

# EVALUATION OF AESTHETICS IN DANCE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KATHAK

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**Abstract:**

*Dance in India has always been a profound expression of human emotions and spiritual experiences. The classical dance form of Kathak, rooted in ancient storytelling traditions, offers a unique perspective on aesthetic appreciation. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the aesthetic principles inherent in Kathak, drawing from both ancient Indian treatises and contemporary dance theory. The author has proposed a seven point evaluation scale for evaluation of aesthetics in dance, which can be applied by dance teachers, scholars, researchers or any individual who wishes to identify the best inherent qualities of a dance performance or a dancer in a competitive set up or as a feedback after training sessions. This research paper is an extract from the unpublished PhD research work of the author which is an original research work.*

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## Introduction

"Dance" can be described in one sentence as a combination of artistic body movements executed in graceful and rhythmic patterns as a medium of expression by man. By dancing man expressed himself in a way which he conceived as the most powerful and eloquent at his disposal. He celebrated by dancing, he gained courage by dancing, he prayed and did-rituals through dancing and he entertained through dancing.

Dancing is found among all men whether primitive or advanced societies. Some tribal dances were a part of their tribal identity. It is no won that he experiences pleasure as well as satisfaction in rhythmical movement, since this both exercise his body and at the same time, releases inner tensions. It was believed that regular movement in constant time can induce hypnotic trances which has magical powers (Reginald & Messiah, 1954), which could be the reason for dance becoming part of religion & rituals in the earlier cults.

## Changing Aspects of Dance

In the present day society, dance is becoming more & more a physical activity which gives personal pleasure of uninhibited expression of joy & celebration during festivity and gathering or a means of entertainment. Few forms of dance have been still preserved as part of tradition and heritage of a country or society in the various forms of folk dances and classical dances like in the present Indian society. In western & European countries dance is becoming more & more of a leisure activity or allied to sport when performed in its changed forms of Aerobics or rhythmic gymnastics etc. One can see more and more fusion of dance and sports in activities like figure Skating, Synchronized Swimming, Cheerleading group performances etc., which are becoming more popular than traditional dance forms of the west like Ballet, Jazz *e etc.*

## Dance and allied activities as competitive Activity in society.

As we have seen earlier dance was either a form of tribal culture, rituals, folk forms or classical form carrying on through ages the traditions and cultural heritage of a society. It was either being performed by rural folk or by the royal families through their patronage for mere entertainment or artistic value. The change in the social system world over from a feudal society to a democratic scientific and more modern society has lead Dance to become a field of academic activity and in some societies even as a competitive activity. This development first began in the west which has very recently been adopted by Indian society also. Dance as a competitive activity is becoming popular in India in various form of folk, classical, cinematic style, modern style etc. Dance as a competitive activity is popular in schools, colleges and Universities and various independent cultural and event management institutions, widely supported by the government and Ministry of Human resources and development, conducted by AIU throughout the country as youth festival activities every year. Thus dance has taken up new social meaning and requirement in present day Indian society and in the west. In dance, and other allied activities which have human body movements, such as rhythmic gymnastics, aerobics, synchronised swimming, figure skating etc., there is one underlying common factor that binds them all together, which is, the "Aesthetics of body movements". When we talk of dance as an aesthetic body movement, we need to explore the meaning and application of aesthetics in the art of Dance.

## Aesthetics, Aesthetics in dance, and Evaluation of Aesthetics in Kathak Dance

Aesthetics belong to the branch of Philosophy. Aesthetics as an independent discipline is of a very recent origin, though speculation upon the nature of art and beauty dates back to almost the same time as the early cosmological speculation of ancient civilization. Nearly ten to fifteen centuries ago, Indian philosophers and literary critics like *Bharata, Anandavardhana, Abhinavagupta, Mammata and Jagannath* have discussed some of the most modern problems of aesthetics. They have made valuable contribution to the understanding of the nature of aesthetic meaning (Rekha Jhanji. 1980)<sup>1</sup>. Aesthetics is defined by Webster as 'study of the language, experiences and modes of behavior, which bear an art'. In present days, Aesthetics is taken in a very wide sense. According to Sushil Kumar Saxena "Aesthetics covers all studies of the arts and related types of experience from a philosophic, scientific, or other theoretical standpoints, including those of psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural history, art criticism and education". According to him, the word 'arts' is said to include '*Sangeet*' which signifies dance too, in addition to music and the literary, theatre and visual arts. Aesthetics is the study that sets out to answer the question.-What is art? Aesthetics is also known as expression of emotions, feelings, life ideas and other experiences. Art is an expression of emotions. Artists express their own and universal feelings and emotions in the making of art. To have a holistic view of aesthetics, one also needs to know about the Western concept. The need to know the western concept of aesthetics is to understand how the Western Philosophers and/or Art critics define aesthetic experience.

## Western Concept of Aesthetics

Since it is not possible to discuss the entire history of western aesthetics, only few aesthetic theories of the past have been considered that have paved the way for a discussion on contemporary aesthetic concepts. Until the eighteenth century, aesthetics was evaluated in the west. with reference either to morality or to philosophy and religion. If we look at Plato's analysis of aesthetic concepts, the linking of the aesthetic with the moral and the cognitive become evident. The role that Plato reserved for art was primarily that of injecting values into the dutiful citizens of his ideal state. However, Plato believed in the beauty of proportionality & symmetry. According to Aristotle, art has essentially therapeutic function while Controlling the emotions. However, artistic manifestation and its significance is closely associated with the moral problems for both Plato and Aristotle. Among the classical thinkers, Plotinus is significant for his Remarks on the nature of beauty. Plotinus shares with Plato his contempt of external reality. Thus the beauty transcends the domain of the sensible. Plotinus thinks that what lends beauty to art and nature is not its materiality but its form.

In the Middle Ages Augustine looks upon beauty in nature and art as the Manifestation of the principle of reason. Beauty pleases the sense of reason. What creates the effect of beauty is design and composition representing a sense of proportion and symmetry. Western aesthetic traditions-ranging from Plato's notions of ideal forms to Kant's idea of 'disinterested pleasure'-focus more on form, symmetry, and rational judgment. To summarize, there was no uniform concept on aesthetics among Western Philosophers and they had varied opinion. Though they talked about Metaphysics, they were relating aesthetics to religion and theology and only few like Shaftsbury, Leonardo da Vinci, Edmund Burg, Cant etc. have linked aesthetics to physical beauty and senses. Thus in the Western concept the Philosophers talk of beauty in proportionality, symmetry, beauty in form, design, composition, physical beauty and also metaphysical beauty which pleases the senses of reason, which comes close to the Indian Rasa Theory.

### Indian Concept of Aesthetics

For the traditional Indian artist regardless of the field in which he worked, artistic creation was the supreme means of realizing the universal being through artistic creation, the artist sought a state of pure joy (*Ananda*). Physical perception and imitation of nature was irrelevant to him and artistic creation could be a success only if it achieved that supreme artistic purpose of creating state of absolute bliss, the *BRAHMANANDA*. Irrespective of different systems of Indian Philosophy. *NYAYA*, *SANKHYA*, *VEDANTA* and *SAIVA* doctrine, it was unanimously accepted that the aesthetic experience at the highest level was essentially different from any experience in the empirical world.

The aesthetics, which emerged as a result of these believes was the theory applied to all forms of art like dance, music etc. and is still being evaluated and savoured by the connoisseurs of art in society based on Rasa experience. The aesthetics, as a result of these believes was the theory of *RASA*. The configuration of numerous transitory states (*VYABICARI BHAVA*) involuntary states (*SATTVIKA BHAVA*) and dominant moods (*STHAYI BHAVA*) into eight or nine states of being can be understood in the light these spiritual believes. The technique of the arts was directly conditioned by these principles and the techniques of the Indian arts are the rules through which these *RASA* states can be evoked. These principles are evident in the rules of Proportion in architecture. in the detailed formulations of the principles of *TALA* (measurement) and *BHANGA* (stance) of Indian sculpture, in the relative disposition and proportion of color and perspective in painting and the use of *SRUTI* and *SVARA* (notes) in a given mode (*RAGA*) to create a particular mood in Indian music. Thus the theory of *RASA* provides an underlying unity to the Indian Arts. In the patterns of division and combination of the movements of the major limbs (*ANGA*) and minor limbs (*UPANGA*) in dancing. Thus this is the evident element to be seen for visually and mentally evaluating dance.

### Possibilities of measuring aesthetics in dance

According to western concept, aesthetics in dance can be evaluated by seeing the form and content of the dance. Form can be evaluated subjectively by considering the beauty of the form and technical aspects of the dance form. Content can be evaluated through expression, nature of taste of that expression and the faculty of aesthetic enjoyment. Beauty of the dance form can be evaluated by observing beauty in design, symmetry of movement, grace, elegance, rhythm and precision, harmony, and perfect artistic execution.

According to Indian concept, the aesthetics in content as well as form in dance can be evaluated through the elements of *RASA* and *BHAVA* as explained in *BHARATA's Natyasastra*. In Indian philosophy, the experience of '*Rasa*' is central to understanding art. Bharata's *Natyashastra* explains the relationship between '*Bhava*' (emotions) and '*Rasa*' (flavour) in artistic expression. Abhinavagupta further elaborated on this theory by emphasizing the audience's inner realization and enjoyment (*Rasanubhuti*), forming the foundation of Indian aesthetic theory.

### Necessity to evaluate dance performance

Academic interest in performance arts has encouraged the development of objective methods for evaluating aesthetic experiences. In Kathak, features like rhythm (*laya*), intricate footwork (*tatkar*), graceful posture (*Thaat*) and expressive storytelling (*abhinaya*) become key elements. The dancer's ability to convey rasa through body and facial expressions becomes central.

As elucidated above dance has gone through various changes from being a traditional art form to a form of competitive activity or even semi sports activity in various societies the world over. This has resulted in the need to evaluate dance performances in a more objective manner. Thus the need to understand what aspects in dance can be or should be evaluated, leads us to the point of evaluating aesthetic elements in dance. Because any dance which does not have the ability to evoke a sense of beauty and bliss or say a sense of *Ananda* may not attract the attention of the audience. Thus the need to technically identify the elements of aesthetics in dance arises.

### Aesthetics in Dance

Though dance involves physical movements, these movements should be performed with grace, fluency, rhythm etc. Dance movements have to be expressive movements. Here the element of aesthetics come into force.

Dance being a performing art can be described in one sentence as a combination of artistic body movements executed in graceful and rhythmic patterns as a medium of expression by man. By dancing man expressed himself in a way which he conceived as the most powerful and eloquent at his disposal.

### Evaluation of Aesthetics in dance

Earlier dance was a medium of entertainment where the audience would evaluate a performance for their own satisfaction or for giving artistic status to a performer or group of performers. Here the Indian "*Rasa*" theory was easily applicable, where in the performer and the spectator would taste the performance through their perceived levels of aesthetics which is intangible. But today more and more need is felt to assess the performances objectively, because of the fact that dance has gone through various changes from being a traditional art form to a form of competitive activity or even into a semi sports activity in various societies all over the world. Even in the West for a long time the evaluation technique followed in the field of performing art dance was subjective. When it comes to measuring the "Aesthetic value" or improvement in the Aesthetic ability of a performer there should be rationale and objective measurement scale on the basis of which such a measurement can be made. It is seen that no objective measurement method is available. The reasons for this are mainly two — first being that- by tradition the subjective assessment or criticism of the performance of the dancer by gurus or experts was accepted implicitly and no one used to have the courage to challenge it. The second reason being that considerable amount of difficulties will have to be faced while devising an objective instrument and hence, all along the judgment is being carried out subjectively as 'good', 'average' and "bad" by experts. Now the question that arises is that, do dance performances or dancers improve upon their performance or not? If they do then how to rate or rank the improvement even if it is subjective? This led to the thought that one needs to identify the elements of dance that have aesthetic value. When it comes to measuring the 'Aesthetic value' or improvement in the Aesthetic ability of a performer there should be rationale and objective measurement scale on the basis of which such a measurement could be made. Thus there was as such no universally acceptable standard measurement method or scale on the basis of which 'Aesthetics in dance' could be measured. As a general concept of idea it was seen that mostly a dance performance by individual or a group of performers, was always judged by people by subjective view generally stating, good, average or bad. Upon reviewing related literature and research, it was found that there are theoretical perspectives but they lack comprehensive evaluative framework, which this study proposes. It was seen that not much work had ever been done in this area either by any Indian researcher in the field of aesthetics or by any one even in the west. This further led to the thought that a measurement scale can be developed. This led to the view that, 'which elements can be easily observed in dance which have "Aesthetic value- to it? Since dance is a movement based activity, therefore one has to look for such movements and identify them. Man learns to walk, run, eat and do day to day activities instinctively and socially as he grows from a small child to a grown up adult. However, Human movement cannot be regarded only in terms of physical efficiency & strength, but the moving body has also certain other qualities which give rise to experience of a more aesthetic and expressive nature. (Douglas Sandal), According to 'Douglas Sandal' human movement can be differentiated into three conceptual categories Instrumental, Quantitative and Qualitative.

### Instrumental movement

When the ends achieved by a movement are of a more immediate significance than the movements itself, such movement can be regarded as instrumental. For example picking up a knife to cut a bread. It does not matter how quickly or in which manner this movement of picking a knife is done. Instrumental movements occur automatic and the purpose of such a movement is beyond the actual movement.

### Quantitative movement

Quantitative movement is concerned with the physical presence of movement as force. The significance of quantitative movement depends on the extent to which such movement can displace an object in time and space irrespective of other instrumental ends this might achieve. Quantitative movement predominates in sports, where objectives such as running fast, jumping high, throwing an object can be displaced in time and space and where movement is assessed by measures of time, height distances and so on. Like in high jump, bowling, sprint running etc.

### Qualitative movement

When attention and experience is directed towards the intrinsic qualities of movements as they appear to consciousness, we have an instance of qualitative movement. Qualitative movement gains its significance from how a movement experience feels irrespective of its Instrumental ends and irrespective of its quantitative aspect of Physical force and achievements. For example, a dancer may want to move faster from A to B but her concern will be qualitative if she is not trying to achieve a greater displacement of her body through space (measured in terms of time taken). She would be concerned with the expressive and aesthetic qualities that such a movement in its fast form and within the context of the dance would achieve.

However, the dancer would be able to execute such a qualitative movement with complete artistic ability only after having mastered the technique and having gone through sufficient practice of moving her body in time and space in such a manner that the execution of that movement looks smooth and graceful *in spite of the effort she puts in*, that is, her quantitative movement should be such that it must contain qualitative movement aspects. Qualitative movement, thus is not only displacement of the objective the "dancer" in time and space as a phenomenal event, but, with the feelings moods and affective states which implicitly arise within such perception. Thus how the movement is executed, whether with a degree of potency with a perceptual awareness and sensory experience and moods is important for a qualitative movement. Qualitative movement is especially relevant to movement expression and art forms such as dance, but also has relevance to sports and games. In Indian classical Dance especially Kathak, Qualitative movement can be seen in the *Nritt*, *Nrittang* and *Abhinaya part* or *Natya* i.e technique. Thus it has been asserted that an awareness of body rhythm, Patterns of movements and the expressive Qualities of movements as experienced in Sports and Dance will help to develop a general sensitivity to aesthetic qualities in art and the environment in general.

Therefore its these qualitative movements which need to be identified for evaluating the aesthetic content in them The qualities to be stressed upon are; SWIFTNESS, GRACE, FLUENCY, RHYTHM AND PERCEIVED VITALITY. These qualities in various combinations constitute beauty of movement.

Thus beauty of movement containing above elements is called Qualitative movement which is commonly found in dance and identified as elements for evaluation of aesthetics in any dance and also classical dance *Kathak*.

### SEVEN POINTS EVALUATION SCALE FOR EVALUATING AESTHETICS IN DANCE.

On the basis of identifying qualitative movement elements as stated above, it is generally observed that throughout the world, for all such Physical activities, which had elements of artistic ability in them they were judged on the basis of following:

1. Flexibility, flow and grace of movements and posture.
2. Coordination and synchronization of body movements within Self and with music.
3. Rhythm and timing in body movements.
4. Use of space (individual space and performance space)
5. Balance of body movements and mastery in the technique of the particular activity. (Dance, gymnastic etc).
6. Speed of movement — equilibrium.
7. Artistic expression — i.e. ability to express dance movements in a vibrant and enthusiastic manner thus conveying meaning to that movement and conveying meaning through that movement. In this the body mind and soul coming together is felt which creates the total effect of the dance.

With the above generalized idea the following physical activities and Dance activities were being already evaluated in somewhat similar pattern by experts around the world in "Rhythmic Gymnastics, Aerobics, Figure skating, synchronized swimming and competitions in dance.

Based on the above and the various concepts of aesthetics of western thinkers and Indian thinkers the researcher has formed a SEVEN POINT RATING SCALE for evaluating Aesthetics in Dance / classical Dance *Kathak* can be carried out. It is concluded that the evaluation scale could be further modified with expert opinion in the field.

### Conclusion

This paper proposes a seven-point scale to assess Kathak performances:

1. Flexibility and Grace
2. Coordination and Synchronization
3. Rhythm and Timing
4. Use of Space
5. Balance and Mastery
6. Speed and Equilibrium
7. Artistic Expression (Unity of Body, Mind and Soul).

The aesthetics of Kathak reflect a harmony of rhythm, emotion, and spiritual engagement. By integrating Classical Indian aesthetic theory with structured evaluation methods, this paper contributes towards holistic assessment approaches that honour both technical skill and emotional impact.

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