

"Bharata Natyam"

The Famous Classical Dance of South India

Abstract

The classical dance is practiced in South India, Tamil Nadu, under the name of Bharata Natyam, and the centers where it is most active are Tanjore and Madras.

The present prescribed form which the Bharata Natyam is performed was set in this particular order about a century ago by the adepts and teachers (gurus) of the South, known as Nattuvanars. Among them may be mentioned illustrious names like Vadivelu Pillai, Chinniah, Ponniah and Sivanandam, and their revered guru Muttuswami Dikshitar, all of who were Sanskrit and Tamil Scholars and masters of music and the dance.

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Introduction

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Although Bharata Natyam is performed today in solo by women, it took many forms, such as the dance dramas of the Bhagavata Mela Natakas of Melatur (Tamil Nad), the Kuruvanji dance ballet, and the Navasandhi ritual dance of the temples.

Really, therefore, the Bharata Natyam embraces a wide and comprehensive system of classical dancing based on the Natya Sastra by Bharata Muni and the Abhinaya Dharpana by Nandikeshwara.

The word "Bharata" as used in this form of the classical dance, is believed to be composed of the first syllable of each of its Three Main Elements:

BHAV or **Mood.**
RAGA or **Melody, Song.**
TALA or **Rhythmic Timing**

Natyam means the combination of both dancing and acting.

The dance being composed of these three Elements commences with Nrta or pure dance movements to emphasise the importance of timing and rhythm. Timing is based on time measures, that is, beats of equal length.

The cymbal player and one Mridanga drum player keep the main basic timing or Talam' with its regular intervals of time beats. Another Mrindanga player is employed to play an intricate combination of drum syllables which are fitted into the main timing to give it pattern. These drum syllables correspond to word syllables which are recited or chanted by a musician. Each step that the dancer takes has to correspond with the syllable which is simultaneously played by the drummer and recited by the musician.

Grace, speed, versatility and complete mastery of the art are necessary to do full justice to technique such as this. And skilful team-work must be obtained all through between the drum player, the musician and the dancer.

In the Bharata Natyam, therefore, the dance technique of pure dance or Nrta consists of a number of Adavus or phrases of combinations of postures in which the body, waist, arm, hand, leg and foot, head and neck movements are done to various set dance syllable wordings. Like the Karana, the Adavu is the basic foundation and unit of dance step patterns and postured movements, each Adavu involving a basic pose or Sthanka. A combination of adavus makes what is known as a Adavujati. Some beautiful gestures and arm positions combine to ornament the general beauty of postures, and we find among these, the use of the classical hand gestures with the arms stretched forwards, sideways and bent in varying manner.

Dancers, however, generally learn about forty to seventy-two adavus, and then study the intricate dance techniques of pure dance and Abhinayam.

The Abhinayam comprises the interpretation of the classic Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu lyrics and songs, by gestures, facial expressions, postures and acting. These songs are either devotional like the Geetam, Sabdam and Kirtana, or love themes like the Padams or Javeli.

The dance moves in a very methodical manner. The movements of posture, arms, hands and rhythmic patterns of the feet, proceed gradually from simple to difficult and thence to very difficult techniques in set stages. Finally it ends with a dramatic finale, in which the feet move very swiftly, arms take various angles and lines, with the hands in varying gestures, the dancer finally making graceful circular movement of the arm over the head and bringing the arm downwards so that the hand points straight down in front of the feet. This finale is known as the Thirmana, and it not only lends a perfect climax to each series of movements in each stage of the dance, but is also often used most

effectively in between alternate short and long sequences of the dance. The Thirmana is usually repeated three times, and done in three speeds, each time the dancer moving faster.

Alarippu

The **Alarippu**, which is the first stage of the dance is not generally accompanied by music, but is danced to the first stage of the dance, is not generally accompanied by music, but is danced to the accompaniment of Sollu-kuttu or the rhythmic syllables recited by the singer. These are set to a particular time measure of Tisram (3 beats) or Misram (7 beats), played on the Mirdanga and cymbals.

The Alarippu is short and sweet, its rhythm is very beautiful. Dancers usually study at least two Alarippus, in which there are slight variations of movement and postures. The most popular timings are Tisram and Misram.

Jatisvaram

Following the Alarippu comes the Jatisvaram. Jatis are time measures, and Svaram is the musical notation. Streets laid on these two aspects time and musical score. It is danced stress to the accompaniment of Svara passages composed of Ragas.

At this stage, the background music, the timing and dance movements become highly technical. It is pure dance composition at its best with accompanying sequences of the scale and the timing elaborately combined.

Sabdam

Here, emphasis is on interpretation. This stage of the dance usually commences with a few pure dance movements that are very lovely, yet subtly different from what has gone previously, followed by a Thirmana. Then comes the rendering in gesture language and emotional acting, the explanation of a song or Sahitya which are devotional sentiments in lyrical verse form and are the text to be interpreted. A religious, heroic or philosophical theme based either on sacred legend or story, is interpreted, generally in a meter of seven beats.

Varnam

Comes after the Sabdam, and 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 should and true intentions of Bharata Natyam.

Padam

To soften the high pitch that the dance has now reached, the dancer glides into the Padams. These are finely chanted seven-line lyrical songs of mother love or romantic theme, in Tamil, Telugu or Sanskrit, as immortalized in the Classics, or telling of Gods and Goddesses in the Sringara Bhava or Mood of Love.

Tillana

(The final stage of the performance is Tillana or pure dance with statuesque postures, intricate rhythms and a complete unison between the technique and touches of emotional acting.

Conclusion

The music and song accompanying it are haunting, the melody repeated over and over again, its alluringly rhythms marked by liveliness.