

BHARATANATYAM – A RHYTHMIC GESTURE

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ABSTRACT

The fascination for Indian dance all over the world is indicative of the deep-felt needs to use the human body to express and celebrate the great universal truths. Since dance is physical and visual, it illuminates India's culture in a direct manner, playing on the sensibilities of the onlooker. Thus, those who are attracted to India will find the idiom of dance the best introduction to India's rich ethos and traditions. India offers a number of classical dances forms each of which can be traced to different parts of the country. Each form represents the culture and ethos of a particular region or a group of people. It is said that the gods created dance as a device for entertainment. Later, in order to please the gods, human beings enacted the tale and glory of the gods. Thus began a cycle of celebration manifested in the joyous abandon of movement and music. Over a period of two millennia, dance in India acquired set grammar, which led to a certain codification of technique. Dance is an instinctive art. Some compelling emotions within us that urges us to find expression in dance, that is, outward rhythmic movements which gradually seem to have come to assume certain forms.

Keywords: Indian dance, classical dance, culture, traditions, dance forms, rhythmic movements

Introduction

Bharatanatyam is the classical dance style of Tamil Nadu. The word conjures up images of a young, beautiful girl attired in resplendent silks and adorned with jewellery, dancing on a proscenium stage, to the accompaniment of a Carnatic music ensemble seated on one side. This in essence is Bharatanatyam, full of colour, spectacle, movement, rhythm, music and poetry.

Background

It is fascinating that this vibrant art traces its origins to the Natya Shastra said to be the world's oldest treatise on theatre. However, over the centuries, as the regional forms of dance evolved, the dance style of Tamil Nadu became a distinctly native form. The earliest reference to this form is in Silappadikaram, the Tamil epic (5th century A.D.), where Madhavi, one of the heroines was a ganika, a dancing girl.

Dance became the exclusive profession of women dedicated to the temples who were called Devaradiyars or Devadasis (Servants of the Gods). They were not allowed to marry and performed at the temple as part of the rituals. We infer that there were nearly 400 devadasis in the service of the temple of Brihadisvara at Tanjavur, built by Raja Raja Chola I (10th century A. D). There were also rajadasis and alankaradasis who were patronised by kings and chieftains. The nattuvanars were males who trained the devadasis and conducted the recitals, but were never performers themselves. This gave the dance form its name. 'Dasiattam', as the name suggests, was danced chiefly by women, for they were considered as harbingers of luck. As they were 'married' to God, they could never be widowed.

Invasion from the north and British rule affected the temples and the fortunes of the patrons and the devadasis fell on bad days. Along with them the art acquired a stigma. The final blow came when the Tamil Nadu government banned dance from the temples and the devadasis lost their vocation and sustenance.

Etymology

According to some scholars, the name derives from Bharata Natyashastra. Some ascribe it to Bha, Ra and Ta standing for Bhava, Ranga and Tala. This ancient dance has been nurtured in Tamil Nadu and most probably derived from the sadir-the solo dance performances by the devadasis the temple dancers. It was in the early twentieth century that E. Krishna Iyer, a freedom fighter and art connoisseur, took up the cause of Bharatanatyam. Fighting against prejudice and propaganda, he was quite successful in reviving interest in the dance form. Another name associated with the revitalisation of the form is that of Rukmini Devi Arundale who was, in fact, encouraged by the famous Anna Pavlova to learn dancing. Rukmini Devi did much to uplift, enrich and propagate the art through her school, Kalakshetra. The two famous styles of Bharatanatyam are the Pandanallur and the Tanjore styles.

Features

The dance form conceives the body in triangles. The shoulders to the waist form an

inverted triangle while the second triangle is conceived through the outstretched knees to the heels placed together. Even though the ‘samabhanga’ (linear position) is first employed, it quickly descends into the familiar ‘ardhamandali’ or the ‘araimandali’ (half-sitting position with outstretched knees) that imparts the imagery of triangles. The hand movements are linear in nature and the mood of the dancer is grave and serene.

While doing an ‘adavu’, the hands are stretched to the fullest. The ‘adavu’ is the basic unit of dance and is considered to be a derivative of the ‘karana’ described in the Natyashastra. There are about fifteen groups of ‘adavus’ with further sub-groups within them. A series of short brilliant ‘adavus’ form the ‘tirmanas’. The ‘tirmanas’ usually explore the range of ‘jatis’ which are complex rhythmical patterns.

In its rendering, the dancer follows one basic principle, namely, that every action that is done, say to the right, has to be mirrored on the left side too, for it is believed that the right side representing the masculine or the ‘tandava’ has to be balanced by the feminine or the ‘lasya’ assumed to be on the left side. This arises from the concept of ‘Ardhanareshwar’ wherein. Lord Shiva is represented on his left as a woman and on his right as a male, both indivisible parts of a whole. The adornment of the head by brooches with sun and moon shapes seems to have been influenced by the following Sanskrit verse.

angikambhuvanamyasyavacikamsarvavaangmayam

aharyamcandraradi ta numahasattvikamshivam

(We bow to the sattvika Shiva whose ‘angika’ (body) is the world, ‘vacika’ is the entire language and whose ‘aharya’ (adornment) are the moon, the stars, etc.)

Presentation

Bharatanatyam is believed to be the oldest, because it is the form which is based, to the largest extent, on ancient texts on the dance. Bharatanatyam, in its pure form, Nritya, interprets the language of rhythm and melody in diverse patterns of courses, angles and lateral motions of precise rhythmic movements of the hands, and the continuous footwork that is the basis of the dance. Rhythm and emotion are beautifully blended in Nritya the expository dance that conveys poetic meaning in gestures and facial expressions combined with rhythmic gaits and pastures. Nataraja, (king of dance) is the presiding deity of dance and his icon is placed on one corner of the stage during performances. A traditional recital features a string of items, long and short, emphasizing one or more aspects of the dance such as wriita (pure dance), abhinaya (expressive dance) or a combination of both. A layperson

can enjoy the music and the spectacle to a great extent. Like any classical art, it calls for a deeper knowledge of its idiom and intricacies for fuller appreciation.

The dance comprising movements of the body, hands, limbs together with facial expressions, and filled with flavour, which is perfect for dramatic interpretation. From this classic dance one gets a true picture of how the dance can be translated into the poetry of movement through the grace and talent of a beautiful woman.

Alarippu (Invocation)

The dance usually begins with the Alarippu, meaning opening of the bud into blossom. Alarippu literally is the Temple Flower used as an offering at the beginning of devotional worship. The Alarippu, which is the first stage of the dance, is not generally accompanied by music, but is danced to the accompaniment of the rhythmic syllables rectified by the singer.

Jatisvaram

Following the Alarippu comes the Jatisvaram. Jatis are time measures, and svaram is the musical notation. At this stage, the background music, the timing and dance movement become highly technical. Beautiful movements of the neck, arms, gestures, feet, and bodily postures are combined in a fascinating design.

Sabdam

Sabdam emphasises on interpretation. The stage of the dance usually commences with a few pure dance movements that are very lovely. The dance has ample scope used to show her art of interpretation by the use of gesture language and acting, her facial expressions, eloquent eye and eyebrows play, mobility of lips and the manner in which she moves on the stage. The dance performance has now reached the stage where the audience has been introduced to the three elements of the Bharatanatyam namely Mood, Raga and Song. Tala or Rhythmic Timing and Natya are the combination of both dancing and acting.

Varnam

Narpan, is one of the most beautiful and highly elaborate dance conceptions, incorporating technical brilliance, richness of melody and artful interpretation. It gives form and shape to the soul and true intentions of Bharatanatyam and is the most complete example of the art of Bharatanatyam.

Padam

These are finely chanted lyrical songs of mother's love or romantic theme, in Tamil,

Sanskrit, as immortalised in the classics, or telling of gods and goddesses in the mood of love.

Tillana

The final stage of the performance is Tillana or pure dance with statuesque postures, intricate rhythm and a complete unison between the technique and touches of emotional acting. It is a picture of all the feminine charm and the intricate patterns of the dance and footwork with swiftly moving arms, the tilt of the head and neck, the play of the eyes and eyebrows, coquetry and lifting grace.

Music and Costume

Musical accompaniment to the dance includes the ‘nattuvanan’ (the conductor reciting rhythmic patterns, often wielding a pair of cymbals that strike out beats, i.e., ‘talams’ and rhythmic patterns), percussionist on the ‘mridangam’ (horizontal drum), singer, flautist and violinist. Sometimes the ‘veena’ (a plucked string instrument) and the ‘ghatam’ (an earthenware pot) are also used to accompany the dance. The accompanying music follows the Carnatic style of rendering.

The costume is rich and is a modern stitched adaptation of the sari worn between the legs. The dancer is heavily bejewelled. On the head the dancer wears a head-set (thalai saman) that has a moon and the sun adorning the head on either side of the middle parting. A rakodi, namely a circular piece, is placed on the crown of the head. The hair is usually worn in a long braid decked with white jasmine flowers and orange kanakambharam and a ‘kunjalam’ at the end. ‘Mattal’ and ‘jhimki’ attached to the ‘thodu’ adorn the ears. Nose rings are optional. ‘Chokker’ or ‘muthumalai’, the neck- hugging necklace, are worn along with the long chain known as ‘kasumalai’. Armlets (‘vankis’) and bangles adorn the arms and wrists of the dancer. A golden metal belt ‘odyanam’ is worn around the waist and silver anklets known as ‘kolusu’ on the ankles. A belt of thirty to forty ankle bells is tied around each ankle.

Exponents of Bharatanatyam

Four individuals pioneered the cause namely Bala - Saraswathi, one of the last of the devadasis, was a legend in her own time as the queen of abhinaya. E. Krishna Iyer, a crusader for the cause of sadir, renamed it as Bharatanatyam, to give it a new respectability and persuaded the leading sabhas of Madras to feature dance. Rukmini Devi Arundale started Kalakshetra, the first institution to teach Bharatanatyam, as an academic discipline, and Kamala, the ten-year old prodigy performing Bharatanatyam on films, inspired every mother

to teach dance to her daughter.

Its foremost centre of training is Kalakshetra in Madras, while some other important institutions are Darpana, Ahmedabad, Rajarajeswari Kala Mandir, Bombay and Triveni Kala Sangam, Delhi. Some famous dancers of the recent past and the present are T. Balasaraswathi, Rukmini Devi, Yamini Krishnamurthy, Sonal Mansingh, Padma Subramaniam, Mrinalini Sarabhai. The modern form of Bharatanatyam presentation is the arrangement of four Nattuvans of Pandanallur. They were the brothers - Ponniah, Chinniah, Vadivelu and Sivanandam, who lived in the eighteenth century. The Vidwan, Menaskshi Sundaram Pillay of Pandanallur, the greatest teacher of Bharatanatyam is a direct descendant of the four brothers. Among the leading exponents of Bharatanatyam today are:

1. Balasaraswati
2. Yamini Krishnamurti
3. Shanta Rao
4. Indrani Rehman
5. Vyjayantimala
6. Kamla and Padma Subramany

Exploring Therapeutic Potential of Classical Dances

In Bharatanatyam dance form the dancers make considerable use of hand-and-eye movements to express different emotions. It is an amalgamation of emotion, music, rhythm and expression. Bharatanatyam is *mudra* oriented and gives importance to *padarthaabhinaya*, each word interpreted through mudras. In *Navarasa* parts (nine sentiments) the dancers express their inner feelings and it helps to release their emotions. This practice can be well used for emotional wellbeing and psycho-therapy. This dance form strengthens the hamstring muscles including semi-tendinosus, semi-membranous, biceps femoris, etc.

Conclusion

Today the art flourishes not only in Tamil Nadu, but has become a global phenomenon, with dances setting up schools all over the world and people of other nationalities flocking to India to learn the art in its home many talented dancers took up Bharatanatyam with professional zeal and carried its fame far and wide. Shante, Kamala, and Kausalya are three distinguished names in the Bharatanatyam style, representing the art in its superb form.



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