

# A Note on Representation in Kathak Dance

S. K. SAXENA

**K**athak of North India is one of our major classical dance-forms. It is commonly known for its rich and skilful employment of rhythm. But it is by no means indifferent to verbal meaning. In fact, some of its exponents take pride in presenting some patterns in which the *bols* or syllables, though apparently mnemonic, have a covert meaning as well, because of which they are called वामायने (or with meaning). Speaking quite generally, it is common knowledge that the Kathak utilizes not only the intrinsic charm of structure and of the very sound of *bols*, but the evocative power of words. Our dance-forms indeed have never been plagued by the controversy as to which of the two is more essential for art, mimesis or sheer form. There is here no dearth of patterns which blend passages of pure footwork and figural carriage with representation of verbal meaning through gestures.

Nor has Kathak ever been faced with the 'either-or' of representation and expression. As we shall see in the pages that follow, both have their due place in this dance-form. But let me first explain what the two terms mean and how in the context of art their mutual difference may vary in sharpness.

Of the various meanings of the word, *represent*, the ones that are relevant to art are: 'to stand as an equivalent of', 'to correspond to', 'to portray', and 'to present an image of, through the medium of a picture or sculpture'. Representational art is indeed taken to mean the arts which aim at depicting objects, scenes and figures directly as seen. This does not however mean that what such a work of art signifies is always a mere particular. A painting like 'The Madonna and Child'<sup>1</sup> is a generalized image; it is the token of a *type*. On the other hand, a landscape or a still life painting or a portrait can be representational in a much simpler way. It may be 'purely descriptive

of an experienced reality unencumbered by interpretive content... (connoting) nothing beyond the surface appearance depicted<sup>2</sup>. But whether the art-work is symbolic or simple, some equivalence or likeness between what is represented and that which represents is implicit in the very meaning of representation; and it is no accident that the word is turned into a principle by the imitation theory which looks on art as 'faithful literal duplication of the objects and events of ordinary experience'<sup>3</sup>.

Turning now to the rival word : *express*, I find its following meanings germane to our purpose : 'to transform into words', 'to show or reveal' 'to communicate emotion etc.) without words. as through music, painting etc ', and 'to force or squeeze out'. Taken as one, these various meanings suggest that expression is the act of making clear or projecting what is hidden or inward, say, our thoughts or feelings. In representation the emphasis is on likeness to outer reality; in expression, on projection of (what makes the content of) our subjective life. Indeed as we know, the art movement known as expressionism seeks to express emotions rather than to represent external reality by resorting to such deviations from literalism as symbolism, exaggeration and distortion.

But, be it noted, the difference between the two views of art appears a clear opposition only if we assume that our inner emotional states have nothing to do with our perception of outer reality. The evidence of recent psychological researches, on the other hand is that 'perception depends upon the basic structure of the mind... past knowledge *and expectations based upon known experience*'<sup>4</sup>. But if this is so, our very perception of outer reality is already determined by our *attitudes*, and therefore the representation of a reality so determined must at once be regarded as being in part *their* expression. In other words, representation is not *as* removed from expression, as it was thought to be in traditional art theory.

The same truth is suggested by a contemporary refinement of the concept of artistic expression. Such expression is no longer regarded as a direct projection of the artist's own present feelings. The change, I may add, is supported by the evidence of actual art. Thus, when in a Kathak number of Radha Krishna *ched-charh* 'Radha' is seen to withdraw in *bashfulness*, the quality that we see in 'her' face and bearing may not at all touch her inner attitude which is likely to remain, if the dancing is competent, as one of mere quiet confidence. But if this is so - that is, if the seeming coyness is a look of the mere body - 'expression' loses its sense of projection *from within* and becomes indistinguishable from a representation of the quality in question.

Here, I find it instructive to mark a feature of our Kathak parlance. In respect of *bhava-pradarshan* on a *thumri* we often use the words : भाव बताना or भाव करना rather than the following : भावों का इजहार करना या उन्हें फर्म व्यक्त करना ।

A question may however seem to arise from the view that we cannot *separate* representation from expression. If the two go together, and if expression as projection of a distinct emotion cannot be ascribed to our *patterns of pure rhythm*, they cannot be said to be representation either. But then, if they neither express nor represent anything, what do they do ? The answer to this question may run roughly as under :

Much here depends on how well we are able to hold on to the truth of creation in rhythm. Our experts in this field of course do not *aim at* what is today sought by some painters of the Post-Modern kind : that is, the creation of (art-) objects that may be quite non-referring. But, on the other hand, they also wholly eschew<sup>5</sup> imitation of *outer things and happenings*. At the same, however, just as the very spatial relationships in a painting may make it seem suggestive here and there of things and situations, attitudes and moods<sup>6</sup>, similarly there are moments when the rhythmic design and syllabic filling of a pattern may make us admire the confrontation ( लड़न्त ) or criss-cross ( ताना - बाना ) or ( काट तराश ) of *bols*. But such incidental features that often encourage us to use the language of life in respect of art do not make a number representational on the whole, any more than a formation of clouds may be said to represent the geographical bounds of a country simply because it seems to be roughly similar to a map of that land. In the actual contemplation of a rhythmic number we certainly notice details of inner content and arrangement, as also the occasional changes of pace. But the notice is here inseparable from how the 'bols' *sound*, and the 'confrontation' of two units of *vibrant* rhythmic *aksharas* (or letters) is therefore a quite different experience from two human adversaries facing each other in real life.

I may now answer the question, as to what it is that a rhythmic number *does*. It cannot be said to (merely) *represent* rhythm, for it is *itself an essay in rhythm*; and in case one insists on being told what the pattern's function is, we could fairly say : 'it just shows what rhythm is' or, to be more precise, 'it reveals possibilities of creation within the limits of a particular rhythm-cycle'. I have a definite feeling that the challenge of some modern aestheticians that art can never succeed 'in being completely self contained and non-representational'<sup>7</sup> is squarely met by our rhythm, whether Hindustani or Karnatik. It is

certainly possible to argue, with fair sense, how our rhythm is an independent *art*<sup>8</sup>. But it is not fair to suggest that the moment we put an art-work 'in an art context' it at once comes to refer beyond itself - and towards reality; for putting in an art context may simply mean comparing (say) an exposition of rhythm with works in the region of other arts, say painting and poetry, and this is surely not the same thing as rhythm's being *about some detail of actual life*<sup>9</sup>. 'Claiming' to be non-referring may well be 'itself a kind of referring'. But our rhythm just does not refer to reality; *it* does not claim to so keep apart; and if *I* make this claim on behalf of rhythm it does not make the art itself referential, in the sense of referring *to reality*.

Yet, as is widely known, quite a few Kathak numbers are frankly referential. They depict outer happenings, real or mythological; and express inner feelings. *Nritya* or dancing as representational/expressive is indeed an essential part of a full Kathak recital, and it is to a part of this subject that I now turn.

Here, as we know, just as in the case of the other arts, so in respect of *Kathak* dance, the question about the different ways in which art can relate to reality reveals interesting details.

A clear distinction can be made between the representational and the non-representational aspects of the dance. Intra-forms (or numbers) like *thata* and *gattnikas*, *parans*, and *tatkar* do not tell us anything about life and reality. They are all designs or configurations to be sure; but they only present bodily bearing as graceful or as unfolding itself majestically, or the latticework of pure rhythm, instead of representing any event from common life. Nor are they said to express any definite emotion. Perhaps the most abstract of these is *tatkar*; for, whereas in respect of the other intra-forms listed the terminal stance is (by some) required to be that of *thata*, and so may give a slight hint of Krishna, in *tatkar* we only contemplate the clarity, variety and adroitness of rhythm as manifest in footwork. Here, how well the *ang* is prevented from shaking awkwardly is of course a part object of admiring notice; but the figure is not at all taken to *represent* any character, thing or attitude.

*Tala* and the basic *ang*, however, do not exhaust Kathak; and we find in this dance-form all the common ways of art-reality relation: representation as depiction and as portrayal, imitation, abstraction, transformation, idealization, and even a measure of distortion<sup>10</sup> at places. Imitation, or attempts at expressly faithful representation, may be found in such intra forms as *panghat-ki-gat* and *draupadi cheer haran* where details like pulling the full bucket from the well and making a coil of the rope may be quite clearly shown; and unending rolls of cloth be in fact secretly supplied from the wings

by enlisting the *rasika's* imagination - than the one who first goes through the act of imitating the bird's winged spread. The really subtle thing here is, however, the way in which a seasoned Kathak abstracts continually from both the normal impact of *bols* and the usual width of beats, so to say, in respect of the (more or less) time that they occupy. His *bols* - as they sound on the floor - are very rarely thumps, though they are always discernible<sup>14</sup> with ease; and as he touches the *sama*,<sup>15</sup> it is often a hardly perceptible turn of the neck or a lift of *nigah* that meets the eye, instead of the customary footfall that is only correct and loud, and not a delicate accent enframed in winsome *ang* which it may at once seem to enliven. Abstraction of this kind makes for an admirable leanness of style.

a. *Abstraction and the Dramatic* :

In any case, in so far as representation in dance is throughout meant to be *seen*, such phrases as the following : 'हिरण्य कश्यप चीर डालो' are *not* broadly imitated in Kathak; for, if such restraint is not exercised the onlooker may well feel repelled. Here however, a question may be put :

Where the *narsingha avatara* theme is portrayed in the Kathakali way,<sup>16</sup> representation is frankly imitative, at places it is indeed expressly so as when the dancer sets out to suggest that the very entrails of Hiranakashyap are being dug out. Even in Orissi the representation of *narhari rupa* and the tearing apart (by using the *urnanabha mudra*) of the vicious king in the *dasavtara* intraform is fairly obvious, though not so elaborate as in Kathakali. How is then Kathak justified in making it seem relatively subdued ?

My answer may here be developed with an eye on the following *tritala Kavitta* :<sup>17</sup>

१ जुरामरा	२ नरहरि	३ खम्ब	४ तेऽ	५ प्रराटज्वा	६ ऽलधरा	७ धरा	८ ऽधरा	९ धरा	१० ऽ
११ इकरस	१२ चलीभु	१३ वाहरि	१४ केवल	१५ ऽ	१६ ऽ	१ प्ररारारा	२ निकसत	३ खरारारा	
४ निकसत	५ कृपालु	६ हरिशिशु	७ पालकह	८ रिपरि	९ नाशक	१० हरि			
११ हरितमा	१२ मिहरि	१३ नमाऽमि	१४ त्वकधा	१५ ऽधा	१६ नधान	१ धाऽ	२ ऽ		

to the swirly figure of the danseuse.<sup>11</sup> In thematic patterns like *Kaliya-daman* and Radha-Krishna छेड़छाड़ movements like jumping (into the river) and clapping when *Kaliya* has been subdued) and 'holding Radha by the arm' are plainly imitated. Depiction (or representation in general) occurs where a *gopi* or a mere boat is shown; and portrayal - that is, representation of specific characters - in such intra - forms as the ones that relate to Shiva or Saraswati. Portrayal of gods and goddesses may, however, be said to be 'nominal' in so far as we do not claim such a direct familiarity with them as is freely seen to distinguish the portrait-painter's relation to the 'sitter.'

Those Kathaks who aim at absolute imitation in their representational intra - forms would do well to remember that in art, speaking generally, 'imitation, though faithful to what the artist sees is never a copy in the ordinary sense, (it is rather) a record of what he finds significant'; and that, though art is commonly said to have originated in the instinct of imitation, even primitive art tends to be 'purely stylized'<sup>12</sup>

Good Kathaks, indeed, prefer suggestion to imitation. Showing Krishna with the flute, मोर मुकुट and *vaijan'imola* is an instance of direct representation which can with ease become imitation. But the person of Krishna can also be gently suggested. A very good instance of this, I recall, occurred in the Jaipur Seminar (of March '69). There, when some Kathaks of the Jaipur School objected to the representation of gods and goddesses in dance as an act of irreverence, the late Lacchu Maharaj, whose quick-wittedness was truly remarkable, promptly presented a variant, saying : "हम सीधा क्यों दिखाएंगे; हम ऐसे दिखाएंगे कृष्णा को," he cupped his hands deftly, but fairly apart, over his head and stepped out with such appropriate daintiness that the knowledgeable at once registered what the movement suggested : namely, that the *baby* Krishna was being gently smuggled out of the prison. Of course, the meaning could here be seized only in the context of the full Krishna story that most Indians know, illustrating the working of a determinant that seems akin to what has been called suggestion - congruence,<sup>13</sup> a principle which requires one to determine the suggested meaning by considering the context of the detail that appears to be suggestive.

It is here easy to see how the avoidance of imitation at once makes for a measure of abstraction. But the forms of abstraction in Kathak have to be carefully distinguished. The instance just cited abstracts a whole incident. But what is taken out of a whole may be a mere movement, a typical gait. Thus, in representing *mayur ki chal* the dancer who, after a mere mention of what he is going to present, is able to work up the intended effect *without* representing the peacock's playful plumage, abstracts better - and satisfies more deeply,

३ हरिनमा	४ मिहरि	५ नमाऽमि	६ त्रकधा	७ ऽधा	८ नधान	९ धाऽ	१० ऽ
११ हरिनमा	१२ मिहरि	१३ नमाऽमि	१४ त्रकधा	१५ ऽधा	१६ नधान	घ्रा	सम

The composition abstracts what is perhaps the devotional - visual core of the story of the child devotee Prahlad. Here, there is no direct reference to the vile king Hiranyakashyap, or to the terrifying way in which his body is clawed apart. All this is left to the imagination of the *rasika* who is supposed to know the whole story. What is presented to the onlooker's eye is only the dance - portrayal of the following ideas : Narsingh<sup>18</sup> (or the half - man God) shining through the pillar, afire and frightful; a tiny ant yet creeping on the pillar utterly unharmed, and so serving to steady the faith of Prahlad; the flames that flash out like swords; God (to whom Prahlap prays) as One who is the ever - merciful, protector of children and the slayer of enemies; and the final victory of the Lord which is simply suggested by the sparkling tuft of mnemonic syllables, following हरि नमामि which verbal twosome is danced as an offering of flowers to the Lord on His spectacular conquest. The first of the images listed - that is, *Narhari* (after जरामरा) - is just presented as a fleeting yet unmistakable glimpse of the terrifying clawed deity with mere facial gestures and movement of hands and arms. The *bols* : प्रराटेज्वाल are duly reinforced with emphatic footfalls. But, the following complex : इकरस चली मुँवा, हरि के बल is rightly danced without footfalls, and as the etching of a delicate movement by cupping a thumb with its adjacent finger, thus providing a clear contrast to, and so balancing the preceding धराधरा which is obviously dramatic in quality. The next tuft of syllables : प्ररारारा निकसत खरारारा निकसत is again danced vigorously, and with forceful footwork, after which another delicate foil is provided by कृपालु हरि शिशु पालक हरि portrayed by hands alone so used as to work up the images of blessing and reassurance. The entire composition, though brief, is a blend of the dainty and the dramatic, and of meaningful words and *bols* that accord therewith in a way onomatopoeic<sup>19</sup>. Imitation of the entire episode is here eschewed because, I repeat, the *rasika* as a knowledgeable onlooker is expected to know the full theme; and, what is more, to register the merely euphonic character of dancesyllables.

b. *The Verbal and the Mnemonic* :

The detail just listed as the last impels me to make a mention of

another *kavitta* which is admired for its वामानी बोल, that is, as a blend of meaningful words and accordant syllables or *bols* :

Kavitta

१	२	३	४	५	६	७	८	९	१०	११				
तट	तिट	कृत	रा	धा	ऽऽ	दिण	दिण	ऽनित	करत	ध्या	ऽनकृत	कृततकृत	ततदिण	जात
१२	१३	१४	१५	१६	१	२	३	४	५					
ऽदृश	दृशनव	सेदृश	दृशनव	सेरा	धाथी	हरिदृश	दृशनव	सेदृश	दृशनव					
६	७	८	९	१०	११	१२	१३	१४						
सेरा	धा, थी	हरिदृश	दृशनव	सेदृश	दृशनव	सेरा	धाथी	हरिरा						
१५	१६													
धारा	धारा	धा												

The net meaning of this (partly) representational composition is that on the river bank and day in and day out - Radha remembers Krishna who, we are told, abides for ever in her eyes. But see how the verbal and the merely mnemonic cooperate in making for the total meaning. The word तट means a bank; तिट is a mere syllable that seems euphonious with तट; कृत is another meaningless *bol* that lends a little sparkle to the dance; and दिण here signifies day. In the complex, नित करत ध्यान which means the act of contemplating ceaselessly, करत seems a mere explication of, and so related to कृत कृत कृतत कृतत is doubtless a meaningless phrase, but कृ and तत (as we know) are apt as *bols* for dance<sup>20</sup>; and, what is more, the following दिण जात taken along with the preceding नित करत ध्यान, which is a quite explicit phrase, saves the verbal meaning from getting quite eclipsed. The closing *tiya* of दृश दृश न वसे ... राधा gives to the total composition a clear look of dance.

c. *Transformation and some other ways :*

Of *transformation* too we find quite a few good instances in Kathak. But let me first explain, quite simply, what the word in question means.

Where the native material of a specific art does not permit direct imitation of an 'object' that interests the artist, he may yet succeed in representing it by producing an equivalent sense - impression rather than a visible likeness of the thing<sup>21</sup>. For instance, unlike shapes of things, sounds cannot be imitated in painting. But, as borne out by *The Scream*, a well-known work of



Edward Munch, a terrified cry can well be represented by, so to say, transforming the sound - impression into an apt configuration of shapes and lines.<sup>22</sup> Other examples of 'transformation' are : conveying a spatial effect through the medium of sound, and the dramatic quality of a situation by 'well-timed silences instead of exciting statements'. In Kathak similar instances are provided by representation of the pranks of Krishna as a child (say, where the dancer is an elderly male) as much by brief and sprightly bouts of toying with *laya* as by a twinkle of mischief in the eyes; the terminal continuity of the sound of a syllable like धिनऽऽऽ in terms of a gentle taking apart of the two outstretched hands, so that what is presented to the eye is, as it were, the suggestion of a wire drawn out; and the heard self-completion (or *sama*-attainment) of a rhythmic pattern, by carefully manifesting its orderly quality till before the penultimate syllable when the dancing is cleverly withheld and the focal beat lit up for the mind's eye through the coercive quality of rhythmic design capped by the adroit avoidance of *sama* in terms of a well-timed moment of silence.

Does the Kathak danseuse also resort to idealization, that is, to the practice of representing things as better than what they really are? Yes, she does. One may here refer to details such as the following : depicting eyes, with the aid of fingers, always as more distinctly almond-shaped than they commonly are; and the bloom of a flower as a more noticeable self-opening than it can ever in life appear to any one act of attention. The aim here, I may add, is not only at easier visibility, but at visual appeal. This is why कटि (or waist) is shown as streamlined rather than as ample or broad.

Finally, *distortion* too may be said to occur in the art of Kathak provided the word is taken to mean not the pervasive variation of details from the usual manner - an artifice which makes each one of them appear to be directly congruent with the rest, as in the generally vibrant brushwork of Van Gogh or in the consistently elongated figures of El Greco - but the wilful hurrying or slowing of *a mere syllable or tuft of bols* to which the phrase that follows has to be duly adjusted in respect of pace and filling. The italicized words are here important. For, if what the danseuse presents is a *complete* pattern of 'ateet' or 'anagat' variety, though the deviation from the normal location of the *sama*-sound will of course be there, the danseuse will not in fact be *distorting* anything; for she would only present what is wholly prefixed in respect of structure. What is more, and this is noteworthy, whereas distortion in painting is generally apparent to the common man, what we have given the same name in Kathak dance can be appreciated only by those who have devoted considerable prior attention to the flow and variations of rhythm.

## Notes and References

1. By the great Venetian painter, Titian. We here see the Virgin's figure holding the infant Christ tenderly on her lap, but the work may well be regarded as an effective projection of maternal love as such. See the reproduction, Plate XIII in *Masterpieces in Colour*, (at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) ed. Bryan Home, American Studio Books, New York & London, 1945.
2. C. Donnell-Kotrozo : 'Representation as Denotation' in *JAAC*, Summer, 82, p. 361.
3. Jerome Stolnitz : *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism* Boston, 1960, p. 110.
4. Donnell Kotrozo : 'Representation and Expression : A False Antinomy in *JAAC*, Winter 1980, p. 168. Italics added.
5. That is, where they are not forced to somehow please a lay audience.
6. H. Gene Blocker : 'Autonomy, Reference and Post-Modern Art' in *BJA*, vol. 20, No. 3, Summer, 1980, p. 230.
7. H. Gene Blocker's essay : 'Autonomy, Reference and Post-Modern Art', op. cit., p. 235.
8. See my essay : 'Aesthetic Theory and Hindustani Rhythm' in *BJA*, Summer 1976, Vol. 16, No. 3.
9. Cf. Blocker's essay, op. cit., p. 235.
10. In my understanding of these concepts I follow here the treatment of Monroe C. Beardsley in his : *Aesthetics : Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1958, pp. 269-223.
11. This has happened at least once in my knowledge; to be precise in the evening recitals that formed a part of the Jaipur Kathak Seminar of March 1969.
12. S. K. Langer : *Problems of Art*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, p. 95.
13. M. C. Beardsley : *Aesthetics ! Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, op. cit., p. 284.
14. Here, I am partly indebted to the following remark of Padma Vibhushan Birju Maharaj in the Kathak Kendra (New Delhi) Seminar of March 78 : *बोल पैर से निकलें तो, मगर जरा प्यार से*. The remark was made by the maestro in the course of his recital on March 30.
15. The first or rather the focal beat of the rhythm-cycle.
16. In comparing Kathak with our other dance-forms, I am, in this essay indebted to Smt. Rani Karnaa, the well-known Kathak danseuse.

17. The bracketted part of the composition is to be danced thrice.
18. The text of the pattern, be it noted, speaks of 'narhari', not really of 'narsingh'. It is the context provided by the whole story that enables the *rasika* to readily interpret narhari as *narsingh*.
19. Thus, see the coupling of ज्वाल with धराधरा
20. कृ incidentally, also opens the word कृष्ण
21. S. K. Langer : *Problems of Art*, op. cit., p. 98.
- 22 Reinhold Heller : *Munch - The Scream*, The Penguin Press. See the full-colour pull-out at the end of the book.

Professor of Philosophy (Retired)  
University of Delhi  
(India)