
THE STUDY OF COMPOSITIONAL AND CHOREOGRAPHIC LEGACY OF NĀṬYĀCĀRYA H.R. KESHA VA MURTHY

Author Name

Lasya Priya Ravishankar

Postgraduate Student, Master of Performing Arts – Bharatanatyam

Jain University, Bangalore

lasyapriyaravishankar@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the compositional and choreographic legacy of Nāṭyācārya H.R. Keshava Murthy (HRK), a distinguished Bharatanāṭyam exponent whose innovative productions have left a lasting impression on Karnāṭaka's cultural heritage. With a repertoire of over thirty Nṛṭya Rūpaka-s covering historical, mythological, and social themes, HRK's work is distinguished by his ability to bring classical texts to life through dance, rhythm, and stagecraft. He has also composed a wide range of musical pieces for Bharatanāṭyam, including JatiSvaram-s, Varṇam-s, Tillāna-s, and thematic compositions. His choreographies, such as Mēgha Sandēśa, Pañcavaṭi, Sītārāma Kalyāṇa, Śrī Kṛṣṇa Tulābhāra, and Saṅgōḷli Rāyaṇṇa, reveal his sensitivity to literature and his skill in transforming textual material into compelling stage productions and exemplify a deep understanding of narrative, aesthetics, and structure. These productions have not only entertained audiences but also educated and inspired dancers, helping sustain and renew Karnāṭaka's Bharatanāṭyam tradition.

The primary objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive overview of his contributions and to analyze his choreographic style through the lens of Caturvidha Abhinaya. Focusing especially on Āṅgika (movement and gesture), Vācika (music and verbal expression), and Āhārya (costume and visual elements). The paper also highlights the specific innovations in technique and presentation found in a few select productions. A descriptive and analytical methodology is adopted through the study of archival video footage, personal interviews with his students and review of documentary materials.

The findings highlight HRK's enduring legacy and the relevance of his artistic vision and uniqueness in each of the dance drama and how his works continues to serve as a valuable reference for performers and scholars, especially through his lesser known yet unique compositions that offer rich possibilities for performance and study. One can also observe the wide range of productions he created across diverse

themes an achievement that reflects a lifetime of consistent artistic dedication. His dance dramas reveal numerous special features that enhance effectiveness, including creative innovations in Āṅgika, Vācika, and Āhārya, and his attention to even the smallest choreographic and theatrical details. This research contributes to preserving and promoting the work of one of Karnāṭaka's most prolific and visionary dance artist.

Keywords

Bharatanatyam, H.R. Keshava Murthy, Dance Drama, Caturvidha Abhinaya, Kannāḍa Literature, Kṛṣṇa Tulābhāra, Jaṭāyu Mokṣa, Śilābālika,

Introduction

Late Nāṭyacārya Nāṭya Vidvān Guru Sri H.R. Kēśava Mūrṭhy was born in a village known as Hocihalḷi of Cikkamagaḷūr district of Karnāṭaka as the son of B. Ramaswamaiah and Seetamma. Having completed his primary education in his own village, he continued his general education in Tumkūr and Maisūr. Besides his general education, he started learning Vocal Music, flute under eminent Guru-s and started giving concerts. Having developed the interest in dance, he came to Bangalore and started learning Kathak under guru Sohanlal and later he learnt Bharatanāṭyam under Naṭṭuvaṇār Śrī Gundappa.

H.R. Keshava Murthy's contributions to dance repertoire are invaluable, reflecting his artistry and dedication. In 1966–67, he composed a JatiSvaram in thirty-five tāla-s, showcasing his rhythmic mastery. His works include Śabdham, Varṇamm, Tillāna, and Śṛṅgāra Padam-s bringing new dimensions to dance. One of his compositions is a Varṇam based on the Kāḍu Mallēśvara temple in Mallēśvara and is composed in Kannāḍa. Navarasa Rāmāyaṇa is a unique composition which showcases the Navarasa-s with reference to Śrī Rāma. He has also composed a Tillāna in which a rare Sāhitya based on Bēlūru Cenna Keśava is included.

In 1949, H.R. Keshava Murthy founded Keshava Nritya Shala, initially teaching both Kathak and Bharatanāṭyam before dedicating himself solely to Bharatanāṭyam. He has trained over Five Thousand students. many of whom are now leading dancers and teachers, and presented numerous performances in India and abroad at the invitation of various organizations. His institution was awarded a gold medal by the Mysore Pradesh Congress Committee in 1961. In 1995, he launched the Kannāḍa Kavi Kavya Paramapare series, showcasing Kannāḍa literary works through dance drama. He founded the Karnāṭaka Nrityakala Parishath in 1979 to promote unity and growth in the classical dance field, organizing major festivals. HRK also served in the Karnāṭaka Saṅgīta Nrītya Academy, chaired the Bharatanāṭyam syllabus

committee of the Karnāṭaka Secondary Education Examination Board, and led Vidwath Bharatanatyam examinations. He delivered numerous lectures, published the book *Nāṭya Vicāra Saṅgraha*, and celebrated his institution's golden jubilee in 1998–1999 with year-long festivals featuring over 500 dancers in 50 events, honoring eminent artists.

Literature Survey Review of Literature

Two key sources provide valuable insights into the life and works of H.R. Keshava Murthy.

A biographical book on H.R. Keshava Murthy offers a detailed account of his achievements, contributions to Bharatanatyam, and his role in enriching the field of classical dance through his institution, Keshava Nritya Shala. The book highlights his artistic journey, choreographic innovations, and the recognition he and his institution have received over the decades.

The dissertation titled 'An Avalokana of the Initial Productions from Kannāḍa Kavi Kavya Parampara' by Ashwini Sukeerti focuses on selected dance dramas from the Kannāḍa Kavi Kavya Parampara series. The study aims to critically compare the original Kāvya texts with their adaptation into dance dramas, examining both the fidelity to the original literary works and the creative liberties taken in their stage presentation. It provides an analysis of how the literary essence of the Kāvya-s has been interpreted, transformed, and communicated through the medium of dance.

Methodology / Approach

This research adopts a descriptive and analytical approach:

- Analytical study of selected video recordings of HRK's productions.
- Interviews with his son B.K. Ravishankar, students, and artists who were a part of his productions
- Review of archival material, including documentary footage, articles, and the books such as *Keshavaya Tubhyam Namaha*.

Analysis, Results & Discussion

1. Pañcavaṭi (Jaṭāyu Mokṣa)

In the Ramayana recitation, Lava and Kuśa, deeply immersed in devotion, earnestly request their revered teacher Vālmīki to narrate the episode that took place in Pañcavaṭī during the Araṇya Kāṇḍa. This includes the disfigurement of Śūrpaṅakhā by Lakṣmaṇa at the command of Rāma, Śūrpaṅakhā's flight to Laṅkā and

her provocation of Rāvaṇa to abduct Sītā, Rāvaṇa's evil intention taking root, and the episode of Mārīca assuming the form of a golden deer.

As the illusory deer appeared before Sītā, Rāma, and Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā, captivated by its charm, asked Rāma to fetch it. Rāma pursued and ultimately slew Mārīca. Taking advantage of Rāma's absence, Rāvaṇa, in the guise of a mendicant, deceitfully abducted Sītā.

This is followed by Rāma's heart-wrenching lament over Sītā's loss. The tale also recounts the valiant Jaṭāyu's attempt to rescue Sītā, his battle with Rāvaṇa, and his mortal wounding. Upon finding the dying bird, Rāma performs the final rites with reverence and grants Jaṭāyu liberation, mokṣa, accompanied by the offering of sacred flowers.

The Sāhitya for this production was inspired by Kannaḍa Ramayana verses that HRK's grandmother used to sing daily, lending an authentic and deeply personal touch to the work. The story begins with Śrī Rāma leaving Ayōdhya for the forest along with Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā for fourteen years. After traveling several miles, they settle in a hut in Pañcavaṭi near the Gōdāvāri river. Vālmīki's narration to Lava and Kuśa sets the stage for a series of vivid scenes, including Śūrpaṇakhā's humiliation, Rāvaṇa's wicked schemes, Mārīca's slaying, Sītā's abduction, and Jaṭāyu's heroic battle and martyrdom.

Āṅgika

A defining feature of Pañcavaṭi is the extensive use of Jati-s for character entries, pātra praveśa, with every major character introduced through rhythmic patterns. Unique to this production is the simultaneous performance of different Aḍavu-s where one dancer performs one Aḍavu for a Svāra and another executes a contrasting Aḍavu at the same time. Śūrpaṇakhā's entry is innovatively portrayed using only eye and arm movements along with distinct body actions, and includes a specially composed Jati. Rāvaṇa's characterization features Kathakaḷi influenced Āṅgika and a powerful standing posture, while his court scene includes the use of a Tillāna. Rāma's sorrow during Sītā's abduction is depicted with detailed expressions of viraha. Jaṭāyu is presented through bird-like movements, including a sitting posture and leg actions that mimic flight. The choreography of Jaṭāyu's combat with Rāvaṇa highlights dynamic fight sequences.

Vācika

The production skillfully integrates Jathi-s and Svāra-s of identical patterns, performed in alternation. Distinct musical instruments mark character entries Śūrpaṇakhā's arrival is signaled with a unique

instrument like Maddaḷa and Caṇḍa, and a different one heralds Rāvaṇa. The music reflects the narrative nuances, such as using the same instrument for Rāvaṇa's appearance as a yati or a sage, and his true form. Special instruments underscore the battle between Jaṭāyu and Rāvaṇa. The sorrow of Jaṭāyu's death is poignantly conveyed through Bouli Rāga. The ensemble includes Maddaḷa and Caṇḍa, adding rhythmic richness.

Āhārya

Costumes are distinct, with dancers wearing side kacce skirts - a rare sight today compared to the more common pant costumes. Śūrpaṅakhā appears in black with red, while Sātvika characters wear orange. Rāma's costume is simple orange with symbolic makeup and Sītā's long skirt adds elegance. Rāvaṇa's yati disguise is represented with symbolic and eye-catching attire. Jaṭāyu's blackish costume includes a beak to enhance the bird imagery. The creative set design includes an imaginative kuṭira, hut for Rāma in Pañcavaṭi.

In all, Pañcavaṭi stands out for its innovative choreography, layered musicality, distinctive costuming, and evocative portrayal of key episodes from the Araṇya Kāṇḍa, leaving a lasting impression on audiences.

2. Śrī Kṛṣṇa Tulābhāra

Kṛṣṇa Tulabhara was directed by H.R. Keshava Murthy during 1976–78 based on Harapanahalli Bheemakka's Kannaḍa Sāhitya, this drama presents Satyabhāma's pride and its resolution through devotion.

In the royal palace of Dvārakā, Lord Kṛṣṇa engages in playful conversation with his chief consort Rukmiṇi, while Satyabhāma suffers the pangs of separation. Seeing Kṛṣṇa with Rukmiṇi, a jealous and angered Satyabhāma is guided toward wisdom by Kṛṣṇa through a dialogue with the sage Nārada. Provoked by Nārada, Satyabhāma decides to offer a grand gift to the sage in the hope of winning back Kṛṣṇa's affection. Hurt by the slander of others and distressed by Kṛṣṇa's distance, Satyabhāma pours out her sorrow to Devaki.

With Nārada's help, she reconciles with Devaki, leading to the celebrated Tulābhāra episode—where Satyabhāma attempts to weigh Kṛṣṇa with riches but finds that only a single sacred Tuḷasi leaf offered with devotion can balance the scale. This forms the narrative basis of this dance drama.

Āṅgika

The choreography includes thematic dances according to each mood, with strong, precise Nŗtta especially highlighted in the Tillāna. A distinctive feature is the portrayal of the tulābhāra itself - Kṛṣṇa's weighing where the dancers depict the weight and height of the golden bricks through carefully detailed Āṅgika movements. The act of placing the bricks on the scale is performed with precision, bringing the scene vividly to life.

Vācika

The Sāhitya Sāhitya is rich in prāsa, rhyme, lending a lyrical beauty to the presentation. Rukmiṇi's dialogue with Kṛṣṇa, blending spoken word, song, and dance, is particularly striking and engaging. The Tillāna Sāhitya Sāhityawas specially composed by H.R. Keshava Murthy, adding originality and depth to the musical dimension of the production.

Āhārya

The costumes are simple and elegant, avoiding pant styles and retaining a traditional look. Kṛṣṇa's appearance is distinctive- he is depicted without the usual feather in his crown, setting him apart visually. The set design is symbolic, with the backdrop changing meaningfully during key scenes such as Satyabhāma's conversation with Nārada and Kṛṣṇa. The tulābhāra scene itself is a highlight, with the entire tula, balance ingeniously created and presented on stage, adding authenticity and grandeur to the production.

In all, Śrī Kṛṣṇa Tulābhāra combines literary richness, expressive dance, and thoughtful stagecraft, offering a memorable interpretation of this well-loved episode from Kṛṣṇa's life.

3. Śrī Cennakēśava

Śrī Cennakēśava is an imaginative and artistically rich dance drama that portrays a stranger's wonder and spiritual experience upon entering the temple of Bēlūru. A visionary drama where a wanderer dreams of Bēlūru temple's Śilābālika sculptures coming to life. Set against the majestic backdrop of the world-renowned Śrī Cennakēśava Temple at Bēlūru, this imaginative dance-drama is woven together with a selected Śilāgāna, stone-song from the renowned Kannaḍa poet and philosopher Śrī D. V. Gundappa's Antahpura Gītē.

The storyline follows a curious visitor, unfamiliar with the nuances of dance, sculpture, and music, who enters the temple sanctum of the graceful consorts of Lord Cennakēśava. After offering salutations to the deity, he is captivated by the surrounding sculptures of celestial maidens frozen in exquisite dance postures. Enchanted by the imagined sound of sculpted rhythms, he begins to experience a surreal illusion.

A devout woman, who regularly visits the temple for her daily ritual of artistic worship, arrives and begins to sing and dance in praise of the sculpted maidens. Hidden behind a pillar, the visitor watches in wonder and joy, eventually drifting into sleep.

In his dream, the sculpted maidens come to life, performing a divine dance in devotion to Śrī Cennakēśava and his consorts. Awakened by the intensity of the dream and the vibrant dance movements, he rushes towards the sculptures in awe only to find them once again still and silent in stone. Overwhelmed, he praises the Lord, exclaiming, “O Śrī Cennakēśava! All this is but your divine illusion (māyā)!”

A key highlight of this production is the innovative representation of the Śilābālikā-s. Enormous 8- to 10-foot posters depicting the temple sculptures were created. As the dream sequence unfolds, the Śilā-s are shown turning, and from behind them emerge the actual dancers, creating the striking illusion of stone figures transforming into living dancers. This concept was highly advanced and creatively executed for its time, with B.K. Ravishankar being one of the principal contributors to this remarkable idea and staging.

Āṅgika

The dancers brought out the feel of Śilābālikā-s not just through elegance, but by holding sculptural poses with such calm and precision that one could imagine them as temple figures coming alive for a brief moment. The choreography maintained a balanced integration of Nṛtta and Abhinaya enhancing both the visual beauty and emotional depth of the production.

Vācika

The Antaḥpura Gīte formed the main musical source, with each song rendered in a rāga that matched the mood and character of each Madanika. Svāra-s were incorporated wherever needed to enhance the musical texture, and Śloka-s preceding the Antaḥpura Gīte were included to give a fuller picture of each Madanika and her context.

Āhārya

The dancers wore white costumes adorned with small red colored shawl on the upper body and their makeup included white dots on the eyebrows to evoke the appearance of temple sculptures. The layman's costume was simple and realistic, fitting his role as an ordinary visitor. The stage design featured creatively constructed temple backdrops, with the massive Śīla posters adding to the visual grandeur and authenticity of the setting. The overall design effectively transported audiences into the world of Bēlūru's sculptural and spiritual beauty.

Conclusion

Nāṭyācārya H.R. Keshava Murthy was a pioneering artist, choreographer, composer, and a teacher whose contributions to Bharatanāṭyam are immense. A strict disciplinarian and visionary, he composed numerous dance pieces, directed over 30 Nṛtya Rūpakas, and played a key role in shaping dance education in Karnāṭaka.

This study explores his choreographic techniques through Caturvidha Abhinaya, focusing on Āṅgika , Vācika, and Āhārya in select compositions. By analyzing his unique movement vocabulary and thematic innovations, it seeks to document his artistic legacy and highlight his lesser known works.

Understanding and analyzing the compositions of such great legends not only deepens our appreciation for their creativity and dedication but also sparks fresh ideas and strengthens our connection to artistic traditions. Studies like these are essential for preserving and advancing our cultural heritage while inspiring future generations.

Future Scope

Further research may explore his use stories from different dance dramas, taking the dance compositions and analysis, training pedagogy, and collaborations with other art forms. Digitization and notational documentation of his works can support preservation and wider access. Comparative studies with other regional choreographers could further illuminate Karnāṭaka's contribution to Bharatanāṭyam.

References

Books:

Keshava Nritya Shala (Ed.). Keshavaya Tubhyam Namah: A Commemorative Volume in Memory of Sri H. R. Keshavamurthy. Keshava Nritya Shala, Bengaluru, 2008.

Papers:

- Sukeerthi, Ashwini. An Avalokana of the Initial Productions from Kannaḍa Kavi Kāvya Paraṁpara. 2024. Christ University, Master's dissertation work.

Online publications:

- H. R. Keshavamurthy - Natya Parampara | Classical Dance | Nruthya Choodamani | DD Chandana. YouTube, uploaded by Nruthya Choodamani, 27 Apr. 2021, youtu.be/7Evywc4HMJk.

For CD /DVD:

- "Dance Drama Recording." 18 Sept. 1988, Ravindra Kalakshetra, Bengaluru. Video recording by BS Photo Studio, Rajajinagar, Bangalore. DVD.
- Archival footage and program recordings of selected dance dramas
- YouTube documentary: <https://youtu.be/7Evywc4HMJk?si=YZXdc4TXeecgKKQO>

Interview

- Ravishankar, B. K. Personal interview. 12 Mar. 2025.

APPENDIX

Compositions of HR Keshava Murthy

Composition name	Rāga	Tāla
Sapta Tāleśwari Jatiśvaram	Dēvagāndhāri	Tālamālikā
Pañcatrimśa Tāla Jatiśvaram,	Kalyāṇi	set in 35 tāla-s
Śabdham	Rāgamālikā	Miśra Cāpu
Varṇam	Kalyāṇi	Ādi
Ānanda Tāṇḍava	Ārabhī	Ādi
Padam – "Avarivarendarēnaytu"	Bhairavī	Miśra Cāpu
Jāvali – "Nēnapu"	Varāḷi	Ādi
Navarasa Rāmāyaṇa	Rāgamālikā	Triśra Gati Ādi Tāla
Tillāna	Śrī	Ādi

Dance Dramas of H.R. Keshava Murthy

DANCE DRAMA	LANGUAGE
Cauti Candra	Kannaḍa
Hoysaḷa	Kannaḍa
Giri Kānye Pārvaṭī	Kannaḍa
Mohinī Bhāsmasura	Saṁskṛta
Navarātri	Kannaḍa
Uttarāṇa Pauruṣa	Kannaḍa
Svātantra Saṅgrāma	Kannaḍa
Navarasa Rāmāyaṇa	Kannaḍa
Daśāvātāra	Saṁskṛta
Kṛṣṇa MadhuRāgamana	Kannaḍa
Dāsa Sāhitya Saurabha	Kannaḍa
Kṛṣṇa Mīrā	Hindī
Rati Manmatha	Kannaḍa
Cakra Pradhāna	Kannaḍa
Śilā Tapasvinī	Kannaḍa

Dance Dramas of H.R. Keshava Murthy

DANCE DRAMA	LANGUAGE
Meghasandeśa	Saṁskṛta
Pañcavaṭi	Kannaḍa
Sītārāma Kalyāṇa	Kannaḍa
ŚrīKāverī Vaibhava	Kannaḍa
Śākuntala	Kannaḍa
Kṛṣṇa Tulābhāra	Kannaḍa
Mahatmā Īsu Kṛṣṭa	Kannaḍa
Saṅgolli Rāyaṇṇa	Kannaḍa
Purandara Kṛṣṇa	Kannaḍa
Karebaṅṭana Kālāga	Jānāpada
Kālidāsa Kāvya darśana	Saṁskṛta
ŚrīCanna Keśava	Kannaḍa
Pārvatī Kura-vaṅgi	Kannaḍa
Tirukaṇa Kanasu	Kannaḍa
Dhīra Bālakaru	Kannaḍa
Cauti Candra	Kannaḍa

Photographs of the Dance Dramas



ಪುರಂದರ - ಕೃಷ್ಣ ಸ್ಮೃತ್ಯ ರೂಪಕದ ಒಂದು ದೃಶ್ಯ



ಶಾದಂಬರಿ ಸ್ಮೃತ್ಯ ರೂಪಕದ ಒಂದು ದೃಶ್ಯ



ಕುಮಾರವ್ಯಾಸ ಭಾರತದ ಸ್ಮೃತ್ಯ ರೂಪಕದ ಒಂದು ದೃಶ್ಯ



ಗಿರಿಜಾಕಲ್ಯಾಣ ಸ್ಮೃತ್ಯ ರೂಪಕದ ಒಂದು ದೃಶ್ಯ



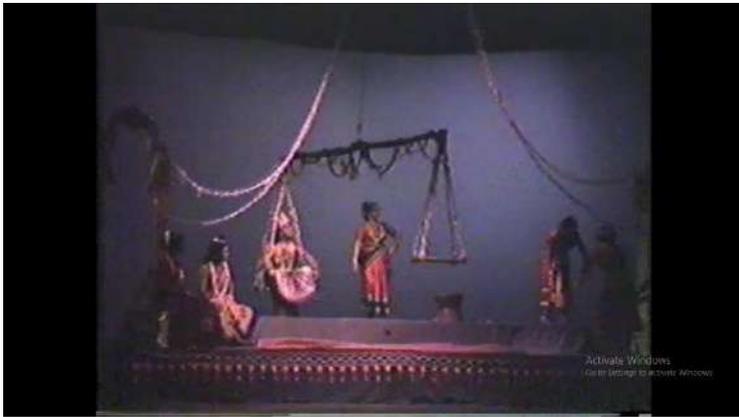
ಪ. ಮುಲಿಂಗ ರೀತಿ ನ ತ ರೂಪಕದ ಒಂದು ದೃಶ್ಯ



Photographs of Jaṭāyu Mokṣa



Photographs of Kṛṣṇa Tulābhāra



Photographs of Śrī Cenna Keśava

