



CHOREOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES FOR DIFFERENT VAGGEYAKARAS IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: This paper presents a comprehensive literature review of choreographic techniques employed across Indian classical dance traditions in the interpretation of compositions by different vaggeyakaras — poet-composers who authored both the literary text and the musical setting of their works. Spanning foundational figures such as Jayadeva (12th century), Annamacharya (15th century), Kshetrappa (17th century), Tyagaraja (18th–19th century), Siddhendra Yogi, Narayana Tirtha, Swati Tirunal, and Purandaradasa, this review examines how the poetic register, rasa orientation, lyrical language, tala structure, and devotional philosophy of each vaggeyakara directly inform the abhinaya, nritta, and nritya choices made by choreographers and gurus across Kuchipudi, Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Manipuri, and Mohiniattam. Drawing on peer-reviewed articles, doctoral theses from Indian universities, and institutional records from the Sangeet Natak Akademi and Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), this study traces both cross-form commonalities and form-specific distinctions in the treatment of vaggeyakara compositions. The review argues that choreographic technique is not merely a bodily practice but a hermeneutic act — a reading of the poet-composer's intent mediated through the grammar of the dance tradition — and identifies significant lacunae in the existing scholarship warranting future research.

Keywords: Vaggeyakara, Choreographic Technique, Abhinaya, Kuchipudi, Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Rasa, Nritta, Nritya, Padam, Ashtapadi, Indian Classical Dance

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian classical dance is inseparable from the literary and musical traditions that gave it shape. The primary texts for dance — the Natya Shastra of Bharata Muni (c. 200 BCE–200 CE), the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara, and the Sangita Ratnakara of Sarngadeva — establish the theoretical coordinates within which choreographic practice operates. Yet choreography, as a living practice, is never purely theoretical: it is always an encounter between a dancer's trained body, a guru's pedagogical lineage, and the specific expressive demands of the musical composition being interpreted. At the heart of these compositions stands the vaggeyakara.

The term vaggeyakara (Sanskrit: vak — speech/text; geya — that which is sung) denotes a composer who creates both the lyrical content and the musical setting of a work. Unlike composers who set existing poetry to music, the vaggeyakara is simultaneously poet, musician, and devotee. This trinity — of word, melody, and spiritual intent — makes their compositions uniquely rich material for dance: each composition carries an internal dramaturgy that a skilled choreographer must decode and re-embody.

The vaggeyakaras whose compositions most deeply inform the classical dance repertoire include Jayadeva (Gita Govinda, Sanskrit, 12th century), Tallapaka Annamacharya (Telugu sankeertanas, 15th century), Purandaradasa (Kannada padas and kritis, 15th–16th century), Siddhendra Yogi (Telugu Bhama Kalapam, 15th–17th century), Narayana Tirtha (Sanskrit Krishna Lila Tarangini, 17th–18th century), Kshetrappa (Telugu padams, 17th century), Tyagaraja (Telugu kritis, 18th–19th century), Muthuswami Dikshitar (Sanskrit kritis, 18th–19th century), and Swati Tirunal (multi-lingual padams and kritis, 19th century). Each created a distinctive compositional universe — in terms of rasa, literary register, metrical architecture, and theological orientation — that demands a specific choreographic response.

This literature review systematically surveys scholarly work on this relationship, identifies key methodological frameworks, and maps the current state of research. It also identifies lacunae in existing literature and suggests directions for future research.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Classical Shastric Foundations

Bharata Muni's Natya Shastra establishes the fundamental vocabulary for analysing how compositions are rendered in dance. The text explicitly defines two primary dimensions of performance: nritya (pure rhythmic movement, devoid of narrative or emotional content) and natya (dramatic performance combining dance, music, and dialogue). The full tripartite classification — adding nritya (expressive dance conveying rasa and bhava) as a distinct category — was subsequently codified by Nandikesvara in the Abhinaya Darpana, where he defines nritya as that form of dance which possesses rasa, bhava, and vyanjana (suggestive expression). Together, nritya, nritya, and natya constitute the theoretical framework within which all classical choreography for vaggeyakara compositions operates, with the balance between the three dimensions shifting depending on the compositional form. A Tyagaraja kriti, for instance, foregrounds nritya and sattvika abhinaya, whereas a jatiswaram demands primarily nritya.

Abhinaya — the art of expression — is further divided into four types: angika (bodily expression, including hastas, sthanakas, and charis), vachika (vocal expression), aharya (costume and make-up), and sattvika (involuntary emotional responses such as tears, trembling, and perspiration). The Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara provides detailed viniyogas — applications of specific hand gestures — that are directly employed when choreographing texts with complex imagery. Interpreting Annamacharya's sankeertanas or Kshetrappa's padams requires precise hasta selections for each key word and image in the composition [1][2].

B. Modern Scholarly Frameworks

Kapila Vatsyayan's work provides the dominant modern theoretical framework for analysing Indian classical dance. As Lopez y Royo (2000) demonstrates, her analytical framework integrates pedagogical and performative dimensions of dance, positioning movement vocabulary within broader aesthetic and historical contexts and linking bodily practice to scholarly performance analysis [3]. Vatsyayan distinguishes between aesthetic theory and historical practice, enabling scholars to analyse how different vaggeyakara traditions have been differently embodied across dance forms. Her books — Indian Classical Dance (1974) and Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts (1977) — remain essential references [4][5].

Scholars such as Jonnalagadda Anuradha, Sunil Kothari, and Rajyalakshmi Seth have provided form-specific analytical frameworks for Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam that help locate the choreographic treatment of vaggeyakara compositions within specific pedagogical genealogies [6]. These frameworks acknowledge that choreographic meaning is produced through the encounter between the composition and a particular bani (stylistic lineage) — the Vempati bani in Kuchipudi, the Kalakshetra bani in Bharatanatyam, the Kelucharan bani in Odissi, and so on.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Jayadeva and the Gita Govinda

The 12th-century Sanskrit poet Jayadeva's Gita Govinda represents the most extensively documented case of a vaggeyakara's work shaping choreographic tradition across multiple dance forms. The poem's twenty-four prabandhas, organised into twelve chapters, provide material for Odissi, Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, Mohiniattam, Kuchipudi, and experimental treatments in Kathak.

In Odissi, the relationship is foundational. As documented in Use and Application of Gita Govinda in Odissi Dance (IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol. 22, Issue 8), the ashtapadis were performed by Maharis (female temple servants) and Gotipuas (young male dancers) in the Jagannath Temple at Puri, making the Gita Govinda not merely an artistic source but a liturgical one [7]. The paper demonstrates that Odissi's characteristic tribhangi posture — a three-point bend at the neck, torso, and knee — is itself a choreographic response to the sensuous, bending, yearning imagery of Radha in the poem.

In Manipuri, the choreographic response to Jayadeva is mediated through the Vaishnavism of the region. As documented on Natyasutra Online, Maisnam Amubi Singh — the first Sangeet Natak Akademi Award recipient from Manipur in 1956 — composed many classical Manipuri solos based on the Gita Govinda [8][17]. His choreographic approach differs from that of Odissi: where Odissi employs an angular contrapposto rooted in the tribhangi posture, Manipuri favours a gentle, horizontal swaying quality reflecting its lasya-dominant aesthetic.

The journal Odissi Dance and Gita Govinda: An Overview (Global Journal for Research Analysis) adds institutional context, tracing how the Sangeet Natak Akademi's recognition of Odissi in 1958 led to the standardisation of Gita Govinda choreography under Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's pedagogy [9]. The treatment in Kathak is markedly less documented: Kathak's abhinaya is more sahaj (natural) with lesser reliance on codified hastas, creating a specific tension when interpreting compositions that demand precise gesture-word correspondence [10].

B. Annamacharya and the Sankeertana Tradition

Tallapaka Annamacharya (1408–1503), who composed over thirty-two thousand sankeertanas in Telugu and Sanskrit in praise of Lord Venkateswara of Tirupati, presents a choreographic challenge of unusual complexity. His compositions range from the philosophical-devotional (adhyatma sankeertanas) to the intensely erotic-devotional (shringara sankeertanas), requiring a dancer to navigate between entirely different abhinaya registers often within a single composition.

A practitioner reflection titled The Nayikas of Annamacharya — An Interpretation for Dance (University of Silicon Andhra, n.d.) offers choreographic insight, though this source is a practitioner essay rather than a peer-reviewed publication [11]. It examines how the nayika typology — the Ashtavidha Nayika system of the Natya Shastra — is embedded in Annamacharya's compositions. Annamacharya's nayika is typically a sweeya nayika (devoted wife), in contrast to Kshetravaya's parakeeya (adulterous) nayika — a distinction with profound implications for the quality and register of abhinaya [11].

Vempati Ravi Shankar, son and successor of Padmabhushan Guru Vempati Chinna Satyam, has provided important practitioner documentation of how Annamacharya's sankeertanas are choreographed within the Kuchipudi tradition. In an interview published by Kuchipudi Vaibhavam, he describes how a sankeertana about a woman adorning herself requires the choreographer to understand Annamacharya's theological intent — the surrender of youth to the divine — before selecting the instrumental accompaniment and the corresponding gestural vocabulary [12].

C. Kshetravaya and the Padam Tradition

Kshetravaya (c. 1600–1680) is the vaggeyakara most systematically studied in relation to choreographic technique, partly because his padams have been central to Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi repertoires for several generations, and partly because their explicit erotic-devotional register has generated sustained scholarly attention.

The doctoral thesis Sattvikabhinaya and Psychosomatics with Special Reference to Kshetravaya Padams (University of Hyderabad) offers the most technically detailed analysis available. The thesis demonstrates that Kshetravaya's padams foreground the sattvika dimension of abhinaya — involuntary emotional states that the dancer must internally experience and externally project — more than any other

compositional form. The psychosomatic analysis shows that successful interpretation of Kshetrappa requires the dancer to enter specific emotional states corresponding to the nayika's experience of vipralambha shringara (love-in-separation) [13].

Prof. Alekhya Punjala's PhD thesis *Kshetrappa Padams — Their Importance in the Abhinaya Aspect of Kuchipudi Dance: A Historical Perspective* (Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University) approaches the same material from a historical angle, documenting the evolution of specific choreographic conventions for key padams across the 20th century [14]. The thesis identifies how Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry's treatment — with an emphasis on vachika abhinaya and full lyrical rendering — was modified by Vempati Chinna Satyam's Kuchipudi Art Academy, which introduced a more systematised nritya integration.

The distinction Kshetrappa draws between padams and javalis has direct choreographic implications, documented in the Kuchipudi Vaibhavam compendium. Javalis, being more rhythmically lively and structurally simpler (often lacking an anupallavi), allow less time for extended abhinaya exploration than padams. Choreographers must calibrate the proportion of pure dance to expressive dance differently — a calibration specific to this vaggeyakara's compositional system [12].

D. Siddhendra Yogi and the Kuchipudi Dance Drama Tradition

Siddhendra Yogi occupies a unique position in this study: he is both a vaggeyakara and the reforming institutional founder of the Kuchipudi tradition. His composition *Parijatapaharana*, structured as a dance drama, is not merely a source text for choreography but the founding document of an entire performance tradition.

The most comprehensive academic study of this tradition is Yamini Yasoda Kurati's doctoral thesis *Kuchipudi Dance Dramas — Structure, Changes and Emerging Trends* (University of Hyderabad, 2017, supervised by Prof. Pasumarthy Ramalinga Sastry). This 200+ page thesis documents the structural features of Siddhendra Yogi's compositional architecture — the role of the sutradhari (stage manager), the pravesa daruvu (entry song), the dialogue sections — and traces how each structural element has been choreographically treated and modified across the 20th century [15].

The IIM Bangalore Working Paper on Performing Arts governance provides a complementary institutional analysis, documenting how Vempati Chinna Satyam's classification of nritya movements — Bhaumi Caris such as Edakakridita, Janita, Syandita, and Apasyandita — was applied systematically to Siddhendra Yogi's compositions, correlating folk-derived footwork patterns with the *Natya Shastra's* cari taxonomy [16].

E. Narayana Tirtha and the Tarangam Tradition

Narayana Tirtha's *Krishna Lila Tarangini* (17th–18th century) is the source for the Tarangam — the signature choreographic form of Kuchipudi in which the dancer performs on the rim of a brass plate while singing and dancing simultaneously. This form integrates the vaggeyakara's concept of the tidal wave (taranga) of bhakti with a physically demanding choreographic conceit.

Academic documentation of the Tarangam's choreographic technique remains comparatively sparse. Performance reviews and practitioner accounts confirm that the brass-plate sequences are typically set to compositions from the *Krishna Lila Tarangini* in ragamalika (a garland of ragas) and *Adi tala*, with choreography calibrated to the emotional arc of Krishna's childhood pranks as experienced by Yashoda [17].

F. Tyagaraja and the Bhakti Kriti Tradition

Tyagaraja (1767–1847) composed nearly seven hundred kritis, predominantly in Telugu, in devotion to Lord Rama. Unlike the poet-composers discussed above, Tyagaraja did not compose for dance: his kritis are concert music compositions, and their adaptation for dance represents a secondary choreographic act — an interpretation of an interpretation.

A practitioner essay by Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer Divya Devaguptapu articulates this challenge: "How can one choreograph or teach abhinaya to a composition where Tyagaraja says 'Oh Ramaiah, do not leave me and go'?" The essay argues that Tyagaraja's kritis demand a quality of internally lived devotion that cannot be reduced to coded gesture sequences — each performance must be different, spontaneous, and fresh, arising from the dancer's own identification with the saint-poet's bhakti [18].

The textbook *Technique of Presenting Music Compositions in Dance* by Dr. V. Janaka Maya Devi (Avinashilingam University) attempts to systematise this, identifying and codifying the potential for dance in kritis of Tyagaraja, Dikshitar, Syama Sastri, Annamacharya, and Purandaradasa through word-by-word analysis and dance photographs [19].

G. Swati Tirunal and the Mohiniyattam Padam Tradition

Swati Tirunal (1813–1846), the Maharaja of Travancore, composed in multiple languages and his padams and kritis are used most extensively in Mohiniyattam and Bharatanatyam. His compositions were uniquely oriented toward classical dance: he provided direct patronage to leading dancers and explicitly conceived certain compositions for performance [20].

His Navaratna Malika — nine songs in nine ragas exploring nine forms of bhakti — presents a choreographic challenge of thematic architecture: how to choreograph across nine distinct devotional registers in a single sustained performance. The language of these compositions, often multilingual and incorporating Hindustani raga forms without Carnatic adaptation, requires choreographers to work across the stylistic borders of their training.

IV. CROSS-CUTTING THEMES AND ANALYSIS

A. Rasa as Choreographic Organiser

Across the literature, the dominant rasa (aesthetic sentiment) of each vaggeyakara's corpus emerges as the primary organiser of choreographic technique. Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* foregrounds madhura bhakti — the sweet, erotic-devotional love between Radha and Krishna — requiring choreographic choices that honour both the devotional and the sensuous. Kshetrappa's padams are predominantly in vipralambha shringara (love-in-separation), orienting the choreographer toward the portrayal of yearning, jealousy, and anxious waiting. Tyagaraja's kritis are predominantly in bhakti rasa with karuna (compassionate sadness) as a supporting rasa, orienting the choreographer toward interiority, humility, and the pathos of devotion. These rasa orientations shape the quality of movement, the depth of sustained facial expression, and the balance between nritta and abhinaya that characterises competent performance.

B. Lyrical Language and Hasta Viniyoga

The language in which a vaggeyakara's compositions are set — Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, or multilingual — significantly affects hasta viniyoga (the application of hand gestures). Sanskrit compositions, with their complex compound formations and philosophical density, tend toward a more allusive, metaphorical gestural vocabulary. Telugu padams and sankeertanas, with their directness and emotional immediacy, tend toward a more explicit, image-by-image gestural mapping. Kshetrappa's Telugu padams, in particular, permit and even encourage detailed sanchari (elaboration) of each image, with considerable freedom for the dancer to expand and improvise within the padam's emotional space.

C. Form-Specific Choreographic Grammars

The literature consistently demonstrates that each dance form brings its own choreographic grammar to the same vaggeyakara texts. The Odissi dancer approaches Jayadeva's ashtapadis through the tribhangi and chowk postural framework; the Bharatanatyam dancer approaches them through the aramandi and adavus of the Chennai school; the Mohiniattam dancer through the cylindrical, swaying lasya of the Kerala tradition. These are not neutral technical choices: they carry the accumulated aesthetic philosophy of each tradition, producing fundamentally different performances of the same poem.

V. IDENTIFIED RESEARCH GAPS

The existing literature, while substantial in certain areas, reveals significant gaps. First, there is a notable asymmetry in research attention: Jayadeva, Kshetrappa, and Tyagaraja have received sustained scholarly treatment, while figures such as Narayana Tirtha, Bhadrachala Ramadasu, and the Tanjore Quartet (Chinnaiah, Ponnaiah, Sivanandham, and Vadivelu) remain under-studied in relation to their choreographic treatment.

Second, most existing scholarship approaches choreographic technique from either a historical or a descriptive angle. There is a scarcity of analytical work that examines the micro-level choreographic choices — specific hasta selections for specific words, timing relationships between musical phrases and movement sequences, the use of eye movements (drishti) in relation to textual imagery — in sufficient detail to constitute a replicable choreographic analysis.

Third, comparative work across dance forms interpreting the same vaggeyakara is almost entirely absent. While scholars have studied how Odissi treats Jayadeva and how Bharatanatyam treats Jayadeva, no systematic comparative study has examined both in relation to each other and to the text itself. Such a study would shed significant light on how dance traditions construct their aesthetic identities through their treatment of shared textual materials.

Fourth, the pedagogical transmission of choreographic conventions for vaggeyakara compositions — how a guru teaches a student to interpret Kshetranya, or what a student is expected to bring to a Tyagaraja kriti beyond the basic gestures — is almost entirely unresearched, despite its centrality to the continuation of the tradition.

VI. CONCLUSION

This literature review has surveyed the scholarly landscape of choreographic technique as it relates to the compositions of major vaggeyakaras in the Indian classical dance tradition. Several key conclusions emerge from this survey.

First, choreographic technique is never a purely technical matter. It is always simultaneously a literary, theological, and aesthetic act: a reading of the vaggeyakara's intent, mediated through the bodily grammar of a specific dance tradition. The choreographer who interprets Jayadeva's ashtapadis must be, in some sense, a reader of Sanskrit poetry, a student of Vaishnava theology, and a master of the specific abhinaya conventions of their tradition. Without this tripartite competence, the choreography risks becoming either a mechanical illustration of the text or a display of technique disconnected from the composition's expressive life.

Second, different vaggeyakaras demand different choreographic responses. The rasa orientation, lyrical register, compositional form, and theological framework of each vaggeyakara create specific choreographic problems that can only be solved through a deep understanding of both the composition and the technical resources of the dance tradition. The academic literature reviewed here demonstrates that scholars and practitioners are increasingly aware of this specificity, though systematic comparative analyses remain rare.

Third, the codification of choreographic technique for vaggeyakara compositions is itself a historically contingent process. The work of figures like Vempati Chinna Satyam in Kuchipudi, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra in Odissi, and Rukmini Devi Arundale in Bharatanatyam represents not merely the preservation of existing techniques but the active creation of new choreographic standards for the interpretation of vaggeyakara compositions.

Fourth, there remains significant scope for original research in this area. The micro-level analysis of choreographic choices, the comparative study of cross-form treatments of the same vaggeyakara, and the ethnographic documentation of pedagogical transmission are all areas where the existing literature is thin and where future scholarship could make important contributions.

In sum, choreographic technique for vaggeyakara compositions is a domain where performance practice and scholarly inquiry must work in close dialogue. The compositions of Jayadeva, Annamacharya, Kshetranya, Tyagaraja, Siddhendra Yogi, and their contemporaries are complex, layered artistic and theological objects that make specific demands of the choreographer and the dancer. Meeting those demands requires not only technical mastery but a sustained engagement with the literary, musical, and spiritual dimensions of the vaggeyakara's creative universe. It is this sustained engagement that distinguishes choreographic interpretation from choreographic decoration, and that ultimately determines the depth and integrity of the performance.

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