

Dance and Dissent in India: Exploring 'Movement' and Law through Emotions

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1 Dance, Dissent and the Law: Building Context

This article explores how dance, dissent and law *move* with each other and blend into one another through the lens of *rasa* in Indian aesthetic philosophy. *Rasa* (literally meaning taste, savour or relish in Sanskrit) is realised when an emotion is awakened in the mind through an artistic representation (Chaudhary 1965: 145). In other words, Indian art belonging to the realm of dance, dramaturgy (*Natyashastra*) or poetry (*Alamkarsastra*) 'reveals or communicates major moods or emotions of a person' known as *rasas* (Mukherjee 1965: 91). There are nine prominent emotions that are identified in dramaturgy, dance and other art forms called the *navarasas* – disgust, anger, courage, amusement, love/adornment, wonder, compassion, fear, and peace/tranquility.

Being one of the most basic human instincts, dance exudes and liberates varied emotions that can mobilise solidarity. Dance as activism has been witnessed worldwide (Mills 2021) through street dance, flash mobs, or spontaneous movements, which can be extremely cathartic for the dancer-activist as well as other protesters. Amidst this, the law has played a crucial role in both regulating dance and dance activism (Jackson and Shapiro-Phim 2008). Within this context, I will highlight the emotional responses of the law towards dance (activism) in India.

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My aim in exploring the interplay of dance, dissent and law through *rasa* is twofold: first, the connecting thread between law, dance and dissent is that of emotions; second, the *rasa* theory provides a unique and enriching framework for analysing law and dance activism in India. Indian aesthetic philosophy is vast and complex (Chakrabarti 2016), and I am merely attempting to list the primary emotions identified by scholars and aesthetes over time and situating the subject areas of law and dance activism within them.

2 Experiencing Law through Aesthetics and Dance

Many critical legal scholars have been bridging the gap between law and aesthetics (Sircar 2021, 2024). The need to reconcile these subject areas arises from the normative understanding of their respective characteristics – law as a field is seen as rigid, objective and logic-oriented; aesthetics as a school of philosophy dealing with beauty, taste and emotions (Nanay 2019: 8) is construed to be fluid and creative. However, whether in the law governing aesthetic materials such as art, photography, cinema, dance, music, and literature, or the aesthetic principles that govern our understanding of a legal judgement or the courtroom architecture, there is a synchronous interplay between these two disciplines. This interplay gives rise to multifarious possibilities of evolving these fields independently as well as together in an enriching manner.

Dance, as an art form like poetry, theatre or visual arts, falls under the broader school of aesthetics (McFee 1998). In this backdrop, to draw a direct and obvious link between dance and law, there have been multiple instances of the law governing and regulating dance in India. I will explain this with two case studies – the temple dancers called *Devadasis* and the bar dancers in pubs in the state of Maharashtra, India.

Devadasi, a Sanskrit word for servant of god, was a term used for temple dancers of south India who were ritually deemed to be married or dedicated to the temple gods (Puri 2015). The history of their identity can be traced back to around 850AD, when women of low social status

were 'donated' to the temple for cleaning and providing various services within the temple (ibid: 132). They gained economic stability and social recognition by singing and dancing before the statues of the gods. They were the proponents of the dance form called *Sadir* (Krishna 2018: 23). With immense freedom and literacy, as opposed to other women during this period, they began to gain more autonomy over time and were not only associated with the Royal Court but also had non-conjugal sexual relationships with upper-caste men (Puri 2015: 133).

With the British taking control of the legal system in the 1800s, new debates emerged on morality and criminality. This also led to the stigmatisation of *Devdasis* as sex workers (Shankar and Ganesan 2021: 104). Despite the *Devadasi* community's plea that not all temple dancers participate in sex work, laws were specifically drafted to abolish the *Devadasi* tradition (Frontline 2022). In 1947, the *Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act* was passed on the premise that 'dedicating women as "*devadasis*" to Hindu deities, idols, objects of worship, temples and other religious institutions... has led many of the women to a life of prostitution' and that such dedication is unlawful. The Act banned all dances by female dancers in and around religious deities. This was followed by similar legislations in other states with *Devadasi* tradition (*Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act 1982*). The abolishing of the *Devadasi* system led to a slow erasure of a rich tradition of arts and dance. The erstwhile dance form *Sadir* now became *Bharatnatyam*, which is practised among the upper-caste Hindus and is supposed to be 'respectable' and cleansed of eroticism (Frontline 2022). This also highlights how the female body's movement is often dictated and restricted by legal and moral norms.

In a similar vein, in 2005, the debate over female dancers and morality resurfaced when the State Government of Maharashtra amended the *Maharashtra Police Act 1951* to ban dance performances in certain establishments, most particularly bars. This, however, was struck down by the Bombay High Court and later by the Supreme Court, stating it to be unconstitutional. Nonetheless, the state government passed the *Maharashtra Prohibition of Obscene Dance in*

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Hotels, Restaurants and Bar Rooms and Protection of Dignity of Women (working therein) Act in 2016. Known as the Bar Dancer's Act, it, in effect, imposed stringent conditions on granting licenses. Although the Supreme Court addressed this issue in *Indian Hotel and Restaurant Association v The State of Maharashtra* (2019), it merely 'relaxed' the strictness of these provisions (Bhatia 2019) by upholding the overall sentiment of wanting to preserve dignity and relegating bodily agency and sexual expression to an act of indecency. As a consequence, not a single license was granted after the Act came into force, and the agency and livelihood of the bar dancers were severely affected (Baboona 2019).

While the two cases I discussed above concern the law regulating dance, Sean Mulcahy takes it further, exploring dance as a movement-based art form and the possibilities it offers for legal practice and research (Mulcahy 2021). He particularly challenges the predominant dichotomies between dance and law: 'that dance is body oriented, whereas law is word oriented; dance is emotional, whereas law is protocol; dance is about connection, whereas law is about confrontation; dance is impressionistic, whereas law is conclusive' (ibid: 124). By engaging with 'dance as legal practice, legal resolution and legal research' through case studies, he concludes that the 'law is expressed as much through the body as through words' (ibid: 122).

Within the dichotomies that Mulcahy has broadly listed, I am particularly interested in breaking down the dichotomy between dance, which is imbued with emotions, and law, which is often perceived as emotionless and protocol-oriented. The impossibility of subtracting emotions from the law or the legal system has been asserted time and again (Bandes 1999: 1). From pleas and sentencing to pardoning, emotional appeals have always been made (Bandes 2024). The very idea of a statute protecting a victim's privacy (*Code of Criminal Procedure 1973*) or welfare legislation preventing misuse of power imbalance between parties (*Consumer Protection Act 2019*) is an example of how law aims to operate with compassion.

These aforementioned meditations on law, dance, and emotions help me segue into the next few components of the paper – *rasa* theory

and the role of *navarasas*, or the nine emotions, in understanding the relationship between dance activism and law.

3 The Rasa Theory: Expressing the Nine Emotions (Navarasas)

Aesthetic experience encompasses concepts like beauty, pleasure and emotion (Nanay 2019: 9). There can be certain aesthetic engagements where the sensory experience dominates the emotional experience; however, it is widely understood that emotions are a crucial part of savouring aesthetics (ibid: 16, 17). Dance evokes aesthetic experiences in the dancer as well as the spectator. Emotions as an aspect of aesthetics are central to not only the dance form but also the narrative the dancer is portraying. In this context, I will delve into *rasa* in Indian aesthetics.

According to Bharata's *Natyashastra*, a treatise on the performing arts in India, *rasa* is the 'seeds and fruits' of the art (Mukherjee 1965: 91). It is the feeling of a spectrum of moods, sentiments and emotions through art. The *Natyashastra* propounds eight categories of *rasa* that supposedly emerge from 'basic states of consciousness' (ibid: 92). They are love (*Sringara*), joy or humour (*Hasya*), compassion or pathos (*Karuna*), fury or anger (*Raudra*), valour or courage (*Veera*), fear (*Bhayanaka*), disgust (*Bhibhatsa*) and wonder (*Adbhuta*). Eventually the ninth category was added around the 4th century AD, which is peace and tranquility (*Shanta*) (ibid). In dance, the various 'gestures, positions and movements of hands, fingers, eyes, and neck are used to mirror the various *rasas*' (ibid: 96), depending on the narration. These emotions or *rasas* do not exist in a void and are shaped by society and culture (Mesquita 2022). I argue that they also, in turn, affect the society and culture. Therefore, engaging with dance activism and law through the *navarasas*, or the nine emotions, will provide us with an interesting perspective to understand them.

4 Dance Activism – Rage, Disgust, Courage, Joy

A Outlining Dance Activism

Dissent is the foundation of democracy. In recent decades, novel and

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creative forms of dissent and activism have emerged across the world (McGarry et al 2020). This has given rise to meaningful scholarship on how, amidst authoritarian governance practices, communities have reacted and resorted to impactful yet nonviolent forms of activism (Barrow and Fuller 2023).

One such non-violent and creative form of activism is dance. Like most art forms, dance, through body movements, evokes the baser instincts in people. It brings together diverse communities and creates spaces for cultural expression (Jackson and Shapiro-Phim 2008: xv), thus building solidarity. Dance can act as a commentary on systemic discrimination and other forms of violence across the world and can also be used as a medium to promote ideals such as equality, freedom, and peace (ibid: xvi).

In the context of contemporary leaderless protests and horizontal social movements, scholars like Ganesh Gaigouria emphasise the importance of emotions and affect in any political action (Gaigouria 2024). Gaigouria also writes about how, when legal mechanisms fail, the collective emotion of belonging in a marginalised community becomes visible as a roadmap for justice (ibid). To demonstrate the role of emotions in dance activism, I will engage with four emotions from the *navrasas* – disgust, anger, courage and joy/amusement in the next sub-sections.

B A Dance Activist's Disgust, Anger, and Courage (*Bhibhatsa, Raudra and Veera Rasa*)

To begin with, the evolutionary origin of the emotion of disgust was a 'way to keep pathogens, toxins, and other harmful substances from entering our bodies' (Patrick 2021: 88). It eventually transcended to morally repulsive behaviours (ibid: 89). Disgust as an emotion has also been used to exclude and discriminate against minorities and to 'justify stigmatisation', be it in terms of race, caste or religion across the world (Hasan et al 2018). In turn, a protester or activist's immediate response is disgust towards the government, institution or a group that is meting out injustice towards them. Scholars like Valerie Curtis highlight how we ought to feel disgusted towards certain

acts, such as cheating, violence, and exploitation (Curtis 2013: 117). William Ian Miller articulates this well in his book, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997). He writes that the emotion of disgust could be used as ‘a type of coordination device—a tool for collectively condemning behaviour’ (ibid: 202). Therefore, when, ethically and socio-politically, a certain governing behaviour becomes unacceptable to an individual or a community, their disgust towards the given situation becomes the starting point of activism.

Disgust transforms into anger, rage and public outrage. While Nussbaum (2001) argues against anger even in politically unjust circumstances, Amia Srinivasan makes a case for ‘aptness of anger’ by stating that ‘anger presents its object as involving a moral violation: not just a violation of how one wishes things were, but a violation of how things ought to be’ (Srinivasan 2021: 122). With respect to arguments by critics that anger can be counterproductive by inviting more violence, she demands further justification and nuance, and very eloquently says, ‘If a rational politics has no room for anger, then it has no room for one of the few weapons available to the oppressed’ (ibid: 128).

In elaborating on the rationality of anger especially among the oppressed communities, Ganesh Gaigouria makes a nuanced distinction between anger and revenge: ‘Unlike revenge, anger has a moral intensity... [by] ensuring self-respect and dignity without harming others’ (Gaigouria 2024). The emotion of anger is very palpable in the protests from the ‘Black Rage’ of the Black Arts Movement in 1960s and 1970s America (Gladney 1995: 291) to the women in Manipur, India, staging flash mobs (Krishnan 2023) against the *Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1972* (AFSPA) that grants special powers to the army official in the ‘Disturbed Area’ to arrest without warrants and use extensive force on suspicion of a crime. Sustained violence, especially gendered and brutal sexual violence by the officials led to the manifestation of rage through the mobilisation of women in Manipur against AFSPA (Kakoti 2021).

Anger, being an impetus for dissent and a basis for the confrontation of injustice, can be seen through the Indian classical dancer and scholar

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Ananya Chatterjea's choreography *From Sita: Lament, Fury, and a Plea for Peace* (Chatterjea 2003). The inspiration for this piece stemmed from the state of communal violence in the country. Sita is the female protagonist in the Indian epic *Ramayana* and is married to Rama. She gets abducted by Ravana, and her chastity and 'purity' are tested after she gets freed. Ananya argues that Sita's image has often been 'manipulated or silenced' by the politics of Hindu fundamentalism and patriarchy, and she wanted to reclaim her voice through this choreography. Especially in the backdrop of the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, which is claimed to be the birthplace of Ram, she states that religion and myth have been distorted to suit political gains. Therefore, she co-opts Sita, who has been portrayed as a pacifist in many accounts, as being horrified by the violence that she is being associated with both in the *Ramayana* and in contemporary politics (ibid).

Anger as an emotion has the ability to further fuel courage (*Veera Rasa*) in an activist. To protest against an authority or a majoritarian viewpoint is a courageous act. The courage and bravery can be seen in the women in Manipur who have actively resisted using their bodies or Ananya Chatterjea who has choreographed a piece reimagining Sita in a politically conservative climate. While disgust and anger make the activists take a step towards resistance, courage is what gives them the strength to assert their rights.

C Affective Solidarity and the Joy in Protest (Hasya Rasa)

Social movements are not mere political events but are also a series of cultural happenings and social encounters (Baumgarten et al 2014). The spaces and practices of activism are deeply influenced by national and local cultures (Marada 2023: 8). Popular culture and counter-culture, as forms of dissent, have also played an important role in dismantling dominant perspectives (Baudinette 2023).

One of the essential concepts in understanding the cultural aspects of social movements is 'affect'. Affect is an intense feeling that transcends emotions and can be experienced as the bonds created by activists through music, art, and mutual care at protest sites. This is

what Tong and Cheng call ‘affective solidarity’, where the activists mobilise the feeling of oneness through the sharing of a common culture and emotional purge (Tong and Cheng 2023). Here is where I will bring in *Hasya Rasa*, the emotion of joy/amusement among the activists. Although protest sites can be dominated by anger, rage, and disappointment among protesters, there are moments of joy, amusement, and humour that promote a sense of togetherness. This feeling of oneness is strengthened and cemented through cultural experiences such as dance, art, music, and poetry.

One of the contemporary heart-warming examples of a leaderless peaceful protest was that surrounding the impeachment of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol in December 2024. With various songs being sung at the protest site, one of the protesters acclaimed that the gathering felt like a festival, with the protesters dancing to the popular song *Apt* by Rose, which went viral across social media (K Times 2024).

5 Law’s Existence, Law’s Response – Love, Compassion and Fear

In this segment, I will highlight how the law positions itself and reacts or responds to dissent and dance activism through a focus on adornment (*Sringar Rasa*), compassion (*Karuna*) and fear (*Bhayanaka Rasa*).

A The Allure of the Law:

Love, Adornment (*Shringar*) and Wonder (*Adhbhuta Rasa*)

Law is ornate in its existence. To elaborate, the visual and aural characteristics of the law – such as the courtroom architecture, the robes of the judges and the lawyers, or the legal language either spoken or written in the judgements and statute books – are adornments (*Sringar Rasa*). These adornments further create a sense of awe and wonder (*Adhbhuta Rasa*) in people. Many of these adornments might be the gatekeepers to justice (Kafka 1915) by making access to the law intimidating and ritualistic. But they also create an allure around the law. Through these ocular representations and legal symbolism, the law creates a visual culture of its own that affects the way it is ‘perceived and venerated’ (Khorakiwala 2019: 3).

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B The Compassionate Law (*Karuna Rasa*)

Karuna, or the emotion of compassion, is the inherent foundation of the law. Martha Nussbaum defines compassion as the 'painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune' (Nussbaum 2001: 301). She deconstructs this definition by encapsulating three cognitive elements: 'The harm suffered by the other person is serious; the misfortune is not the other person's fault; and that the person is worthy of your concern' (Herring 2017: 158-159). While laws are regulating and restricting in nature, there are compassionate aspects to the law. Applying Nussbaum's understanding, when a person or a citizen suffers from harm which is beyond their fault, the said person becomes worthy of concern of the law, conceived of as the ultimate protector of the rights of the people. This element of concern by the law translates into compassion which, especially in the context of activism, can be seen through fundamental legal rights like right to free expression and protest (*Constitution of India 1950* art 19).

C Fearing the Law (*Bhayanaka Rasa*)

The law also regulates free expression and creates an emotion of fear (*Bhayanaka Rasa*) in protesters by suppressing dissent. In the earlier sections, I have laid down how the law has regulated dance as a form of expression with respect to *devdasis* and bar dancers in India. The regulation is more forceful and repressive when dance is used as a tool for dissent or is in opposition to the prevalent political ideology. This can be seen during the Cultural Revolution in China, where dancers and performing artists were persecuted, or in Nazi Germany, where Jewish dancers were banned from studios and stages and then directed to perform in concentration camps (Jackson and Shapiro-Phim 2008: xxi). I will elaborate on how the fear of the regulatory authorities seeps in at every point of preparing for an activist dance performance through the following case.

The students of Fine Arts at the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, wanted to present a performance titled *Chandni Ba(ha)r* (literally, spring moon) in 2003. Male dancers willing to cross-dress from a gay community-based organization called Lakshya were

approached to perform. The idea was two-fold: first, they wanted to emulate the popular Hindi film, *Chandni Bar* (literally, moonlight bar), which shows the plight of female bar dancers; second, they wanted to subvert the dominant heterosexual and patriarchal ideology of the university and the society at large (Kannegal and Kuttiah 2012: 281).

The institution found the public expression of minority sexuality to a largely heterosexual audience unacceptable (ibid: 290). The fear of the institution stemmed from a letter from the Police Commissioner's office that performances that will qualify as 'vulgar' must be disallowed for security reasons (ibid). What would exactly constitute vulgarity was left vague. This was not new since debates on sexuality, morality and obscenity have always been a part of the socio-political and legal space of India; and the societal and legal repercussions have instilled restraint in artistic and sexual expression of the people. Eventually, *Chandni Ba(ha)r* had to be censored and muted down (ibid). The aim for subverting and resisting dominant thought processes was subdued in fear.

6 Concluding with Hope, Healing and Peace (*Shanta Rasa*)

The primary aim of this paper was to demonstrate how the nine emotions or the *navrasas* from Indian aesthetic philosophy provide an engaging framework for understanding dance, dissent and the law. In the previous sections, I expanded on eight of the nine emotions – disgust, anger, courage, joy/amusement, love/adornment, wonder, compassion and fear. In this section, I want to conclude with the final emotion of peace and tranquility (*Shanta Rasa*).

The very purpose of law – and of dances of dissent – is to attain peace and tranquility in society. In fact, dissent through dance is itself a very peaceful and sensitive form of responding to legal injustices. Dance has also been used as a tool to heal victims of trauma and human rights abuses (Gray 2008: 122) and healing can be a way to achieve tranquility and stability. However, in this world filled with so many complexities and divisions, healing and peace feel idealistic and impossible to attain. Yet we can only hope because hope is a resilient emotion, and hope can make us work towards a better world.

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