Chapter II.

THE BHARATA NATYAM SCHOOL

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As has been said earlier, there are four main schools of classical dance in India. Besides these four main schools, there are a few other minor varieties of classical dance. We shall first take up the study of the main four schools of Indian dance one by one.

THE BHARATA NATYA: ITS ORIGIN

All the four main schools owe their origin to Bharata's Nātya Śāstra and are regarded as equally ancient. Traditionally the Bharata Nātyam school comes first. E. Krishna Iyer opines that Bharata Nātyam was the oldest, the best developed and the most popular national dance-art of India.

The Bharata Nātya style originated in the South, where it was known as Dassiattam.

1. Supra, Preface, Page ii.


   Also see: Shanti Swarup, The Arts and Crafts of India and Pakistan, Page 5.
It was also called Attam Adal or Kuttu. The old Tamil word for Bharata Nāṭyam is Koothu or Attam, meaning a play. For a considerably long time this school of dance was equated with the original Bharata Nāṭya and this confusion led many writers to emphasize, more than once, the difference between the original Bharata Nāṭya and the Bharata Nāṭya School of dance as practised in the South. Kay Ambrose observes "It should be borne in mind that the Bharata Nāṭyasāstra, whilst governing the whole of the application of the classical dances of India, should not be confused with Bharata Nāṭya, which last is the term used to describe the ancient secular dance of Tanjore." Faubion Bowers also concludes that Bharata Nāṭya originated in the South. Ram Gopal, one of the famous exponents of this school, has given a more definite opinion and has thus observed: "The term Bharata Nāṭyam, in its restricted sense, applies to the dance-technique evolved in the south of India and practised in the temples of Śiva. The exact birth place of Bharata Nāṭyam is controversial."

2. 'Classical Dances and Costumes of India', page 31.
3. 'The Dance in India', page 133.
4. 'Indian Dancing', page 54-55.
Whatever controversies there might be with regard to the time and location of the origin of this school and with regard to its exact connection with the original Bharata Nātyaśāstra, it cannot be doubted that this school of dance developed and flourished in the South, particularly around Madras and Tanjore.

The word Dassiattam for the Bharata Nātyaśāstra suggests that this dance was practised by Devadāsis and for a considerable period this style of dancing was confined to temples. This custom probably became quite common in the 6th Century A.D., when most of the Purānas, containing references to it, seem to have been composed. The connection of devadāsis with ancient temple was not confined to the South. In several other regions also this practice was well-known.

The connection between religion and dance is deep in India and no school of dancing can claim a purely secular origin. In the Hindu mythology, Lord Śiva is supposed to have created this world by setting its first rhythm in motion by dance. Lord Śiva is the creator of tānḍava. Pārvati, Lord Śiva's consort, is said to have originated the lāśya, the female or the

or the delicate style of dancing. Bharata Nātya, as practised in the South today, has emphasized the lāṣya aspect of dance.

Elements of Bharata Nātyam

The entire performance of Bharata Nātyam consists of the following items in sequel: -

I. ALARIIPPU
II. JATISWARAM
III. SABDAM
IV. VARNAM
V. PADAM
VI. TILLĀNA

I. ALARIIPPU :-

The preamble of Bharata Nātyam is Alarippu, i.e., 'flowering out'. In Alarippu a dancer offers salutation to the gods, to the learned in the audience and to the ordinary public, the dancer's hands, with palms together, are held above the head, in front of the face or of the chest. Thus Alarippu starts as a salutation to pay homage to the deity to whom the dance is offered. It also includes salutation in turn to the members of the audience. It is known as flowering out in the sense that the dancer exposes the self, before the dance is offered to the deity. The actual movement consists in keeping the feet together, with body inclined slightly forward and the
dancer raises the hands jointly together over the head. This movement is accompanied by a rhythmic and harmonious movement of neck and eyes. The dancer moves forward and backward always facing the deity or the audience. This item is accompanied with music of rhythmic syllables. The meaning of the syllables uttered in the accompaniment of Alarippu is not clear to many authors or even to the teacher. According to Faubion Bowers, the word has no significance and he places Alarippu in the category of 'Nritta', which affords no scope for expressive interpretation (abhinaya). Beryl de Zoete has thus expressed his views: "It is an example of pure dance, but of course not without expression, ....... Alarippu corresponds to the statement of a theme before the variations begin." According to Dr. Raghavan, no definite meaning can be found in these words but every teacher of the Bharata Nātyam begins with it. Whatever might be the interpretation, there is and always can be found an expression in this item, as it is the beginning of the actual dance which is to follow. Alarippu is an obeisance to Lord Śiva without which no performance may begin.

1. The Dance in India, page 49-50.
2. The Other Mind, A Study of Dance in South India, page 171.
According to E. Krishna Iyer "Alarippu is the shortest and simplest item of Bharata Nātyam. It is primarily intended to be an invocatory piece for doing obeisance to the gods and the assembly of onlookers. It is also said to mean the flowering or opening of the body and limbs to get prepared to execute more difficult pieces to be taken up subsequently." It is of three to five minutes duration.

II. JĀTISWARA:-

In the performance of Bharata Nātyam after Alarippu comes the Jatiswaram. It consists in rhythmic time-measure movements to the accompaniment of music. Jatis are known as time-measures. Jatiswaram is a complex and a little more complicated movement as compared to Alarippu. Generally time measures are taken as 3, 5, 7, 9 and obviously it requires a great skill to master these combinations. In Jatiswaram Nrītta plays an important role and it is a difficult item of Nrītta, which is performed with the tune of a combination of Swara passages in a particular rāga and tāla. It is a more complicated item of Bharata Nātyam. If it is performed without proper accompaniment of music and emotions, it may amount to mere gymnasium.

1. MARG, A Note on the Repertory from Alarippu to Tillana, Vol. X, No. 4, page 41.
The combination of the sound effects imparts beauty to this dance.

It would be apt to point out here that in Jatiswaram the emphasis and part played by adavu and timānā is again an evidence of the emotional part of this item. However, Mohan Khokar is of the view that "Adavus belong to the realm of Nṛṛta and hence there can be no meaning in the movements and actions." Adavu may be described as the interpretation by feet, hands and mood of the rhythmic phrase which is called Jati. Adavu can thus be called Jati in action and the Jati is the tongue of Adavu. The timānā, which consists of a series of Adavus, comes right at the end of Jatiswaram and it is normally repeated thrice. It is significant for its highly technical and brilliant quality. An Adavu may be called a 'dance-unit' of Bharata Nāṭyam. Here we have a short rhythmic sequence of co-ordinated movements of the body, the limbs, the head, hands and feet. The Adavu when combined together go to make Tillānā.

III. ŠABDAM :-

With this item the expressive core of Bharata

1. G. Venkatachalam, Dance in India, page 92.
Nātyam assumes prominence. Šabdam is the third item in the sequence. In Šabdam the Abhinaya begins to play an important role. As the word Šabdam suggests, it is a song in praise of the glory of a god or a king. In this item verses in praise of the deity are sung with a blending of pure dance. Thus both abhinaya and nṛtta combined together give this item the necessary form. K.V. Ramchandram is also of the opinion that Šabda is the name of a musical composition in which a king, hero or deity is greeted with addresses and epithets, glorifying him and ending with salutation. The main characteristic of this item lies in its high religious and devotional fervour.

In Šabdam the two hand-palms are put up in front of the chest, then raised to the forehead, palms out towards the audience. This greeting was known as Salamrei (salutation to you). Faubion Bowers thinks that this style of salutation was introduced in Šabdam to please the Muslim envoys before whom the dance was performed and who took the greetings personally. In Šabdam the abhinaya is introduced and it is only at the stage of Varnam and Padam that we

1. Faubion Bowers, The Dance in India, (1953), page 52.
3. The Dance in India, (1953), page 52.
find that expressive element is the sole element which is prominent. In theory, in this item only the deity is saluted and normally we find that Bharata Nāṭyaṃ is performed usually before lord Śiva and lord Krisṇa. As has been said earlier, this item brings element of abhinaya into the programme and thus it is very brief in scope. The detailed abhinaya comes at the stage of Padam.

IV. VARNAM :-

The next item Varnam can be said to be the most interesting and complex item of Bharata Nāṭyaṃ. It is a very elaborate dance-composition, giving full scope for pure dance and mime, which alternate in dazzling succession.

E. Krishna Iyer observes; "Varnam is the central and the most elaborate and difficult item of a Bharata Nāṭyaṃ programme. It is the most scholarly piece-de-resistance, seeking to bring out the best in pure dance and abhinaya in the first movements; and then with a combination of both. It will be testing the training, capacity, skill and stamina of the dancer to a great extent. The word Varnam was also known as Swarajati, which signifies that in this

1. Beryl-de-Zoete, The Other Mind, A Study of Dance in South India, (1953), page 173. Also see Ram Gopal's, Indian Dancing, page 65.

item the melody dominates over rhythmic movements. In Varnam the dance is accompanied with music and the music combined with abhinaya is significant. In Varnam many rhythmic dance sequences (Nṛitta) are interspersed with long passages of songs in interpretation. Thus we find that in this item there are both Nṛitta and Nṛitya alternatively. "Varna culminates the preceding items of programme. In Varnam the highest point of development is reached, starting with initial dance-movements and invocation to god in Alarippu, indicating briefly the rhythmic and melodic resources of the dance and music in Jatisvara and inaugurating the expressive and descriptive aspects in Sabdam and setting a stage for a dance combining all aspects. Consequently Varnam combines in it exquisite melody, complex dance patterns and subtle interpretation."

The song which is accompanied in Varnam is of great significance. Generally it consists of three parts. Firstly, Pallavi, which consists of one line opening statement expressing a mood; secondly Anupallavi which consists of a two line explanation of the initial mood and lastly Charana which consists of a four line recapitulation of the entire mood developed in the song. In Charanas pure dancing i.e., Nṛitta is mixed. The songs in this item are

1. Faubion Bowers, The Dance in India, (1953x), page 53.
the loveliest in the entire programme and the abhinaya is of a very high order. Generally the themes of the song are: the longing of a lady for her lover, description of his beauty, remembrance of their past happiness, despondency and hope. The Charana part of this item is full of rich movements and if it is performed by an expert dancer it forms one of the most beautiful dance compositions. It is as delightful to the heart, as it is fascinating to the eyes. The concluding part of the Varnam consists in a tempo of very fast and quick movements of feet in a complex pattern.

V. PADAM:

The ending of Varnam in a great speed and tempo necessitates the beginning of the next item, Padam, as a slow and quiet display of nritya abhinaya. In this item formerly the dancer used to sing a line of the song to the accompaniment of the expressions. But now, usually, the musician who accompanies in the whole dance performance sings one particular line of a song and repeats it several times. The dancer gives expression to that line and dance

1. G. Venkatachalam, Dance in India, page 93. Also see Manjulika Bhadhury and Santosh Chatterjee, The Art of Hindu Dance, page 229-230.

2. See Shanti Swarup, The Arts and Crafts of India, and Pakistan, page 5.
in a slow tempo. E. Krishna Iyer has observed: "after the
exactingly strenuous physical and mental exercise involved
in the Varna, an interval of a few minutes is usually
given. The subsequent half of the programme will, in the
main, be occupied by smooth sailing and leisurely
exposition of abhinaya. This abhinaya or pada is ordinarily
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a love lyric." Each repetition carries a different
expression and each expression gives a new interpretation
to the meaning of that line. For example, in Telugu pada
the singer repeats the line 'Samiki sari evvare' (who is
equal to my Lord). Now as the singer repeats this line
again and again, the dancer gives expression to the qualities
of the lord by expressing His beauty, generosity, heroism
etc. Normally one line of pada gives rise to as many as
twenty different interpretations. The whole song in Pada
again consists of Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charana, as it is
in Varnam. The main theme of Pallavi is known as Sathayi
Bhava and then in Anupallavi the expression is called as
'Sanchari Bhava'. Usually the dancer assumes the role of
Radha and dances for lord Krishna or Gopala. In charana we
find that there is repetition of various interpretation of
the main central theme of Pallavi.

In this item the main theme of dance is of the

1. A Note on the Repertoire from Alarippu to Tillana,
MARG, Vol. X, No. 4, (September 1957), page 42.
'Sringara Rasa' and contains all its aspects, viz., of longing, hesitation, fear, forgiveness, love in separation, wilful rebuff etc. The subject matter of all Padas is the relationship between the lover and the beloved and it is basically erotic. But these expressions are interwoven with devotional songs and religious voluptuousness. In the present day there is a tendency to take away this item from its divine spirit and emphasize more the secular sexuality in order to please the audience. The dance was originally to be performed before the deity. Now it is performed before the audience and this makes a lot of difference. In this connection Bowers remarks: "the Bharata Natya artist who carries her own unabashed and definitive reactions to a Pada does a disservice and violates Bharata's rules of art." Beryl de Zoete has remarked that the exploitation by the dancers of the sensuous images tends to be offensive because it takes away Padam from its religious intention.

In Padam, songs are sung and usually Sringar Rasa predominates in these songs. The songs of Jayadeva, Purandar Das, Ksetrajna, Muthutandavar and Bharathi are usually popular in Padam.

VI. TILLĀṆĀ :-

To avoid monotony to the audience by a number of successive padas, TILLĀṆĀ which is an item of pure dance (Nṛtta) is introduced in between the Padas. The TILLĀṆĀ is considered to be the most beautiful piece of dance with a number of tempting poses as are seen in fine specimens of ancient sculpture, portraying graceful movements. It consists of very intricate foot-work and is generally the concluding item in the Bharata Nātyam. It is also accompanied with music and the performance requires a great deal of skill on the part of the dancer. This item has been borrowed from northern India where its counterpart is known as 'Tarānā', a form of song. Tarānā was adopted by the Karnātak music as TILLĀṆĀ. It was incorporated as a dance form in the Bharata Nāṭya programme by the four late masters of the Ponniah Pillai family, who taught it to their descendants. Tillānā is a pure dance (Nṛtta). There are regular out-bursts of joyous smiles expressed through both lips and eyes, conveying an over-all mood of relaxation and pleasure through Nṛttas. Tillānā is similar to the opening item of Alarippu and exhibits all the technical resources of the dance. It is


3. Faubion Bowers, The Dance in India, (1953), page 60.
very exciting and tempting to the eyes and is expressive of bodily delight. Every part of the dancer's body, eyes, hands, neck, fingers and feet combine to present a dazzling sight. It, however, carries no interpretative meaning.

SLOKA :-

Occasionally, towards the end of Tillānā, there is a line in praise of god. It may be an after-thought and might have been added afterwards. Normally Bharata Nātya programme ends with Tillānā. But sometimes verses are drawn from old Sanskrit texts in which there is a line of praise to god and the dance ends immediately after the verse.

This a solo Bharata Nātya programme begins with Alarippu and ends with Tillānā or slokas. Apart from the solo performance it is found that in group dances too the Bharata Nāṭya technique has been employed in the South. A brief description of those group dances is therefore necessary.

DEVADĀSIS :-

The Bharata Nāṭya, as a temple dance, is not confined to lifeless temple statues. The dedication of the temple dancers and the devotion with which the nāṭya is practised, have given a life and meaning to this style of dance. When temples of Hindu gods came to be built and endowed on a magnificent scale, some people began to feel in course of time that there should be singing girls attached
to the shrines to play music on the occasion of different services and worships of the deity. The custom, however, had come into vogue by about the 3rd Century A.D. The preservation of the tradition of this style of dancing has produced a class of dancers known as Devadāsī, meaning thereby the servants of the deity for whose devotion they dance their whole life. Certain writers have tried to put forth a parallel between Devadāsī of India and similar female dancers found in ancient Egypt, Syria or Mesopotamia. 'The Egypt temples of Osins and Isis were crowded with dancing girls. At Corinth in Greece thousands of women used to dedicate themselves to Venus and sell their bodies for the benefit of the temple. The custom was prevalent among the Hebrews and Babylonions as well.' Faubion Bowers, on the other hand, has drawn a similarity of devotion between Devadāsī of temples and heavenly apsarās of mythology and has tried to show that the idea of 'Celestial dancers' is found in India, China and Cambodia. Whatever might be the


2. There are four kinds of devadāsī: - Devadāsī, Brahmadāsī Svantra and Sudradāsīkā. The first two occupy the status of a Ksatriya lady; the third enjoys the status of a dancing girl (vesi); and the last, that of a low caste (Hinajati). A synonym of Paricarka or a servant maid. Matsya Purāṇa 29, 17-23.


4. The Dance in India, page 19.
parallels found in different cultures of these Asian countries, the devotion and the spirit in which it is rendered in the temples of South is unique. Several inscriptions from South India prove the association of dancing girls with temple services from about the 9th Century A.D. When King Rajaraja built his famous temple at Tanjore in the 10th Century A.D., he deemed it necessary to provide for the temple service no less than 400 dancing girls, each one of whom was given a piece of land for her maintenance. The strictness with which its traditions are maintained in the temple is a clear proof and the main reason why this style of dancing has not undergone any appreciable change.

With the passage of time, the class of Devīdāsis and their status underwent a change. Instead of being looked as devotees to the deity they were looked as an ordinary stock of female dancers. Due to the other social factors, some writers tried to equate these Devīdāsis with a particular class of prostitutes. Whatever may be the


2. E. Krishna Iyer, MARG, Vol. X, No. 4, page 8. Abbe Dubois is of the view that in the 18th Century the status of Devadāsis had fallen to that of common prostitute. Dr. Shortt in his paper Dancing Girls of Southern India, also shared this view. See Beryl de Zoete The Other Mind, A Study of Dance in South India, page 163-165. Also see G. Venkatachalam, Dance in India, page 78.
malady as regards their social prestige and status at the present day, it need not be re-emphasized that Devadāsis represent the most devoted class of dancers. If due to some social factors, their due status is not given to them, it is a mis-interpretation of various social values. The high esteem in which these class of dancers were originally held in society can be ascertained by observing the custom among Kaikolan musicians of Coimbatore to send at least one girl from each family to this class of temple dancers.

BHAGVATAS:

To popular minds Bharata Nātyam today consists of Alarippu, Jatiswaram, Padam, Tillānā in this order. But this notion is not a broad-based one. As a matter of fact the Bharata Nātyam is a dance-technique and it assumes various forms. There are four main forms of Bharata Nātyam which are very popular (apart from several other variations). These are the Sadir Nātya, Kuravanjis, Bhagavata Melā Nātak and Kuchipudi.

The Bhagvatas are the male dancers performing dance-dramas in the technique of Bharata Nātya. The Bhagvatas like Devadāsis worshipped with the dance in the temple of South India. Dr. Raghavan has pointed out that as early as 1052 A.D. these Bhagvatas were found in South India. These dancers

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took narratives from old Sanskrit texts and danced them in the Bharata Nātya technique. These dance-dramas were based on the stories of the epics and the Puranas. In the Tanjore district they still observe this dance-drama during a temple festival. Such performances are known as Bhagavata Mela Natakam. Generally these dramas are danced throughout the night.

KURAVANJJI :-

This group of the dance-drama is also in the style of Bharata Nātya, but it is performed only by women. In the extreme South in the village Viralimalai this dance-drama is still performed by devadāsis on the Mahā-Sivaratri night. The female dancers, dressed like gipsies, perform this dance.

Apart from these two main group dances, the Bharata Nātyam technique is also applied to: (a) The lyrical solo Sadir Nātya of the Nattuva Mela; (b) The lighter Kuravanji ballet; (c) The Nav-Sandhi ritual dance and (d) The Kuchipudi of Andhra. Besides these four, there are many other forms of Bharata Nātyam, such as the Ahamargam, Chindu, Varikolam and Sokkam of the Tiruvotiyur temple, near Madras, the

Santhikuthu of Tiruvengaivoyal, the Suraguru Nātakam of Tirukazhikunram, the Thiru Nātakam of Pattamadai in the Tirunelveli district and the Rajarajeswari Nātakam of Tanjore. The Bharata Nātyam represents a vast and comprehensive generic system of classical Indian dancing. In the beginning the four types of Bharata Nātyam, viz. Sadir Nātya, Kuravanji, Kuchipudi and Bhagavata melā were all connected with Bhakti and were performed in temples only. Subsequently the former two begun to be used for secular purposes also. The Rajas who patronised the five arts developed a liking for flattery and got verses composed in their own praises. Thus the Sadir Nātya and Kuravanji which were performed mainly at Śiva temples with themes relating to lord Śiva were also turned into court dances. They were conducted by non-Brahmins.

The Kuchipudi and Bhagavata Melā were performed only at Viṣṇu temples with themes relating to Viṣṇu and were conducted exclusively by Brahmanas. It is a notable feature of modern school of Bharata Nātyam that teaching in this art is imparted by a family of Gurus.

One of the most adorned exponents of the Bharata Nātyam is Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai of Pandanallur. Other notable dance-gurus or Nattuvanars are Chokkalongam Pillai,

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Kubemath Pillai, Vidwan Muthukumara Koiland K.N.
Dandayuthapani Pillai. The four sons of Subharaya
Nattuvanars, Chinnayya Ponniah Sivanandam, Vadinelu had
been the famous Nattuvanar in Sarjoji's time (1798-1824).
Balā Saraswati is also the finest exponent specially of
Abhinaya in Bharata Nātyam in modern days. Rukhmini Devi
has also revived this dance, Ram Gopal as a male dancer
has proved that it is wrong to say that Bharata Nātyam is
suitable for females only but males can also perform it
and can surpass others. Shanta Rao, Kamla Laxman,
Mārinalini Sarabhai and Indrani Rehman are also notable
exponent dancers in Bharata Nātyam. They are well-versed
in the Sāstric exposition and they impart training in the
classical style. Their disciples and descendants are still
contributing to the teaching of this art.

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