



Nāyikā Bhāva and Śṛṅgāra Rasa in the Dance-Based Compositions of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal

Unnikrishnan Kunnummal

Research Scholar, Department of Dance
University College of Fine Arts, University of Mysore
Manasagangothri, Mysuru – 570006, India

Prof. Dr. Sheela H. K. Sridhar

Professor, Department of Dance, University College of Fine Arts
University of Mysore
Manasagangothri, Mysuru – 570006, India

Abstract

Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma (1813–1846), the renowned ruler of Travancore, occupies an eminent place in the history of Indian classical music and dance. His compositions demonstrate a remarkable synthesis of musical sophistication, poetic refinement, and devotional philosophy. Among the aesthetic dimensions present in his works, the portrayal of **Nāyikā Bhāva and Śṛṅgāra Rasa** holds particular significance. Drawing upon classical aesthetic frameworks described in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and later treatises such as *Rasamañjarī*, Swathi Thirunal's compositions explore diverse emotional states of the heroine in relation to the beloved deity, frequently identified with Krishna or Padmanābha. This article examines the manifestation of Nāyikā classification and Śṛṅgāra aesthetics in the Maharaja's dance-oriented compositions, including varnams, padams, jāvalis, bhajans, and selected Hindustani compositions. The study also investigates the role of rasa theory, musical structure, and abhinaya interpretation in Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam. Through this analysis, the article demonstrates how Swathi Thirunal's works transform romantic emotion into a profound expression of devotional experience.

Keywords

Swathi Thirunal, Nāyikā Bhāva, Śṛṅgāra Rasa, Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam, Abhinaya, Indian Aesthetics, Padam, Hindustani Compositions.

1. Introduction

Indian classical dance traditions derive their expressive richness from the aesthetic theories of **rasa** and **bhāva** articulated in Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. These concepts provide a philosophical framework through which human emotions are transformed into aesthetic experience. Among the various rasas, **Śṛṅgāra Rasa**, associated with love and beauty, occupies a privileged position and is frequently described as the *rasa-rāja*—the king of rasas.

In the compositions of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal, Śṛṅgāra is not limited to romantic sentiment but frequently assumes devotional significance. Through the symbolic relationship between the **nāyikā (heroine)** and the **nāyaka (hero)**, the composer articulates the spiritual longing of the devotee for union with the divine. This transformation of romantic emotion into devotional experience aligns with the concept of **madhura bhakti**, where divine love is expressed through the metaphor of human romance.

Swathi Thirunal's dance-oriented compositions—particularly varnams, padams, and jāvalis—provide rich material for expressive interpretation in Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam. Through the portrayal of Nāyikā Bhāva, these compositions allow dancers to explore a wide spectrum of emotional states including longing, devotion, joy, anger, persuasion, and surrender.

2. Theoretical Framework of Nāyikā Classification

The concept of the **Nāyikā** occupies a central position in Indian aesthetic theory. Classical texts classify heroines according to psychological disposition, relational context, emotional maturity, and situational states of love.

One of the most influential classifications is the **Aṣṭa Nāyikā system**, which describes eight emotional states of the heroine in relation to the beloved: Vāsakasajjā, Virahotkaṇṭhitā, Svādhīnapatikā, Kalahāntarītā, Khaṇḍitā, Vipralabdā, Proṣitabhartṛkā, and Abhisārikā. These categories represent

diverse emotional conditions such as anticipation, separation, anger, disappointment, and bold initiative.

Rather than functioning as rigid categories, these classifications provide performers with an interpretative framework for exploring emotional nuance through abhinaya.

3. Nāyaka–Nāyikā Bhāva in Swathi Thirunal's Compositions

The emotional foundation of Śṛṅgāra Rasa lies in the relationship between the **nāyaka** and the **nāyikā**. In Swathi Thirunal's compositions, this relationship often reflects the devotional paradigm of **Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa love**, where romantic longing becomes a metaphor for spiritual yearning.

Krishna frequently appears as the **Dhirolalita nāyaka**, characterized by charm, playfulness, and emotional intimacy. In devotional contexts he may also embody the **Dhirodātta nāyaka**, marked by dignity and divine authority.

4. Rasa Theory and Emotional Expression

The theory of **rasa** explains how emotional experience becomes aesthetic enjoyment. Bharata Muni describes the emergence of rasa through the interaction of **vibhāva**, **anubhāva**, and **vyabhicāribhāvas**, supported by the dominant emotional state known as **sthāyibhāva**.

In the case of Śṛṅgāra Rasa, the dominant emotion is love, which may appear in two forms:

- **Sambhoga Śṛṅgāra** – love in union
- **Vipralambha Śṛṅgāra** – love in separation

Swathi Thirunal's compositions frequently emphasise **vipralambha Śṛṅgāra**, where the heroine experiences longing and emotional turmoil in the absence of the beloved.

5. Śṛṅgāra Rasa in Swathi Thirunal's Dance-Based Compositions

In Swathi Thirunal's dance-oriented repertoire, Śṛṅgāra Rasa manifests through several compositional genres including **varnams**, **padams**, **jāvalis**, and **devotional compositions**.

Varnams

Varnams provide the most expansive canvas for emotional development and narrative abhinaya.

Examples include:

- **Sarasa Mr̥dupada Varnam** – p.335
- **Hā Hanta Varnam** – p.339
- **Dāni Samajendra Varnam** – p.342

These compositions present the nāyikā expressing longing and devotion toward the divine beloved.

Padams

Padams represent the most introspective form of Śṛṅgāra, emphasizing psychological depth and emotional subtlety.

Examples include:

- **Alarśara Paritāpam** – p.399
- **Alamanagha Vilambēna** – p.380
- **Ena Nērmizhi Hē Kāmini** – p.411
- **Pannagēndra Śayana** – p.200
- **Māninī Vāmata Manasi** – p.443

These compositions present diverse relational perspectives involving the nāyikā, nāyaka, and sakhī.

Jāvalis

Jāvalis portray lighter emotional exchanges and conversational expressions of love.

Examples include:

- **Itu Sāhasamulu** – p.440
- **Sāramaina Mātālānda** – p.439

Devotional Compositions

Śṛṅgāra often merges with **bhakti rasa** in devotional compositions.

Examples include:

- **Bhāvayāmi Raghurāmam** – p.250
- **Gopālaka Pāhimām** – p.217

These works reflect the emotional intimacy of **madhura bhakti**.

6. Śṛṅgāra Rasa in Swathi Thirunal's Hindustani Compositions

Maharaja Swathi Thirunal also composed several works influenced by **Hindustani musical traditions**, written in Hindi and Braj Bhasha.

Examples include:

- **Aj Aye Śyām Mohan** – p.450
- **Nāce Raghunātha**
- **Chaliye Kunjan Me** – p.456
- **Śaṅkara Śrī Giri** – p.445

These compositions portray the emotional relationship between the heroine and Krishna within a Hindustani musical framework.

7. Abhinaya Interpretation in Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam

The expressive interpretation of these compositions relies on classical forms of **abhinaya**:

- **Āṅgika Abhinaya** – physical expression
- **Vācika Abhinaya** – lyrical expression
- **Sāttvika Abhinaya** – internal emotional expression

Bharatanatyam emphasises structured choreography and dramatic storytelling, while Mohiniyattam employs graceful movement and subtle emotional expression.

8. Conclusion

The dance-based compositions of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal reveal a profound synthesis of **Nāyikā Bhāva, Śṛṅgāra Rasa, and devotional philosophy**. By transforming romantic emotion into spiritual longing, the composer created works that continue to inspire performers in Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam.

References

1. Bharata Muni. *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Translated by Manomohan Ghosh. Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1951.
2. Kothari, Sunil. *Bharatanatyam*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2001.
3. Raghavan, V. *The Concept of Bhakti in Indian Aesthetics*. Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1978.
4. Sharma, V. S. *Sree Swathi Thirunal: Jeevithavum Krithikalum*. Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 2012.
5. Vatsyayan, Kapila. *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1968.