

The Historical Dialectic between Classical Music and Dance in India*

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Philosophers of art like Croce and Ananda Coomaraswamy would like to interpret all developments in the arts in terms of their internal motivations and momentum of the artists as individuals or as a closed group. At the other end, several Marxists would like to interpret them as dependent on socio-economic developments. These interpretations need not, however, be mutually exclusive. The history of the relation between classical music and dance in India seems to have been governed by internal artistic as well as external socio-economic factors. For a long period, the two were closely related so that the textual definition of "Sangita" included dance — a definition which dancers still love to quote. On the other hand, in common parlance the word "Sangita" has come to denote music exclusively, leading to some holier-than-thou declarations by musicians¹.

We will therefore examine critically the inter-relationship over the centuries. We notice three broad periods, a period of close relationship almost down to the 11th century slowly leading to separate identities, followed by a period of separation and rivalry with the increasing dominance of music. This period of rivalry partly enriched both. The modern period of expansion has raised several basic questions about this relationship.

I

The earliest classical work on the performing arts of India (200 B.C. to 200 A.D.) was Bharata's *Nāṭya Śāstra*, a huge compendium of 37 chapters on theatre as a whole with a strong emphasis on dance. The first three chapters may be considered introductory but the core chapters from 4 to 25 deal with dance in the broadest sense including stage set-up, metres, figures of speech etc.; chapters 26 and 27 deal with *Prakṛti* (nature of characters) and *siddhi* (success of dramatic performance) respectively, while chapters 28 to 34 with music in itself and music for dance, with the last three chapters dealing with roles, rituals, etc. Music is thus treated as part of the larger whole and somewhat subordinate to dance. In the chapters dealing with music, twenty-two *Śrutis* and seven basic notes are described but the concept of *Rāga* has not emerged clearly as the term "*Jāti*" covers a musical scale and also rhythm. Musical compositions are not classified purely on musical structure (like *kṛti* or *varṇam*) but collectively on their verbal content, emotions expressed, rhythm etc., apart from the musical scales. Present-day musicologists like Jayadeva Singh and

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Prem Lata Sharma like to trace modern Hindustani musical forms such as Ghazal, Thumri, Tappa etc. to such forms in Nāṭya Śāstra². Bharata's work also indulges in some satire about idiosyncratic musicians gritting their teeth (*Sandashṭa*) or shaking their heads (*Kampitaśīrṇ*) too much. Altogether neither music nor dance has acquired clear and separate identities in Bharata's Nāṭya Śāstra. This is not unique to India and similar concepts of composite theatre and music-dance union prevailed in Europe too. But in the Vedic ritual tradition, music seems to be developing a separate identity without reference to dance³.

The process of specialization of the separate components started rather slowly. Music just begins to acquire some separate identity in Maṭaṅga's *Brhaddeśi*, where the term and concept Rāga are a little more explicitly identified. Similarly Kalidasa's *Mālavikāgnimitram* is a landmark where individual dance is separated from theatre clearly though this is anticipated in Nāṭya Śāstra as "Ekāhārya Lāsyaṅga", namely one dancer dancing all parts by oneself⁴. But the process of separation was quite slow; the evidence of sculpture is quite positive on this count; there are plenty of sculptured panels where music accompanies dance but practically very few of a music performance by itself. It is claimed with some justification by some musicians that this lumping retarded the growth of music into a sophisticated art by itself.

The specialization process crept in very slowly. Works on music included chapters on dance but the "Nartanādhyāya" was getting thinner. The last work to glorify dance under the title of Sangīta was Devanācharya's *Saṅgīta Muktāvalī*, totally devoted to Abhinaya. *Aumāpatam* which preceded *Saṅgīta Rātanakra* allots two chapters for dance. Sārṅgadeva's *Saṅgīta Ratnākara* was probably the last major work with a chapter on dance. In dance, too, textual works began to focus solely on Abhinaya starting with Nandikeśwara's *Abhinaya Darpana* followed by several works with the same focus on Abhinaya. Later works on music such as Dāmodara's *Saṅgītaadarpana* or Rāmāmātya's classic *Swaramelakalānidhi* have almost severed their ties with dance and deal purely about *svaras* and Rāga-classification system. But a more final separation came about from the late 17th century onwards due to a concatenation of circumstances.

Down to the early 17th century, the majority of the actual practitioners of music and dance were drawn from non-Brahmin groups down the caste ladder, while the texts on music and dance were composed mostly by Brahmins and upper caste non-Brahmins. This arrangement evolved as part of the total package of sacralizing the performing arts. I have referred to the need for sacralization in an article on "Nāṭyadharmī versus Lokadharmī" (*Sruti*, Madras). I argued that the attitude of the ruling elite to the performing arts was quite ambivalent; the artists were patronized on the one hand, but were also regarded as security risks on the other. Hence the artists gradually evolved certain tactics to safeguard themselves. One of these was the concept of *Nāṭyadharmī* to justify practices differing from ordinary worldly life. Another was the process of sacralizing the performing arts, derived from the Bhakti movement in Tamil Nadu (which was a transmutation of the older secular Aham and Atruppadaī genres of Sangam poetry)⁵.

One unintended by-product of such sacralization was the division of labour between text writers belonging largely to the Brahmin or upper non-Brahmin castes and the practitioners belonging to castes further down the caste ladder. The latter were largely unfamiliar with Sanskrit in which the texts were written and had only a general knowledge of

these texts. They were thus psychologically free to indulge in limited innovation, which after about a century of usage crept into the texts of the next generation as part of "tradition". This mechanism (of what I call) "creative ignorance and non-communication" allowed the performing arts to enjoy both continuity and change.

This division was more clearly stratified in the South with the practitioners of the performing arts being permanently attached to the temple with suitable land grants. This caste or group called Isai Vellalar was divided into two subcastes of Chinna Melam (mostly dancers) and Peria Melam (mostly musicians), with some internal rivalries⁶, but generally working together among themselves and with Brahmin priests and text writers. The landmark composer Muthuthandavar belonged to this caste and composed both songs for the concert platform and padams for the dance stage.

The close union of music and dance during this long period had its own advantages and disadvantages. Rhythm was more of a "practical" need in dance, therefore more developed, and Purandaradasa acknowledges his debt to the courtesan caste in calling the basic rhythms as Sooladi⁷. Secondly the dominant idea of Bhāva in dance would definitely have developed the concept of Rāga as more than scale and phrase, on to a specific identity.

There were obvious disadvantages too for the development of music in this close union. Dance, as something concrete and tied to the body, rarely encouraged the idea of music as an abstract combination of notes and their ratios; rather it promoted Rāga-Rāginī paintings concretizing the Rāgas as human beings in certain specific landscapes, seasons and times of the day. Beautiful as these paintings were, their ethos delayed independent abstract analysis of notes, their ratios and combinations in Rāgas⁸ and their classification on that basis. Even as music was edging away from dance, the classification of Rāgas was still inductive, based on empirical analysis of practice.

II

This state of affairs was disturbed rudely from the late 17th century onwards in South India. The early Nayak period presided over by Govinda Dikshitar during the three reigns of Sevappa, Achyuta and Raghunatha Nayakas, inaugurated a new wave of sanskritization and Brahminization in Tamil Nadu. This included the granting of more Brahmadeya villages for new groups of Brahmins to settle down and pursue knowledge which was being redefined to include the arts.

These art-oriented Brahmins brought to bear a new scientific attitude to the earlier aesthetic and sacral approach of the professionals. The final product of this approach was the 72 Melakartā classification of parent Rāgas by Venkatamakhī, a son of Govinda Dikshitar; a scheme which opened the way for the creation of new Rāgas for a better understanding of the structure and scope of the Rāga system but, more importantly, it led to a more analytic grammatical vision of music to displace the earlier romantic myth-oriented aesthetic vision.

This scheme gave Carnatic music a more scientific status than dance as it then was. Together with some other factors this drew a substantial number of Brahmins as music practitioners. The emerging Brahmin dominance also generated a love-hate relationship

between them and the traditional Isai Vellala caste of musicians and dancers which expressed itself in various ways, the main product of which was the wider separation of music from dance. Almost contemporaneously with Venkatamakhi, Ahobala in his *Saṅgītapārijāta* notices that Saṅgita has come to mean music alone in his pithy verse

*Gīta-Vāditrū-Nṛtyāṇām trayam Saṅgītamucyate
Gānasyātra prad-hānatvat tatsaṅgītamitiritam,*

(Song, instruments and dance are said to constitute music. Because of the dominance of music, that is proclaimed as *Saṅgītam*.)

Musicians, now mostly Brahmins, also developed a holier-than-thou attitude not logically connected with the scientization of music itself. They based it on the concept of their worship of Nāḍabrahman as musicians. This concept is not as old as its proponents would like to claim⁹. While sacredness and divine origin has been claimed for music in all its traditional texts, the concept of Nāḍabrahman as such developed much later, partly from Bhartrhari's idea of Śabda as Brahman in the 5th or 6th century, partly from Jain and Hindu ideas of Nāmarūpa equation in the later centuries, and partly from the Tamil Bhakti poetic tradition of equating Śiva with pure sound. All these ideas clustered to produce the concept of Nāḍabrahman, and musicians claim to be its special worshippers and guardians, by the 18th century. The dominant Brahmin musicians latched on to this idea with enthusiasm.

It is no use denying that this attitude of superiority of Brahmin musicians, developed through a mixture of reasons, generated that love-hate relation with the traditional music-dance castes of Chinna and Peria Melam. An extreme position of total dissociation from dance was taken by Tyagaraja who would not call Śiva a dancer in his *kṛtis*, while he called him a Nadatanu or Nadarupa in several places¹⁰. Some leading Melam musicians retaliated by criticizing Venkatamakhi's classification, some with more reason like Madurai Ponnuswamy Pillai, some with less reason like T.N. Rajaratnam¹¹.

Our main concern is with the impact of all this on music-dance relationships. By the early 19th century, Carnatic music had developed a separate, sophisticated, self-sustaining identity divorced from classical dance. Dance in the meanwhile had either developed substantially its ritual aspects connected with temple processions, and its rhythmic aspects, but was still related to the slow-moving padams of Kshetragna or Muthuthandavar in regard to Abhinaya. These two aspects were also not closely related. A scientifically developed Carnatic music system was thus confronting this dance tradition somewhat unsure of itself. This confrontation could have led to two opposite results: either one of gradual alienation from the more developed music system, or one of confrontation and mutual interaction. In the former case, South Indian classical dance might have developed like Kuchipudi, rich in Abhinaya but with limited attachment to Carnatic music or like Kathak with increasing emphasis on rhythm. The virile components of South Indian dance coming down from the Vijayanagar court like Jakkini were strongly rhythm-oriented, probably under the influence of *Nṛtta Ratnāvalī*, while Abhinaya latched on *Śṛīgāra padams* of Kshetragna or Muthuthandavar¹². This bifocal development could have continued to increase the distance between classical dance and classical Carnatic music if classical musicians had all followed the austere path of Tyagaraja.

III

Such an alienation did not take place; instead the confrontation led to a fruitful interaction enriching both music and dance, thanks to the Dikshitar family, the Tanjavur quartet, the Tanjavur Rajahs and Swati Tirunal. The full story needs a lot more researching but certain basic facts are clear. The royal patrons of Tanjavur and Travancore, like royal patrons anywhere, liked dance and music equally and acted in favour of a liaison. The Dikshitar family maintained its connections with the temple and dance; Ramaswamy Dikshitar reorganized the dances to be performed and the Rāgas to be played, for the procession of Tyagaraja image round the main streets of Tiruvapur. His son Muthuswamy Dikshitar was closely associated with the Tanjavur quartet as their Guru and Guru to the danseuse Kamalam. We may regard the creation of the *padavarnam*, the centrepiece of a Bharata Natyam performance, as the main result of this association. The verbal and emotional content of the *Varnam* was the product of centuries of development of *Bhakti-Śrīgāra* and the King-God equation in tandem, as I have argued in detail in an article¹³. But the musical dance format was the joint creation of the Tanjavur quartet and Muthuswamy Dikshitar with the encouragement and even participation of the royal patrons. The Tanjavur Mahratta Rajahs from Shaji onwards took a personal interest in dance and music together, composing pieces and even evolving a dance concert pattern¹⁴. Swati Tirunal's keen interest in dance was well known and his dance compositions have become part of today's dance repertoire. This royal interest provided the encouraging atmosphere in which the music-dance confrontation took place. It was equally fortunate that Dikshitar and the Tanjavur quartet interacted intimately during this crucial period. The main product of this confrontational interaction was the *padavarnam* which absorbed the best in the dance rhythmic tradition and the music tradition of composing songs in words to a Rāga-tāla pattern.

To repeat our main conclusion: it was fortunate that the contact between the Melam composite tradition of music and dance and the new Brahmin ethos of scientific music was not severed. In particular, the close contact of Muthuswamy Dikshitar (and his father Ramaswamy Dikshitar) with Melam caste musicians and in particular with the Tanjavur quartet (Ponniah, Chinnaiah, Sivanandan and Vadivelu) and the latter's migration to the court of Swati Tirunal kept the new sophisticated scientific music in close interaction with the traditional music and dance system to the benefit of both and to the development of excellence in both. Indeed both sides became productive in this friendly rivalry. The birth of Tana Varnam and Pada Varnam, of Svarajāti and Jātisvaram, the Dikshitar style of composition and the evolution of new forms like Javali and Tillana, all bear testimony to the high quality of the product of this confrontation and rivalry. The outburst of creative activity early in the last century in musical and dance compositions is in part or whole the result of this productive dialectic: first the sophistication, scientization and separation of music from dance, their bitter rivalry, and their later interaction. The Tana Varnam (for concert) and the Pada Varnam (for dance) certainly influenced each other, both deriving some inspiration from the earlier Huseni Svarajāti¹⁵. Similarly Svarajātis and Jātisvarams borrowed ideas from each other; more importantly the Tanjore quartet and Dikshitar had

more influence on each other than is admitted. His *chaukka* (slow temps) style was only partly inspired by the *Dhrupad* format he became familiar with in Benares; it also followed the need for a *chaukka* *Pallavi* and *Anupallavi* for the *padavarnam*. More interestingly the *Madhyama kala* of his *kritis* corresponded to the fast tempo of the *charanams* of *padavarnams* as composed by Ponniah Pillai. New forms like *Javali* or *Tillana* would not have taken shape without that rivalry and interaction. All told, it was fortunate that music separated itself to scientize itself. It was equally fortunate that this did not result in mutual isolation but more in rivalry, sometimes friendly, sometimes less than friendly. It is worth referring very briefly to a similar development in Western music for comparison¹⁶. As in India, dance and music developed together till the 18th century, though some distinctions were emerging. Thus some baroque music compositions took over the rhythmic format of dance and these were progressively considered inferior. Secondly the male-female distinction, adumbrated earlier in France, was taken over in Germany, characterizing higher music as male. More importantly, the distinction between body and mind in Christian Protestant doctrine progressively led to the consideration of dance associated with the body as inferior and music associated with the mind as superior. More specifically, the residue of the Protestant and Calvinist religious revolution favoured music at the expense of all over arts in the 18th century. Martin Luther was a choir singer himself and somewhat averse to sculpture. Calvin was more fanatical, promoting iconoclasm—the destruction of statues as well as church organs—to concentrate on vocal singing. Thus in the 18th century all artistic energies focussed on music in Protestant Germany. The resultant German glorification of music as a totally independent, self-justifying art is reflected in Hegel's philosophy and his theory of the state. All of this certainly led to the relative isolation of music, as superior, from dance as inferior. They came together again with the music of Stravinsky and his like.

IV

We argue that the relation of music to dance and the evolution of the performing arts in general has been affected as much by societal conditions as by internal factors. This was quite well recognized in European thinking from the last century onwards if not earlier, while the general Indian attitude has been to ignore societal conditions as determinates. We have argued in this brief account that they affected the music-dance relation substantially. Their fairly close relation over a long period was due to two societal factors quite apart from the general delay in composite arts moving towards specialization. Both of them when regarded as sources of pleasure were suspect in the eyes of religious orthodoxy, and both responded by affectations of spirituality. In South India however there was less need of open defence, when the *Bhakti* movement became institutionalized¹⁷. *Bhakti* or an intense personal relationship with the deity was by itself against repression of natural feelings and even a glorification of them. When it took the specific form of *Śṛṅgāra bhakti* or erotic devotion, i.e. fanatisizing oneself as the Lord's beloved, it became even more unrepressed. This was later combined with another tradition—of regarding the deity

as a munificent King—which flowed out of an earlier Tamil poetic genre of *arruppada*. Together these two engineered *rajopachara* in temples: that is, the offering of the sensuous fine arts of music and dance to the deity. The gifting of lands to the temple by kings and noblemen to sustain music and dance practitioners attached to the temple entrenched it. In short, this arrangement encouraged the *status quo* through a sure source of income, and through a reverence for the source itself.

It was only after the Brahmins not dependent on the temple began to scientize music and glorify it as *Nāḍopāsana* that the separation gathered momentum even though it was taking shape slowly over the centuries. Both this separation and specialization in South India did not go to the ultimate limit, because of the close contact of some Brahmin musicians and temple dancers. It led instead to new forms of expression, and the rejuvenated dance form was again sustained by the rise of a prosperous landowning class under British rule¹⁸. In short, the music-dance interrelation was governed to a considerable extent by the caste and class affiliation of the proponents of each art.

This relation between Carnatic music and Bharata Natyam, hitherto deemed as inviolable, is again begin sacralized and legitimized by some and challenged and changed through changing social conditions. Thus in South India the same Brahmin (and higher castes) supply the majority of musicians as well as dancers, bringing the two arts closer than before. On the other hand, the quick spread of Bharata Natyam to the rest of India, unfamiliar with Carnatic music, has led to the relation being challenged. The majority of these practitioners carry on mechanically without any effort to understand the music or language. The very few who care to maintain a living relation either learn the language and the music or, like Sucheta Chapekar, match and marry Bharata Natyam to Hindustani music.

To return to our opening question: why have European thinkers generally accepted societal factors as influencing the performing arts while Indians have in general ignored them? The first obvious reason was rivalry between Marxist and non-Marxist social scientists to explain economy and society through various mutual relations extending to and including the arts. Austrian Marxists from Alois Riegl interpreted the development of art and society together, and Max Weber from another viewpoint related the development of European music to social developments. This trend was also supported by the substantial amount of empirical research material that was available. In contrast to this, in India, the general tendency to ascribe a religious connection to things artistic was buttressed by Ananda Coomaraswamy's zeal to equate religion and art. While this effectively dampened attempts at sociological explanation, the Marxist efforts did no better with their attachment to orthodox ideas of commodification of art and suchlike. Sociological explanation of developments in art is just beginning in India.

NOTES

1. This basic question about the status of (classical dance) Bharata Natyam vis a vis Carnatic music was raised twice by Veenai S. Balachander at music conferences. He raised it the first time when Srimati Balasaraswati was chosen as Sangitha Kalanidhi (President of the Madras Music Academy) by asking whether dance was really a part of Sangita. Years later he raised the same question obliquely when Kathakali maestro Gopinath was honoured with the Sangitha Kala Sikhamani title by the Indian Fine Arts

Society in 1988. Padma Subrahmanyam challenged Balachandar on the spot by referring to the classical definition of Sangitas constituted by *Gīta*, *Vādyā* and *Nṛtya* (dance). Her obvious reference was to the famous verse of Śārngadeva's Śārngita Ratnākara quoted and requoted thereafter, saying *Geetam Vadyam Cha Nrityam Cha Tryam Sangitamuchyate*.

2. Jayadeva Singh, "The evolution of the Thumri", Chapter IX in V. Subramaniam (ed), *The sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts*, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, 1979.
3. Agnihotram Ramanuja Thatachiar, "Vedam Potrum Geetam", *Kalki Deepavali Malar*, 1969.
4. In the Nāṭya Śāstra, "Ekāhārya Lāsyaṅga" occupies a marginal place but in Kalidasa's Mālavikāgnimitram, Mālavikā dances and interprets a *catuspadi* like a padam as *part of a dance competition* indicating that individual dance had gained a clear identity outside drama.
5. This has been discussed in detail in V. Subramaniam, *op. cit.* Chapters 1, 2 and 3.
6. For a more detailed idea of the Isai Vellala caste and its internal divisions, see P. Sundaram, "Mangala Isai Mannargal", Madras, 1992 and Anne-Marie Gaston, "Tradition and Change in South Indian Classical Dance", D. Phil thesis, Oxford University, 1987.
7. The term "Soola" apparently meant accomplished court dancer in Purandaradasa's time, and not a prostitute as it does now in present-day Kannada.
8. This critical view of the Ragini paintings is held by several musicologists. This is not to deny their supreme beauty as visual art.
9. It is the Indian custom to trace everything as far back as possible, without relating it to the actual impact or dominance of that idea. The *Rig Veda* includes a "Devi Suktam" glorifying *Vāk*, but one cannot trace Nāḍabrahman to that. Bhartṛhari's Śabda is sound with meaning and not just a musical sound. The Nāḍabrahman idea really took shape only by the 17th or 18th centuries.
10. Tyagaraja refers to Natesa along with Bhrungi and Hanuman in his "Sangita gnanamu" without glorifying Śiva's dance. He refers to Śiva as "Natana Chatura" in the Ghambira Vani kriti "Sada Madin". These are passing references. Basically he distanced himself from dance.
11. Madurai Ponnuswamy Pillai argued with good reason that the true number of Melas is 32. Most Isai Vellals would agree with that view. Rajaratnam with his typical gusto referred to Venkatamakhi's work as "Abhasa Apswara Kalanjiyam" (the treasure house of unpleasant cacophony). I agree with the 32 Melakarta system but I am placing Venkatamakhi in proper perspective in a forthcoming article.
12. The separate and fast development of pure rhythmic dance is traced in some detail in Dr. Arudra's "Suddha Nritham", paper read at the Natakala Conference, Madras, 1989.
13. V. Subramaniam, "The Varnam in Bharata Natyam," *Sangeet Natak*, New Delhi, 1985. See also my articles on Kavadi Chindu and Muthuthandavar in *Sruti*.
14. The pioneering work of the Mahratta rulers of Tanjavur on the pattern of the dance concert has been discussed by Parvatikumar in *Sruti*.

15. The provocation for the famous "Viribhomi" Tana Varnam is not far to seek. Throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries the structure of Bhairavi was changing into its modern shape with two dhaivatams and consequent readjustments of key phrases. The final shape of Bhairavi was firmed up by Panchimiriyam Adiyappaya's Viribhoni varnam including all the key phrases or prayogas. It became clear in this process that the earlier mode of describing a Rāga through a Geetam was quite inadequate to cover all the prayogas. Hence the more elaborate instrument Varnam (Varnanam or description) too shaped to define other major Rāgas too. The idea of a definitive description or Varnanam of a love mood seems to have caught on with the dance artists about the same time and as the Tanjavur quartet and Dikshitar were working closely, it took its refined shape with a perfect balance of rhythm and Abhinaya, as well as Chakkam (in Pallavi and Anupallavi) and Dhutam (in the Charanams). The technique of singing the Svara passage (solfa notation) first and the Sāhitya after, also took shape in that context. It is not unlikely that Tyagaraja's Pancharatnas followed this mode, with the persuasion of Rama Rao, a senior *chela* (disciple) of the saint who induced him to composed the Pancharatnas.
16. My brief account of the history of European attitudes to music and dance is based upon: 1. J. Kenneth Clark, *Civilization*, British Broadcasting Corporation and John Murray, London 1969; chap. 9; 2. Donald Grant and Claude Palain, *A History of Western Music*, 4th ed., 1988, discussion of Mozart; and 3. Richard Leppert and Susan McClay, *Music and Society*, Chapter by John Sheppard. In addition I had a lively discussion with Professor Elaine Keillor of the department of music at Carleton University on this subject to clarify a number of issues. I learnt that considerable research is going on in this area as by-product of researches in gender history.
17. For a detailed discussion of the Bhakti cult and the performing arts. see V. Subramaniam, *The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts*, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, 1979. Chap. 3.
18. V. Subramaniam, *Arya Satyam*, Ajanta Books International, New Delhi, 1993, "In defence of the dance drama".