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Bharathanatyam: - A Journey Through Different Ages

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ABSTRACT

Natya is one of the chief amusement for people of varying tastes. It is the nature of an Indian classical form that it remains ancient and unchangeable at the preliminary stage, continues to grow, then decline, and modify again and acquire changes every day. Even though it remains silent in occasions or to be precise for a period it doesn't leave from the blood of our people. The existence or progress of the art form depends on religious beliefs, social circumstances and royal patronage in ancient time, but now it is about more than money, fame etc even though the interest and talent of the artists lies within. Through this work I try to peep over the changes Bharathanatyam has acquired, the importance of the art form etc.

INTRODUCTION

Bharathanatyam is one of the classical dances of India which is the most widely accepted form all over the world. Bharathanatyam literally means dance of Bharatha (India). It combines Bhava, Raga and thala and may hence the name Bha_ra_tha _natyam. It is a virile, forceful dance. The beauty of the dance lies in its strength. The form is known for its elegance, grace and magnificence. In Bharathanatyam the text followed is Abhinaya Darpana. There are different banis practiced throughout the country. It combines the aspects of nritta, nritya and natya. The language of dance is technical, systematic, orderly yet flexible. It is a medium for self realisation and spiritual attainment. Through learning the art forms one comes across the culture, puranas, music, thala etc. It transforms the inner wheel of the artist. We may say watching a full recital gives the effect of a devotee visiting a temple.

HISTORY

The history of Bharathanatyam over a period of 2000 years can be constructed through the two important Tamil Books- Silappathikaram and Manimeghalai of the sangam literature. We have evidences for dance in the pre historic and vedic period too. In Natyashastra we come across "dakshinaya" and also a generic type called the 'Ekaharya lasyanga'. In this form there is one actor playing many roles. The actor himself is the narrator, the whole idea is presented by the solo actor through chatur vidha abhinaya. The present Bharathanatyam may be traced back to this form. After 10th century this art form seems to have flourished in Tamil nadu receiving patronage from the Chola and pallava kings. Changes with accordance with time are inevitable for an art form provided there is no dilution in the quality of the art form.

Early the art form was practiced by devadasis who did dasi attam. They were well versed in Sanskrit and other languages, music, theory, etc. They were considered very pious. Later it degraded during the British reign and again the art form gained life through various social reformers and art lovers.

1.1 Pre Historic Period

The period comprises the evidence found in the cave paintings, engraving, the evidence of Mohenjodaro and Harappa, literary evidence from Vedas, Upanishads and epics. Even before the usage of verbal language men needed to convey their feelings, messages instructions etc. This might have been through actions and movements. It can be traced out as the first dance. As civilisation emerged the art form may have become, more systematized and codified. Hence it emerged as a part of the society and civilization.

1.2 Vedic Period

Dancers are referred to in the earliest known text of Aryans: - The Rig Veda. It mentions the dance of Indra, apsaras. Vedic texts even shows that social and group dancing was prevalent and descriptions are available as to what it was like. The chants were sung to rhythm and body gestures were used in Vedas. This may be the foundation for abhinaya. Dance was used in secular and religious functions. We get mention in the epics; Ramayana for the first time perhaps mention the technique of dance.

1.3 SANGAM PERIOD

Tolkappiam of the 3rd century BC provides ample guidance to what dance and music was in the sangam period. The art form reached the zenith during the region of Cholas, Pallavas, Pandyas. First century AD witnessed powerful kings like Karikala Chola, Nedunisezhian, Pandya king at Madurai. During the Naiks rule the art form received tremendous momentum and revivment. Govinda Deekshithar wrote sangeetha sudha, Venkata makhi the chathurdandi Prakashika during this time. Kshetrappa, the Tanjore Quartet the Trinity all contributed to the art form during this time. Cholas, Nayakas and Marattas had Tanjore as a seat of royal power and art patronage.

Art grew healthily during these periods. Refinement progressed without affecting the basic forms. This phenomenon can be described "A change in continuity". A clear picture emerges from the Sangam Classic –Silappathikaram. This creation mixes the northern sanskritic traditions with the local Tamil Traditions.

1.4 MARATHAS

During the time of Marattas like Ekoji, Sahaji II, Serfoji I the art form still got patronage. Thulaja I wrote Sangeetha Saramritham. He strengthened the Maharastrian tradition of bhajans and Kirthans. Shivakama Sundari Parinayam is his creation in the Yakshagana style. Sanskrit nataka titled Raja ranjana vidya vilasa nataka.

1.5 ART AFTER THE MARATTAS

Historical evidence suggests moral degeneration on the part of the artists, which became more pronounced during this transition from temple to the theatre which had its reflections even very late. Many groups demanded and gained success in the abolition of Devadasi system. Due to this many precious art forms even disappeared from the scenario. Smt Rukmini Devi Arundale, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Kamala Lakshman of Madaras etc have contributed to the revivment of the art form. Institutions like Darpana and Kalakshetra were developed. Nattuvanars formulated, systematized and choreographed in different style and called them after their village names. Thus evolved the banis like Vahzavoor bani, Tanjore bani, Pandanallur bani etc.. The base is the same, the style and mode of rendering varies. E Krishna Iyer is yet another personality who founded two institutions in Madras. It was he who coined the term "Bharathanatyam". He single handedly fought against the antinautich movement.

2. TECHNIQUE

We have basic steps almost same in all banis. Foot contact in the most important. Weight is equally distributed if entire foot touches the ground. "Thattu" is stamping of this flat foot. Raising heels is the second method. Still another way is there in which toes are raised. The concept of Nritha, Nritya, is used Aramandi is the most relevant position. Samapada and Muzhumandi are the other positions. Feet are turned sideways. Knees are bent; arms are either stretched out or firmly placed on the waist. Line forms are given ample importance. Adavu the basic unit is followed rigorously, only its catogories may differ. Adavus chained together forms Korvais. Theermanams is literally used for the rhythmic syllables spoken by the nattuvanar as he plays on the cymbals. Adavus, Korvai, Theermanams are set to the beats of a tala. Theermanams are set to sollukettu. Choreographer Uday Sankar was a pioneer in presenting a new form of dance named oriental dance. The dance was set first and then music was composed for the piece. It was not even guided by any

stylized pattern .Instrumental music was used to highlight the effect of the dance. Geometrical designs are not relevant. labour and machinery was his master piece. Many experiments are still in progress in this variety of dance but Classical dance in India is solid with a traditional background .Even though changes happen the essence sustains. Now dance drama has gained popularity over solo recitals .They must be on a particular theme.

3. REPETOIRE

The present form of Bharathanatyam was codified by the Thanjore Quartette. The dramatic representation can be viewed in Bhagavatha mela. It pictures dance as both solo and group while devadasi tradition is dominantly of solo dance.

3.1 Alarippu

A recital opens with alarippu. It is a pure nritya piece. It is an invocatory number .Beginning with sama pada posture we proceed to muzhumandi postures ending with a theermanam. It can be done in all jathis and thalam. Pushpanjali may be done before alarippu. It is mentioned as ranga pooja. Ranga pooja means worship of the stage. Puspanjali means offering of flowers. It is also an obeisance to the God.

3.2 Jathiswaram

Another pure nritya piece which starts with a small jathi ;swaras filled with beautifully woven korvais. It comprises pallavi, anu pallavi and charanam. It shows the expertise of the artist in nritya and rhythmic sequences.

3.3 Sabdam

Abhinaya is started in this piece. It is set to misra chappu thalam and in ragamalika. It praises a diety or a king. Stanzas are divided by small sollukettus or jathis .

3.4 Pada Varnam

Nritya piece; rendered after the artist proves her nritya and natya through alarippu, Jathiswaram and shabdam. Varnam gives the artist the total or fullest scope to show his or her expertise over the art form .He has the freedom to improvise on a given theme .The varnam starts with a thrikala jathi ,woven in three tempos. It is complex and highly elaborate. There is a great synchronization between the nattuvanar, dancer and the percussionist. Varnam comprises pallavi, Anupallavi, Muthayi swaram sahithyam, Ethukettu sahityam . Each stanza of the pallavi anupallavi etc ends with a thattu mettu adavu. Jathis and abhinaya portion is separated with an “aruthi”.

The theme of the sahitya may either be devotional, sringara or in praise of a patron. Slow music like in padas give ample space for detailed abhinaya .This brings out the beauty of the raga used too. Padavarnams are used in dance .To decorate the varnams; ragamalika ,thalamalika and raga tala malika. Earlier varnams were done for more than an hour. It has been now shortened to thirty minutes. Varnams are mostly in the sringara rasa,virahotkanditha nayika is seen in most of the main varnams. The heroine yearns for the nayaka that is the jeevathma for the paramathma. Varnam may also be in praise of god, goddess and kings etc. Pada varnams are more popular. Tana varnams were said to be used earlier .The dancer uses the technique of padartha vinyasa ad sachari bhavas to the fullest .The dancer needs to know the lyrics ,meanings music, thala and even the subtle nuances of the sahitya .This requires maturity in this filed.

3.5 Padam

This is a pure abhinaya piece. it is usually a sringara rasa piece, Devotional love etc. It is usually done in the chowka kaala.The abhinaya is so deep and has to explore even the minute aspects of lyrics. An artist should be that mature to bring naturality and life to the abhinaya. Padhartha and sanchari bhavas are used. Jeevathma paramathma concept is so relevant in padams. The main theme is the nayika search for the reunion with nayaka which represent an individuals’ search for the paramathma. Padams are mainly composed in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada.

3.6 Javali

This may be described as a different type of padam. Pure bhakthi is rare or is overcome by erotic mood. We see that Sringara dominates. It is much more lighter than padam. Javali is written in many colloquial language rather than strictly adhered to telugu, tamil or kannada. Dominant emotion is interpreted through the nayika or nayaka alone.

3.7 Thillana

The recital concludes with a Nritta piece. There is a small sahityam at the end but it is not relevant. It is usually done in fast tempo. It starts with mei adavu, complicated korvais are done. The last korvai is done with peria adavu or the usi adavu. It is followed by anupallavi and a sahithyam. It ends with a swaram. The sahityam may be in praise of a god, Goddess, King, Temple etc.

This forms the characteristic sequences of a recital till the fifties. Now more items are added. Keerthanams, ashtapadi etc. Recital ends with a mangalam or slokam.

4. COSTUME

In olden times dancers used to wear a saree. In the contemporary period tight fitting pyjama, blouse and dhavani is used. Frill lengthening down the knees are used. It beautifies the aramandi posture. The saree tip is ornamented with golden border with colors mixed.

5. ORNAMENTS

Hair is beautifully plaited and kunjalam is worn. Head is ornamented with sun moon chutti, matti ear rings followed by bangles, waist belt, chain necklace, nose pins, finger rings. Over the years large transformations are seen in costume and ornaments.

6. FACE MAKE UP

If in older times people used naturally made cosmetics like yellow turmeric, Kum Kum, handmade kajal etc. now makeup plays a key role of appearance of the artists on the stage. It is given equal importance as in learning and presenting dance. Products are easily available in the markets.

CONCLUSION

Bharathanatyam is perhaps one of the oldest classical dance forms

It evolved through civilization and culture

It is deep rooted in culture but dynamics and undergoes transformation

Bharatha wrote the natyaveda taking essence from other four Vedas. Abhinaya darpana is used as reference text in Bharathanatyam.

Like our way of living, practices change, the art form too is changing, maybe during writing this journal changes may be happening outside. Changes are inevitable and should be welcomed but the skeleton of the art form must not be touched.

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