

ANALYZING ĀṅGIKA AND ĀHĀRYA OF SELECT CHARACTERS IN RUKMINI DEVI ARUNDALE'S KŪRMĀVATĀRAM DANCE DRAMA

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ABSTRACT:

This paper studies the use of Āṅgika and Āhārya Abhinaya in selected characters from the dance drama Kūrmāvatāram, choreographed by Rukmini Devi Arundale. The research focuses on how Rukmini Devi's creative choices in choreography and aesthetics are seen in the body movements and costume design of the characters. The aim is to understand how her artistic vision shaped the presentation of these characters and contributed to the storytelling of the dance drama. The study uses a qualitative and analytical method, based on the viewing of a 2006 video recording of the performance and discussions with alumni of Kalakshetra who have witnessed the production. The characters selected for detailed analysis are Mahābali, Mohini, Vāsuki, Hālahala, and Lakṣmī. Each of these characters is studied for how their emotional and narrative qualities are expressed through movement vocabulary, hand gestures, body language, and costume. The research observes how Āṅgika Abhinaya aligns with the characters' roles and how Āhārya Abhinaya helps support their symbolic meaning in the narrative. The study also notes the influence of Kathakālī, especially in the portrayal of male characters, and how this added a dramatic quality to the performance. The findings show Rukmini Devi's innovative approach in integrating traditional elements with her personal style. The symbolic staging, attention to detail in costuming, and clarity in character presentation reflect her deep understanding of classical art. The dance drama Kūrmāvatāram, as performed at Kalakshetra, continues to preserve her legacy. This research highlights Rukmini Devi Arundale's role in shaping Bharatanāṭyam as a composite classical art form and her efforts in reviving temple-based dance traditions for modern stage presentation.

KEYWORDS:

Bharatanāṭyam, Rukmini Devi Arundale, Kūrmāvatāram, Āṅgika Abhinaya, Āhārya Abhinaya, Kalakshetra dance-drama

INTRODUCTION:

Rukmini Devi Arundale emerged as a key figure in the revival and transformation of Bharatanāṭyam during the early 20th century. Her work marked a significant departure from the traditional Sadir form, which had faced social stigma and decline due to the Anti-Nautch Movement of the 1890s and the British colonial ban in 1911. Despite societal and familial opposition, Rukmini Devi pursued the revival of this sacred art form, initiating a new approach that emphasized aesthetic refinement and theatrical storytelling.

After nearly a decade of focusing on Bharatanāṭyam as a solo performance, she expanded its scope by incorporating dramaturgical elements from Nāṭya, choreographing over twenty five dance-dramas. A notable dance-dramas include Kumāra Sambhavam, Gītagovinda, Kurma Avatāram, Sītā Svayaṁvaram, Mahā Pattābhiṣēkam, Padukā Pattābhiṣēkam, Sabārī Mokṣam, Rāmāyaṇa (in six episodes), Uṣā Parinayaṁ, Kurrāla Kuṛavañci, Rukmiṇī Kalyāṇam, Chūḍāmaṇi, Bhakta Jayadēva, Kannappar Kuṛavañci, and Meenākṣī Vijayam. A notable milestone in this journey was her adaptation of Kurrāla Kuṛavañci in 1944, where she combined poetic text, narrative, and group choreography to shape a compelling stage production. This approach laid the foundation for her later works, including Kūrmāvatāram, exemplifying her choreographic and aesthetic philosophy.

Choreographed in 1974, Kūrmāvatāram showcases Rukmini Devi's meticulous use of Āṅgika and Āhārya Abhinaya. The performance is based on verses from the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, with music composed by Papanasam Sivan, in collaboration with Thuraiyur Rajagopala Sarma and Bhagavatula Sitarama Sarma. In scenes such as the entry of Hālahala, vividly personified through the dancer's dynamic movements and intense expressions to bring the concept of poison to life, the appearance of Vāsuki, the dance of Mohinī and Lakṣmī, and the entry of Mahābali, Rukmini Devi employs expressive body language, symbolic costumes, and scenic stage elements to enhance narrative clarity and aesthetic impact.

This paper aims to analyse the role of Āṅgika Abhinaya in expressing emotions and narrative structures and examine how Āhārya Abhinaya contributes to the visual and dramatic appeal of the production. Based on the 2006 performance recording and interviews with Kalakshetra alumni, this study highlights the continuity and legacy of Rukmini Devi's choreographic style, which continues to be preserved in its original form at Kalakshetra.

LITERATURE SURVEY:

Several scholars and researchers have studied the contributions of Rukmini Devi Arundale to Bharatanāṭyam and Indian classical dance. Their works help understand her unique style, philosophy, and influence on the field.

Radhika Puthenadam (2021), in her work *Choreography in the Collective Practice of Dance-Dramas of Rukmini Devi*, explains how Rukmini Devi introduced group choreography and a structured storytelling format in Bharatanāṭyam. She highlights the way Rukmini Devi brought together different elements such as dance, drama, music, and visual arts to form complete productions.

Avanthi Meduri (2005), editor of the book *Rukmini Devi Arundale, 1904–1986: A Visionary Architect of Indian Culture and the Performing Arts*, offers deep insights into Rukmini Devi's life and artistic journey. The book includes interviews, letters, and reflections from people who worked closely with her. It shows how Rukmini Devi helped revive Bharatanāṭyam, making it suitable for the modern stage while keeping its spiritual roots.

Jayanti Vaishampayan, in her study *Contribution of Rukmini Devi Arundale to Bharata Natya*, observes that Rukmini Devi saw Bharatanāṭyam as a complete art form, combining music, rhythm, color, poetry, and emotion. She also recognized the importance of theatrical elements and costume design in making the dance more expressive.

Other researchers have focused on Kalakshetra, the institution founded by Rukmini Devi. They study how the school continues to preserve her original choreographies and teaching methods. These works show that even today, Kalakshetra dancers follow the same movements (Āṅgika), costumes (Āhārya), and expressions (Abhinaya) that she created.

These studies provide a foundation for further research into her specific productions, such as *Kūrmāvatāram*, and how she applied concepts like Āṅgika and Āhārya in her choreographic works. However, detailed academic analysis of individual characters and their abhinaya in her dance-dramas is still limited, which this present study attempts to explore.

METHODOLOGY:

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the use of Āṅgika Abhinaya and Āhārya Abhinaya in Kūrmāvatāram, choreographed by Rukmini Devi Arundale. The methodology is structured as follows:

1. Performance Analysis:

The primary source of analysis is the video recording of the 2006¹² Kūrmāvatāram performance. Specific scenes such as the depictions of Hālahala, Vāsuki, and Mohini were closely studied to understand how movement and costume contribute to the narrative and emotional expression.

2. Interviews:³

Insights were gathered through interviews with alumni of Kalakshetra Foundation, who have observed the production. These interviews provided first-hand perspectives on the choreographic vision of Rukmini Devi, particularly her approach to staging, costuming, and character development.

3. Textual and Archival Research:

Supporting material includes scholarly writings and references to Rukmini Devi's contributions, including Jayanti Vaishampayan V's Contribution of Rukmini Devi Arundale to Bharatanāṭyam . These texts helped contextualize her innovations within the broader landscape of Bharatanāṭyam.

¹ Students of Kalakshetra Foundation. (2006, September 24). *Koormavatharam: Dance Drama (Vol. I)* [Video]. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/dni.ncaa.KF-K0032-MDV>

² Students of Kalakshetra Foundation. (2006, September 24). *Koormavatharam: Dance Drama (Vol. II)* [Video]. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/dni.ncaa.KF-K0033-MDVKoormavatharam>

³ Information obtained through a personal interview with Lasya Priya R., an alumna of Kalakshetra Foundation, conducted by the researcher (Anvitha K M), March 2025.

Characters were selected based on visual clarity in the recording and their prominence in the narrative. Mahābali, Mohini, Vāsuki, Hālahala, and Lakṣmi were chosen for their distinct use of Āṅgika and Āhārya elements. Movements were analyzed, particularly focusing on ādavus, hand gestures (hasta-s), and postures (sthānaka-s). Costumes and makeup were studied for their symbolic, aesthetic, and dramaturgical value.

ANALYSIS, RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

ANALYSIS:

Mahābali:

Mahābali's entry is characterized by Kathakali-inspired powerful movements. Holding a sword, the dancer uses forceful ādavus such as Paraval Adavu, Dhi Dhi Tai, and Korvai Adavu, signifying dominance and authority. High leaps and dynamic movement align with the character's Asura identity. His Āhārya includes a Kathakali-style kirīṭa, fan-like dhoti, and sharp-edged jewellery, reflecting both royalty and aggression. The use of symbolic ornaments like Vaṅki and Ḍābu emphasizes his heroic stature.



Figure 1 Mahābali ⁴

⁴ Students of Kalakshetra Foundation, *Koormavatharam: Dance Drama (Vol. I)* [Screenshot from video], Internet Archive, September 24, 2006, <https://archive.org/details/dni.ncaa.KF-K0032-MDV>

Mohini:

Mohini's portrayal emphasizes elegance and charm. The use of smooth Jāraḍavu, Nāṭṭaḍavu, and Egarutaṭṭaḍavu, along with gestures such as Alapadma and Kaṭakamukha, demonstrates her grace. Her Āhārya consists of a white skirt and golden blouse, a double hair bun, and ornaments like Sūrya-Candra headset, Vaṅki, and Ḍābu, symbolizing purity and divine beauty. The fluidity of movement matched with refined costume aesthetics creates a compelling representation of Mohini's mythical persona.



Figure 2 Mohini ⁵

⁵ Students of Kalakshetra Foundation. (2006, September 24). *Koormavatharam: Dance Drama (Vol. II)* [Screenshot from Video]. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/dni.ncaa.KF-K0033-MDVKoormavatharam>

Vāsuki:

Vāsuki's entrance, imitating the coiling of a snake, utilizes Pūrṇa Aramaṇḍi, Maṇḍi Aḍavus, and Sarpasīrṣa hasta, effectively conveying serpentine movement. The black costume and gloves ensure the focus remains on the face and kirīṭa, which resembles a serpent's hood. Kathakali-inspired eye makeup enhances visibility of expressions, blending Nāṭyadharmi elements with symbolic representation. The performance captures the intensity of Samudra Manthana, reinforcing the character's thematic centrality.

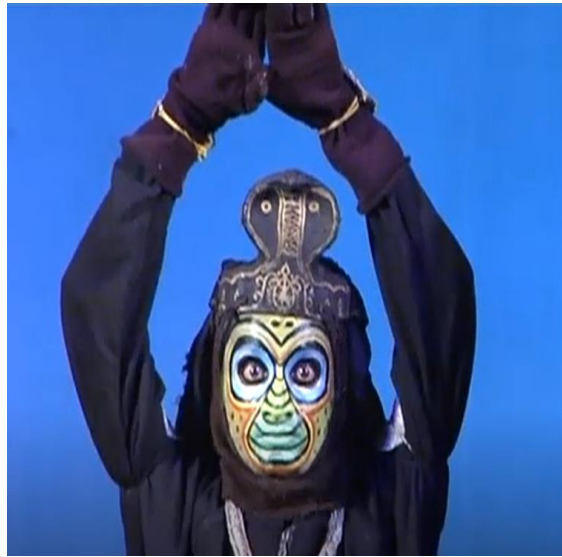


Figure 3 Vāsuki ⁶

Hālahala:

Rukmini Devi's conceptualization of Hālahala as a character showcases her choreographic innovation. The dancer, spinning with a black cloth, represents the uncontrolled spread of poison. The blue and purple costume, combined with dramatic movement and symbolic use of fabric, establishes a visual metaphor for danger. This character stands out as a choreographic invention, emphasizing Rukmini Devi's imaginative use of costume and motion to depict abstract concepts.

⁶ Students of Kalakshetra Foundation, *Koormavatharam: Dance Drama (Vol. I)* [Screenshot from video], Internet Archive, September 24, 2006, <https://archive.org/details/dni.ncaa.KF-K0032-MDV>

Lakṣmi:

Lakṣmi's emergence from the ocean is choreographed with symbolic layering. Four dancers with dupatta-s gradually reveal the goddess, metaphorically representing a lotus blooming. A varying range of āḍavus including the Nāṭṭāḍavu, Paravallāḍavu, Egaru Meṭṭāḍavu, and Taddita, are performed in second and third speeds in Kalakshetra style. The Āhārya a pink skirt, yellow blouse, Sūrya-Candra ornaments, and layered jewellery communicates divine prosperity. Her movement and costume work in harmony to reflect her spiritual and aesthetic essence.



Figure 4 Lakṣmi ⁷

⁷ Students of Kalakshetra Foundation. (2006, September 24). *Koormavatharam: Dance Drama (Vol. II)* [Screenshot from Video]. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/dni.ncaa.KF-K0033-MDVKoormavatharam>

RESULTS:

The following are the key findings from the analysis:

Group Dance and Character-Based Movement:

Rukmini Devi introduced group dance (group choreography) in Bharatanāṭyam, where dancers perform together with movements that match their characters. For example, Mahābali's strong movements and Mohini's graceful steps were different and helped tell the story clearly. This showed how each dancer's body language (Āṅgika) was designed based on the character's role.

Detailed Costumes and Stage Design (Āhārya):

She paid close attention to costumes, colors, and appearance. Each character wore special clothes and jewellery that helped show who they were. For example, Mohini's white and gold outfit showed beauty and purity, while Vāsuki's black costume and snake-like movements helped show a serpent. Rukmini Devi also used stage lights, backgrounds, and cloths to create scenes like the ocean and mountain.

Use of Properties on Stage:

She used stage properties like cloth, jewellery, and headpieces to support the story. For example, Hālahala used a black cloth to show the spread of poison. These visual tools helped the audience understand what was happening on stage.

Clear Storytelling Through Dance:

Rukmini Devi brought drama into Bharatanāṭyam by following a structured format. His dance-drama presents clear scenes, well-defined characters, and distinct emotions. The story of Kūrmāvatāram unfolds step by step, with dancers using movements and expressions that correspond to each event.

Original Choreography Preserved at Kalakshetra:

Even today, Kalakshetra continues to stage Kūrmāvatāram in accordance with the choreography originally established by Rukmini Devi Arundale. Her distinctive movements, costume designs, and stage settings have been meticulously preserved. Alumni of Kalakshetra attest that her stylistic approach is carefully maintained and respected. The official website of the Kalakshetra Foundation emphasizes that Rukmini Devi's vision remains integral to the institution's ethos, and her methodology in Bharatanatyam continues to inform both the performances and pedagogical practices at Kalakshetra⁸.

Building a Temple-Theatre (Kūtāmbalam):

Towards the end of her life, Rukmini Devi built a temple-style theatre called Kūtāmbalam at Kalakshetra. This space was designed with the help of architect Appukuttan Nair. It was meant to show that dance was sacred and had a spiritual connection with temples.

Creative Use of Lights and Stage Look:

She designed the stage with colorful curtains, decorated side panels, and a central lamp. A special front curtain opened to background. With the help of lighting expert Paul Storm, Kalakshetra added smart lighting techniques that made the scenes look deeper and more meaningful.

Simple but Creative Costume Ideas:

When Kalakshetra did not have enough money for real gold jewellery or costumes, Rukmini Devi made jewellery using macramé thread and painted it gold. She avoided black costumes unless the character was meant to show a dark or strong emotion, like anger or danger. Even then, she added red and gold to balance it.

⁸ Kalakshetra Foundation. (n.d.). *The founder*. Kalakshetra Foundation. <https://www.kalakshetra.in/the-founder/>

Using Kathakali Movements for Male Characters:

For powerful male characters like Mahābali, she used strong body movements from the dance form Kathakali. A Kathakali expert, Chandu Panikkar, helped train dancers at Kalakshetra. This gave male roles a more energetic and dramatic effect on stage.

DISCUSSION:

The analysis reveals how Rukmini Devi Arundale strategically employed Āṅika and Āhārya Abhinaya to reinforce character identity, narrative depth, and visual coherence. Her use of group choreography, character-specific movement patterns, and theatrical costume design reflects a holistic understanding of Nāṭyaśāstra, where each element gesture, posture, expression, and attire contributes to storytelling. The elaborate costume and stagecraft were not merely decorative but integral to the embodiment of character traits and metaphysical concepts, aligning with the Nāṭyaśāstra's principle of rasa realization through multiple expressive channels.

Kalakshetra's adherence to her original vision is evident in the 2006 performance, indicating a strong tradition of preservation. The incorporation of Kathakali techniques for male characters, combined with symbolic costume elements, suggests a cross-stylistic integration that broadens the expressive range of Bharatanāṭyam.

This study confirms Rukmini Devi's belief in Bharatanāṭyam as a composite art form, integrating dance, drama, music, costume, and stagecraft. Her choreographic legacy remains foundational to contemporary interpretations and pedagogy within Kalakshetra and beyond.

Conclusion:

The study of Kūrmāvatāram choreographed by Rukmini Devi Arundale shows how she used both Āṅika (body movements) and Āhārya (costume and stage design) in a detailed and thoughtful way. Her choreography gave each character a unique identity through specific movements, costumes, and expressions. The dances of characters like Mahābali, Mohini, Vāsuki, Hālahala, and Lakṣmi clearly show how she combined tradition with creativity.

Rukmini Devi's style of storytelling in Bharatanāṭyam was organized, visual, and expressive. She used group choreography, symbolic costumes, and strong stage settings to support the narrative. Even though the original performance was staged many years ago, Kalakshetra continues to follow her vision exactly as she designed it. The 2006 recording, along with information from Kalakshetra alumni, shows that Rukmini Devi's original choreography and designs are still being followed. The official website of the Kalakshetra Foundation states that her vision remains at the heart of the institution, and her Bharatanatyam methods continue to guide both performances and teaching.

Her work also included creating a temple-like theatre space (Kūtāmbalam), designing creative costumes with limited resources, and adding dramatic techniques from other Indian dance forms like Kathakali. Through all these contributions, Rukmini Devi Arundale played a transformative role in shaping Bharatanāṭyam into a distinguished stage tradition. Her legacy continues to live on through Kalakshetra and through performances like Kūrmāvatāram, which reflect her deep respect for tradition and her innovative artistic vision.

FUTURE SCOPE:

Future research can explore the following areas:

- **Caturvidha Abhinaya Study:** Future work can include a deeper analysis of all four types of abhinaya: Āṅika abhinaya, Vācika abhinaya, Āhārya abhinaya, and Sāttvika abhinaya as used in Kūrmāvatāram and other dance-dramas.
- **More Character Analysis:** Additional characters from Kūrmāvatāram can be studied to understand the complete use of movement, costume, and expressions.
- **Other Productions by Rukmini Devi:** Future studies can explore other dance-dramas choreographed by Rukmini Devi, such as Rāmāyaṇam, Meenakshi Kalyanam, or Sītā Svayaṃvaram, to understand her style across different stories.
- **Comparative Choreography:** Researchers can compare her choreography with that of other Bharatanāṭyam choreographers to see how she created a unique style and structure.

- **Music and Rhythm:** Analysis of her musical choices and rhythmic patterns can reveal how they complement narrative and abhinaya.
- **Cross-Cultural Influence:** Research can examine any influences from other classical dance forms or regional theatre traditions in her choreography.
- **Stagecraft and Lighting:** A technical study of her stage design and lighting methods can be undertaken to see how she used them to enhance the visual impact and storytelling.
- **Oral Histories:** Interviews with more senior dancers and alumni of Kalakshetra can help document personal experiences and preserve the living tradition.
- **Digital Archiving:** High-quality digital restoration of older performances will help make these valuable works accessible to dancers, scholars, and future generations.

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