheersha mudra* is used in Bharatanatyam to show Krishna's flute whereas in Kathak it is done by using *Katakaamukha mudra*. Such examples are plenty.

Numerous such examples are found in regard with all the body-parts and dance-movements that are classified under the *nritta* theory.

## Illustrations from *Natya*

Artistic practice of the *natya* theory is found in all ICDs. This includes science of emotions and moods (*rasa-bhaav*), study of human personalities (*nayak-nayika-bhed*), study of four types of artistic expressions (*angik, vachik, aharya, sattwik*), and so on. Additionally, all ICDs depict stories and themes that come from Hindu religion and Mythology. Yet one sees a lot of diversity in the style of their depiction in dance. Below are some examples.

### 1. *Aharya Abhinaya*

*Aharya abhinaya* is the way of expressing emotions, moods or personality through clothing and attire. In Kathakali a dancer's role-play as a character of the story is displayed vividly through bold facial make-up, and colourful crowns, masks and costumes (Meaden, 2013). Manipuri dancers too use different clothing for the role-play of Krishna and that of *Gopis*, though their facial make-up is not as vivid as Kathakali dancers (Lorandou, 2012). Other ICDs have their unique and traditional attires as well. However, unlike Kathakali and Manipuri, they do not participate in deciding the expression of a particular emotion, mood or a personality. In other words, the use of *aharya abhinaya* is found to be predominant in Kathakali, moderate in Manipuri, and almost nil in other ICDs.

### 2. *Sattwik Abhinaya*

*Sattwik abhinaya* is the way of expressing emotions, moods and personality through an inner bearing, state or attitude (Isvaran, 2004). In Kathakali, a dancer plays the role of only one character in a dance-drama performance. In the Raas Leelaa of Manipuri too, one dancer plays the role of Krishna and others become *Gopis*. In these cases, one dancer bears only one character throughout a story or theme. On the other hand, in case of other ICDs which are predominantly solo performances, a single dancer enacts all the characters of a story or theme. Such solo dancers

then undergo a sequential variety of *sattwik abhinaya*-states during the performance of a single story or theme.

Finally, it must also be noted that the practice of *natya* in every ICD is inseparable from its *nritya* practice. That is, every expressive (*natya*) dance-gesture utilises the technical (*nritya*) aspect to more or less extent, and vice-a-versa. This intimate collaboration between the *natya* and *nritya* aspects of dance in turn enhances the uniqueness of every ICD.

### Illustrations from *Geetam* and *Vadyam*

The richness of scientific study of the musical aspect of dance is that it touches and analyses the most basic elements that act as building blocks for music, be it vocal, instrumental, or lyrical music with or without tune. The diversity found in musical aspect of ICDs is mainly in terms of the following.

1. Language of lyrics (Sanskrit / Regional language / Mixture of both) (Anon-ii, 2016)
2. Choice of instruments used for musical accompaniment (Anon-iii, 2016)
3. Choice of musical style (Hindustani / Carnatic / Mixture)
4. Simplicity / complexity of rhythmic varieties used in dance-movements
5. Intricacy of dance-movements with melody, rhythm and lyrics.

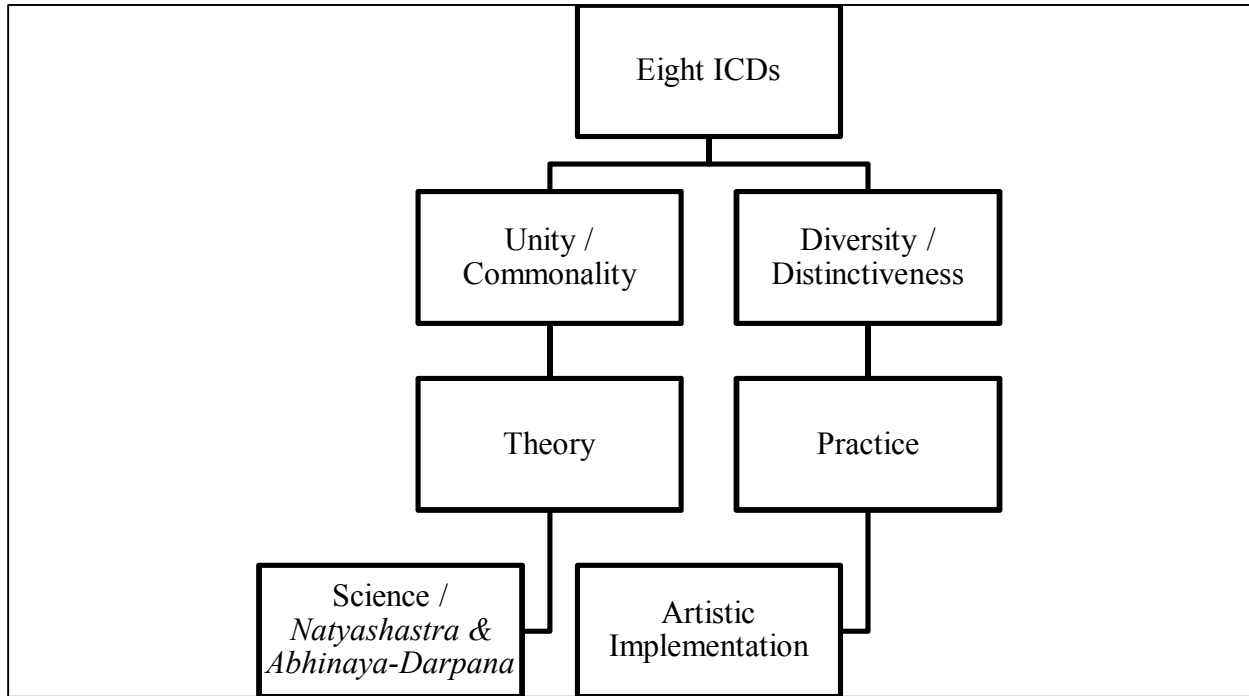
### Concluding Remarks:

Following conclusions can be drawn based on the analysis done in this article. Each remark is given a corresponding diagrammatic representation.

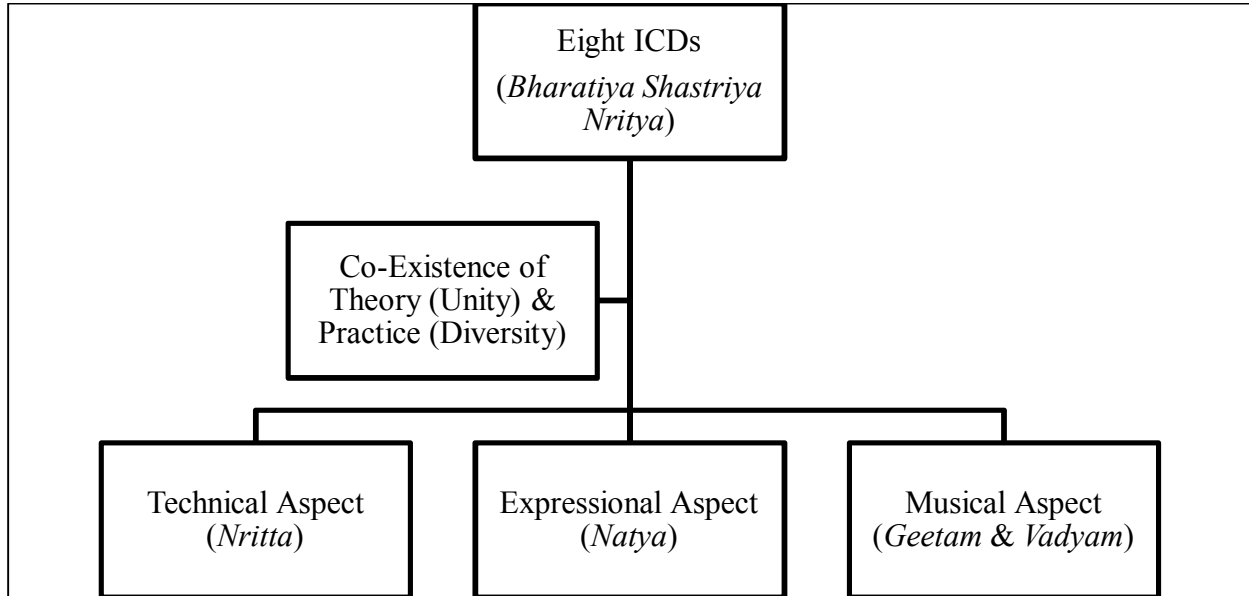
- The unity of all eight ICDs lies in their common theory; while the cause of their diversity is found in the way this theory was implemented during their artistic practices. (Fig. 1)
- Both, the unity and the diversity of ICDs co-exist. This co-existence is found in all the three dimensions which are the building blocks of ICDs, namely, the technical (*nritya*), expressional (*natya*) and musical (*geetam* and *vadyam*) aspects. The co-existence of unity and diversity is possible because the theory of a performing art like dance and its practice, both co-exist in actual dancing. (Fig. 2)
- These three aspects of ICDs are scientific in their theory (Fig. 3, Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). The scientific nature of this theory is such that it gives a large scope for its artistic and creative implementation in the practice of every ICD.
- Both in theory as well as in practice of ICDs, all the three aspects are interdependent on each other. This collective usage of *nritya*, *natya*, *geetam* and *vadyam* is rather inseparable from dance (*nritya*). (Fig. 6)

It is in this context that all eight ICDs are indeed sister-dance-forms whose origin is the same Mother India, and yet each ICD is distinctively unique in its own way.

**Diagrammatic Representations:**



**Figure 1: United in Theory; Diversified in Practice**



**Figure 2: Three Dimensions of Co-Existence of Theory (Unity) & Practice (Diversity)**

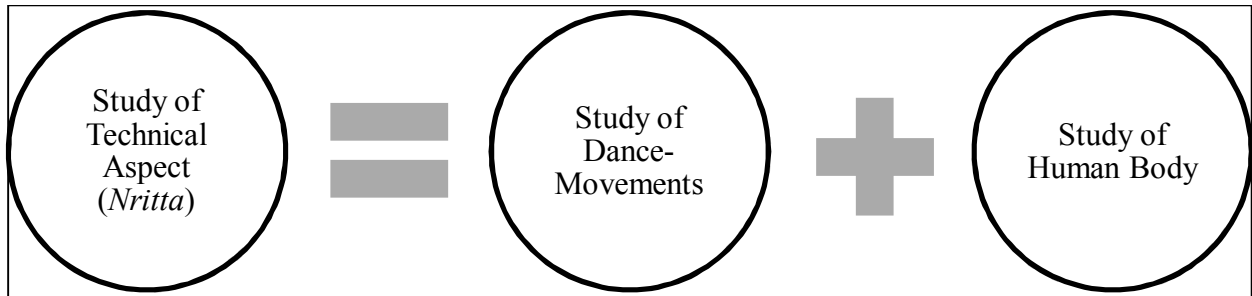


Figure 3: Scientific Nature of Technical Aspect of Dance

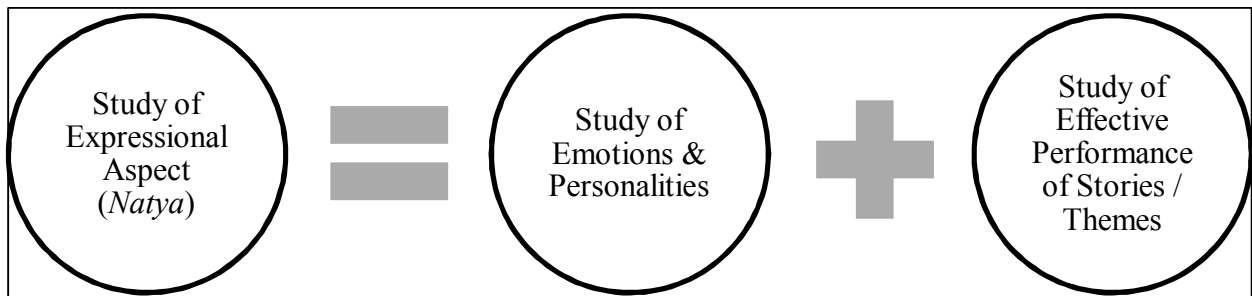


Figure 4: Scientific Nature of Expressional Aspect of Dance

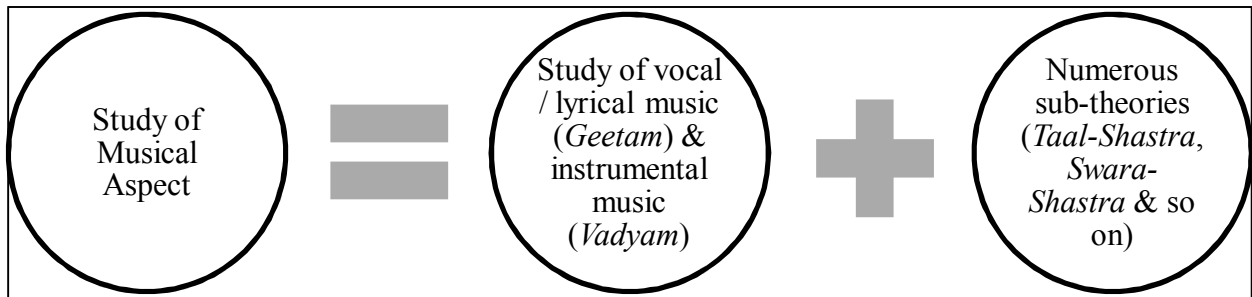


Figure 5: Scientific Nature of Musical Aspect of Dance

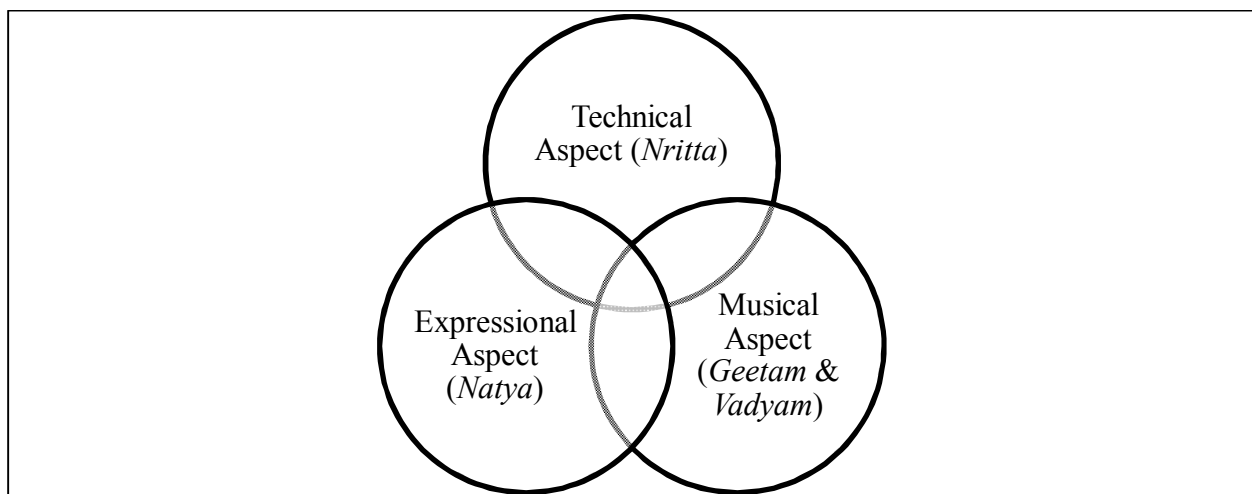


Figure 6: Interdependence of the Three Aspects and Their Inseparability from Dance



### Scope for Further Analysis:

The scope for such analysis is vast and unlimited. To give a glimpse, each of the eight ICDs can be analysed in theory and in practice each in terms of all the three technical, expressional and musical aspects. Additionally, any two or more ICDs can be studied comparatively in each or all of these aspects. Moreover, each ICD has undergone lot of changes since its birth many centuries ago. Each has evolved in terms of its repertoire of dance-movements and of dance-items. Each has modified itself to suite to the changing social and cultural norms at local, national and international levels. Partially affected by the appreciation and receptivity of audience that changed over this long span of time, ICDs have undergone enormous changes in their structure of performance, selection of dance-items, duration of performance, theatrical environment, choice of dancing-styles, and so on. All such factors have kept the tradition of ICDs ever-dynamic, making this analysis practically endless.

### Endnotes:

- i. The *Natyashastra* was written by Bharata between 2nd century BC and 3rd century AD; whereas *Abhinaya-Darpana* was written by Nandikesvara around the same time in the history of ancient India. Both treatises discuss the science of performing art.
- ii. More exact meanings of terms *Nritta*, *Natya*, *Geetam*, *Vadyam* and *Nritya* are scrupulously elaborated in the *Natyashastra* and *Abhinaya-Darpana*. However, to limit the scope of this article, these terms are used here only in context of dance.
- iii. 'Emotion' and 'mood' are only loose translations of Sanskrit terms *rasa* and *bhaav*. Eight *Rasas* are: *Sringara* (Enchanting beauty), *Hasya* (Laughter), *Raudra* (Fury), *Karunya* (Sorrowful compassion), *Bibhatsa* (Disgust), *Bhayanak* (Terror), *Veer* (Heroism), *Adbhuta* (Wonder). These eight *rasas* have corresponding eight *bhaavs*. There is also a ninth *rasa* called *shanta rasa* (peace).

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Mrs Ojasi Sukhatankar (Master of Arts in *Dance Cultures, Histories and Practices* from University of Surrey, Guildford, UK & Bachelor of Engineering from University of Pune, India) is a classical Kathak exponent, teacher, choreographer, performer, dance-critic and software engineer, with national and international experience.

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