

BHARATA NATYAM

*The Dance Art of the Tamils**

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ஆனந்தம் ஆடரங்கம் ஆனந்தம் பாடல்கள்
ஆனந்தம் பல்லியம் ஆனந்தம் வாச்சியம்
ஆனந்தம் அகில சராசரம்
ஆனந்தம் ஆனந்தக் கூத்துகந்தானுக்கே

"Everything was Bliss! the stage, the songs, the orchestra, the various instruments (percussion) the entire universe. It was all one Supreme Bliss for the great Lord who revelled in dancing".

Thus spake Thirumoolar in his Thirumanthram

The very creation is said to be the Dance of the Supreme, it is *Ananda* it is Bliss, it is the 5-fold activity of creation, preservation, destruction, illusion and revelation of the Cosmic Dancer, Lord Nataraja, who is the embodiment and manifestation of eternal energy as the *Nrityamurti*. If this is so, how ancient then is the art of dancing, the Koothu, the Natakam, or the Natyam as referred to in Tamil literature?

Dance is the 'Objective presentation' of the 'Subjective Reality'; it is the outward expression of an inner emotion or a compulsion; the giving of a concrete form to the human ideas and ideals through movement. It seems to be the earliest manifestation of Man's creative impulse. It was one of his most vital expressions of worship and its connection with magic, invocation and appeasement has been projected through movement for thousands of years. It has been part of his ritual in propitiating the gods

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and also as part of his social activities. Also, dance has always been a spontaneous expression of joy as a result of exuberance. All primitive societies have indulged in dancing and the instinct of dancing seems to have preceded the faculty of speech or song. Why! even animals and birds go through elaborate dance rituals. The dance of the honey bees to communicate information like source and distance of nectar so beautifully described by the Nobel laureate Von Frisch, is too well known to be repeated here.

Dance in the west has come to be regarded as a means of self-expression, whereas in the East and India in particular, dance carries the dual message:

1. The physical to be lifted to the plane of the sublime.
2. The interpretation of the universal by the submergence of the individual self.

Dance in India goes back to times immemorial, over 2000 years and even then it had reached a high degree of perfection, subtlety and beauty. The dancing figure of a girl in the Mohenjodaro excavations and also a dancing figure considered to be Lord Siva, illustrate that dance was very much part of the Pre-Aryan Civilization in India. The various phases of Indian Art could be referred to as temple art, because it was essentially part of the mode of worship in temples and spiritual identification with God considered the supreme Artist. Every action of Man, including his daily ritual and his works of art, was guided by the hand of God and the most eloquent representations of Indian culture are the temples of India, that have survived for thousands of years. Religion is so much part and parcel of Indian culture that it is difficult to separate art and culture from Religion, be it painting, dance, poetry or sculpture. Further the origin of the arts in India are so shrouded in the mists of antiquity that, it is very difficult to fix the correct date for many artistic events. So when we speak of dance, the evidences we have are the dance sculptures, frescoes and paintings in the various temples and the available manuscripts and treatises on art. Dance is movement and therefore difficult to record. Karanas in dance sculptures are frozen postures or the beginning or end of a new movement. It is therefore capable of being interpreted differently by different artists according to his or her imagination. What the observer makes out of it would also vary according to the individual's attitude. There is quite a bit of latitude in this. But the Karana as described in written works is movement (of hands and feet) each with a specific name.

Owing to the series of invasions in the north, the influence of foreign cultures on the indigenous arts was inevitable. Hence, the dances there became mingled in form, style and presentation with the foreign arts imported into India, whereas the South enjoyed a more undisturbed atmosphere, thereby preserving and maintaining its traditions in sculpture, painting and

dance. We have the beautiful sculptures of the Pallavas in Mahabalipuram, the Cholas in Chidambaram and Tanjore and of the Hoysalas in Belur and Halebid and so on.

The unique quality of Indian dance is that every minute detail of gesture and movement has been analysed and projected in such a manner that it has reached the highest stage of development. Nothing is left to chance, every position of the hand and body is recognised by a distinct name and charged with a precise significance. The actors and the dancers are but vehicles to project the thematic content and mood. Hence, an amateur has no place on the stage; dance is so much dependant on human emotions, actions and habits, that it is said to be the most 'malleable and changeable' of arts. Art is the vehicle to communicate what lies beyond speech and the dance art is said to be the most ancient art or the mother of the other art forms. It is a visual art, it is an arrangement or a pattern in space and time. It touches one's mind and involves different aspects of life. Dancing is not just steps but the use of gestures to convey ideas and emotions.

As in all walks of life, society incorporates into itself what is necessary and what it requires and rejects what is not wanted. Different styles of dance are no exception to this rule. Hence, some dance forms go into oblivion while others attain more and more popularity.

Bharata Natyam is one such form of dance that has stood the test of time and has evolved into one of the most highly developed and balanced forms of dance in the world. This style of dance is exclusive to the Tamil country. Originally, it was referred to as Koothu, then it came to be called *Sadir* or *Chinna Melam*. Today colloquial usage of the term *Bharata Natyam* has replaced the term '*Sadir*'. This seems to have happened about 60-70 years ago. Ancient art forms like *Bharata Natyam* flourished under royal patronage. Then the rich people have always been patrons of this art and it became an important and integral part of all social events like birthdays and weddings and became a status symbol. Of course, it continued to be part of temple ritual. This role got diminished in course of time and it has today become purely secular.

The very word Bharata has been much debated upon. One is left to wonder whether Bharata is the sage and author of the *Natya Sastra*, or was it a pen-name assumed by a number of authors? Though the *Natya Sastra* is in Sanskrit, a few additions in Prakrit and also some in Pali, seem to be present giving some support to this view. Whether Bharata is referred to as the brother of Rama or as the son of Dushyanta or Bharata that is India or Bha-ra-ta the Bhava, raga, tala, is the question.

It is always difficult to attribute the coining of a particular word and its ancientness, especially when the word has been accepted in the common

parlance. One such is the use of the word Bharata Natyam. It would be a fruitless endeavour to try and say, whether it is an author, a group of authors, Dushyantha's son or simply the ancient name of India. It is nice to speculate that it is only an acronym *Bhava, Raga, Tala* (Bharata). This may well be the case as we commonly use acronyms. This has been a practice in the ancient India as many sutras are in a capsule form.

Purandara Dasa, who lived about 400 years ago considered as the father of Carnatic Music, refers to Bharata Natyam in his song *Addhano Ranga* in *Raga Arabhi*, which described the dance of Krishna on the hood of the serpent Kalinag.

Rambhe, Urvashi Ramaniya rellaru
Chendadi Bharata Natyagal Natisey

The reference is that Rambha and Urvashi and other celestial dancers performed the Bharata Natyam as Sri Krishna danced on the serpent extolling the victory of the child Krishna on the poisonous serpent.

Adiyarku Nallar, the 12th century commentator of Silappadikaram in the course of his commentary observes - 'Ancient Tamil works on dance like *Bharatam* and *Agathiam* have now been lost, also works like *Muruval*, *Sayantham*, *Guna-Nool* and *Seyitriyam* are available only in fragments'.

The above 2 references show that the expression Bharata Natya is not of recent coinage. Whatever it is, society has accepted Bharata Natyam to be the dance of the Tamils and the very word Bharata Natyam brings to mind a particular style of dance found in Tamilnadu.

Today from being a community art performed by a particular sect it has become the universal emblem of culture in every home. Ritualism has now been replaced by lyricism. One of the consequences of this has been the introduction of pieces in popular idiom known as Javali, which could be understood by the common man and even a novice.

Bharata Natyam has always been a flourishing art in Tamil Nadu. Sangam and Tamil classics including *Tholkapiam* are replete with references to Natya of very high order. There are other works in Tamil like *Sevitriyam* which define the various aspects of the science in the art of dance. *Koothanool* (of 200 B.C.?) refers to the various kinds of Adavus and different dances prevalent. Silappadikaram of the 2nd century A.D. is one of the greatest Tamil classics on dance. Madhavi's arangetram has been graphically portrayed as for example.

எண்ணும் எழுத்தும் இயல்ஐந்தும் பண்நான்கும்
பண்நின்ற கூத்துப் பதினொன்றும் மண்ணின்மேல்
போக்கினாள் பூம்புகார்ப் பொற்றொடி மாதவிதன்
வாக்கினால் ஆடாங்கில் வந்து

“When Madhavi entered the stage, she reflected in her performance, the science and the art of dance with its 5 varieties and 4 basic foundations of melody (Pann) and the 2 styles of dance”.

The quotation cited above would go to show how highly organised and sophisticated the dance performances had become. Even the setting of the stage to the minutest detail has been described.

It is surprising that Adiyarku Nallar does not stop with just interpreting Ilango Adigal's *Silappadikaram* but also goes into the details of the requirement of the art of dance and the artist and also elaborately discusses the art and science of dance in ancient times.

These are some of the instances of the unique cultural achievement of the Tamils. It is hardly surprising that the Tamil invaders of Burma, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka carried their rich and colourful cultural heritage with them. As a result, we recognise Bharata Natyam movements in the classical dances of these countries.

In the sculptures in Tamil Nadu, the art-form is represented in the finest manner, apart from the Karnas e.g. Frescoes in the inner corridors of the Brihadeeswara temple of Tanjore, especially of an Apsara.

Even in Mythologies as conceived of by the great Tamil writer, Sekkizhar in his *Periapuranam* and Paranjothi munivar in *Thiruvilayadal Puranam*, we see the great art of dance mentioned.

Thus, what we can recognise, identify and interpret as Bharata Natyam appears to have been an unchanged theme in Music, sculpture, painting, art and mythology in Tamil country. Even in the spiritual domain, there is reference to dance, e.g. the Thirumantram of Thirumoolar, who speaks of Lord Nataraja as:

அண்டங்கள் ஒரேமும் அம்பொற் பதியாகப்
பண்டை ஆகாசங்கள் ஐந்தும் பதியாகி
தெண்டினில் சக்தி திரு அம்பலமாகக்
கொண்டு பரஞ்சோதி கூத்துகந்தானே

“With the skies and the 7 worlds as the stage with shakti as the motivating force, He performed the Supreme Dance; He, the Lord Nataraja”.

ஆடல் அரசன், கூத்தபிரான், ஆடல் அழகன்

are some of the names of the celestial dancer Lord Siva, something unique and peculiar to Tamil Nadu.

தென்னாடுடைய சிவனே போற்றி
எந்நாட்டவர்க்கும் இறைவனே போற்றி

“Hail to thee, O Siva, Lord of the Southern Country
Hail to thee, O Supreme Lord of all nations”.

The conception of the figure of Nataraja encompasses the entire philosophy of life and of creation that Man's intelligence is capable of conceiving. The figure of Nataraja represents perhaps the finest expression of perfection of sculpture not only of India but of the world.

Breathes there a man who is not captivated by a statue of Nataraja with a benign smile, lissome, almost smooth fluid movement, not weak but powerful and showing strength of form, balanced and well poised. No other art any where in this world has reached this height of development. Nataraja represents the rhythmic and vibrant nature of life, which is cyclic. (Fig)

Bharata Natyam is that complex whole that comprises coordinated movements and exacting rhythms with the Nritya sequences mathematically accurate, geometrical in symmetry and form, deliberately infused grace with tremendous suspension and power in the presentation of gesture and movement, sculpturesque poses, decorative and meaningful hand gestures, beauty and colour in costume, all these within itself in a wellbalanced manner, such that it is a visual feast, not just visual but touch the heart of man. All these aspects combined and moulded with the rich tradition, philosophy, religion and culture of over 2000 years, has gone to evolve Bharata Natyam into one of the most beautiful dance styles of the world. It is also a powerful medium of communication. This has been also used for reinforcement of the ideas in our philosophy and religion. Through this powerful medium of communication our ancestors in the ancient Tamil Nadu tried to get across our basic as well as the complex ideas of the universe.

There are various books on the dance art like the Natya Sastra, Abhinaya Darpana, Bharatarnava, Maha Bharata Choodamani and so on, but the Natya Sastra is considered as the most unique and outstanding

contribution. This book is a monumental work and it deals with all aspects of dance, drama and theatre. As one goes through the Natya Sastra one is wonder struck at the variety of every possible movement of the body, eyes, neck, hands, legs etc.. conceived by man and so systematically and methodically codified by Bharata. Also it is no wonder then that we recognize similar movements in the different dance styles of the world. There are many treatises on dance emphasising may be a few aspects relevant to the text and time even before the publication of Natya Sastra. But Natya Sastra seems to be a compendium of dance, drama, theatre and movement. In the Bharata Natyam technique, the principles of movement and gesture as found in the Natya Sastra are there, but the super structure has undergone variations reflecting the changes in the society and with the passage of time, and today it has acquired a supreme beauty and finesse. Natyam is not acting nor is it drama alone, but involves dancing. Bharata Natyam is a highly stylised form of dance and one has to know something about it to enjoy a recital. The gesture language is so complex and complete that one has to have a basic knowledge to understand the theme enacted by the dancer and the dancer herself has to have enough experience to tell a tale in a cogent form so that each gesture flows into other without being jerky and without the connection being disjointed. Her art should be such that a rapport is created between herself and the audience.

Bharata Natyam as seen today is referred to as Lasyam (graceful and feminine), type of dance. It may be divided into Nrityam and Nrithyam. Nrityam is pure dance conveying no meaning or sentiment, it is just visually and aesthetically beautiful. The dance sequences are made up of *Adavus* or the basic dance unit. It consists of *Stanakam*-stance, *Chari*-movement, *Nritta* Hastam, decorative hand gesture and *Hasta Kshetram* position of the hands throughout its performance. There are various groups of *adavus* each of which corresponds to and is easily recognised by a distinct phrase of the drum.

In Nrithyam we have the language of the gestures through which ideas, emotions and stories are rendered. There are, according to the Abhinaya Darpana 28 Asamyuta or single hand gestures and 24 Samyuta or Double hand gestures.

The use of these gestures to convey ideas and sentiments leads us to abhinaya. The works on dance speak of 4 kinds of Abhinaya, *Angika* body and limbs, *Vachika* - words and dialogue, *Kuravanji* and *Bhagavata Mela*, *Aharya* - costume, jewellery and make up and *Satvika* - emotional states.

In the Satvika Abhinaya - here we have the Navarasas or the nine psychological states - love, wonder, anger, fear, humour, disgust, sympathy, courage and peace. The Rasas are actually eight in number and peace has

been added as the ninth. Ancient *Sangam* literature speaks of 8 rasas and they are called *Yennsuvai*.

Love or *Shringara* is the most dominant rasa around which the other rasas revolve. This has been sublimated into *Bhakti*, the yearning of the individual soul for the supreme, the *Jivatma* seeking the *Paramatma*. The other aspects of Bharata Natya to be appreciated are the elasticity, plasticity and the flexibility of the art making it the vibrant and dynamic art that it is. Elasticity in the sense is that the theme can be expanded or contracted. Plasticity means capacity to mould an idea with the aid of the changing gestures. Flexibility means that the theme and the gesture can be used in a variety of ways to project the emotion, the idea and the story.

A Bharata Natya recital lasts for about $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 hrs consisting of 10 or 14 items. It was given its present form by the Tanjore quartet Chinniah, Ponniah, Vadivelu and Sivanandam who were court musicians in Tanjore about 175 years ago. Beginning with a simple item as the invocational dance, the tempo is built up to the piece-de-resistance, that is the *varnam*, which is a test for the capacity, training and stamina of the dancer. After this, there is the leisurely exposition of *Abhinaya*, for songs and Love lyrics and finally a beautiful and rhythmical finish in the *Tillana*.

Change is part of civilization. There is change from moment to moment. Bharata Natyam has reached this stage of development keeping within the frame work of tradition, like carnatic music with its Ragas which though set in a frame work, allows for endless possibilities, variations and innovations depending on the musician handling it. In spite of its apparent rigidity the art of Bharata Natyam is almost like a fresh canvas in the hands of each artist enabling him or her to express the theme in an imaginative way and making it distinctive. Just as in painting the 3 basic colours combine to form innumerable hues, so also in Bharata Natyam the basic movements strung together and woven in an enchanted loom into patterns of alluring beauty. The whole movement is Kaleidoscopic, ever changing, forming myriad patterns of beauty and form. It hardly matters whether it is authored by a single person or a group, nor does it matter whether it is a compendium or a single treatise; what matters, is, that it has stood the ravages of time in this ever changing universe and has maintained its pristine purity to a large extent and which is a pride of our Tamil Culture.

It is interesting to speculate on the figure of Nataraja, as it represents the very quintessence of Tamil Philosophy. Two triangles (Fig 1), placed one over the other (Fig.2) form a six sided star - ("Shatkona" (Fig.3). The figure of Natarajan fits in beautifully into this (Fig.4). The Lord suppressing evil-symbolically represented by *Muyalakan*, the *Damaru* (Drum), on the right hand to represent the rhythmic nature of life, fire on the left hand to symbolize life's energy; the crescent moon—the height of knowledge,

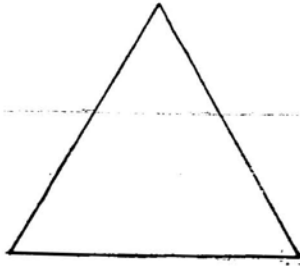


Fig. 1

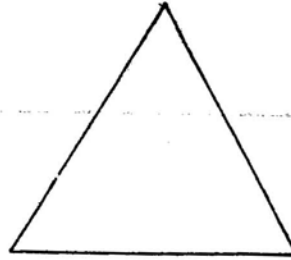


Fig. 2

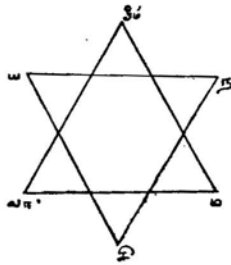


Fig. 3

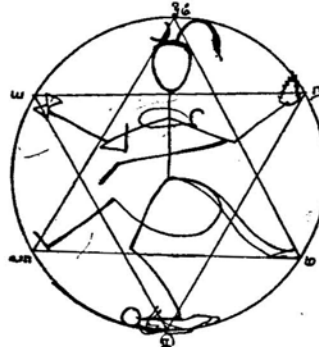


Fig. 4

Ganges on the head - the water of life, snake symbolising air - thus the panchaboothas are represented. The raised right hand indicates Abhayam while the left hand indicates "here I am". The raised left foot - path to salvation, the flying veil - removal of illusion and so on. The Tiruvashi represents the vibrant, rhythmic and cyclic nature of life. This symbolic figure of Nataraja represents perhaps the highest philosophy of Tamils, that all life is essentially made of five elements, there is a constant effort to suppress evil, life is rhythmic, vibrant and cyclic. Life is bliss.

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