

UNIT 2 BHARATA NATYAM

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

Today not only in India but all over the world Bharata Natyam has become extremely popular. Just as *sitaar, tabla and veena* instantly evoke the picture of India, Bharata Natyam transports people all over the world to the land of exquisite and majestic temples, ennobling music which has roots in the distant past, beautiful silks and gorgeous jewellery and above all, dancing of the indescribable beauties.

If you are a student of Bharatanatyam, then we can presume that you have come totally under the spell of this beautiful dance style. You wish to learn it in all its aspects and acquire mastery over it. If you are a student of some other dance style, it would be very beneficial for you to compare and contrast your dance style with Bharatanatyam, because it is one of the most meticulously built and correctly codified dance practices which has now become universal in its appeal. Even if you are a student of some other art form you could not have escaped the charm and beauty of Bharatanatyam.

Bharatanatyam is the glorious dance style from the southern state of Tamil Nadu. As we have observed an art is an integral part of any culture or civilisation reflecting the environmental conditions and social ethos of the group of people who practice it. Bharata Natyam does precisely this. It is one of the most glorious products of the ancient Dravidian culture. One finds references dating from the first few centuries of the Christian era to a very vigorous system of dance and music being practiced at the highest professional level in the Dravida country.

Today's Bharatanatyam is the end product of this great tradition. It had several names like **Chinna Melam, Sadir, Daasiaattam** etc. It was also called **Bharatam** but not after sage Bharata; rather the term is derived from three essential facets of the style – **Bha** from *bhaava* (mental state or emotion), **Ra** from *raaga* (musical mode – melody) and **Ta** from *taala* (time measure).



Bharatanatyam dancer in a Nritta pose

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- Identify a Bharatanatyam dancer by the erect and upright position of the torso, the elegant bearing of the dancer and the precise and crisp footwork;
- Admire and respect the dancer's total dedication to the spiritual element of the dance performance; and
- Be acquainted with the artistic elements in the ancient Tamil Culture.

2.3 APPRECIATION OF BHARATA NATYAM

The earliest reference to systematised dance, referred to as **kuttu**, is to be found in the great Tamil epic **Silappadikaram**, written in all probability in the 3rd or 4th century A.D. **Silappadikaram** is a treatise on the three fold classification of the Tamil language – literary Tamil, music and drama. It is however clear that this epic comes later than the Natyashastra since it shows an awareness of the Natyashastraic practices.

It appears that earlier, in the pre-historic era, dances were performed to propitiate deities or for ritualistic purpose. But by the times of the **Silappadikaram**, it appears, dances were performed for secular purposes also. This appears to be due to the influence

of the Natyashastra.

The **Silappadikaram** is a literal storehouse on the position and practice of dance and music of that era. Writing about dance “*guru*” the epic specifies.

... (the *guru*) could effectively combine the different dancing poses with the *vilakku* songs. He had a clear knowledge of the established rules of the eleven modes of the body movement and limb movement – *aadal* of the song *paattu*. Of the resounding instruments – drums *kottu* as also of the dance *aadal* of gestures – *paadal* which were of eight kinds, of the measure beats *paani* (this was either the hands or mental discs – *taalam*s) and of time beats *tukka*. During the course of the performance of the dancing art, composed of the foregoing elements, he knew when only one hand had to be used for gesticulation – *pindi* and when both the hands had to be used – *pinaiyaal*. He also knew when hands had to be used for exhibiting actions alone – *tolirkai*, and when for graceful effect alone *elirkai*.

There are specifications for the music teacher, the *mridangist*, the composer of songs, the flutist, the player of the *yaazh* (forerunner of the *veenaa*) etc.

2.4 BRIEF HISTORY OF BHARATA NATYAM

Like the other classical dance styles it is impossible to ascertain the origins of what we call Bharata Natyam today. Its roots are certainly to be found in the ancient Dravida or Tamil culture.

The Dravidian culture flourished in the deep south of the country from the pre-historic times. It was a very well defined culture when the Aryans came into our country via the north-western passes from central Asia.

In the **Silappadikaram** one finds references to the eleven *kuttus* – the eleven types of dances of which many were performed by different deities on specific occasions. By this time the Hindu deities had found their way into the Tamil religious ethos, though their names were very much Tamil. The **Silappadikaram** also mentions forms like the *avinay kuttu* (abhinaya) the *shaanti kuttu* etc. At this time the entire south had also come under their influence of Jainism and many Jain doctrines came to influence their social life.

The Tamil literature has had a very glorious existence of which the epic **Silappadikaram** and its twin **Manimekhala** are two shining examples. At this juncture dance appears to be secular in nature.

The Tamil literature appears to be going hand in hand with the changing and developing religious beliefs. As Shaivism and Vaishnavism took deep roots in the Tamil culture there arose exquisite literature in Tamil in these two sects. At the same time, by about the 4th, 5th centuries A.D., there arose exquisite secular literature chief amongst them being the **Aham** and **Puram** poems collected in anthologies (collective books). It may be surmised that these poems exerted great influence on the entire Tamil culture. Their secular base then gradually converted into the religious base resulting in spiritual poems.

It is in the reign of the Chola emperors of Tanjavur (9th century to 11th century A.D.) that the Tamil culture rose to great heights. It gave forth great architecture in the form of magnificent temples adorned with beautiful, classical sculptures many of which portrayed dance poses/sequences. Very notably the temples at Chidambaram, Tanjavur, Kambakonam have been adorned with tall *gopurams* (entrance gates) with exquisite dance sculptures specifically based on the tenets of the **Natyashastra**. The Chola kings

were great patrons of dance and music and employed a large number of *devadasis* to serve at their great temples. These *devadasis* were highly proficient musicians and dancers who performed in the temples singing the praise of the deity.

This tradition of royal patronage came down the centuries where different dynasties very regularly patronised the arts. Songs and dance were popular court entertainment and the kings gave patronage to *gurus* and performers.

We cannot very definitely say that what they danced was Bharata Natyam as we knew it today but it is certain that the system that we find in the **Silappadikaram** continued and flourished albeit with changes as the time passed and needs of the society changed.

It is in the 18th century that we have a very definite concretization of the dance practice in terms of its **Form, Content and Repertoire** in the court of the **Maratha** rulers of Tanjavur. These Maratha Kings were great patrons of the arts but more importantly, were themselves poets and musicians of great merit. It was in **King Serfoji's** court that the present day repertoire of Bharata Natyam was finalised by the famous **Tanjore Quartet** (four brothers) **Chinnayya, Ponnayya, Vadivelu and Shivanandam**.

With the advent of the British rule everything Indian was tabooed. Specially the Indian way of life was very heavily attacked. The British considered Indian dance to be vulgar and so banned dancing from being performed in the temples. With the British becoming the rulers the local kings and zamindars lost their wealth and power. Consequently their patronage for the arts ceased. The arts, without any financial and social support, started deteriorating. Even the educated Indians, under the British influence, started shunning Indian music and dance.

Then the independence movement started. In Tamil Nadu there arose two saviours for Bharata Natyam. Hitherto it was the devout *devadasis* who had somehow or the other kept this magnificent tradition alive. But now, these two individuals, Shri. Krishna Iyer and Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale, who had been anguished by the down fall of this art started very vigorous efforts to restore it to its original glorious status. All this happened almost 80 ago. But today their efforts and sacrifices have borne great results and Bharata Natyam now rests on the highest pinnacle of success and glory.

2.5 THE SPIRITUAL BASE OF BHARATA NATYAM

Traditionally it was the proud privilege of the dancing girl “*Devadasi*” (servant of God) to practice this glorious art. The roots of this system can be traced all over the country but the system appears to be of a special significance in the south.

Indian history provides many references to the practice of dedicating girls to the dancing tradition – the girls being referred to as “*ganikaa*” in the North and “*kuttiyaar* or *virali*” in the South. The Natyashastra tradition mentions that “*naatya*” (inclusive of dance and music) is to be performed for the entertainment of the king and then his populace. In the Indian tradition God is the greatest king and thus he also should be entertained and what better way can there be but “*naatya*”? Thus right through the history of formal worship in India there has been a community of *devadasis* attached to temples and one of the principal functions of these *devadasis* was to dance before the deity of the concerned temple. Each region of the country had their own temples as well as cultural ethos.

These *devadasis* were servants of God but they were also great scholars, experts of their art and despite adverse conditions, it is they and their great spirit which have perpetuated this art.

Bharata Natyam is designed as a votive offering to be placed at the feet of the Lord. As such it must be remembered that most of the items are either religio-philosophical in nature or art in the form of straight forward *bhakti* lyrics in praise of the glory of the Lord. But it also has items which are secular in nature. It is intended as a solo presentation but may occasionally have more than one dancer.

2.6 TECHNIQUE

Technically Bharata Natyam has a judicious blend of both *nritta* and *nritya*.

2.6.1 *Nritta*

The basic and fundamental unit of *nritta* is the *adavu*. It is composed of an opening or basic posture which is followed by a combination of steps and movements. Each *adavu* has its own rhythmic syllables to which it is danced; the syllables are called *sollus*. In fact many of the *adavus* are named after their individual *sollus*.

There are about 18 such basic *adavus*, each having within itself sub varieties. There are some such families which have 8 to 9 varieties resulting in a fabulous storehouse of *nritta* patterns arrived at by adding all the varieties from each family.

The *adavus* are actually used in the items by creating pure *nritta* patterns by linking them in combinations. A passage created by linking the *adavus* is called a *jati* which has an intriguing pattern of rhythm. At the end of such a *jati*, are a special set of *adavus* called *teermaana adavus* which are to be performed thrice.

The Bharatanatyam technique lays a great stress on the very correct and well defined lines that the entire body specially the torso and the arms have to maintain. The erect and upright position of the torso, the elegant stance of the shoulders thrown back give it an angularity which is crisp and at the same time attractive.

2.6.2 *Nritya*

Nritya in Bharatanatyam of course uses the *rasas* laid down in the *Natyashastra*. These *rasas* are very skillfully employed to interpret the *saahitya* (songs). These lyrics (songs) are, by and large, selected from the writings of the South-Indian saint-poets and the Tanjore quartet. In the recent times distinguished musicians have enriched the Bharata Natyam *nritya* repertoire by penning lyrics which have different dimensions.

2.6.3 *Abhinayadarpana* and Bharatanatyam

So far as *Aangika abhinaya* is concerned Bharatanatyam style utilizes the **Abhinayadarpanam** of Nandikeshwara. In addition to the *angas* and *upaangas* and their codified movements, the *Abhinayadarpanam* also gives a third category of limbs the *pratyangas* which have been discussed earlier.

Here it should not be concluded that this text is used in its totality. There may be some movements which are not used in the Bharatanatyam technique but it must be remembered that the text is supposed to have been written may be in 10th century A.D.. Thus in the intervening years changes are bound to have taken place.

You must remember that whenever you feel a lack of a component in your technique you can definitely refer to **Abhinayadarpanam**.

2.7 MUSIC IN BHARATANATYAM

The musical mode is classical Carnatic with its elaborate *taala* system. The songs and lyrics for the *nritya* popularly called *abhinaya* items are, by and large, selected from

2.8 REPERTOIRE

1. *Alarippu* : This is the opening item which is a *nritta* item.

Note : *Alarippu* can be sometimes preceded by an item called *Todayamangalam* or *Pushpaanjali*. *Todayamangalam* is quite often than not followed by an item called “*Kautavam*”.

2. *Jatisvaram* : This again is a *nritta* item. It is a combination of *jatis* (string of *adavus*) danced to the *svaras* of a *raaga*.
3. *Shabdam* : A *nritya* item which makes use of the *saattvika abhinaya* for the first time in a recital. It is addressed to a deity and expresses spiritual love.
4. *Varnam* : An intricate and complex item which has a judicious blend of both *nritta* and *nritya*. It is usually addressed to a deity wherein *bhakti* for the Lord is expressed in terms of endearment. It has both *jatis* as well as *svaras* of the *raaga* employed. These are interspersed with lyrics as *saahitya*.
5. *Padam* : A pure *nritya* item. It is a devotional song depicting the spiritual love of a *bhakta* for his deity. It is in this item that deepest human emotions are depicted.
6. *Jaavali* : Yet another variety of *nritya* composition which is usually secular in character. It usually represent the love of a *naayikaa* (heroine) for the *naayaka* (hero).
7. *Tillaanaa* : A pure *nritta* item performed as the concluding offering in a Bharata Natyam recital.

2.9 SOME WELL KNOWN EXPONENTS AND PERFORMERS

Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale, Shri. K. Kalyanasunderam, Smt. Rajee Narayan, Smt. Kalanidhi Narayan, Shri. C. V. Chandrashekhar, Shri. Adyar K. Laxmanan, Smt. Saroja Vaidyanathan, Smt. Vyjayanthimala Bali, Dr. Padma Subramanyan, Smt. Chitra Vishvesvaran, Smt. Alarmel Valli, Smt. Malavika Sarukkai, Smt. Sucheta Chaphekar, Smt. Leela Samson.

2.10 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Fill in the blank spaces in the following statements using the words given below :

(integral, china Melam, votive, music, sarfoji, offering, civilisation, Literary Tamil, culture, Tanjore Quartet, product, Drama, Tamil, Sadir, Dasiaattam)

- a) An art is an _____ part of any _____ or _____ .
- b) Bharata Natyam is the _____ of the ancient _____ culture.
- c) Bharata Natyam was also known as _____, _____, _____.
- d) The Shilappadikaram is a treatise on the three fold classical of the Tamil language _____, _____ and _____ .

- e) The present day repertoire of Bharata Natyam was concretised in the court of king _____ by the _____.
 - f) Bharata Natyam is designed as a _____.
2. Write on the spiritual base of Bharata Natyam in four or five lines.
 3. Write on the Repertoire of Bharata Natyam.

Answers

1. a) integral , culture, civilisation.
b) product, Tamil
c) Chinna Melam, Sadir, Dasiattam
d) Literary Tamil, Music, drama
e) Sarfoji, Tanjore Quartet.
f) votive offering
2. Bharata Natyam is designed as a votive offering to be placed at the feet of the Lord. So most of the items reflect *bhakti* for the deity and sing the glory of the Lord. Traditionally it was the proud privilege of the dancing girl “Devadaasi” (servant of God) to practice this dance. In the Indian tradition God is the greatest king and so should be entertained by “*naaty*” just like his subjects.
3. The repertoire of Bharata Natyam is a judicious blend of both *nritta* and *nritya*. The repertoire has been standardised by the Tamil Quartet in the court of the Maratha ruler King Sarfoji of Tanjavur. This repertoire is universally followed by all *gurus* and performers.

The performance starts with the *Alarippu*; but many a times an item called *Todayamangalam* (*pushpaanjali*) is performed prior to *Alarippu*. Another option is to perform an item called *Kautvam* followed by *Alarippu*. *Alarippu* and *Todayamangalam* are *nritta* items. Next is the *Jastisvaram* which is also a *nritta* item. It is a combination of *jatis* and *svaras* of a *raaga*. The next *shabdam* is a *nritya* item usually addressed to a deity expressing spiritual love. *Varnam* is an intricate and complex item which has a judicious blend of both *nritta* and *nritya*. It depicts *bhakti* for a deity expressed in terms of endearment. *Padam* is a pure *nritya* item which is a devotional song depicting the spiritual love of a *bhakta* for his deity. *Jaavali* is another *nritya* item which can be secular in nature. It depicts the love of a *naayikaa* for *naayaka*. *Tillaanaa* is the concluding item of a Bharata Natyam recital. It is a pure *nritta* item.