

Vyayama in dance - decoding from the treatises

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Vyayama, the physical exercise plays a major role in the life of a dancer. These exercises ranges from stretching, extending, strengthening and so on which helps in loosening the joints, creating more awareness and also makes the body resilient & flexible to cater the movements. It helps in harmonizing and also revitalizes the body to improve the functioning of each body part in order to avoid any kind of injury or wear & tear.

The trend of warm-ups and cool downs are extensively seen in recent times and many agree that the influence of western dance forms (contemporary, classical ballet etc.) has created more awareness in the Indian classical dancers too. So does that mean that the aspects of warming up/exercise never existed before in Indian classical dance? Or was the dancers not exposed to these aspects? Or did the dancers fail to comprehend the *shastra*?

Well, if we go back to the roots of Indian dramaturgy, the *Natyasastra*, one will be bewildered at the underpinning details of the concepts mentioned. As the *shastra* itself says there is no art, no craft, no lore, no technique that is not found, and it is definitely a unique work one could ever find. Unfortunately this lost work slowly came into light during 18th-19th century, however the techniques of *Abhinaya Darpana* started to rule and was extensively followed which is prevalent even now. As Dr. R. Ganesh rightly says ‘when there is a digest (AD) which is easy to

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comprehend, who will go back to the text (NS)? '. This is continuing to happen amidst many dancers even now.

Natyasastra is a definitely an exclusive work which isn't easy to comprehend. *Bharata* has given enormous information and left it to the beholder to interpret, introspect and use them in accordance to the requirement. The concept of movements can be seen from chapter 4 and chapter 8-13. As we move to chapter 8 which is the *Angika Abhinaya*, he talks extensively about *angas* and *upangas* with shloka and detailed movements about each (Ghosh, 2016). These movements covers the entire range of major to minor limbs. Though these movements are interpreted under the category of *abhinaya* yet there is ample scope to be viewed and interpreted as the *Vyayama* as well, because the movements pertaining to each *shloka* (*bhedha*) w.r.t each body part covers almost all the aspects of the normal warm-up exercise (not in accordance to NS) which one does.

Example: *Paada Bheda* (the movement of feet), according to *Natyasastra*:

“ऊर्द्धथिथह समचैव थथ अग्रथलसञ्चराह

अन्विथं कुन्विथस्चैव पाद पञ्चविदह समृथ ”

The different forms of movements pertaining to feet i.e the diverse ways of using the heels and toes are defined (standing on the toes, bending the toes, standing on the heels, standing on the toes with bent knees). If we closely observe every dancer performs similar exercise as their warm up routine before beginning their practice. Likewise *Bharata* mentions movements for thighs, shanks, shoulders, chest, waist, head, leg, neck, eyes and so on. Since these shlokas are serving same purpose as the

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regular warm up exercise performed by the dancers, will it not be appropriate to incorporate these *Bhedas* as a routine during the practice which shall not just prepare the body but also introduces dancers to the theoretical aspects of *Natyasastra*.

Secondly, *Natyasastra* itself mentions that the *Chari* movements are the *Vyayamas* by itself according to *Chari Bheda* Chapter 11.

"विधानोपगताशार्यो व्यायच्छन्ते परस्परम्

यस्मादङ्गसमायुक्तस्तस्माद् व्यायाम उच्यते"

Meaning: As the *charis* prescribed by rules and connected with [different] limbs relate to (*vyaayacchante* from *vya-yam* = stretch out to) one another, they constitute a *Vyayama* (system). (Ghosh, 2016, p. 276)

Moving the feet, shank and the hip refers to *Chari*. These movements are categorized into two varieties: *Bhumi Chari* (the movements pertaining to floor) & *Akasa Chari* (the aerial movements). He mentions one should perform these exercise on the floor and as well in the air. He also details on the care that needs to be taken i.e. one should have massaged their body with *seasame* oil or with *barley gruel* for the easy blood circulation. It is also mentioned that in order to strengthen the body one should take nasal medication, drink sugar cane juice or sherbet, as vitality depends on the nourishment and exercises depends on vitality. (Ghosh, 2016, p. 290) This proves that in order to keep one going, it is not just the exercise but also the nourishment which plays a major role. He has also not forgotten to state the cases in which one should not indulge in exercise i.e. when bowels are not cleansed, one is tired, hungry or thirsty, when eaten too much or too less and so on. The detailing at which the

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concepts are explained is the commendable work of Sage *Bharata*. This emphasizes that this text is the representation of human life and the world which surrounds the life.

So, analyzing both the features it can be interpreted that if these *bhedas* (*siro, uro, jhangha, parshva, Kati, Hasta, Janu, Mukhaja etc*) are preliminary exercises for *chari's*, then the *chari's* themselves (*bhumi & akasha*) can be the preliminary exercises for *Karanas* and the dance items. However since not many dancers are exposed to the Margi techniques (*Charis & Karanas*), yet one can study and incorporate the different *bhedas* into their daily routine which offers both as a warm up as well the theoretical study. Other treatises like *Sangeetharathnakara* by Sri.Sarangadeva, *Nritta Ratnavali* by Sri Jaya Senapathi and so on gives insight into various other *bhedas* which can also be incorporated based on the need.

An important reference can be found in the works of King Tulaja 1 in the treatise *Sangitha Saramritha*. This text defines the “*Shrama vidhi*” ie the techniques of initial practice where the different positions of feet and hand gestures are involved in the execution of the *adavu*. *Dandika Grahana* is a practice employed to perfect the *araimandi*. The dancers hold the rod (which is connected to two poles), in front of the chest and bends the knee to practice the triangular shaped *araimandi*. This practice was done on daily basis. (General study of Sangita Saramruta)

It is significant to also understand that the interpretation of *vyayamas* in the above context are not to be compared with the *yogasana*, acrobatics or the gym exercises because the intent here is to provide an insight of the existence alongside to accommodate the preparedness of the body with these techniques prior to the dance

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practice routine, whereas the latter is a whole study by itself concentrating on different aspects of body & mind care which is an altogether a different routine by itself. Also one cannot claim that the same *bheda*'s can be used as part of cool down exercise because with a careful observation its seen that these treatises based *vyayamas*(mentioned above) activate the muscles, whereas when it comes to cool down a dancer should be focusing on only stretching the body in order to reduce the tension created in the muscles.

The lack of exposure to the treatises itself in the dancers fraternity has encouraged one to appreciate the western techniques of exercise thus leaving behind the plethora of existing content of our own traditional knowledge. Also at times, introspection plays an important role to create a vision for adapting the aspects and viewing it as a larger picture. *Natyasastra* gives a common link and offers immense help for one to be creative, however it is challenging for one to interpret and introspect *Bharata*'s thoughts. Though it cannot be to the fullest, yet it isn't impossible to draw a close line.

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