

THE CONCEPT OF LOKADHARMI AND NATYADHARMI IN BHARATHNATYAM

Kavitha Sanjay

Research Scholar

Mangalayatan University

Email: rohansanjay2002@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the two foundational modes of dramatic representation—**Lokadharmi** (realistic or folk mode) and **Natyadharmi** (stylized/theatrical mode)—and their functioning within the practice and aesthetics of **Bharathnatyam**. Drawing on primary classical theory (Natyashastra) and contemporary scholarship, the paper traces historical roots, theoretical definitions, practical examples in Bharathnatyam pedagogy and choreography, and the dialectic between realism and convention in performance. A mixed-methods approach—textual analysis of classical sources and secondary literature, together with choreographic analysis of representative pieces—yields insights into how the two modes co-exist, hybridize, and shape rasa, abhinaya, and audience reception in modern practice. Key findings show that Bharathnatyam uses natyadharmi as its structural grammar while selectively deploying lokadharmi gestures for immediacy and audience identification, producing a layered aesthetic experience.

Introduction

Classical Indian theatre theory, primarily codified in the **Natyashastra**, distinguishes between two complementary modes of representation: **Lokadharmi** (लोकधर्मी) and **Natyadharmi** (नाट्यधर्मी). Broadly, Lokadharmi denotes the realistic imitation of everyday life; Natyadharmi refers to stylized, conventionalized stage representation that heightens reality through poetic and technical devices. Bharathnatyam, as a codified classical dance-theatre tradition, negotiates these two poles continually—respecting established conventions (natyadharmi) while at times incorporating lifelike, relatable elements (lokadharmi) to produce rasa and emotional penetration. This paper analyzes those concepts and their interplay within Bharathnatyam training, choreography, and performance.

Lokadharmi is a term used in Indian classical theatre and dance theory. The word comes from Sanskrit:

- **Loka** = the common world, everyday life

- **Dharma** = mode / nature / practice

So Lokadharmi refers to a naturalistic, realistic style of expression that imitates ordinary human behavior as seen in daily life.

Meaning

In Lokadharmi, actions, emotions, speech, gestures, and movements are performed just like how real people do them. There is no exaggeration, stylization, or symbolic expression. It is life-like and spontaneous.

Characteristics of Lokadharmi

Aspect	Description
Expression	Natural and realistic expression of emotions.
Gestures	Simple, everyday gestures similar to daily conversation.
Dance movements	Less stylized, closer to natural body movements.
Dialogue	Spoken in a natural tone, like real speech.
Costume & Makeup	Simple, realistic, and appropriate to the character.
Purpose	To make the audience feel connected and understand directly.

Example in Bharathnatyam

When a dancer shows:

- A mother lovingly feeding her child
- A girl shyly looking at her beloved
- A friend laughing, crying, or telling gossip

These are shown using natural expressions, implying Lokadharmi.

Opposite of Lokadharmi

The opposite concept is Natyadharmi, which is stylized and follows classical rules, using:

- Mudras (hand gestures),
- Codified expressions,
- Symbolic movements.

Natyadharmi is a classical, stylized, and theatrical mode of expression used in Indian classical dance and drama.

The word comes from:

- **Natya** = drama / performing art
- **Dharma** = mode / nature / practice

So Natyadharmi means the artistic and codified style of acting that follows the rules of classical performance, rather than everyday realism.

Meaning

In Natyadharmi, the performer does not act like real life directly.

Instead, they use stylized gestures, symbolic movements, classical postures, and codified expressions as prescribed in ancient texts like Natyashastra.

Characteristics of Natyadharmi

Aspect	Description
Expression	Highly stylized; emotions are shown through codified facial expressions (Rasas & Bhavas).
Movement	Uses precise, classical body movements (Karana, Angika Abhinaya).
Gestures	Uses Mudras (hand gestures) to convey meaning symbolically.
Dialogue / Song	Rhythmic, poetic, and often sung or chanted.
Costume & Makeup	Elaborate, ornamental, symbolic.
Purpose	To elevate the audience from ordinary life to aesthetic experience.

Example in Bharatanatyam

- Showing a bird by using Alapadma mudra rather than fluttering hands like real life.
- Portraying Lord Krishna with tribhangi posture and classical stance, not like normal human walking.
- Depicting sorrow using Sthayi Bhava and Rasa theory instead of everyday crying.

These expressions do not imitate daily life; they are refined artistic forms.

Difference From Lokadharmi

Lokadharmi	Natyadharmi
Natural and realistic actions.	Stylized and symbolic expressions.
Shows life as it is.	Shows life as art.
Everyday conversation and gestures.	Codified gestures, Mudras, Rasas.
Simple costumes.	Elaborate costumes and stage presentation.

Influence of Lokadharmi and Natyadharmi on *Padam* and *Javali*

Understanding Padam and Jāvāli

Item	Description
Padam	Slow, expressive musical composition, focuses on deep bhava (emotion), especially Sringara (love).
Javali	Lighter, faster, romantic composition; often playful and sensuous in mood.

Both are mainly used to show abhinaya (expression).

Lokadharmi in Padam and Jāvāli

Lokadharmi = *Natural, realistic expression.*

How it appears in Padam

- Padams often show deep, subtle emotions such as longing, devotion, hurt, jealousy.
- The dancer uses soft, natural expressions and real-life gestures to convey inner feelings.
- Eye movements, slight smiles, sighs, and natural reactions are emphasized.
- Movements are slow and gentle to make the emotions relatable and sincere.

Example: A Nayika waiting for her beloved may:

- Look repeatedly at the path
- Show anxiety or hope with natural body language

→ This is Lokadharmi because the dancer behaves as a real person in love would.

How it appears in Javali

- Javali themes are romantic and sometimes flirtatious.
- The expressions are light, lively, and conversational, just like real interaction.
- The dancer may show teasing, affection, or slight humor in a natural manner.

→ The charm and playfulness of Javali depend heavily on Lokadharmi.

Natyadharmi in Padam and Javali

Natyadharmi = *Stylized, classical expression.*

How it appears in Padam

- Although Padam uses natural emotions, it still relies on Mudras, classical postures, and codified abhinaya techniques described in Natyashastra.
- The rasa-bhava theory is followed carefully.
- Expressions are controlled and refined, not overly dramatic.

How it appears in Javali

- Even while being playful, the artist must maintain classical body alignment, rhythmic structure, and precise movements.
- Gestures remain symbolic, not fully mimicking real-world action.

Balanced Influence

- Padam leans more toward Lokadharmi because it focuses on subtle, natural emotional depth.
- Javali also uses Lokadharmi, but with a lighter emotional tone and slightly more rhythmic liveliness.
- Natyadharmi provides the *classical frame*—posture, mudras, stage discipline.
- Lokadharmi provides the *emotional realism* that touches the audience.

Historical Context

The Nāṭyaśāstra (attributed to Bharata Muni, compiled between ca. 200 BCE–500 CE in scholarly estimates) is the seminal source that distinguishes representational modes and prescribes theatrical grammar—abhinaya, rasa, gestures, costume, and staging. It frames theatre as both a codified art (natyadharmi) and as rooted in the world (lokadharmi), providing rules for when and how to stylize or naturalize actions on stage. Over centuries, regional classical forms such as Bharathnatyam absorbed these theoretical distinctions and adapted them into codified pedagogies, repertoires, and stylistic schools (bani). In modern times, choreographers and teachers continue to interpret the balance between stylization and realism according to aesthetic aims and audience expectations.

Objectives

1. Define and contrast Lokadharmi and Natyadharmi with reference to primary textual sources and scholarship.

2. Explain how these modes appear and operate within Bharathnatyam technique, repertoire, and abhinaya.
3. Analyze selected choreographic strategies where the two modes interact (e.g., mythic tableaux vs. everyday tableau).
4. Discuss pedagogical implications for teachers and performers in achieving rasa while respecting tradition.
5. Provide a concise literature-backed conclusion and references for further study.

Literature Review

Scholarly and pedagogical discussion divides around authoritative textual exegesis and applied performance studies:

- **Primary textual foundation:** The *Natyashastra* lays out the conceptual distinction and prescriptive uses of *lokadharmi* and *natyadharmi*. Contemporary glosses and translations treat *lokadharmi* as “realistic practice” and *natyadharmi* as “poetic/stylized practice.”
- **Theatre and dance pedagogy:** Modern dance manuals and teacher websites on Bharathnatyam contrast *natyadharmi*’s codified *abhinaya* with *lokadharmi*’s naturalistic expressions—many pedagogues stress that Bharathnatyam’s power lies in mastering *natyadharmi* while knowing when to apply *lokadharmi* for immediacy.
- **Academic analysis:** Peer-reviewed and conference articles (e.g., studies on acting styles and the four acting types in *Natyashastra*) explore how the classical taxonomy continues to inform contemporary practice and cross-cultural theatre. These works treat the two modes as dynamic categories—often hybridized in performance.

Across the literature there is consensus that the two modes are not mutually exclusive but are complementary tools a performer uses depending on dramatic context, audience, and aesthetic goal.

Methodology

This research uses a mixed qualitative approach:

1. **Textual analysis:** Close reading of authoritative summaries and translations of the *Natyashastra* to extract definitional and prescriptive material on *lokadharmi* and *natyadharmi*.

2. **Literature synthesis:** Review of pedagogical websites, academic PDFs, and practitioner essays to map contemporary interpretations and usage within Bharathnatyam.
3. **Choreographic/phenomenological analysis:** Applying theoretical categories to canonical Bharathnatyam items (e.g., Shabdam, Varnam, Padam, Thillana) and described performance practices to illustrate where each mode predominates and where hybridization occurs. (Note: empirical fieldwork—interviews or performance recordings—was not performed for this paper; analysis is based on textual and secondary choreographic sources.)

Analysis

Definitions and key features

- **Lokadharmi:** Realistic, everyday representation. Actions and expressions attempt to mirror lived behavior and ordinary speech. It fosters direct identification with characters by simulating “life-like” behavior. In text-critical terms, it corresponds to depiction that is closer to “truthful” human action.
- **Natyadharmi:** Highly stylized, codified, and poetic mode of presentation developed for the stage—using conventionalized gestures, defined postures, and symbolic actions to express inner states and poetic meaning. Natyadharmi is an artful “translation” of life into a heightened theatrical language.

Where they appear in Bharathnatyam

- **Natyadharmi predominance:** Core classical items—*varnam*, *padam* (when treated poetically), *javali* and abstract *abhinaya* sequences—use codified mudras, prescribed angika alignment, and the grammar of rasa to evoke rather than mimic. The aesthetic relies on technical precision, formalized bhava–rasa progression, and stage conventions.
- **Lokadharmi interventions:** Short realistic gestures (e.g., a wink, a startled recoil, or a simple domestic action presented with minimal stylization) and certain narrative tableaux use lokadharmi to create immediate empathy or comic effect. The lighter shade of emotions like jealousy, infidelity, separation in love are the most common themes performed in javali. Each emotion is carried out or performed with simpler and light movements where the dancer has to enact in a more lokadharmi way of expression. The artist has the freedom to express his own contributions as it varies in attaining the final result. No hidden meanings or subtle emotions but the expressions are more realistic

that even the laymen can understand the emotions expressed. Folk-inflected items or modern thematic choreography (contemporary bharathnatyam works) often intentionally employ lokadharmi for accessibility.

Hybridization and aesthetic effect

Bharathnatyam frequently uses **natyadharmi** as its structural grammar—the rules through which the dance communicates—and selectively incorporates **lokadharmi** as an affective tool. This hybridization allows performers to preserve the art's formal integrity while reaching audiences emotionally. For instance, a dancer performing a mythic encounter may use natyadharmi's stylized sign-language to depict divine action, then briefly switch to lokadharmi to portray a human reaction (shock, grief) that an audience can instantly recognize—thus balancing universality and specificity.

Discussion

Pedagogical implications

Teachers must train students first in the technical and codified aspects of **natyadharmi**—precision of adavus, consistency in hastas (mudras), and control of lasya/tandava elements—because these provide the vocabulary of classical performance. Once secure, students can be taught to incorporate **lokadharmi** gestures with restraint and purpose so such moments heighten, rather than dilute, the formal aesthetic. Several pedagogy resources recommend this staged approach.

Choreographic considerations

Choreographers choose mode according to intent:

- **Ritual/mythic themes:** favor natyadharmi for timelessness and symbolic clarity.
- **Social/modern themes:** often require lokadharmi to communicate ordinary life concerns and make the work legible to contemporary audiences.

Careful dramaturgy prevents an uncontrolled shift toward pure realism that may undercut rasa by losing the art's poetic distance.

Theoretical implications

The lokadharmi–natyadharmi divide demonstrates how classical Indian aesthetics conceive of theatre as both mimesis and poetic synthesis. As such, the two modes are tools rather than dogmas—ways to manipulate distance, empathy, and symbolic meaning to produce rasa. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes their flexibility and the productive tensions that arise when tradition meets innovation.

Conclusion

Lokadharmi and Natyadharmi are foundational, complementary concepts that continue to inform Bharathnatyam performance, pedagogy, and choreography. Bharathnatyam's enduring power lies in its ability to combine the codified elegance of natyadharmi with occasional, purposeful lokadharmi touches that create immediacy and audience connection. For practitioners and scholars, the productive interplay between the two modes offers a rich site for creative experimentation and theoretical reflection—for maintaining tradition while adapting to new social and aesthetic contexts.

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