



Lāsyā as a symbol of divine femininity in Sanskrit literature

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Abstract

Lāsyā embodies the delicate and graceful aspect of classical Indian dance, signifying the dynamic essence of feminine divinity—Śakti. This research re-examines Lāsyā not merely as a stylistic expression, but as a profoundly ingrained motif within the spiritual, cultural, and literary framework of Sanskrit texts. By examining foundational texts such as the Nāṭyaśāstra, Abhinaya Darpaṇa, Nāṭyadarpaṇa, and various Purāṇic sources, the research elucidates Lāsyā's function in expressing divine femininity. It shows how Lāsyā serves as a vessel for devotional sentiment, aesthetic grace, and metaphysical harmony, highlighting its importance in the sacred and artistic perspectives of Indian classical traditions.

Keywords: Lāsyā, Nāṭyaśāstra, Śakti, Pārvatī, Tāṇḍava, Femininity

Introduction

Indian classical arts are deeply embedded in spiritual and philosophical traditions, with performance frequently regarded as a sacred ritual. Dance, or nāṭya, is seen as a way for the divine to express itself, not just as a way to have fun. The Nāṭyaśāstra says that nāṭya is the "fifth Veda," which was made by the god Brahmā to help and guide people. In this holy setting, dance takes on two main forms: Tāṇḍava and Lāsyā. The powerful dance of Śiva, called Tāṇḍava, stands for energy, dissolution, and the rhythm of the universe. On the other hand, Lāsyā, which is associated with Goddess Pārvatī, represents beauty, creativity, and the gentle nurturing forces of life.

From this dual perspective, Lāsyā symbolises the divine feminine Śakti, the life-giving energy that pervades all existence. This research seeks to examine the representation of Lāsyā in Sanskrit literary and aesthetic traditions, emphasising its embodiment of the sacred aspects of femininity. The study reveals the nuanced ways in which Lāsyā embodies the cultural ideals and spiritual ethos of Indian civilisation through textual analysis and theoretical interpretation.

Lāsyā: Its Meaning and Where It Comes From

The Sanskrit root "las," which means "to move playfully" or "to frolic," is where the word "Lāsyā" comes from. In Nāṭyaśāstra (Chapter IV), it is described as a soft, elegant, and very feminine style of dance that Goddess Pārvatī first performed. After watching Śiva's strong Tāṇḍava dance, Pārvatī created her own soft, expressive dance style called Lāsyā. Uṣā, the daughter of the demon Bāṇa, got this style next. She later taught it to women on Earth.

This mythological story has a lot of deep metaphysical meaning. Pārvatī's dance, which represents Śakti, goes well with the strong, masculine energy of Tāṇḍava. These shapes together show how cosmic forces are balanced—creation and destruction are in balance. The Nāṭyadarpaṇa of Nandikeśvara goes into more detail about Lāsyā's traits, such as its fluid and circular movements, soft hand gestures (mṛdu hasta), and expressive facial expressions (abhinaya). These parts show an aesthetic ideal based on feminine emotion, softness, and artistic refinement.

Lāsyā in the Nāṭyaśāstra and Other Classical Texts

The Nāṭyaśāstra, written by Bharata sometime between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, is still an important book for studying Indian drama. The text does not dedicate an entire chapter solely to Lāsyā; however, it provides substantial insights into the form by juxtaposing it with Tāṇḍava—the vigorous and masculine dance of Śiva. In chapters XX and XXI, Bharata presents Lāsyā as a sophisticated and emotive counterpart, emphasising its feminine characteristics.

The treatise contains a verse in Sanskrit that says:

लासनाल्लास्यमित्युक्तं स्त्री-पुम्भावसमाश्रयम् । भाणवच्चैकहार्यं
स्याहवस्तु च तद्भवेत् ।

This passage emphasises Lāsyā's essence as a radiant and emotionally resonant form, utilising themes of human connection and aesthetic allure. It compares Lāsyā to the Bhāṇa, a solo dramatic performance, to show how personal and expressive it is.

Bharata says that Lāsyā includes

Graceful and deliberate bodily movements (mṛdu gatiḥ) Emotional expressivity focusing on feelings such as śṛṅgāra (romantic love), hāsyā (laughter), and karuṇa (pathos) Using facial expressions and hand gestures to show fine motor skills A style that is best for solo performances, usually by women.

The Nāṭyaśāstra does not provide an extensive systematisation of Lāsyā; however, its references underscore the significance of this form in expressing feminine artistic identity.

Bharata distinguishes four specific categories of Lāsyā

Śṛṅgāra Lāsyā – focusing on love and eroticism themes
Prekṣaṇaka Lāsyā- is a dance that is done for fun and to look at.

Bhāva Lāsyā -was all about showing how you felt inside.

Kālika Lāsyā – based on rhythm and changes in time

These classifications provide an initial framework for comprehending the diversity inherent in Lāsyā and its expressive range in classical performance.

Saṅgīta Ratnākara and Abhinaya Darpaṇa

The Saṅgīta Ratnākara, written by Śārṅgadeva in the 13th century, goes into more detail about Lāsya. In this case, Lāsya is divided into five distinct types, each with its own emotional tone and purpose in performance:

Śrṅgāra Lāsya shows romantic desire and sexual attraction. Prekṣaṇa Lāsya was made to be visually appealing and keep the audience's attention. Bhāva Lāsya focuses on how to express feelings. Keli Lāsya is a type of dance that includes fun, flirty, and sexual interactions.

Nāṭya Lāsya adds story elements to dance performances. Śārṅgadeva goes even further by adding regional versions of Lāsya, which he calls Deśī Lāsyaṅgas. The following verse gives an overview of these:

चालिश्रालिवडश्चाथ लढिः सूकमुरोङ्गणम् ।
धसकश्चाङ्गहारः स्यादोयारो विहसी मनः । ।
लास्याङ्गानि दशैतानि देश्यां देशी विदो विदुः ॥

This verse lists eight important styles: Chāli, Chālivada, Laḍhi, Sūka, Urogaṇa, Dhasaka, Aṅgahāra, and Vihasī (also known as Mana). These styles are folk or local versions of classical Lāsya. The Saṅgīta Ratnākara's acknowledgement of these forms signifies a transition towards valuing regional diversity in dance, in contrast to the more standardised Mārga Lāsya of preceding traditions.

The Abhinaya Darpaṇa by Nandikeśvara strengthens the expressive nature of Lāsya by connecting it to abhinaya, or dramatic expression. This treatise emphasises the importance of suggestion (sūcīta), gracefulness, and aesthetic poise as fundamental attributes. Nandikeśvara says that a performer must cultivate feelings like śrṅgāra, karuṇā, and bhakti inside themselves in order to truly express the spirit of Lāsya.

The Kāmasūtra by Vātsyāyana, in addition to technical manuals, sees Lāsya as a part of high-class women's education. This shows that it has cultural value as both an artistic and social achievement. This shows that Lāsya has long been a symbol of emotional sophistication, aesthetic delicacy, and feminine grace.

Lāsya as a way to show divine femininity (Śakti)

Lāsya's inherent connection to the goddess Pārvaṭī embodies the profound metaphysical principle of Śakti—the dynamic, feminine energy that permeates and sustains the universe. Shakti is not a dormant or passive force; she is expressive, generative, and emotionally potent. These are the exact traits that Lāsya shows through its graceful movements and subtle facial expressions. Tāṇḍava shows cosmic intensity and destruction, while Lāsya shows power through softness. This suggests that femininity has its own transformative strength based on care, beauty, and emotional depth.

The Devī Māhātmya calls the goddess "Ya Devī Sarva Bhūteṣu Śakti-rūpeṇa Saṁsthita," which means that she is everywhere in the form of Śakti. When you look at this statement through the lens of Lāsya, it gives divine femininity a whole new meaning. Grace is no longer just a symbol; it becomes an active, sacred performance.

The goddess Tripurasundarī, who is very important to the secret Śrīvidyā tradition, shows this alignment even more. The Lalitāsahasranāma calls her the "quintessence of beauty, rhythm, and cosmic balance." She embodies the same refined aesthetics and spiritual resonance that define

Lāsya. In this context, the dance becomes a way for the divine feminine to show who she is, not just as an idea but also as graceful movement.

Lāsya in Sanskrit Poetry and Drama

Classical Sanskrit literature, encompassing drama (nāṭaka) and courtly poetry (kāvyā), contains numerous depictions of women participating in Lāsya. In Kālidāsa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam, the character of Śakuntalā is portrayed with extraordinary finesse, her movements and emotional nuances reflecting the delicate qualities of Lāsya. To show how graceful and sensitive she is, the poet uses dance-like images.

In the same way, the Meghadūta shows celestial maidens or apsarases dancing Lāsya in Kubera's court. These scenes aren't just for show; they show the spiritual and aesthetic side of divine spaces, showing Lāsya as a refined form of heavenly beauty and entertainment.

Bhāsa's plays also use Lāsya as a way to express emotions. In Svapnavāsavadattam, the main character Vasavadattā uses stylised dance scenes based on Lāsya's expressive vocabulary to show how she feels about things. In this case, dance becomes a way to express feelings instead of just a show.

These references suggest that Lāsya was an important part of how Sanskrit drama and poetry told stories. It was a cultural and literary tool for showing how people feel inside, embodying aesthetic ideals, and strengthening divine or feminine symbolism.

Spiritual Aspects of Lāsya in Bhakti and Tantra

While frequently linked to performance and aesthetics, Lāsya possesses deep spiritual importance within Bhakti devotionism and Tantric philosophy. In these traditions, Lāsya goes beyond art and becomes a holy representation of the Divine Feminine, or Śakti. It represents the universe's dynamic and expressive side, which is what makes spiritual creation and emotional transcendence possible. Lāsya is not just a style; it is also a spiritual metaphor for divine play (līlā), transformative energy, and giving up the self. The vigorous dance of Śiva, known as Tāṇḍava, is usually associated with dissolution (saṁhāra) and the stillness of cosmic absorption. Lāsya, on the other hand, is linked to goddesses like Pārvaṭī and Lalitā and stands for the creative impulse (srṣṭi), grace, and the animation of life.

The Devī Māhātmya and Lalitāsahasranāma are two texts that show the goddess as both a fierce protector and a cosmic force. They also show her as Lāsya-priyā, which means "one who loves to dance." This depiction shows a god who sees beauty as a divine act. Tantric interpretation sees Lāsya as a subtle channel of sacred energy that represents the change from the unmanifest to the manifest, from stillness to movement, and from silence to vibration.

The Yāmala Tantra and other esoteric texts talk about Lāsya as a way for the goddess to show herself to the person who is trying to reach her. Lāsya helps people break down their egoic boundaries and wake up their inner energy, or kundalinī śakti, by using rhythm, motion, and sound. This is part of the mystical journey toward realisation.

Lāsya in Bhakti Traditions: The Dance of Devotion

In the Bhakti movement, particularly within the Vaiṣṇava and Śākta traditions, Lāsya transcends symbolic theology; it manifests in the actual practices of devotion, particularly in

temple rituals, kīrtana-based dances, and sacred lyrical works. In this context, Lāsya becomes a spiritual expression of longing, surrender, and closeness to God. In Jayadeva's famous Gīta Govinda, the character Rādhā embodies Lāsya through her subtle gestures, yearning looks, and soft body movements as she tries to unite with Kṛṣṇa. The poetic descriptions show how beautiful Lāsya is, making it a way to show devotion. The Nāyikā-bhāva, which is the spiritual theme of the devotee taking on the role of the beloved heroine, is common in Bhakti poetry and fits well with Lāsya's emotional language. This aesthetic devotion is vividly expressed through Indian classical dance forms such as Odissi, Manipuri, and Kuchipudi, where Lāsya's grace and expressive power serve as instruments for spiritual realisation.

Rūpa Gosvāmin's Bhakti Rasāmṛta Sindhu fortifies this connection by classifying devotional emotions (bhāvas) in a manner that reflects Lāsya's conventional emotional themes—particularly śṛṅgāra (erotic love), karuṇa (compassion), and mādhyura (sweetness), all of which are integral to feminine devotional aesthetics. So, in Bhakti traditions, Lāsya is more than just a performance; it is an offering, a gentle and graceful letting go of the ego into divine emotion. It turns devotional expression into a spiritual practice (sādhanā), where every movement is prayer and every gesture is a step toward becoming one with the divine.

Temple and Ritual Performance as Holy Lāsya

In the devotional cultures of South and Eastern India, Lāsya is also expressed in the rituals of temples. In these traditions, the devadāsī system, which included women who served in temples by dancing and singing, was very important in embodying Lāsya. Their performances, which often included padams, emotionally charged abhinaya sequences, and devotional lyrics, were very much in line with the aesthetics of Lāsya. These ritual dances were not meant for people to watch, like public stage performances. Instead, they were meant to be offerings to the deity. In these holy places, the line between art and religion is purposely blurred. Instead of being a performer, the dancer becomes a vessel of divine service. The deity, often thought of as Śiva or Kṛṣṇa, usually plays the role of nāyaka (the divine beloved), and the dancer plays the role of nāyikā (the yearning heroine). In this sacred dynamic, dancing becomes a symbolic way of showing love, giving in, and coming together. Every mudrā (gesture), dṛṣṭi (glance), and pāda (step) becomes a way to worship, turning physical movement into a spiritual language that brings you closer to God. Through these ritualised expressions, Lāsya goes beyond entertainment and becomes a mystical link between people and the divine.

Philosophical Consequences: Aesthetic as Transcendental

The convergence of aesthetic theory (rasa) and spiritual emotion in Bhakti and Tantric traditions situates Lāsya in a unique philosophical realm—where artistic pleasure and mystical experience are indistinguishable. In this distinctive convergence, the appreciation of beauty (rasa-anubhava) transforms from a temporal pleasure into a conduit for transcendental bliss (brahmānanda). The eminent

aesthetician Abhinavagupta, in his interpretation of the Nāṭyaśāstra, asserts that authentic aesthetic experience results in the dissolution of the ego, thereby enabling a state of spiritual ascension. In this context, dance is not just an art form; it is also a way to wake up inside.

Lāsya, in particular, is a sacred art form that lets people connect with the divine through graceful movement and emotional expression. It's not just about showing beauty; it's about embodying the sacred and letting the dancer become one with the cosmic rhythm. When viewed in this way, the Lāsya tradition in Bhakti and Tantra goes beyond its roots in performance. It becomes a ritualised act of devotion, a way to meditate, and a journey into the unknown. Lāsya makes the performance space holy, whether it is the goddess's heavenly dance or the devotee's loving surrender. The dancer is no longer just an artist; they are now a seeker. Every beautiful moment brings us closer to union, and beauty itself is a spiritual gift.

Conclusion

Lāsya, as elucidated through Sanskrit texts and classical dance traditions, embodies significantly more than a mere aesthetic form—it is a profound manifestation of the sacred feminine principle referred to as Śakti. Lāsya, which comes from the myth of Pārvatī's heavenly dance, is now a part of Indian culture through ritual performance, poetic symbolism, and devotional art. It celebrates feminine grace, emotional refinement, and spiritual depth. Sanskrit literary traditions express a vision in which aesthetics, spirituality, and gender fluidly converge through this dance. Recognising Lāsya as a manifestation of the divine feminine enhances our understanding of classical Indian philosophy and validates the creative influence of femininity in sustaining cosmic and cultural equilibrium. While Lāsya is frequently linked to feminine performance, ancient texts do not rigidly categorise it by gender. Male dancers have also performed Lāsya, but in a different way, which shows that there is a wider, more open view of artistic expression. Ardhanārīśvara, the combined god of Śiva and Pārvatī, is a symbol of this integration. He represents the balance between Tāṇḍava and Lāsya. This synthesis philosophically represents the balance of masculine and feminine forces both in the cosmos and within the individual. Abhinavagupta states in the Abhinavabhāratī that the essence of aesthetic experience (rasa) goes beyond gender categories. The best performer brings together both energies to achieve spiritual and artistic wholeness.

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