

BHARATA NATYAM: REVIEW OF MARG

SPECIAL NUMBER



●

By

Sangita Kala

Sikhamani

Shri K. Vasudeva

Sastri, Research

Professor,

Saraswathi

Mahal Library,

Tanjore.

●

THE *Marg* in the course of its unique service to the arts of the country has recently begun to supply a long-felt need by students and connoisseurs of Indian dance. This art, as in other branches, has long been and continues to be preserved by masters who are in the line of *Guru-Sishya sampradaya*, and its technique has more or less been a professional secret. There are no doubt text books on the subject, but they are too skeleton-like or too far removed from the present-day practice.

The masters had till the last generation got by memory a few important *stokas* regarding the elements of the art. But even this equipment by way of texts has now been given up. Some of the practical manuals connected

with present-day practice have been jealously kept out of the public view, and attempts are being made to seek them out and present them to the public. It cannot be said that we have yet succeeded in the task. Under these circumstances any little effort to acquaint the public with the elements of the art by writers who are in touch with the practitioners of the art must be welcomed as a first step. The correlation of the practice with their corresponding texts is a very difficult task and has to be undertaken after all the available texts have been published and brought home to the masters, students and connoisseurs. Steps in this direction are being taken, and four good books have already appeared with the translations, viz., *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Natya Sastra*, *Natya Sastra Sangraha* and *Bharataranava*. More books will soon be coming.

The special number brought out by the *Marg* on Bharata Natyam in September, 1957, contains ten articles, including the editorial, in praise of Bharata Natyam. This introduction echoes the general feeling in the country witnessing the renaissance of the art that there is a need for helping the cultured members of our community to understand the art in all its detail instead of "responding only from the surface sensibility with exclamations like 'charming' and 'lovely' without understanding more than a few gestures, hand poses, *adavus* and *jatis*".

The picture drawn here of the intellectuals in the major cities in India who go to see our dance is true to the letter. "These self-conscious patrons are, by and large, ignorant of the language in which the songs are sung, but may never admit that they know nothing about the concept of *Abhinaya* with which shades of thought and emotions are communicated or the intricacies of rhythm and *Bhava* that serve faithfully to suggest the ideas in the piece".

The two schools, the conservative and the liberal towards the art, that are now present among the field workers is a happy sign of healthy development, and the art will surely progress along the middle path taking food for nourishment for both sides. This is, therefore, not a matter to be anxious about. The diagnosis in this introduction attributing the decay of the art to the decrease of living faith in religious institutions and sincere devotion among the public may be true to some extent; but it must be recognised that the renaissance of the art in recent years is re-kindling the faith and devotion. The number of earnest students and connoisseurs of the art is increasing every day and if the proceedings of the Dance Seminar recently held by the Sangeet Natak Akademi be an index, the earnest labourers in the field are quite sufficient in number and capacity for the task ahead.

Choice of Subjects

The choice of the subjects selected for the articles is happy and calculated to give a complete view of the art. The first article tries to depict the spiritual background of Bharata Natyam. The subject is not an easy one to handle. We miss in it the clarity of thought and language that is necessary for

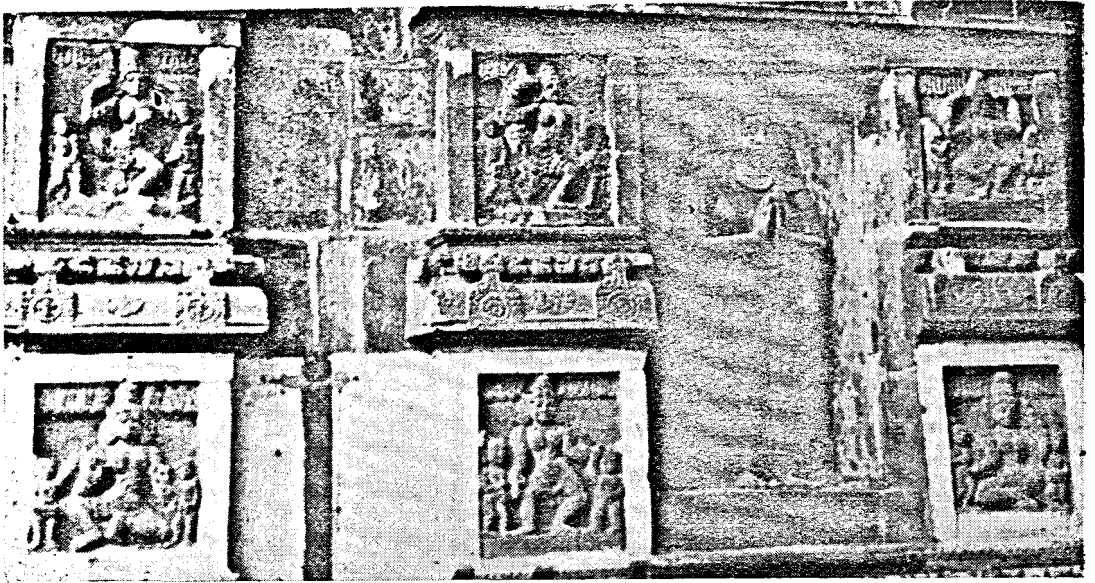
expounding the subject. Forgetting the narrow self which music and dance help us to achieve is the process by which the spiritual experience of merging into higher self takes place. This aspect has not been dealt with in the article. Deeper thought, wider study and closer analysis are required for doing justice to the subject.

In the article on 'the historical survey of Bharata Natyam, we find a detailed account the discouragement of the art in the first two decades of this century and of its renaissance. But we have to search in vain for the history of the art from the days of Bharata's Classic. We have plenty of material by way of dance manuals of several periods, references in general literature, sculpture and frescoes, not to mention lingering echoes of different old *sampradayas* in several parts of the country for writing a good history of the art. Scholars of versatility and an intuitive historic perception have to undertake the task, and let us hope that the task will soon be undertaken.

Musical Content

The article on 'the musical content of Bharata Natyam' deals with the special features of the songs intended for Bharata Natyam. Except for one or two mis-statements, and a fondness for coining new names without scientific basis or significance or traditional sanction, the article is informative. It is difficult to subscribe to the statement of the article that "with the exception of the *Padam* and the *Pada Varna*, the music of the other dance-forms may not have any high musical value. A parallel is sought to be established between *Ghana*, *Naya* and *Desya* types of *ragas* and the three-fold items in a concert of Bharata Natyam — *Nritta*, *Nritya* and *Abhinaya*". In the first place *Nritya* and *Abhinaya* are not two different items of the art for there is no *Nritya* without *Abhinaya*. The third item which we are familiar with is *Natya* which means drama as distinguished from *Nritya*, which is mere *Angika Abhinaya*. Secondly, it is difficult to find any parallel between the three types of *ragas* which belong to the same species and have the same sort of content and the different species of the art of dance having different contents.

The surprising term called *gana rasa* is sought to be added to the technology of music. In the first place, the term does not bring out the idea sought to be conveyed. In music, we



Dance panels from the Chidambaram Temple

have different emotional appeals and we are familiar with the nine *rasas* or the broad divisions into which they are divided. The article evidently refers to musical pieces or efforts in which there is no clear or unequivocal emotional appeal. This is due to the jumble of different emotional appeals or an indistinctness in the emotional appeals. Similarly, the term *Natya Rasa* newly coined in this article is another surprise. There is no *Natya* without a distinct emotional appeal. No purpose is served by coining new terms without scientific or traditional basis. A little more regard for the good sense of readers will cure this fondness for coining such new terms.

Karanas at Chidambaram

The articles (1) on 'The 108 Karanas at Chidambaram' and on (2) 'Hastas' and (3) on 'Adavus' are well illustrated with plates and description, and pre-eminently fulfil the purpose of the Dance Number. There are a few slips and differences of *sampradaya* in the *hastamudras*, but they are easily corrected or explained. The general account of the 108 *Karanas* so far as the Chidambaram temple is concerned is full.

The photographs of the poses that are

printed in the course of the article and on the cover page of the issue are more life-like than the blocks in the Gaekwad edition of *Natya Sastra*. One wishes that all the photographs of the 108 *Karanas* with the *slokas* underneath had been printed. It is hoped that this would be done in the future issues of the journal. A similar account, with photographs of the 81 out of the 108 *Karanas* in Tanjore temple has also to be added to complete the *Karanas* available in sculpture.

Permanent Contribution

The articles on Bhagavata Mela and Kuchipudi forms of *Natya* give a very detailed description of the two allied types of traditional dance-drama and will be found useful by every student of the art.

The rest of the issue contains a rich collection of photographs of poses of different dance pieces, of different artists and portraits of dance teachers and contemporary artists and will satisfy the interest of the general reader.

This issue is a permanent contribution to the study of the art and has to find a place in the library of every student of the art.