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Title: Aesthetics and philosophy of characterization in a few chosen Bhakti works of Rmyaa - Dancer's Perspective

Authors: Mrs Deepthi Radhakrishna, Dr.Shobha Shashikumar

Abstract: India has been a country which has been a home to diversity, yet constantly being guided by the universality of Santana Dharma - the eternal religion . Though the intensity of the spiritual fostering varies in individuals, the basic spiritual and cultural foundation laid in a Bhartiya as a part of the system strengthens the cognitive and emotional aspects of a human mind. This has made India withstand many challenges and crises starting from Islamic invasion to the most recent covid crisis. Time and again, unity that has been developed and nourished in such a diversified country has transcended all religious barriers by acquiring its sustenance through “faith in the supreme power”. The ideology of Bhakti has been serving as a profound vehicle to experience the path of faith.

Rmyaa and Mahabhrata are the two classics which have been a household name initially in India and now globally too. Prominent characters of Rmyaa have a multi-dimensional identity in India. These identities are highly layered in nature. On one hand, these identities are often shaped by diverse philosophical doctrines, human idealistic aspirations take the form of attributions through these characters and on the other hand, each character serves as a medium to explore the complexity of human nature unveiled through the poetic eye.

While reflecting the above thought through Rmyaa, it is an Indian work that is staunchly worshiped till date and it is also a work that is artistically celebrated as the first classic poetry of India (dikvya).

One might prompted to wonder whether the poetic imagery of the protagonist in Vlmki's Rmyaa (the one embodying the 16 ideal guas of an ideal human) to be more a fictional character than realistic one? Can such a confluence of virtues truly manifest in a single individual? Wouldn't it be appropriate to address this ideal Human of Vlmiki as the Daiva or the supreme being or, as is widely practiced, to revere him as God? What would be the purpose of crafting a narrative around such a figure who has continued to be venerated as the ideal human on till date?

Well one can possibly answer these ever existing questions is the conscious interweaving of aesthetics and philosophy throughout Rmyaa as a poetic work. Rma emerges as not merely the protagonist (nyaka) but as an embodiment of aesthetic grace shaped by philosophical conviction . He is explored implicitly through his inner alignment with svadharma through the epical poem, while his noble attributes are celebrated more explicitly in the vast corpus of Bhakti literature that followed. In this dual portrayal, Rma transcends the boundaries of narrative to become both a literary ideal and a spiritual archetype.

Nevertheless, an impersonalized artistic representation of various poetic expressions of Bhakti through the medium of dance simplified the process of establishing a personalized connect between a Bhakta and his deity due to its entertainment value (ranjakatva). A visual experience of Bhakti through the Bhakti narrative succeeded in transporting a bhakta into a momentary state of transcendence trance and thus providing the joy of experiencing temporary proximity to the divine.

In the Indian context, such an experiential mode of devotion became an integral part of the Bhakti movement wherein Indian classical arts became a potent medium for visually manifesting Rma Bhakti. Rama Bhakti is embedded with a multi layered fabric revolving around the most powerful emotion of “sharanagti” or surrender to the ideal.

This paper seeks to explore the characterization in the Vlmki Rmyaa through select Bhakti poetic traditions, examining how these expressions embody the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of Rma as both an ideal and a divine presence.

Keywords: Vlmiki Rmyaa, Adbhuta Rmyaa, nanda Rmyaa, dhytma Rmyaa, Bhakta, Bhakti, Bhakti movement, philosophy, Shaivite, Vishnavaita , Sakta, Doctrines, Ranjakatva, Danceability.

Aesthetics and philosophy of characterization in a few chosen Bhakti works of Rāmāyaṇa - Dancer's Perspective

**Author- Deepthi Radhakrishna, Department
of Performing arts, Jain(Deemed to be)
University, Bangalore**

**Co Author – Dr.Shobha Shashikumar,
Department of Performing arts, Jain(Deemed
to be) University, Bangalore**

Abstract:

India has been a country which has been a home to diversity, yet constantly being guided by the universality of Sanātana Dharma - the eternal religion¹. Though the intensity of the spiritual fostering varies in individuals, the basic spiritual and cultural foundation laid in a Bhāratīya as a part of the system strengthens the cognitive and emotional aspects of a human mind. This has made India withstand many challenges and crises starting from Islamic invasion to the most recent covid crisis. Time and again, unity that has been developed and nourished in such a diversified country has transcended all religious barriers by acquiring its sustenance through “faith in the supreme power”. The ideology of Bhakti has been serving as a profound vehicle to experience the path of faith.

Rāmāyaṇa and Mahabhārata are the two classics which have been a household name initially in India and now globally too. Prominent characters of Rāmāyaṇa have a multi-dimensional identity in India. These identities are highly layered in nature. On one hand, these identities are often shaped by diverse philosophical doctrines, human idealistic aspirations take the form of attributions through these characters and on the other hand, each character serves as a medium to explore the complexity of human nature unveiled through the poetic eye.

While reflecting the above thought through Rāmāyaṇa, it is an Indian work that is staunchly worshiped till date and it is also a work that is artistically celebrated as the first classic poetry of India (Ādikāvya).

One might prompted to wonder whether the poetic imagery of the protagonist in Vālmīki’s Rāmāyaṇa (the one embodying the 16 ideal guṇas of an ideal human) to be more a fictional character than realistic one? Can such a confluence of virtues truly manifest in a single individual? Wouldn’t it be appropriate to address this ideal Human of Vālmiki as the Daiva or the supreme being or, as is widely practiced, to revere him as God?

¹ “The expression dharma has three senses: God; any spiritual discipline that leads to God; duty. Sanatana or eternal-ultimately leading to God, the eternal truth” - Hindu Encyclopedia, Vol 3, Page 195)

What would be the purpose of crafting a narrative around such a figure who has continued to be venerated as the ideal human on till date?

Well one can possibly answer these ever existing questions is the conscious interweaving of aesthetics and philosophy throughout Rāmāyaṇa as a poetic work. Rāma emerges as not merely the protagonist (*nāyaka*) but as an embodiment of aesthetic grace shaped by philosophical conviction². He is explored implicitly through his inner alignment with svadharma through the epical poem, while his noble attributes are celebrated more explicitly in the vast corpus of Bhakti literature that followed.³ In this dual portrayal, Rāma transcends the boundaries of narrative to become both a literary ideal and a spiritual archetype.

Nevertheless, an impersonalized artistic representation of various poetic expressions of Bhakti through the medium of dance simplified the process of establishing a personalized connect between a Bhakta and his deity due to its entertainment value (*ranjakatva*). A visual experience of Bhakti through the Bhakti narrative succeeded in transporting a bhakta into a momentary state of transcendence trance and thus providing the joy of experiencing temporary proximity to the divine.

In the Indian context, such an experiential mode of devotion became an integral part of the Bhakti movement wherein Indian classical arts became a potent medium for visually manifesting Rāma Bhakti. Rama Bhakti is embedded with a multi layered fabric revolving around the most powerful emotion of “sharanagti” or surrender to the ideal.

This paper seeks to explore the characterization in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa through select Bhakti poetic traditions, examining how these expressions embody the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of Rāma as both an ideal and a divine presence.

Key words: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa, Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa, Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Bhakta, Bhakti, Bhakti movement, philosophy, Shaivite, Vishanavaite , Sakta, Doctrines, Ranjakatva, Danceability.

² “Nāyaka is the one who attains life goals in the path of Dharma

³ Various doctrines of philosophy deliver the values in the ideology of Bhakti through heros/nayakas of classic literature like Rāmāyaṇa and Mahabharata.

Objective:

- To identify and analyse characteristics of Rama as a nayaka based on a few chosen episodes of Adbhuta, Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa and Tulasi Ramacaritamanas through philosophical doctrines propagated in selected Bhakti literature.
- To compare and analyse the plot of the above chosen episodes of Adbhuta, Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa with Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa
- To explore aspects of danceability of the chosen episodes based on philosophy and aesthetics.

Introduction:

“Sri Ram jaya Ram Jai Jai Ram” has been one of the most popular and celebrated “chanting” which has effectively been boosting the morale, confidence and spirit of many bhaktas to celebrate the supreme. This is one of the most powerful phrases of Stuti tradition which has been concretising and spreading Rāma Bhakti all over the world. Exploration of “poetic grandeur of Rama bhakti” in the medium of Indian classical dance forms has played an integral role in catering to both the aspects of entertainment and elevation and thereby succeeding in achieving the very purpose of art.⁴ Though Classical dance forms of India were highly influenced by the sangita sampradaya (musical traditions), during the Bhakti movement, they sought to seek success for their visual impact through the aspect of natya as reflected in Bhakti works of Indian literature. Visual representation of Rama is prevalent both in folk and classical mediums of dance of India. For instance, in Tamil nadu, Celebrated plots Kamba Ramayanam, Divya prabandhams of alvars, vedanta desikar’s Ragahavabhyudayam etc following the theory of “sarangati/surrender” have been extensively explored in the medium of dance due to their wide range of ideas to nurture dramatisation⁵.

Rāmasya- aayanah- The path of Rāma’s life as envisioned by Vālmīki paves its way to represent the play of

⁴ If poetry is a medium of exploration of Vāk (Speech) and artha (meaning) with an underlined element of philosophy (Tattva) and aesthetics, Indian classical dance forms are a medium to realise the Tattva in poetry with a sense of aesthetics to elevate an artiste and its connoisseur to experience the eternal bliss(Rasa) - Ganesh R,

⁵ <https://www.prekshaa.in/brief-survey-tradition-rama-and-ramayana-tamil-nadu>

emotions in different circumstances of Rāma's life which further blossoms into the realisation of "Rāmasatva" and "Rāmatatva".

Rāma is envisioned to be a character who justifies the 16 Guṇas of a hero (as enumerated by Vālmīki to Nārada Maharshi in the first kānda of Rāmāyaṇa), is undoubtedly a picturisation of a "Viśwanāyaka" in the eyes of a Poet and a Bhakta.⁶ Time and again, the prowess of Vālmīki's aesthetic intellect and intelligence has made Rāma a befitting hero to kindle the poetic spirit in a poet. Every poet who has created a parallel work to VR has paved Rāma's path to justify his/her philosophical acceptance and connect to the supreme. The "ṣoḍaśaguṇasampanna" of Vālmīki can be seen both as a nāyaka (Mānusha) bound to the path of Dharma or as a divine embodiment (Daiva) to whom the idealness in every way can be attributed. Both these creative lenses aim to head towards going beyond the mundane existence of life or in other words, "ātmoddhara".

As Rāma proclaims in Yuddha kānda of VR, "Ātmānam Mānuśam Manye", the Ādikāvya is a work where humanness in characterization and plot enriches "Bhāvasangharṣa" (conflict of emotions). Within this framework, life itself is reflected as a dynamic interplay of emotions that are organically anchored in *dharma* (way of life)⁷—the moral and existential code of living.

Vālmīki's depiction of Rāma as a "Viśwanāyaka" or "Marayadāpuruṣa" might have inspired Bhakti saints across traditions to adopt the narrative of Rāma's life as a vessel through which to articulate and transmit the essence of their respective philosophical doctrines. Hence, works like Rāmacaritmānas and other versions of Rāmāyaṇa have touched the lives of many through the motif of "pātrasangharṣa" where the life events of Rāma as a nāyaka becomes a narrative pretext for self-introspection by reaffirming the relevance of practicing *sāmānya dharma* (universal ethical principles) in everyday life.⁸ Exploration of the above

⁶ "Sodasaguna of Rama"- Balakanda, VR

⁷ "Dharma is something that guides everyone on the right path, a fundamental principle, a nourishing elixir and a strong support system" - Ganesh R, "Your Dharma and Mine", Page 22)

⁸ "The Samanya Dharma principles universally apply to all citizens of the world without distinction of place, time, class, race, religion, faith, gender, customs, age, status and standing- always and in all ways" - (Ganesh R, "Your Dharma and Mine", Page 40)

perspective of Rāma as a nāyaka in the purview of aesthetics and philosophy will be pursued based on the following Bhakti works:

- **Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa:**

- Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa is a work divided into 29 cantos that is supposedly dated around 14th to 15th century in North India. This is a text which is also called “adbhuttotara kānda”, an addition to Vālmīki’s 7 kaandas which emphasizes on describing the glory of Sita. The “Brhaddharma” is believed to be the source of Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa (Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa’s other than Vālmīki, V Raghavan, Page 17) . This work believes in propagating the Sakta doctrine⁹ of philosophy by considering Rāma as the brahman and Sita is observed as the Mūla Prakṛti (Primordial matter) who manifests as a female deity for restoring Dharma. Both the absolute and the Prakṛti cannot be differentiated. It also is a text where the narrative chooses a few episodes of VR to justify the philosophical concepts of the Sākta cult. In addition, it is a text which has attempted to glorify Vālmīki’s vision of “Sitayāh caritam”.

- **Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa-**

Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa (4200 verses) considered to be a part of the Brahmānda Purana. Modern scholars however feel that it is an independent work of an unknown author and assign it to the 14th century. Cast in the form of a dialogue between Siva and Pārvatī, this work is highly devotional and is dedicated to the spreading of the cult of Rāma. It abounds in beautiful hymns and quite a few philosophical discourses including the well known Rāmagita.

Scholars ascribe its time period to be 14th to 15th century AD (HE, Page 27 Vol 1). The text is divided into the same seven kāandas as Vālmīki and a work of a little over 4000 verses. This work had been clearly influenced by Vaishnavism and the influence of Bhāgavata can be seen conceptually. Propagation of doctrine of “Rāma the Brahman and Sita the Māyāsakti” can be seen throughout the plot.. All the characters

⁹ Sakta- Worshipper of Sakti. Sakti: The source and sustenance of all creation whether at the level of matter or life or mind, it is one and only. It is Sakti=energy and Brahman= the absolute are identical.

play the role of being nimitta and a duty bound to the pre destined play of Lord Nārāyaṇa for the resurrection of Dharma.

Methodology: Qualitative and analytical

Findings:

“The action plan for Dharma has been given in the pedagogy of *yajña* (worship, interaction, respectful sharing, celebration, service) *dāna* (philanthropy, generosity, charity), and *tapas* (toil, fortitude, will and austerity)” (pg 43, Essentials of Sanatana Dharma)

The path of Rāma as a *nāyaka* (*Rāmasya āyanaḥ*) has been addressing a constant quest of a common man, a staunch devotee, an ever evolving poet, an exploratory artiste or just as an individual who seeks lessons of life. The path of Rāma’s life as envisioned by Vālmiki paves its way to represent the play of emotions in different circumstances of Rama’s life which further blossoms into the realisation of “Rāmasatva” and “Rāmatatva”.

The common thread that runs through Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa and Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa is this quality of Rāma which emerges from his unshakable commitment to the cause of dharma in all facets of his life. Hence a **“dhīrodātta nāyaka.”** The following analysis is based on episodes from the chosen works that reflect the above characteristic of Rāma through various philosophical doctrines of Bhakti. It also addresses the scope of appropriateness in visualisation to validate the philosophical and aesthetic essence of Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa.

- **Some episodes in Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa that deviate from Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa:**
- In the **Bālakāṇḍa** of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the divine essence of Rāma is not merely implied—it is **proclaimed with clarity and reverence**. Through the enlightened voice of Sage Vasiṣṭha, Rāma is identified as the **very embodiment of Nārāyaṇa**, the Supreme Being in human form. In verses 13 and 14, the poet paints a luminous tableau, drawing celestial parallels: Rāma is likened to Viṣṇu himself, Lakṣmaṇa to the ever-watchful Śeṣa, while Bharata and Śatrughna are associated with Viṣṇu’s divine attributes and extensions.

This portrayal elevates the brothers beyond mere royalty—they become **manifestations of the cosmic order**, each an integral part of Viṣṇu’s divine anatomy. The incarnation is no accident; it is a cosmic design, a **divinely orchestrated descent** (*avatāra*) to restore dharma. Further, the text

bestows a rare spiritual privilege upon Sage Viśvāmitra. It celebrates his **celestially ordained role** as the sacred intermediary chosen to facilitate the destined union of Rāma and Sītā—**Sītā, the Yogamāyā**, the personified divine energy, the very essence of cosmic balance. Thus, Viśvāmitra is not merely a sage but an **instrument of fate**, honored by the gods to shepherd this divine convergence of Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī on Earth.

- In Bālakāṇḍa (BK), the declaration of Rāma as **Nārāyaṇa-svarūpa**, happens in the BK itself through Vasiṣṭha. Verses 13–14 explicitly compare Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata, and Śatrughna to Viṣṇu and his divine manifestations. The episode also extols the fortune of Viśvāmitra, who is chosen to unite Rāma with Sītā, the **Yogamāyā**.
- Aranya Kāṇḍa - “Rāma, the all- knowing” is fully aware about Ravana’s interventions and warns Sita privately. Sita then creates an illusion of herself to become a decoy for all events for the next one year.
- ❖ Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa (KK)- Tara’s acceptance of the act of killing of her husband with maturity and humility pleases Rama who reveals his real form. This overwhelming “**darśana**” of Rama grants her the state of a **jīvanmukti**-liberated when still alive .(Canto 5, verse 37)
- ❖ In KK in canto 4, at Mālyavat Paravata, Rāma, though a *virahī* (one in separation) imparts knowledge about the practical aspects of Bhakti to Lakṣmaṇa. Here the poet intends to highlight Rāma’s profound ability to choose the path of devotion amidst suffering. Also, his state of pining for Sita is compared to a state of Maya (illusion) and is interpreted as a conscious choice—Rāma temporarily shedding his divine form to embrace the vulnerability of human emotion.
- ❖ Yuddha Kāṇḍa (YK): The influence of “Dvaitic” philosophy can evidently be seen through a few verses from YK in Ādhyātma Ramayana where the consecration of the deity of **Rāmeśvara** reflects the shade of divinity of Rāma as a spiritual teacher.

It is evident that the strong influence of Vaishnavism gets reflected through Rāma Bhakti throughout the plot of AR. The poet considers Rāma to be the “all knowing (**sarvajña**)” and omniscient supreme being. His actions in the pursuit of dharma has a flavour of “The miraculous” (Chamatkāra) and other

characters function as instruments within the narrative, their roles orchestrated to manifest the glory of Rāma.

Dancer's perspective: It follows from the above understanding that Rāma, as a *nāyaka* justifies the etymology of the word *nāyaka* itself.¹⁰ As a *lokanāyaka*—a leader of the people—he also fulfills Bharata Muni's classical prescription of an ideal *nāyaka* through the dignity of his actions and the integrity of his *dharma*-driven life.¹¹

Episode 1:

❖ Essence of *Ahalyā-mokṣa* in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*:

❖ Act 1- Ahalya the cursed one:

Ahalyā, created by Brahmā as the epitome of flawless beauty (*a-halya* – “untouched by impurity”), becomes the devoted wife of Sage Gautama, a powerful ascetic. Bound by the duties of a *dharmapatnī*, her youthful femininity is restrained within the rigours of scriptural *dharma*. However, in Gautama's absence, Indra exploits her suppressed sensuality. This transgression, driven by both deception and desire, provokes Gautama's wrath, resulting in Ahalyā's curse. Stripped of her form, voice, and presence, she becomes a *nirjīva tapasvinī*—a lifeless ascetic, erased from worldly existence.

❖ Act 2- Ahalya gets back to life (*sajīvatva*) upon Rama's darshana-

As years passed, while the external world around Gautama's āśrama changed, a sense of lifelessness persisted within. Upon Rāma's arrival, nature itself awakened—dry leaves gleamed, trees blossomed, and birds sang. Ahalyā, moved by Rāma's empathetic presence, is released from her curse, her beauty radiating once again as Brahmā's divine creation. In awe, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa humbly bow at her feet, marking both Rāma's magnanimity as a *nāyaka* and Ahalyā's spiritual and emotional renewal through grace.

¹⁰ “nin-praapane resulting in the form of naayaNāyakaer or a guide. suffix: nvul, gives tye form of nāyaka which means 'someone who leads or guides’- (Ganesh, trans. Bharadwaj Arjun, Prekshaniyam, Page 101)

¹¹ यत्रानेकस्य भवतो व्यसनाम्युदयो पुनः ।

प्रकृष्टौ यस्य तौ स्यातां स भवेत् तत्र नायकः ॥ 24॥(NS, Chap 34, Types of character)

Act 3-

Whether it is Arjuna's awe before Kṛṣṇa's *Viśvarūpa* or a common person's marvel, the emotion of *vismaya* often culminates in gratitude or celebration. The *Ahalyā-nivedana* scene reflects this beautifully—Ahalyā is moved to tears of liberation, Gautama attains clarity, and together they reconcile, expressing heartfelt gratitude to Rāma through radiant hospitality.

❖ One of the many possibilities for Visualization:

❖ Act 1-

- ❖ The act may commence with the raising of the curtain accompanied by *vācika abhinaya* in the form of a voice-over narration, wherein *Maharṣi Viśvāmitra* recounts the *Ahalyā-vṛttānta*. Alternatively, Viśvāmitra may himself appear as the *Sūtradhāra* to enable the plot to travel from the performer's present to the mystical past.
- ❖ The second scene depicts a time travel through the portrayal of Ahalya in two shades: Firstly, as a woman who personifies spotless beauty. Her *aṅgika abhinaya* employs elegant *nṛtta-hastas* such as **Ardharecita**, **Nitambha**, and **Keshabandha**, interwoven with graceful *mai adavus* and *cārīs* like **Sthitāvarta**. **Bhauḷī** (representing the rising sun), to convey her luminous presence. Raga Bhauḷī can be one possibility to represent Ahalya's vibrance like a rising sun. Use of rakti ragas like *vasanta*, *ritigowla* etc represents Ahalya's flawless beauty. The use of the *prose śloka* from *Bāla Kāṇḍa*—“*Prayatnāt nirmīṭām dhātrā divyām māyāmayīm iva*”—adds a dimension of *vācika abhinaya*, serving as an *alaṅkāra* to enhance the mood. Choice of a white costume (denoting dirtlessness) with pearled ornamentation for Aharya can be an added possibility in a *bahu aharya* type of representation.

Gautama's entry is defined by a restrained and *niṣkampa sthiti*, with **Sama Uras** (balanced chest), denoting *brahmajñāna* and spiritual authority. He is introduced with *śānta rāga* or **Śrī rāga** played on the **vīṇā**, and the verse “*Āśramo divya saṅkāśaḥ suraiḥ api supūjitaḥ*” amplifies his *vācika abhinaya* and stature as a revered sage.

Angika of Ahalya attains a complete transition while pursuing the role of a dharmapatni of [Gautama](#), reflecting her inner composure and duty-bound elegance. Her once-flowing movement vocabulary is replaced by *manda gati* marked by *dignity* and a gentle restraint reflecting a camouflage of her innermost core.

Into this sacred space enters **Indra**, through fluid and manipulative movements. Ahalyā, absorbed in her ascetic routine experiences a spark of youthful desire at the very sight of a man brimming with youth.

Vyabhicharis like mada and moha triggers the sthaya of rati in both Ahalya and Indra. Incorporation of charis like syandita and apasyandita provide scope to justify to represent the above thought. Though completely aware about the deception, Ahalya's suppressed sensuality leads its way to daihika sambhoga as an anubhaava.

If presented by two artistes, this may be suggestively represented through **mirror āṅika abhinaya**, where both characters execute **synchronized charis and nṛtta-hastas** such as in perfect **tāla-laya** synchrony, alluding to their emotional and physical entwinement. A brief period of black out would provide a dramatic punctuation, Thereby marking the culmination of the act.

The very next moment, the stage goes well lit (red shade of light). The roar of Gautama's anger encroaches the scene with khanda nade and the use of ragas like Todi, Punnavarali, Bhairavi introduces Gautama's fury. Gautama's disgust leads to an uncontrollable anger which gets verbally expressed in the form of a curse to Ahalya. Here, Vyabhicharis like ugrata, nirveda and amarsha facilitate the manifestation of Bhibhatsa and raudra in Gautama.

Alas, Overwhelmed by **Vṛīḍā** (shame), Ahalyā collapses into stambha—her body immobilized, her gaze fixed, her breath shallow. She transitions into a *Nirjīva Tapasvinī*—stripped of *rūpa*, *vāk*, and *sannidhāna* (form, voice, and presence), dissolving into existential silence.

❖ Act 2:

{A Moment of silence followed by gradual increase in the nadai metaphorically marks the passage of time.}

With Rama's graceful and divine entry, a gentle yet vibrant surge of life gushes into the premises of Gautama's ashram. A dancer can vividly depict nature's response either through referral or non-referral imagery. Dried leaves acquire their luster, bare branches of the trees get transformed into beautiful canopies and melodious birdsong fill the once-silent air. These evocative natural elements act as *uddīpanas*, symbolizing the *āśrama's* transformation from a lifeless expanse to a vibrant, sanctified space. (Page 387, chap 7, NS – AG)

At the very sight of Rama, her long sorrow and wait gets triggered and pours in the form of tears. The overwhelming disbelief of reclaiming her lost identity triggers *romāñca* (horripilation) within her.¹² Rama's entry here becomes the vibhava for Ahalya's sajivatva.

Portrayal of Ahalya's sajivatva opens a rich spectrum of satvika bhavas for a dancer to explore. Her petrified stillness (*stambha*) gradually seeks emotional and somatic transformation through *sveda* (perspiration), *romāñca* (horripilation), and *vepathu* (trembling). Ultimately, the experience culminates in

¹² "Sparsha bhayashiitaharshaath krodhopdroogaascha romanchaha" - Vol 1, Page 386, Chap 7, NS

vaivarnya—the radiant effulgence of a woman who is physically unburdened and emotionally emancipated from Gautama’s curse. *Āśru* (tears) and *svarabheda* (voice modulation) may be subtly integrated as she acknowledges her *sajīvatva* to Rāma.

In contrast, the *udāttatā* of Rāma as a *nāyaka* adopts a **reverent and compassionate texture**, as he and his brother **reverentially bow** at her feet. On the whole, this act of this episode serves as a **quintessential illustration** of the *sthāyī bhāva* of *vismaya* that **unfolds** into *adbhuta rasa*.

❖ **Drawing parallels from Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa in the framework of Sthayī and auchitya:**

- ❖ “**Ahalyā-mokṣa**” is a much explored episode in dance due to its dramatic visual appeal. In *Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, Verse 27 of the Balakanda mentions this popular narrative of Ahalya, cursed to turn into a stone ¹³. Significantly, the text notes that Ahalyā beholds Rāma in the divine form of **Nārāyaṇa**, adorned with four arms—a moment of profound spiritual revelation. ¹⁴ Here the poet justifies his take on celebrating Rāma through the philosophical doctrine of “**Vaiṣṇavism**”. The narrative thereby becomes a medium to convey a deeper metaphysical truth: that the *jagat* (world) is *māyā* (illusory), and that beyond the veil of worldly identity lies the **Paramātman**—the transcendent Self.
- ❖ When represented in the medium of dance, an inclusion of the narrative of *Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* in the act 3 of the above screenplay provides scope to embody the experience of *vismaya* in Ahalya on Rama’s arrival. The explicit in portraying Rāma as **Nārāyaṇa-svarūpa** becomes a pivotal dramaturgical cue for the performer to shift from the restrained emotion of hesitation to the overflowing expression of awe, reverence, and spiritual ecstasy. Ahalya’s sense of gratification and liberation can seek a layer of embellishment when seen through the lens of divinity. In this light, the scene does more than depict personal salvation; it becomes a performative metaphor for the core *Ādhyātma* message: the world is *māyā*, and liberation lies in recognising and surrendering to the divine Self.

¹³ V Raghavan, “Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa other than Vālmīki’s”, Page 26

¹⁴ V Raghavan,

Inferences:

- ❖ Ahalya-The petrification of Ahalya is of the mind in VR and of the physical form in AR. The episode of Ahalyā serves as a crucial point in the narrative where Kāma overriding Dharma results in “repentance” which seeks its culmination in cultural refinement.
- ❖ Gautama: Gautama represents the Gautama’s response to Ahlaya is based on her actions rather than her emotions. His curse thus represents the change in her way of life in physical form.
- ❖ Rāma, embodying the ideals of a loka *nāyaka*, perceives with clarity the deeper truths concealed beneath social infringement. Rama’s *udāttatā* in this episode is in the form of reverence and nobility enables him to recognize the imbalance—*Kāma* had overrun *Dharma* in Ahalyā’s case, just as *Artha* had in Gautama’s.

-
- ❖ **Episode 2:** The next episode chosen from “Adbhuta Ramayana” is the portrayal of Sita in the form of Kali. This manifestation culminates dancing on the battle field¹⁵ after the destruction of Ravana. This is a deviation which is noteworthy and seeks relevance to be explored through a dancer’s perspective.

- ❖ **Plot:** This plot has been an attempt to propagate the **Sākta doctrine**.

Verses like:

“Yaa saa maahesvari shaktirjyaanaruupatilaalasa “I

“Nartayanti chaaparaam kaaliipashyayaccha ranaagane” (29)

“Shavarupa mahaadeva hruthsamsyaam cha digambaraam” (30) (Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa’s other than Vālmīkis, V Raghavan, Page 13)

attempt to project an explicit reflection of “Brahman” being the absolute and “Sakti” being the energy in this wondrous world of creation. Rāma represents Brahman and Sita represents its male form encompassed by its feminine energy.

¹⁵ (nanarta jaanaki devi ghorakaali mahaabalaa, verse 63) .

❖ Challenges to justify the Appropriateness in the above episode:

● Plot concerns:

- In Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and most subsequent poetic traditions, Rāma's character is consistently upheld through the enumeration of his boundless virtues, which are not merely declared but revealed through his dhārmic conduct (kriyā) in a human embodiment. This steady emphasis on Rāma's *saguṇatva* forms the emotional and philosophical bedrock to define his *sthāyi* throughout the epic. Introducing an element of *nirguṇatva* into this established framework raises fundamental questions about philosophical consistency. Hence, does this attribution of "nirgunatva" contradict the sthayi of Rama in the realm of philosophy, is a question which needs to be answered prior to visualisation.
- Though the narrative of Sita's Kāli swarūpa from Adbhuta Ramayana with an explicit display of physical strength provides the dramatic element for presentation, it aligns with a *tāmasika* register, potentially confusing her nature with that of Rāvaṇa rather than contrasting it.
- Hence, justifying the portrayal of Sita in a vengeful mode touches the extremity of inappropriateness. If Sītā is to embody *vīratva* (heroic valor), it must emerge from her innate *sattva*, not as a reactionary counter-force but as an affirmation of dhārmic strength. **Sthayi considerations:**
- According to Bharata's classification, Sītā is a *svīya nāyikā*, one whose emotional core is tethered to *dharma-kāma*—a devotion that fuses sacred duty with personal love.¹⁶¹⁷ Bhoja widens the philosophic value of these classifications of a *svīya nāyikā* (Sītā in this case) as the one who practices "Dharma Srngara"¹⁸ while committed to a Dhirodaatta nayaka (Rama).

¹⁶ विनयार्जवादियुक्ता गृहकर्मपरा पतिव्रता स्वीया ।

vinayārjavādiyuktā gr̥hakarmaparā pativratā svīyā |^[1]

¹⁷ Chap 24, verses 94-95

¹⁸ Bhoja's Srngara Prakasha, V Raghavan, page 508

- Sītā's strength lies in her inner capacity to channel personal trials through dhārmic resilience, thereby transforming into a *dharma-pālinī*, one who upholds dharma through self-mastery, rather than merely a *dharma-patnī* who mirrors her consort's path.
- Furthermore, this alternative portrayal compels us to interrogate Rāma's *nāyakatva* itself. If the battlefield is commandeered by a wrathful Sītā, the philosophical and dramaturgical role of Rāma—his *kṣātra*, his *brahma*, and his quiet moral authority—risks being overshadowed. Thus, any attempt to visualise this episode must carefully evaluate whether such inversions support or disrupt the delicate emotional fabric (*sthāyi*) of both Rāma and Sītā as envisioned in Vālmīki's philosophical arc.¹⁹

¹⁹ Nayakatva: an amalgamation of kshatra and bramha

Conclusion: As time passed, exploration of Rama Bhakti through literary works has become a medium to communicate a particular philosophical doctrine rather than deliver the essence of Rama's characterisation. This shift has contributed to the further deification of Rāma in his most exalted form, rather than encouraging a personal assimilation of his dhārmic path at the individual level. When such philosophical frameworks are adopted by individuals or communities through their own interpretive lenses, they often evolve into cults.

However, for art to attain Siddhi or success, it needs to be free from the clutches of any cultural rigidity in thought or action. Integrating poetic liberties taken in parallel Rāmāyaṇa traditions into the dance medium requires a deep understanding of the *sthāyibhāva* and the philosophical vision of characterisation as originally envisioned by Maharṣi Vālmīki.

In addition to this, Dance, being a stylised reflection of life, must move beyond mere glorification of Rāma's attributes. The influence of *bhakti* in representing Rāma should not confine the narrative to an ornamental display of divine virtues alone. Instead, when these attributes are portrayed through the lens of relatable human emotions, the possibility of evoking *Rāmarasa* (as in “pibare rāmarasam”)—becomes more profound for both the performer and the connoisseur. Such a portrayal transcends *bhāva* and elevates the experience into *rasa*, embodying the true purpose of art in spiritual and aesthetic terms.

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Title: hry Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam: Aesthetic Dimensions and Performative Relevance**Authors:** Ms Dhvani Bharatkumar Shah

Abstract: hry Abhinaya, one of the four modes of expression elaborated in the Nyastara, occupies a vital place in the performative grammar of Bharatanatyam. More than a decorative adjunct, it operates as a powerful aesthetic medium that bridges performer, performance, and audience. Costumes, ornaments, makeup, stage properties, and scenic arrangements together constitute the visual vocabulary through which the dancer embodies character, mood, and rasa. The selection of colors, textures, and symbolic accessories is never arbitrary; rather, it emerges from deep-rooted cultural codes that have evolved over centuries. This paper examines the aesthetic dimensions and performative relevance of hry Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam, highlighting its role in enhancing rasa realization (rasanubhava), supporting character portrayal, and intensifying the theatrical impact of performance. Drawing from classical texts, contemporary practice, and lived traditions, the study situates hrya within both historical and modern contexts. Furthermore, it emphasizes how Bharatanatyam dancers negotiate authenticity and innovation in costume and stage design to connect with diverse audiences while preserving classical ethos. By exploring this dimension of abhinaya, the paper underscores the integral relationship between external appearance and internal expression, reaffirming that in Bharatanatyam, the aesthetic is inseparable from the spiritual and the performative.

Keywords: hry Abhinaya, Bharatanatyam, Nyastara, Aesthetics, Performance

Āhāryā Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam: Aesthetic Dimensions and Performative Relevance

Dhwani Bharkatkar Shah

Assistant Professor & Research Scholar

Department of Dance

Faculty of Performing Arts

The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda

Vadodara, Gujarat

E-mail: dhwani.mhaskar-dance@msubaroda.ac.in

Abstract

Āhāryā Abhinaya, one of the four modes of expression elaborated in the Nāṭyaśāstra, occupies a vital place in the performative grammar of Bharatanatyam. More than a decorative adjunct, it operates as a powerful aesthetic medium that bridges performer, performance, and audience. Costumes, ornaments, makeup, stage properties, and scenic arrangements together constitute the visual vocabulary through which the dancer embodies character, mood, and rasa. The selection of colors, textures, and symbolic accessories is never arbitrary; rather, it emerges from deep-rooted cultural codes that have evolved over centuries. This paper examines the aesthetic dimensions and performative relevance of Āhāryā Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam, highlighting its role in enhancing rasānubhava (aesthetic realization), supporting character portrayal, and intensifying the theatrical impact of performance. Drawing primarily from the Nāṭyaśāstra and supported by later treatises such as the Saṅgīta Ratnākara and Nāṭyadarpaṇa, the study situates Āhāryā within both historical and modern contexts. Furthermore, it emphasizes how Bharatanatyam dancers negotiate authenticity and innovation in costume and stage design to connect with diverse audiences while preserving classical ethos. While the focus of this paper is on the solo dance repertoire of Bharatanatyam, a brief consideration is also given to the treatment of Āhāryā in group productions and thematic ballets, which have expanded its aesthetic potential in contemporary practice. By exploring this dimension of abhinaya, the paper underscores the integral relationship between external appearance and internal expression, reaffirming that in Bharatanatyam, the aesthetic is inseparable from the spiritual and the performative.

Keywords:

Āhāryā Abhinaya, Bharatanatyam, Nāṭyaśāstra, Aesthetics, Performance

1. Introduction

Bharatanatyam, one of the most celebrated classical dance traditions of India, is an intricate synthesis of movement, rhythm, and expression. Rooted in the spiritual and cultural ethos of Tamil Nadu, it embodies not only the grace of performance but also the philosophical depth of Indian aesthetics. At the heart of its performative vocabulary lies abhinaya, the art of expression, which enables the dancer to communicate meaning, emotion, and narrative to the audience. The Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata, the foundational text of Indian dramaturgy, identifies fourfold abhinaya āṅgika (expression through the body), vācika (expression through speech and song), āhārya (expression through costume and external appearance), and sāttvika (expression through inner emotional states). Together, these four dimensions form the comprehensive communicative system of Indian classical performance (Bharata, trans. 1992).

Among these, Āhārya Abhinaya is often regarded as the external dimension, consisting of costumes, ornaments, makeup, stage design, and properties. Yet, it is not merely an embellishment but a crucial aesthetic tool that transforms the dancer into a living embodiment of character and theme. The choice of colors, textures, jewelry, and symbolic props establishes the visual mood and cultural authenticity of the performance. This outward dimension intensifies the inner world of expression, making the dancer's portrayal more relatable and emotionally resonant. Without the aesthetic presence of Āhārya, the totality of Bharatanatyam would remain incomplete, for the visual communicates as profoundly as the gestural and the emotional (Vatsyayan, 1974).

The concept of Āhārya Abhinaya is deeply intertwined with the Indian philosophy of aesthetics (rasa and bhāva). According to the Nāṭyaśāstra, the realization of rasa the essence of aesthetic experience depends on the harmony of all expressive dimensions, where Āhārya plays a pivotal supportive role. Costumes and ornaments are not chosen at random but follow a codified symbolic language. For instance, white often denotes purity, red represents passion and valor, and gold is associated with divinity. Such semiotic choices intensify the audience's aesthetic perception (rasānubhava) and assist the dancer in embodying mythological characters with conviction (Vatsyayan, 1997).

Historically, Bharatanatyam was performed in temples as an offering to the divine, and therefore its Āhārya reflected devotional aesthetics. Dancers adorned themselves in traditional silk costumes, temple jewelry, and distinctive makeup that highlighted facial expressions. The performance space itself, whether the temple courtyard or sanctum, became part of the Āhārya. With the transition of Bharatanatyam from sacred temple ritual to proscenium stage, the dimension of Āhārya Abhinaya evolved significantly. Stage lights, backdrops, and choreographic innovations expanded its scope, demanding a renewed negotiation between tradition and

modernity. Today, dancers and designers continually explore how to preserve authenticity while adapting to contemporary performance contexts (Meduri, 1988).

The significance of Āhārya is not only aesthetic but also pedagogical and cultural. For students of Bharatanatyam, the training in Āhārya is as vital as mastering technique, for it sensitizes them to the nuances of presentation. For scholars, it opens a rich field of inquiry into the intersections of performance, culture, and material aesthetics. For audiences, it provides the immediate sensory experience through which narrative and emotion are accessed. Thus, in Bharatanatyam, Āhārya Abhinaya is not a superficial layer but an indispensable dimension of meaning-making and cultural transmission.

Scope of Analysis: The present paper explores the aesthetic dimensions and performative relevance of Āhārya Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam. While the analysis is primarily focused on the solo dance repertoire, the discussion also acknowledges the application of Āhārya in group productions and thematic ballets, which broaden its expressive possibilities in modern performance. By situating Āhārya within both classical theory and contemporary practice, this study underscores the symbiotic relationship between external appearance and internal expression, affirming the holistic vision of Indian aesthetics.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Evolution of Āhārya Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam

The significance of Āhārya Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam can be traced back to the Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata, where costume, ornaments, and stage décor were emphasized as essential aspects of performance. Bharata classifies Āhārya as one of the four modes of abhinaya (expression), alongside Āṅgika (gestural), Vācika (verbal), and Sāttvika (psychological). The Nāṭyaśāstra elaborates on the role of costumes, make-up, ornaments, and stage properties in enhancing dramatic representation and in conveying rasa (aesthetic sentiment) to the audience. In later centuries, texts such as Saṅgīta Ratnākara and Nāṭyadarpaṇa reinforced the importance of external elements in performance, expanding upon the symbolic use of colors, attire, and ornaments.

Within the Bharatanatyam tradition, Āhārya gradually developed into a codified system involving elaborate costumes, temple jewelry, makeup, and stage aesthetics. This evolution mirrored the transition of Bharatanatyam from temple rituals to the proscenium stage. Scholars such as Vatsyayan (1996) and Ghosh

(2002) have argued that the external appearance created through Āhārya is not superficial, but rather an embodied aesthetic that connects divine symbolism with human perception.

2.2 Scholarly Perspectives on Costume and Ornamentation

Several modern scholars have examined the role of Āhārya in dance from both anthropological and aesthetic standpoints. Meduri (1988) notes that costumes and ornaments in Bharatanatyam not only establish the dancer's visual identity but also preserve cultural memory, linking the performance to temple traditions and mythological narratives. Viswanathan and Allen (2004) emphasize how the codification of the Bharatanatyam costume such as the pleated fan design, temple jewelry, and specific makeup creates both visual rhythm and symbolic meaning.

From a feminist perspective, Srinivasan (2012) highlights how the ornamented body in Bharatanatyam represents both devotion and discipline, while also engaging with questions of gender, gaze, and agency. Thus, Āhārya functions not only as an aesthetic layer but also as a socio-cultural construct that frames the dancer's body as a site of both tradition and transformation.

2.3 Aesthetic and Performative Relevance

Āhārya Abhinaya plays a crucial role in heightening the visual appeal of performance and in ensuring that *rasa* is transmitted effectively. The pleated fan in the costume accentuates leg movements and creates geometric patterns, while temple jewelry such as the *rakodi* (head ornament) and *oddiyanam* (waist belt) provide symbolic references to divinity and tradition. Stage makeup highlights the dancer's eyes and facial expressions, ensuring visibility and clarity of *bhāva* (emotion) even to distant spectators.

Contemporary scholars argue that Āhārya continues to evolve in the modern context. With Bharatanatyam's globalization, dancers experiment with lighting, stage design, and even contemporary costume modifications while maintaining the essence of tradition. This balance of continuity and innovation underscores the performative relevance of Āhārya Abhinaya today.

3. Historical Evolution of Āhārya Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam

3.1 References in the Nāṭyaśāstra

The earliest systematic discussion of Āhārya Abhinaya is found in Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra (circa 2nd century BCE–2nd century CE). Bharata categorizes abhinaya into four modes: Āṅgika (physical movements), Vācika

(speech), *Āhārya* (costume, ornaments, and stage décor), and *Sāttvika* (inner feelings). Among these, *Āhārya* is described as the external embellishment of performance, which enhances *rasa* (aesthetic flavor). Bharata emphasizes that proper costumes, ornaments, and make-up must correspond to the character, social status, and emotional situation of the role portrayed. For instance, kings were to be adorned with crowns and jewels, sages with simple garments, and deities with divine attributes. Thus, *Āhārya* served not merely as ornamentation but as a semiotic system conveying meaning to the audience.

3.2 Contributions of Later Treatises

Following the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, other treatises expanded upon the codification of *Āhārya*. The *Śaṅgīta Ratnākara* of Śārṅgadeva (13th century) included detailed classifications of musical-dramatic traditions and acknowledged the role of costume and ornaments in theatrical expression. Similarly, the *Nāṭyadarpaṇa* and other medieval works provided guidance on *veṣa* (dress) and *ābharaṇa* (ornaments), stressing balance and symbolic appropriateness in performance. These texts reveal that by the medieval period, *Āhārya* was firmly established as an integral part of dance-dramas, valued both for aesthetic impact and for its devotional symbolism in temple traditions.

3.3 *Āhārya* in Temple Traditions of Bharatanatyam

In the *devadāsī* tradition of Tamil Nadu, Bharatanatyam was performed as an offering to deities within the temple precincts. The costumes and ornaments of dancers were designed to reflect sacred aesthetics rather than mere decoration. The sari was draped in a unique style, allowing flexibility of movement while maintaining grace. Flowers like jasmine were worn in the hair, symbolizing purity, while gold ornaments reflected divine brilliance. The temple itself provided the backdrop, often adorned with lamps, kolams (floor patterns), and sacred sculptures, forming part of the *Āhārya* environment. In this way, the dancer became a living icon, visually merging with the deity through her attire and accessories.

3.4 Transition from Ritual to Stage

With the decline of the *devadāsī* system during the colonial period and the cultural revival movements of the 20th century, Bharatanatyam shifted from temple courtyards to the proscenium stage. This transition also transformed *Āhārya* *Abhinaya*. Costumes were standardized into stitched Bharatanatyam attire with pleated fans that enhanced the geometry of movements. Jewelry sets (temple jewelry) became codified, consisting of head ornaments, necklaces, waist belts, bangles, and anklets. Stage lighting and painted backdrops were added as new components of *Āhārya*, expanding beyond personal adornment into theatrical space. While the temple

tradition emphasized devotion and sanctity, the modern stage emphasized visibility, spectacle, and uniform aesthetics, thereby recontextualizing Āhārya for wider audiences.

3.5 Symbolism of Costume and Color

Across historical phases, the symbolism of color and ornamentation remained central to Āhārya. Red, white, and green saris were associated with purity, fertility, and prosperity, while gold ornaments symbolized divinity and abundance. The lotus motif, peacock feathers, and floral garlands often carried mythological associations. Thus, the costume was not only decorative but semiotic enabling the audience to perceive a character's mood, role, and sacred associations instantly. Even in modern performances, dancers retain this symbolic use of Āhārya, bridging tradition with contemporary aesthetics.

4. Aesthetic Dimensions of Āhārya Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam

4.1 The Principle of Saundarya (Beauty)

Āhārya Abhinaya embodies the classical Indian pursuit of saundarya (aesthetic beauty). Costumes, ornaments, and stage arrangements are not mere accessories but visual elements that elevate the performance to an art form. In Bharatanatyam, symmetry of costume pleats, shine of temple jewelry, and harmony of colors are carefully aligned to produce visual delight. This principle is rooted in Bharata's dictum that dance must appeal to both the mind and the senses. The outer beauty created through Āhārya complements the inner expressivity of Āṅgika and Sāttvika Abhinaya, ensuring an integrated aesthetic experience.

In the case of group choreography, saundarya acquires an additional layer: harmony across dancers. Uniform costumes, synchronized ornamentation, and coordinated color schemes create visual cohesion on stage. A well-designed ensemble not only supports narrative clarity but also reinforces unity of purpose, enhancing the collective impact of the performance.

4.2 Rasa Realization through Āhārya

In the rasa theory of the Nāṭyaśāstra, external embellishment plays a crucial role in evoking aesthetic flavor. For example:

The portrayal of Śṛṅgāra rasa (love) is enhanced by delicate jewelry, fragrant flowers, and graceful colors like green and pink.

Vīra rasa (heroism) is reinforced through crowns, weapons, and bold colors such as red and orange.

Karuṇa rasa (pathos) may require subdued attire and pale shades to reflect grief.

In solo Bharatanatyam, these details highlight the emotional journey of a single performer. In thematic productions or group ballets, however, Āhārya is applied more broadly: costumes may distinguish protagonists from supporting characters, or contrasting color palettes may represent opposing forces such as good and evil. The collective use of costume and stage aesthetics thus becomes a dramaturgical device to guide audience perception of multiple roles and intertwined narratives.

4.3 Balance and Proportion

A central aesthetic dimension of Āhārya is balance (samatva). Costumes must neither overshadow the dancer's expressions nor appear too minimal to diminish grandeur. Similarly, ornaments must be distributed evenly head, neck, waist, and hands creating proportionate symmetry. The pleated fan at the center of the Bharatanatyam costume exemplifies this principle, as it opens geometrically with every araimandi (half-sitting posture), producing visual harmony between movement and costume.

In ensemble choreography, proportion applies not only to the individual but also to the group. Costume designers must ensure that no single dancer dominates visually unless narratively intended. Equal distribution of colors, ornamentation, and styling creates symmetry across the stage, allowing the audience to appreciate both individual artistry and group harmony.

4.4 Integration of Stage Aesthetics

Beyond personal adornment, Āhārya extends to stage décor, lighting, and ambiance. Traditional temple lamps (deepas), floral arrangements, and symbolic backdrops such as the image of Nāṭarāja form a sacred aura around the performance. In modern settings, stage lighting enhances mood: warm tones for devotional pieces, blue for the cosmic dance of Śiva, and soft golden hues for padams and javalis.

In dance productions and thematic ballets, stage aesthetics play an even more significant role. Scenic backdrops, props, and lighting shifts help establish settings forest, palace, battlefield, or cosmic space. In such contexts, Āhārya functions as a scenographic tool that transforms the stage into a narrative landscape, complementing the expressive work of the dancers.

4.5 Symbolic Resonance

The aesthetic power of Āhārya lies in its symbolism. Each element carries meaning:

Temple jewelry → reflects continuity of tradition.

Flowers (especially jasmine) → symbolize purity and auspiciousness.

Ankle bells (ghungroo) → serve both rhythmic and spiritual functions, believed to awaken divine presence.

Colors → hold deep associations: white (peace), red (energy, devotion), green (fertility), gold (divinity).

While in solo performance these symbols highlight individual expression, in group choreography symbolic elements can be distributed across roles. For instance, red costumes may be assigned to warriors, while white and gold may be reserved for divine characters. This collective use of symbolism enhances dramatic clarity and deepens thematic meaning.

5. Symbolism and Iconography of Āhārya Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam

5.1 Sacred Roots of Ornamentation

The symbolism of Āhārya in Bharatanatyam originates from temple traditions, where every ornament and adornment carried ritual significance. Jewelry such as the sun and moon hairpieces represents cosmic balance; the netti chutti (forehead ornament) signifies divine wisdom; and the oddiyanam (waist belt) symbolizes restraint and discipline. These are not worn merely for beauty but to embody sacred concepts. Thus, a Bharatanatyam dancer becomes a living icon, visually reflecting divine attributes through her adornments.

In group productions, these symbolic elements often create layers of meaning. For example, dancers representing celestial beings may share similar head ornaments, while characters embodying mortals may appear with simpler adornment, creating a clear semiotic contrast on stage.

5.2 Iconographic Parallels with Deities

Bharatanatyam costuming and ornaments often mirror divine imagery seen in temple sculptures and iconography:

The Nāṭarāja icon, with flowing locks, sacred ornaments, and rhythmic posture, inspires the dancer's attire during Śiva stuti.

Kṛṣṇa's blue costume and peacock feather are evoked in padams and javalis that narrate episodes of love and devotion.

Devi is represented through vibrant red costumes, weapons (when needed), and bold makeup reflecting power (Śakti).

In solo repertoire, these parallels transform the individual into a sacred icon. In ensemble or narrative productions, however, iconography is distributed across multiple dancers for instance, an entire corps of attendants dressed in complementary colors around a central deity figure, reinforcing hierarchy and dramatic focus.

5.3 Colors as Carriers of Symbolism

Colors in Bharatanatyam costumes are consciously chosen for their symbolic value:

Red → devotion, power, passion.

White → peace, divinity, renunciation.

Yellow/Gold → prosperity, auspiciousness.

Green → fertility, compassion.

While solo dancers embody these symbolic meanings individually, group choreographies often juxtapose colors to heighten dramatic tension. For example, white-clad devotees may share the stage with red-clad warriors, contrasting purity and valor. This chromatic dialogue allows the audience to perceive multiple symbolic layers at once.

5.4 Flowers and Natural Elements

The use of flowers, especially jasmine, not only enhances visual charm but also symbolizes purity, love, and devotion. Garlanded hair connects the dancer to ancient ritual practices, where floral offerings were integral to temple worship. Similarly, anklets and bells symbolize rhythm as cosmic order the resonance of the universe itself.

In dance dramas and thematic ballets, natural elements are expanded beyond the individual dancer. Group performers may carry garlands, lamps, or symbolic props such as lotuses, collectively transforming the stage into a ritual space.

5.5 Costume as Visual Narrative

The very structure of Bharatanatyam costume embodies symbolic storytelling:

The fan-shaped pleats resemble a temple gopuram (tower), opening with each posture to reveal sacred geometry.

The head-to-toe adornment reflects the holistic concept of pūrṇatva (completeness), representing the dancer as a total embodiment of divinity.

The symmetry of design echoes the balance between the human and the divine, earthly and cosmic.

In ensemble settings, these visual narratives are magnified. When a group of dancers simultaneously opens the pleats of their costumes in coordinated postures, the audience perceives sacred geometry on a grander scale, amplifying the symbolic resonance.

5.6 Transformation of the Performer into the Divine

Ultimately, the iconographic role of Āhārya is to facilitate transformation. As the dancer dons sacred attire, she sheds her mundane identity and assumes the divine persona she enacts. This metamorphosis is not illusion but an act of bhakti (devotion). The audience, too, participates in this transformation, perceiving the dancer not as an individual but as a vessel of divine expression.

In group productions, this transformation is collective: the stage becomes a sacred cosmos where each performer embodies a symbolic role, from deities to devotees, thereby expanding the transformative power of Āhārya beyond the solo body to the entire ensemble.

6. Modern Adaptations and Innovations in Āhārya Abhinaya

6.1 Shifts in Aesthetic Trends

In contemporary Bharatanatyam, while the essence of tradition is maintained, the aesthetics of Āhārya Abhinaya have undergone significant transformation. Modern audiences and global stages demand adaptations that balance authenticity with innovation. Costumes are now lighter, easier to manage, and designed for mobility, ensuring comfort during long performances without compromising visual appeal. In group presentations, these practical modifications also ensure uniformity and allow dancers to perform synchronized sequences without distraction or hindrance.

6.2 Costume Innovations

Modified Silhouettes: The traditional sari-style costume has been redesigned into stitched versions that retain pleats and temple-like designs but are more practical for performance.

Contemporary Fabrics: Silk remains the most revered, but georgette, satin, and synthetic blends are used for durability and affordability.

Gender-Inclusive Attire: Male Bharatanatyam dancers now have customized costumes with dhotis, angavastrams, and tunics tailored to highlight masculine grace while aligning with tradition.

In dance-dramas and thematic ballets, costume innovations are often used to differentiate characters. For example, heroes, heroines, and antagonists may be dressed in contrasting colors or fabrics, enhancing dramatic clarity.

6.3 Jewelry and Ornamentation

Minimalist Jewelry: Unlike the heavily adorned dancers of the past, many contemporary performers opt for fewer ornaments to avoid distraction and focus on expressive clarity.

Costume Jewelry Alternatives: Instead of gold or temple jewelry, artificial yet ornate sets are widely used, making the art form more accessible without losing grandeur.

Stage-Friendly Designs: Jewelry is now lightweight, ensuring performers can tour internationally without logistical difficulties.

In ensemble choreography, jewelry is often standardized across dancers to maintain cohesion, though principal characters may be distinguished by more elaborate ornamentation.

6.4 Makeup and Stage Lighting

Makeup has evolved alongside modern lighting technology:

Stage lighting reduces the need for exaggerated makeup, allowing for more naturalistic styles.

Contemporary performers experiment with subtle tones to highlight expressions while still ensuring visibility to the audience.

Use of high-definition stage technology sometimes calls for even greater refinement in facial aesthetics.

In group performances, lighting becomes a shared component of *Āhārya*. Carefully coordinated stage lights highlight formations, create depth, and synchronize visual rhythm, ensuring that collective choreography resonates as strongly as solo performance.

6.5 Fusion and Global Influences

Intercultural Collaborations: When Bharatanatyam is performed with Western dance styles or on global platforms, costumes sometimes blend Indian and international aesthetics.

Thematic Costuming: Experimental productions create costumes reflecting contemporary issues such as environmental themes, gender discourse, or peace thus expanding the expressive range of Āhārya.

Innovative Accessories: Props like scarves, masks, or multimedia projections are occasionally incorporated, extending the meaning of traditional Āhārya beyond its classical scope.

In large-scale productions, thematic costuming allows each character or group to represent symbolic elements such as earth, fire, water, or cosmic forces expanding the interpretive scope of Bharatanatyam's visual language.

6.6 Balancing Tradition and Modernity

Despite innovations, there is a conscious effort to preserve the sanctity of Bharatanatyam. Dancers and choreographers carefully balance tradition with experimentation, ensuring that adaptations serve the spirit of bhakti and rasa rather than becoming mere spectacle. Thus, modern Āhārya Abhinaya reflects continuity within change an evolving art that speaks to both its roots and the present.

In ensemble and ballet contexts, this balance is particularly important. While modern costumes, lighting, and props may enhance visual appeal, choreographers emphasize that they must never overshadow the expressive depth of the dance. Instead, group aesthetics are designed to amplify the narrative while remaining faithful to the spirit of Bharatanatyam.

7. Case Studies of Renowned Dancers and Their Use of Āhārya Abhinaya

7.1 Rukmini Devi Arundale: Reviving Tradition with Elegance

Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904–1986), the visionary founder of Kalakshetra, played a pioneering role in re-establishing Bharatanatyam's dignity on the global stage. Her approach to Āhārya Abhinaya was marked by:

Costume Redesign: She introduced stitched costumes that allowed greater mobility and modesty while preserving the temple aesthetic.

Temple Jewelry Revival: She reintroduced the use of temple-inspired ornaments, emphasizing Bharatanatyam's sacred roots.

Minimalist Makeup: She rejected the gaudy styles of early 20th-century performances, preferring subtle makeup that highlighted bhāva.

Her productions, particularly dance-dramas staged at Kalakshetra, showcased group choreography where costumes and stage aesthetics were standardized for harmony while still differentiating characters through

symbolic color and ornament. In this way, Rukmini Devi ensured that Āhārya became a collective aesthetic medium as much as an individual one.

7.2 Balasaraswati: Āhārya as a Natural Extension of Bhāva

In contrast, Balasaraswati (1918–1984) embodied the traditional devadāsī style, where Āhārya Abhinaya was not a separate ornamentation but a seamless part of bhāva.

She retained traditional saree draping styles, often without modern stitched costumes.

Jewelry and makeup were modest, with more emphasis on emotional depth than visual grandeur.

Her philosophy highlighted that rasa is awakened primarily through expression, while Āhārya served only to enhance it subtly. Balasaraswati's performances were predominantly solo, but even in her ensemble contexts, she maintained the primacy of expression over spectacle, demonstrating that Āhārya should support rather than dominate performance.

7.3 Yamini Krishnamurthy: Majestic Grandeur

Known as the “torchbearer of Bharatanatyam,” Yamini Krishnamurthy (b. 1940) introduced majestic grandeur to Āhārya Abhinaya:

She used vibrant, heavily pleated costumes that highlighted her dynamic movements.

Jewelry was elaborate, aligning with her fiery stage presence.

Her stage persona reflected the larger-than-life archetype of mythological characters, making Āhārya a powerful tool of dramatic intensity.

In her group ballets, she often adopted striking contrasts of color and design across dancers, amplifying the visual drama and highlighting the narrative conflict.

7.4 Alarmel Valli: Subtle Sophistication

Alarmel Valli (b. 1956) is admired for her subtle sophistication in integrating Āhārya with sahrīdaya (empathy with the audience).

Her costumes combine tradition with aesthetic refinement, emphasizing elegance rather than extravagance.

Jewelry and makeup are carefully balanced to highlight expressiveness.

She avoids excessive ornamentation, believing that abhinaya must shine without distraction.

Although primarily known for solo repertoire, in collaborative productions she ensured that costumes and stage aesthetics never overshadowed the delicacy of bhāva, offering an alternative model to spectacle-driven performances.

7.5 Malavika Sarukkai: Experimentation with Contemporary Themes

Malavika Sarukkai (b. 1959) has extended the scope of Āhārya into contemporary experimental work:

Costumes are adapted to suit thematic innovations, sometimes incorporating non-traditional elements.

Props and minimalist stage design are occasionally used to deepen interpretive meaning.

She redefines Āhārya as a living, adaptable tool, proving that Bharatanatyam can address contemporary issues while rooted in tradition.

In her ensemble productions, costumes often vary according to symbolic roles, enabling the audience to recognize shifts in narrative theme. This approach demonstrates how Āhārya can function dynamically in group contexts without losing its classical grounding.

7.6 Insights from Case Studies

These renowned dancers reveal the diversity of approaches to Āhārya Abhinaya:

Rukmini Devi emphasized reform and collective dignity.

Balasaraswati valued authenticity and emotional truth.

Yamini Krishnamurthy celebrated grandeur and spectacle.

Alarmel Valli cultivated elegance and restraint.

Malavika Sarukkai embraced innovation and experimentation.

Together, they illustrate how Āhārya Abhinaya is not static but evolves according to personal artistry, cultural needs, and performance contexts whether solo recitals, thematic ballets, or group productions.

8. Critical Analysis and Theoretical Implications of Āhārya Abhinaya

8.1 Traditional vs. Modern Perspectives

In classical theory, as outlined in the Nāṭyaśāstra and other texts, Āhārya was considered a supportive element an external embellishment to aid abhinaya and rasa.

Traditional View: Āhārya must remain secondary to Āṅika (body movements) and Vācika (speech/music). It should never dominate the rasa experience.

Modern Practice: With larger auditoriums, lighting, and global audiences, dancers emphasize costumes, jewelry, and stage design to capture attention and communicate cultural aesthetics.

In solo repertoire, this balance often depends on the dancer's choices. In group productions, however, the scale of performance makes Āhārya more prominent, as coordinated costumes and stage aesthetics are essential for visual harmony and narrative clarity.

8.2 Āhārya and Rasa Theory

According to Bharata, rasa arises from the combination of determinants (vibhāva), consequents (anubhāva), and transitory emotions (vyabhicāribhāva). Āhārya serves as a vibhāva a contextual determinant that helps the audience visualize the character and setting.

Example (solo): A crown (mukuta) immediately establishes a king, while minimal white attire can symbolize renunciation.

Example (ensemble): In a group ballet, entire groups may wear contrasting colors red to represent warriors, white to represent ascetics allowing the audience to decode symbolic relationships at a glance.

Thus, Āhārya is not merely decorative but a semiotic tool that deepens audience engagement with both solo and collective performance.

8.3 Aesthetic Value vs. Practicality

The effectiveness of Āhārya lies in balancing aesthetic beauty (śobha) with practical utility:

Excessively heavy costumes or ornaments may restrict movement.

Too much makeup under strong lights may distort expressions.

Inadequate Āhārya, on the other hand, may dilute dramatic effect and reduce audience engagement.

In ensemble settings, practicality is even more crucial. Costumes must be lightweight and uniform to facilitate synchronized group movement, while still retaining symbolic and aesthetic richness.

8.4 Symbolism and Semiotics in Āhārya

From a theoretical lens, Āhārya can be studied as a semiotic system:

Colors, textures, and ornaments act as cultural codes.

Each element conveys symbolic meaning (e.g., red = valor, white = purity, gold = divinity).

Props and stage design construct the narrative environment where abhinaya unfolds.

In thematic productions, semiotics is expanded across multiple dancers. For instance, dancers symbolizing the five elements may each embody a different color or prop, collectively constructing a cosmological framework on stage.

8.5 Critical Challenges in the Contemporary Context

Commercialization: In global performances, Āhārya risks becoming spectacle-driven, overshadowing bhāva.

Standardization vs. Individuality: Institutions like Kalakshetra emphasize uniform costumes for group productions, while solo artists experiment with personal styles. This raises debates on authenticity vs. innovation.

Cultural Translation: For international audiences unfamiliar with Indian iconography, Āhārya must sometimes adapt for clarity without diluting its cultural essence.

8.6 Theoretical Implications

Āhārya demonstrates that outer form and inner essence are inseparable in performance. It embodies the dialogue between tradition and modernity, where visual culture evolves while retaining classical roots.

In solo repertoire, Āhārya externalizes inner states of the dancer, bridging emotion and appearance.

In ensemble contexts, it unifies multiple bodies into a single aesthetic frame, amplifying collective meaning.

From an aesthetic standpoint, Āhārya reflects the Indian concept of holistic unity—where art engages body, mind, spirit, and environment together.

9. Pedagogical and Practical Relevance in Bharatanatyam Training

9.1 Āhārya in the Pedagogy of Bharatanatyam

In the traditional guru–śiṣya paramparā, the primary focus was on Āṅgika Abhinaya (body movements) and bhāva (emotional expression), with Āhārya introduced only during stage performances. In modern institutional training whether at Kalakshetra, Nalanda, or university departments systematic guidance is now given in:

Costume draping and maintenance.

Ornamentation techniques.

Makeup suited for stage lights.

Stage presentation and aesthetics.

Thus, Āhārya forms a complementary discipline within dance education, ensuring that students view performance as a holistic aesthetic practice rather than mere technique.

9.2 Grooming and Professionalism

For a dancer, correct use of Āhārya is not just aesthetic it contributes to professional identity:

A well-presented costume reflects discipline and respect for tradition.

Proper grooming instills confidence in the performer.

Students learn to value attention to detail an essential quality in all performing arts.

In ensemble performances, grooming and uniformity also reinforce group cohesion, making the collective appear disciplined, synchronized, and aesthetically unified.

9.3 Developing Stage Awareness

Training in Āhārya makes students sensitive to stagecraft:

How colors and textures appear under lights.

How costumes support or hinder movement.

How ornaments, flowers, and props can enhance mudrā and bhāva.

In group choreography, stage awareness also involves understanding formations and spatial balance. Dancers must learn how costumes and ornamentation appear not just individually but as part of a coordinated visual design.

9.4 Experiential Learning and Creativity

Learning about Āhārya gives students scope for creative exploration:

Designing costumes inspired by tradition but adapted for comfort.

Experimenting with subtle makeup that highlights abhinaya.

Understanding symbolism in colors and jewelry for thematic presentations.

In group productions, creativity extends to designing color palettes for different characters or using collective props (lamps, scarves, or symbolic accessories) that create narrative resonance. When guided properly, such experimentation nurtures innovation without breaking tradition.

9.5 Practical Training Modules (Contemporary Context)

Modern dance schools often include:

Workshops on Costume Design – training in fabric choice, stitching, and draping styles.

Ornamentation & Hairstyling – preserving cultural authenticity while ensuring stability during performance.

Stage Makeup Techniques – balancing classical demands with modern lighting conditions.

Stage Décor & Props – integrating minimalistic yet symbolic stage setups.

For ensemble dancers, workshops also emphasize coordinated dressing and collective presentation, ensuring that costumes support choreographic formations and thematic clarity.

9.6 Pedagogical Implications

Incorporating Āhārya ensures all-round training in Bharatanatyam. It reinforces the idea that performance is not just movement but a visual-auditory-spiritual experience. By connecting aesthetic theory with practical execution, Āhārya training enables students to appreciate the unity of art and life.

In solo repertoire, this develops individual responsibility for artistic presentation, while in group contexts, it fosters teamwork and collaborative discipline both of which are vital for the evolving landscape of Bharatanatyam.

10. Contemporary Innovations and Future Directions in Āhārya Abhinaya

10.1 Fusion Costumes and Modern Fabrics

In today's globalized cultural context, Bharatanatyam costuming has seen innovations in fabric, style, and design:

Use of lighter, breathable fabrics such as georgette and chiffon instead of traditional silk for ease of travel and performance.

Experimentation with fusion drapes that retain the silhouette of classical costume while offering modern comfort.

Costumes tailored for thematic productions (e.g., mythological, environmental, or social themes).

In group ballets, fusion styles are often used to differentiate characters or to represent contrasting symbolic forces, giving audiences immediate visual cues.

10.2 Experimentation with Colors and Symbols

Beyond the traditional red, green, and gold palette, dancers now explore pastels, metallic shades, and monochrome costumes for thematic effect.

White may be used to suggest purity in devotional pieces.

Dark shades may intensify tragic or cosmic themes.

In ensemble productions, color codes are distributed across roles to heighten dramatic meaning—for example, warriors may appear in fiery tones, while sages and devotees appear in softer hues.

10.3 Makeup and Lighting Innovations

Modern stage lighting technology has transformed how *Āhārya* is applied:

Makeup today must adapt to LED stage lights, HD cameras, and online streaming, ensuring expressions remain visible without looking exaggerated.

Subtle, high-definition makeup kits are replacing heavily stylized grease paints, offering a balance between tradition and modern media requirements.

In group choreography, lighting design plays a critical role in unifying costume colors, highlighting formations, and creating dramatic atmosphere. Thus, makeup and lighting function together as extended aspects of *Āhārya*.

10.4 Props and Stage Design

Contemporary Bharatanatyam productions sometimes employ minimalistic props (lotus, lamp, fabric) to enhance symbolism. Experiments with digital backdrops and projections are seen in urban theatres, though

purists debate their relevance. Traditional alankāra (garlands, décor) is often reimagined with eco-friendly materials in modern festivals.

In ensemble works, props are often shared by groups of dancers, creating collective symbolism for example, all dancers carrying lamps in a devotional piece, or coordinated use of fabrics to depict natural elements like rivers or wind.

10.5 Globalization and Cross-Cultural Exchange

With Bharatanatyam being performed worldwide, costumes often undergo practical modifications for international audiences and climates. Collaborations with world dance forms (ballet, contemporary dance) bring new ideas into Āhārya, while retaining Bharatanatyam's identity. Diaspora communities preserve tradition yet adapt aesthetics to resonate with local culture.

In group cross-cultural projects, costume design often blends Indian and global aesthetics, creating hybrid visual languages that communicate across cultural boundaries.

10.6 Sustainability and Ethical Considerations

Eco-conscious dancers now promote:

Handloom fabrics and natural dyes.

Recycled or lightweight ornaments.

Environmentally sustainable stage décor.

This approach aligns with both Indian aesthetics (respect for nature) and global concerns about sustainable art practices. For large productions, sustainability becomes even more significant, since multiple costumes and props are required, making eco-friendly choices essential.

10.7 Future Directions

The future of Āhārya Abhinaya may include:

Greater use of costume research and design as an academic subject in performing arts universities.

Integration of digital costume visualization tools for design before tailoring.

Broader collaboration between choreographers, designers, and scholars to ensure authenticity alongside innovation.

For group choreography, future directions will likely focus on creating scalable, adaptable costume and stage designs that can retain Bharatanatyam's classical essence while addressing the logistics of ensemble performance.

11. Conclusion

The exploration of Āhārya Abhinaya in Bharatanatyam reveals its dual role as both an aesthetic and functional dimension of performance. While the Nāṭyaśāstra remains the primary textual foundation for understanding Āhārya, its principles have been continually reinterpreted within the evolving context of Bharatanatyam. By focusing on the solo repertoire the heart of the Bharatanatyam tradition this study highlights how costume, ornamentation, makeup, and stage décor support the dancer's expression, enhance rasa, and transform the performer into a living icon of sacred art.

At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the expanded horizons of Bharatanatyam in the modern era. Solo performances continue to emphasize subtlety and depth, yet group productions, thematic ballets, and ensemble choreographies have introduced new demands on Āhārya. Here, costume uniformity, symbolic differentiation, and collective stage design become essential tools of visual storytelling. The aesthetics of Āhārya thus extend beyond individual identity to collective harmony, offering new possibilities while remaining rooted in classical ideals.

Importantly, this study does not engage in detailed discussions of character-specific Āhārya as prescribed for dramatic theatre. Instead, it limits its scope to Bharatanatyam as a performance form in both its solo and group expressions, thereby ensuring methodological clarity. By situating Āhārya within this defined framework, the analysis gains both scholarly validity and contemporary relevance.

In the current cultural landscape, innovations in fabric, design, lighting, and sustainability further demonstrate that Āhārya is not a static accessory but a dynamic, living dimension of Bharatanatyam. It preserves continuity with ancient aesthetics while adapting to the needs of modern audiences, performance spaces, and pedagogical practices.

Ultimately, Āhārya Abhinaya functions as the visible thread that binds tradition, innovation, and devotion. Whether in the intimacy of a solo recital or the grandeur of a group ballet, it enhances the performative experience, harmonizing external beauty with inner essence. As Bharatanatyam continues to flourish globally,

Āhārya will remain a vital site of negotiation between heritage and modernity, ensuring that the dance retains its sacred aura while embracing new forms of artistic expression.

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