



Navavidha Bhakti in the Dance-Based Compositions of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal: An Aesthetic Study

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Abstract

Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma (1813–1846), the illustrious ruler of Travancore, occupies a significant place in the history of Indian classical music and dance. His compositions reveal a profound synthesis of devotional philosophy, poetic expression, and musical sophistication. Among the many devotional frameworks reflected in his works, the concept of **Navavidha Bhakti**, or the nine modes of devotion described in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, holds a central position. These nine devotional attitudes—Śravaṇam, Kīrtanam, Smaraṇam, Pāda-sevanam, Arcanam, Vandanam, Dāsyam, Sākhyam, and Ātma-nivedanam—represent progressive stages through which the devotee approaches the divine. The **Navaratna Mālīkā** compositions attributed to Maharaja Swathi Thirunal embody these nine devotional modes in a musico-poetic framework that is highly adaptable for classical dance interpretation. This article examines the aesthetic, devotional, and performative dimensions of these compositions, highlighting their significance for Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam traditions. The study demonstrates how Swathi Thirunal's compositions integrate philosophical depth with expressive artistic possibilities, thereby contributing to the rich devotional heritage of Indian performing arts.

Keywords

Navavidha Bhakti, Maharaja Swathi Thirunal, Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam, Abhinaya, Indian Aesthetics, Carnatic Music, Devotional Compositions.

1. Introduction

The cultural history of South India is marked by the remarkable contributions of royal patrons who actively supported and enriched the performing arts. Among them, **Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma** stands as a unique figure who combined the roles of ruler, scholar, musician, and composer. His compositions occupy an important place in both the Carnatic and Hindustani musical traditions and continue to be widely performed in classical dance repertoires.

A distinctive feature of Swathi Thirunal's compositions is their deep devotional orientation. Many of his works are dedicated to **Lord Padmanābha**, the presiding deity of the Travancore royal family. The Maharaja considered himself the servant of this deity and adopted the title **Padmanābha Dāsa**, reflecting his intense personal devotion. His compositions therefore embody not merely musical creativity but also spiritual philosophy.

One of the most significant devotional frameworks reflected in Swathi Thirunal's works is the concept of **Navavidha Bhakti**, the nine modes of devotion described in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. These nine forms represent different ways through which a devotee may approach the divine, ranging from listening to sacred narratives to complete surrender of the self. In the **Navaratna Mālikā compositions**, Swathi Thirunal presents these devotional attitudes through lyrical imagery, melodic expression, and philosophical symbolism.

In the context of Indian performing arts, such devotional compositions acquire additional significance through the theory of **rasa and abhinaya**. Dance traditions such as Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam interpret these compositions through expressive gestures, facial expressions, and narrative representation. Thus, the Navavidha Bhakti compositions serve not only as musical works but also as rich sources for aesthetic interpretation in classical dance.

2. Concept of Navavidha Bhakti in Devotional Literature

The concept of **Navavidha Bhakti** originates from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which describes nine distinct modes of devotional practice through which a devotee may approach the divine. These modes are not rigid categories but represent progressive stages of spiritual engagement.

The nine forms are traditionally enumerated as:

- **Śravaṇam** – listening to the divine stories and glories of the Lord
- **Kīrtanam** – singing or chanting the divine names
- **Smaranam** – remembering the Lord continuously
- **Pāda-sevanam** – serving the divine feet
- **Arcanam** – ritual worship of the deity
- **Vandanam** – offering salutations and prayers
- **Dāsyam** – serving the Lord as a humble servant
- **Sākhyam** – cultivating friendship with the Lord
- **Ātma-nivedanam** – complete surrender of the self

These devotional practices illustrate the evolving relationship between the **jīvātma (individual soul)** and the **paramātma (Supreme Being)**. In the performing arts, these attitudes are expressed through **bhakti rasa**, which evokes spiritual emotion and aesthetic experience.

3. Navaratna Mālikā and the Representation of Nine Modes of Devotion

The **Navaratna Mālikā** attributed to Maharaja Swathi Thirunal consists of nine compositions, each representing one aspect of Navavidha Bhakti. The compositions collectively illustrate the progressive stages of devotional experience.

The first kriti represents **Śravaṇam**, emphasizing the spiritual value of listening to divine narratives. The second kriti illustrates **Kīrtanam**, highlighting the transformative power of chanting the divine names. The third kriti expresses **Smaranam**, where the devotee constantly remembers the divine form.

The subsequent compositions explore **Pāda-sevanam** and **Arcanam**, where devotion manifests through acts of service and ritual worship. These practices emphasize humility and dedication toward the divine.

The next set of compositions explores relational devotion through **Vandanam**, **Dāsyam**, and **Sākhyam**. These modes illustrate different emotional relationships between the devotee and the deity—ranging from reverential salutation to servitude and ultimately friendship.

The final kriti represents **Ātma-nivedanam**, the highest stage of devotion characterized by complete surrender of the self to the divine.

4. Aesthetic Dimensions of Navavidha Bhakti Compositions

From an aesthetic perspective, the Navavidha Bhakti compositions reflect a rich interplay between **rāga**, **sahitya**, and **emotional expression**. Swathi Thirunal carefully selected rāgas that complement the devotional mood of each composition.

For instance, rāgas associated with deep devotional sentiment such as **Bhairavi** enhance the contemplative mood of listening to divine narratives. Meditative rāgas such as **Nilambari** support the introspective nature of remembrance. Bright and uplifting rāgas such as **Mohanam** effectively convey the warmth and intimacy of divine friendship.

The sahitya of these compositions also reveals rich poetic imagery drawn from mythology and devotional literature. References to episodes such as the rescue of **Gajendra**, the childhood of **Krishna in Gokula**, and the devotion of sages and celestial beings reinforce the spiritual message of the compositions.

Within the framework of Indian aesthetics, these compositions primarily evoke **Bhakti Rasa**, which reflects devotion and spiritual reverence. In certain contexts, elements of **Śānta Rasa (tranquility)** and **Karuṇā Rasa (compassion)** also emerge, enriching the emotional texture of the compositions.

5. Dance Interpretative Possibilities

The Navavidha Bhakti compositions offer significant scope for interpretation within classical dance traditions such as **Bharatanatyam** and **Mohiniyattam**. The expressive dimension of dance, known as **abhinaya**, enables performers to convey the devotional sentiments embedded in the lyrics.

In Bharatanatyam, the dancer may portray narrative episodes described in the compositions through symbolic gestures and dramatic expression. For example, scenes depicting Krishna's childhood, the devotion of sages, or the rescue of Gajendra can be interpreted through expressive storytelling.

In Mohiniyattam, the graceful and fluid movements characteristic of the style allow for subtle emotional expression. The gentle **lasya** quality of the dance effectively conveys devotional moods such as reverence, surrender, and spiritual longing.

These compositions therefore function as ideal material for **abhinaya-oriented choreography**, enabling performers to explore both narrative and symbolic interpretations of devotional themes.

6. Comparative Perspective of the Nine Devotional Modes

When examined collectively, the Navaratna Mālikā compositions reveal a carefully structured spiritual progression. The sequence moves from **external devotional acts to internal spiritual realization**.

The initial modes—Śravaṇam, Kīrtanam, and Smaraṇam—focus on cognitive and emotional engagement with the divine through listening, singing, and remembering. The middle modes—Pāda-sevanam and Arcanam—emphasize devotional action expressed through service and ritual worship.

The later modes—Vandanam, Dāsyam, and Sākhyam—explore different relational attitudes between the devotee and the deity. Finally, **Ātma-nivedanam** represents the culmination of the devotional journey where the devotee completely surrenders the self to the divine.

7. Conclusion

The compositions of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal represent a remarkable synthesis of **devotional philosophy, musical creativity, and aesthetic expression**. Through the Navaratna Mālikā, the composer presents the nine modes of devotion described in the Navavidha Bhakti tradition in a musically and poetically refined form.

These compositions not only convey spiritual teachings but also offer rich interpretative possibilities for classical dance traditions such as **Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam**. By integrating lyrical imagery, melodic structure, and devotional philosophy, Swathi Thirunal created compositions that continue to inspire performers and scholars alike.

Ultimately, the Navavidha Bhakti compositions illustrate the transformative journey of devotion—from listening and remembrance to complete surrender of the self. Through this artistic expression,

the works of Swathi Thirunal reaffirm the profound connection between **spirituality and aesthetics in Indian performing arts**.

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