

Analysis on relevance of Ashtapadi in Indian Classical Dance – A study through characters and emotions.

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Abstract:

Ashtapadi, written by Jayadeva is a Shringara Kavya that depicts the relation between Krishna, Radha and her friend, Sakhi. These three characters have utmost significance in Indian aesthetics and philosophical thoughts. This has been rightly embraced by Indian classical dance irrespective of forms, mode of presentation and music. The heroine, Radha goes through different emotions according to the behaviour of Krishna, the hero. Hence she can be categorized as Shringara Nayika. This study delves through emotional portrayal of these three characters.

The concept of Ashtapadi is very vast and highly philosophical. The idea of three important characters, the Hero, Heroine and a Friend has many inferred layers of interpretations from literal to suggestive to philosophical level.

Keywords : ashtapadi, abhinaya, nayaka, nayika, sakhi, dhoothi, vipralabdha, virahotkhandita, swaadeenapathika, khandita, kalahantharitha, proudaabhisarika, dheeralalita, uthamanayaka, dakshinanayaka, Bharatanatyam, indianclassicaldance, panindian

Introduction:

Ashtapadi literally means “eight steps”. In musical parlance it refers to musical composition with eight lines. But in Indian Classical dance realm, the term Ashtapadi generally points out to the 12th century composition by Indian poet Jayadeva, called Gita Govinda. The Ashtapadi consists of 12 sargams or cantos, containing 24 Ashtapadi songs. Each song comprises mostly of eight stanzas/charanam with exception of one or two Ashtapadis, which are less or more than 8 stanzas and hence the name Ashtapadi. Being a ‘Shringara Kavya’ that depicts the relationship between Radha and Lord Krishna, it gives immense scope for Shringara Bhava. Through Radha and Krishna the poet symbolizes the eternal love of a devotee for the divine. And Sakhi, a prominent character in Nayaka-Nayika concept acts as a mediator to hero and heroine. Beyond their immediate denotation, this trinity signifies highly philosophical subject matters.

1. The concept of Nayaka-Nayika – Sakhi in Indian aesthetics:

In the depiction of various moods and sentiments, classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi etc. takes the medium of Nayaka and Nayika, who are referred to as hero and heroine in common parlance. Quite often the Nayakas may be Gods and deities and Nayikas, the female devotees who fall in love with them. And the Sakhi, usually will be Nayika’s friend who helps her to unite with the hero.

In Indian aesthetics, three characters in common are – hero, heroine and her friend. The



Nayaka or the hero is the one who has reputation and prowess, blessed with righteousness, desire and wealth and is a good administrator. He is humble, sacrificial, expert, sweet conversationalist, popular and pure in nature. Nayika or the dancer is the devotee separated from her beloved (God). She expresses every mood of a woman who yearns for her lover. Sakhi, the friend of the heroine, is trustworthy and accompanies her. Sakhi is a prominent character who acts as mediators to hero and heroine. Though this refers the common parlance, the nature of these characters vary according to the mood, situation etc. As Natyasastra itself has given a general classification for all characters according to their behaviour as Uttama(Superior), Madhyama (Middle) and Adhama(inferior)*¹. This trinity concept of Indian aesthetics is beautifully portrayed in Jayadeva's Gita Govinda and the domain rasa in Ashtapadi is Shringara Rasa.

2. Philosophical aspect:

Our scriptures declare that for every manthra, shloka or song, there is an inner import, which leads to a higher realm. Seers have composed these Brahma Tathva verses in aphorism or short phrases, prayer songs, shlokas, puranas, scriptures, smrithis and various Bhashyams. More than the literal meaning it suggests 'Dhvani' that has more complex as well as deep connotation that point towards highly philosophical aspects of life. They lead towards the methods to attain reunion with the ultimate truth.

In Ashtapadi, there are three characters – Krishna, The Nayaka; Radhika, the Nayika and Sakhi, the companion. Radhika represent all the Jeevathmas, Krishna, the Paramathma and Sakhi, the Guru. Like Radhika, all Jeevathmas being separated from Paramathma feels pangs of separation, entangled in ignorance of our origin and self. In this juncture, the ignorant and desperate Jeevathma, seeks advice of Guru to elude from this stagger, to crave for the presence of Supreme and ultimately to re-unite with the Paramathma. Here, Sakhi, who plays the role of Guru, advises Radhika for a total surrender to Lord Krishna, the Paramathma, the Ultimate truth. In this impression, one can depict Ashtapadi in BhaktiShringara. Thus the essence of Gita Govindam is the pathetic state of Jeevathma and the way to re-unite with Paramathma through Shringara Bhakti. As it depicts about the extreme surrender and devotion in pure BhaktiShringara through Krishna, Radha and Gopikas, it is sung in temples during Poojas. In Kerala, it is sung as Sopana Sangeetham in Vishnu temples as a part of temple rituals.

3. The Shringara Rasa in Ashtapadi :

The domain Rasa in Ashtapadi is the Shringara Rasa between Radhika and Krishna. Shringara, the erotic sentiment proceeds from the dominant state of Love. Shringara stands supreme in the range of emotions. No other emotion could portray better the relation that reflects the mystic union of human with the Divine. The Shringara not only confines to Rati Shringara, but includes Bhakti Shringara and Vatsalya Shringara. However Shringara is a cardinal emotion that gives fullest scope for artistic improvisation, continuously divaricating into different shades of moods and emotions with spontaneous nuances. One can see Viprayoga Shringara(Love in separation) and Sambhoga Shringara(Love in union) in Ashtapadi.

4. The essence of emotion and psyche of Characters in Ashtapadi :

Ashtapadi, also called Gita Govindam is said to be the ancient form of Shringara Kavyam in Sanskrit, which describes Shringara Rasa between Krishna and Radhika. The Nayika's



egoistic nature, anger towards Krishna, her Viraha or the sorrow in separation, their re-union, everything is beautifully depicted in this Kavya. Expressions are given foremost importance while performing Ashtapadi. The artist should be matured enough to understand and interpret the lyrics in all its divergent sense. One can find the fine details of Uddhipana Vibhava in every verse to enhance the emotion and mood of the character. For example the Vasanthakaala depiction and Rasa lila in 1st Sargam.

1. The Nayaka:

In first Sargam, called as “Saamoda Damodarah”, Krishna is depicted as Joyful Krishna. The third and fourth Ashtapadis describe the flowering spring season and Raasa lila of Krishna with Gopikas of Vrindavan. Krishna is a Dheeralalita Nayaka and is very joyous, calm and soft hero. He can be depicted as a Dakshina Nayaka^{*2}, a playful hero who loves and treats all Gopis equally. Seventh Ashtapadi(Sargam 3), also known as Mugdha Madhusoodanah portrays Krishna as confused and bewildered, as he feels guilty and repentant for ignoring Radhika. Here, though Lalita or playful in nature, he is also a Uthama Nayaka who loves genuinely. In 19th Ashtapadi, (Sargam 10) Krishna is called as Chathura Chathurbhuj meaning intelligent Krishna. Here Krishna with his sweet and pleasing words tries to pacify Radhika and pleads for forgiveness and hence DheeraLalita Nayaka.

2. Nayikas portrayed in Ashtapadi :

In Indian dancing, the heroine is depicted according to their love relationship with the hero and is called lovelorn heroines or Shringara Nayikas. The most general classification is that of eight kinds and hence the name Ashtanayika^{*3}. Other classification comes in relation to their age, societal status, birth etc. In Ashtapadi, one can consider the Nayikas as Shringara Nayikas. The heroine, Radhika passes through different states of mind and experiences the situations of five Nayikas such as Virahothkandita, Vipralabda, Khandita, Kalahantharita and Swadeenapathika. The Gopikas, who goes to Krishna for RasaLila can be called as ProudAbhisarika.

1. Radhika as VirahothKandita:

“Anekarddha Vysangaadyasya Na Gacchati Priya: |

Thadha Naagata Dukharthaa VirahothKandita Smrtha||

A heroine who suffers by the separation of her lover and is disappointed when he delays to come. In 2nd Sargam, 5th and 6th Ashtapadi depicts a distressed and anxious Radhika due to the non-arrival of Krishna. She dislikes everything in the form of pleasure and excitement as the moon, cool mountain breeze, flowers, sound of bees humming, scent etc. Immersed in the thoughts of her beloved and imagines various reasons for being the cause of his absence. She expresses her anxiety to her Sakhi, recollects her past and gets exhausted and discontent.

2. Radhika as Vipralabdha :

“Yasyaam Doothim Priya: Preshya Datva Sanketa meva va|

Naagatha: Kaaraneneha Vipralabdha Tu Sa Bhavet||



Vipralabdha is the one who has been deceived by her lover. When she comes to the meeting place, she does not find her lover and feels dejected. She feels offended that he does not keep trust with her. She becomes heavy of heart. The characteristics of Vipralabda Nayika include mourning, fearful, weeping every time and imagines everyone is deceiving her. Feeling of inferiority emerges out of jealous.

There are two types of Vipralabda viz., Naayaka Vanchita, who is deceived by hero himself and Sakhi Vanchita, who is deceived by Sakhi. Here, she feels greatly offended that her Hero does not keep trust with her. In Sargam 7, 13th Ashtapadi, Radha waits for Krishna in the forest for a very long time and feels so disappointed. She gets so depressed and started blabbering like a mad person in imagination of Krishna being in company of other Gopikas. She feels that she is deceived by Sakhi, who is enjoying with Krishna. These are all typical characteristic features of Vipralabda Nayika.

3. Radha as Khandita Nayika :

“Vyaasangaduchithe Yasya Vaasake Naagata: Priya: |

Thadha Naagamadukhaarttha Khandita Sa Prakeerthita||

Khandita is the one who is filled with jealous. She becomes angry on discovering that her lover is not faithful towards her. Her expression is hot, her words struggle. She have been ignored by her lover and she also knows his love is for another women. Anubhavas like weeping, sighing, heavy breath etc shows her anger and pain. Silence and contempt is the way of showing her anger. She tries to make use of any opportunity that she gets to rebuke and abuse him. Her conversation is full of sarcasm and words are rude. But deep inside, she loves him and due to this love only she is showing angry. This is also called PranayaKopa.

In 8th Sargam, 17th Ashtapadi, Radha is infuriated on seeing Krishna arriving in the dawn with all the marks of enjoyment with other Goipkas. She, in anger drives away Krishna saying ‘Yahi Madhava, Yahi Kesava...’ “Don’t say lie to me, go to the lady whom you feel comfortable, go to that lady. And thus in this Sargam, she is a KhanditaNayika.

4. Radhika as Kalahaantharita Nayika :

“Eershya Kalahanishkraantho Yasyaa Nagacchathi Priya:|

Saamarsha Vashasampraapta Kalahaantharita Bhavet ||

KalahantharitaNayika is the one who is separated from her beloved due to a quarrel and who repents, after she has abused him in 17th Ashtapadi. She has repulsed her lover in indignation and punished severely in a sudden rage and now keenly regrets. Very confused in thoughts and feels sorry for him, blaming herself for her pathetic condition. Both Khandita Nayika and Kalahantharita Nayika are same while in anger. But the distinction comes when the angry mood subsides and starts repenting for ill-treating her lover. One can find Radhika repents after abusing and driving away Krishna in anger in Sargam 9, Ashtapadi 18. Here she laments her wilfulness, repents and realizes her faults when Sakhi criticizes her anger that made Krishna disappear.



5. Radhika as Swadheenapathika/Swadheenabharthrka :

“Soorthathi Rasairbaddho Yasya: Paarsvethu Naayaka: |

Saandraamoda Guna Prapta Bhavet SvaadeenaBharthrka ||

Swadheenabharthrka is the Nayika who is having a lover and is always obedient to him. Her lover or husband is devoted to her and is assured of his love and service. Her characteristic features include enjoying the nature and other amusements. She is in high spirits and is proud of her good fortune. She is never disappointed in her charm and expectations. In the last Sargam(12th Sargam), 23rd and 24th Ashtapadi, both Radhika and Krishna enter the house with full love and faith. In 12th Sargam, Radhika is having full confidence in Krishna's love and is very happy. Also Krishna tends to please her in every possible way.

6. Gopikas as Proudabhisarika :

“Hithva Lajja Tu Ya Slishta Madane Ca |

Abhisarayate Kantha Sa Bhavet Abhisarika ||

She is the one who boldly goes out to find or meet her lover. She is sick with love and only recourse is to find him and be with him. Her dress and ornaments are perfectly adapted to the circumstance. Ashtapadi 3rd and 4th describes RasaLila of Krishna with Gopikas of Vrindavan. The Gopikas, intoxicated by the charming beauty of Krishna comes for RasaLila. They can be called as Proudabhisarika, as they go out in search of the person who they love.

3. The Sakhi :

The friend of the heroine who is trustworthy and accompanies her is called Sakhi. The Sakhi, who is a prominent character in Nayaka-Nayika concept acts as a mediator to hero and heroine. The activities of Sakhi according to SringaaraManjari and RasaManjari are decoration, criticism, instruction, teasing, praise, entertainment, to humiliate, to advocate self-respect, listening to and questioning her feelings, consoling and accompanying her (Nayika) in sports and entertainments.

1. Sakhee as Dhoothi:

A woman who helps Nayaka and Nayika by conveying messages secretly, pleasing and supporting Nayika through amusing activities or songs, dance and music is called Dhoothi. She should be very intelligent and well versed with the current affairs of the country as well as sensible. A Dhoothi is supposed to help and assist Nayika by all means. She could be her neighbour, maid-servant, attendant, relative or friend.

In Gita Govindam, The Sakhi or friend is the Dhoothi. She plays a vital role in unifying Krishna and Radhika. She conveys messages and addresses Krishna about the pathetic situation of Radhika. She makes understand the real situation of Radhika, how she bears the separation and tackles the situation in a matured way and takes him to Radha. Sakhi pleads to Krishna to please Radha with his presence. Sakhi consoles Radha while in Viraha. She understands Radha



to the full extend and act according to the situation. Also Sakhi criticize Radha when she commits mistake by threatening Krishna while he comes. And then teaches her how to handle the situation. Ultimately she makes understand Radha her mistakes and lets her to go to Krishna for union. Thus she plays the role of Guru who guides Jeevathma to unite with Paramathma.

It is indeed challenging for an artist to depict Sakhi because when she talks about Radha to Krishna, she need to depict the heroine's plight in its full intensity, yet should be vigilant enough to not to cross the limit of her 'self' as Sakhi. It is a very thin borderline to be enacted with significant precision and care.

Conclusion:

Gita Govindam possesses rich philosophical aspect of Indian Classical Dance tradition and aesthetics through Hero, Heroine and Sakhi that suggests Paramathma, Jeevathma and Guru who helps to attain the ultimate bliss immersed in Shringara Rasa.

In this context, Ashtapadi becomes a part of all Indian Classical dance repertoires like Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, Sattriya, Manipuri irrespective of differences in forms, language, mode of presentation, portrayal, music and body kinaesthetic that each art form demands. This reflects the richest aesthetics of great Indian culture and tradition and its diversity.

It gives immense scope for Abhinaya portrayal and challenges the potentiality of artist even in subtle nuances.

In spite of being a Sanskrit poem, it is well accepted all over India crossing all language boundaries because of its richness in quality.

References

- *1. Natyasastra (Ch.34, Sh.3 to 9)
- *2 Agnipuran (7-11 CE) classifies Shringara Nayakas according to their relation with women as Anukool(loyal), Dakshina(Many lovers but treats them equally), Drashta(a little rude, keep silence when questioned by lover) and Shata(deceitful hero)
- *3 Natyasastra (Ch.24,p.210-11)
- 4. Dr.P.V.S. Subramanian, Jayadeva's Gita Govindam(Ashtapadi), Giri Books, ISBN-13-978-8179506561

