

CLASSICAL INDIAN TEMPLE DANCE

A Compilation of Sastric Evidence, Scientific Research
and Personal Experience

by

Indira dasi – Classical Bharata Natyam Dancer

1984 – 2000

No part of this paper may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, by any means, including mechanical, electronic, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Indira Dasi, Donaustraat 159, 8226 LD Lelystad, The Netherlands
Phone: (31) 320 – 25 62 82 - E-mail: indira@scarlet.nl

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
The Origin of Drama	2
Three styles at the outset (origin of dance)	3
Svati and Narada assist Bharata	4
Characteristic features of the dramatic art	5
Adoration and floral offerings	6
Gist of the topics dealt with in the First Chapter	6
Natya-vatara (Incarnation of the Science of Dramatic Performance)	8
The sages curse the sons of Bharata	9
Nahusa invites divine artistes to the earth	10
Urvashi and the dramatic performance	10
Demonstration of dramatic art on earth	11
The greatness of Natya Sastra	11
Historical Background of Vedic Temple Dance	13
Indira-dasi's teachers	15
Bharata Natya worldwide	16
'Bharata Natya' by Balasarasvati devidasi	17
Alarippu	18
Sabda	18
Singing	20
Abhinaya	20
Gestures	21

CLASSICAL INDIAN TEMPLE DANCE

*yatho hastha sthatho drishti
yatho drishti sthatho mana
yatho mana sthatho bhava
yatho bhava sthatho rasa*

‘Where the hands are, go the eyes,
where the eyes are, goes the mind,
where the mind goes, is bhava,
where bhava is, manifests rasa.’

Introduction

“The *hastas* or hand gestures may be said to be the alphabet of the suggestive language of Bharata Natya [the performing art by Bharata Muni]. Many of these *mudras* are common to both the *Tantra Sastras* and Bharata Natya. *Tantra Sastra* is an arduous ordeal of religious disciplines meant to divinise the physical body in various ways, and here the *mudras* play an important part. The very fact that these same *mudras* occur in dancing alone bears testimony to the religious character of Bharata Natya. How these *mudras* acquire new meanings artistically in Bharata Natya is a subject which deserves study. Suffice it, if I point out a single example. The *mudra* of joining the tips of the thumb and the fore-finger is called *cin-mudra* in the religious scriptures, meaning the ‘Sign of Wisdom’. It is the Wisdom of realising the oneness of the individual soul (signified by the fore-finger) with the Supersoul (signified by the thumb). Now, the *cin-mudra* is accepted in this scriptural sense in dancing also. But see what new meaning it acquires in addition. It is the ‘Sign of Wisdom’ only when the palm is held in a graceful slant. The same *mudra* when the palm is held stiffly upright depicts the valour of the bowman who holds the arrow between the two fingertips. When, with the palm’s back to the audience’s view, the danseuse touches the mid-point of her eye-brows with this *mudra*, it conveys her putting of the mark of beauty, the *tilaka*. So the same *mudra* stands for three such entirely different concepts as spiritual wisdom, valour, and preparation for meeting her lover.”

(Srimati Balasarasvati devidasi, in *Quarterly, Journal of the National Centre for the Performing Arts*)

The Origin of Drama

Natya Sastra, Chapter One

(1) I bow to the grandfather of the world (Brahma) and the great lord Shiva and proceed to propound the *Natya Sastra* (the science of gesticulation and dance originally imparted by Brahma).

The plea of the sages

(2-5) Formerly, Atreya and other noble-souled sages with great control over their sense organs approached the righteous Bharata, the master of the science of drama and dance, at the time when they had a short respite from studies. The sage had just concluded his *japa* (repetition of holy names and utterance of prayers) and his sons, too, were with him. They asked him with great respect, - 'How did *Natya-Veda* on a par with the *srutis* originate? O *brahmana*, verily you had propounded it. For whom is that science intended? How many parts does it have? What is its magnitude and how are we to apply the same? Kindly bless us with the full details'.

Bharata replies

(6) On hearing the request of the sages Bharata began to explain the *Natya-Veda* thus.

(7) - "Let the origin of the *Natya-Veda* evolved by Brahma be heard by you all after being pure and attentive.

(8) O *brahmanas*, the *manvantara* [time of reign] of Svayambhuva [Manu] passed by and later on the Krita-*yuga* [Satya-*yuga*] of Vaisvasvata Manu, too, passed. Thereafter, when the Treta-*yuga* arrived people became victims of lust and covetousness, and were engaged in rustic rites and activities, overwhelmed by jealousy and deluded by wrath, experiencing happiness and misery. When the Jambudvipa was overrun by the *devas* [demigods], *dinavas*, *gandharvas* [celestial musicians], *yaksas* [gnomes], *raksasas* [malevolent geniuses] and great serpents [dragons] it became well established by the guardians of the worlds (i.e. Indra and others) when Mahendra [Siva] and other leading *devas* submitted Pitamaha [Brahma],

- 'We wish to have a pastime that shall simultaneously be visual as well as auditory.

(12) The Vedic discussion and practice cannot be proclaimed among those born of the *sudra* caste [laborer class]. Hence evolve another *Veda* common to all the *varnas* (castes).'

(13) After saying to them 'Let it be so' he dismissed the king of the *devas* [Siva]. Conversant with all principles he made use of the yogic power and recollected the four *Vedas*.

(14-16) The divine being resolved thus, - 'I shall evolve this *Veda* entitled *Natya-Veda* along with its historical basis. It shall be conducive to righteousness, production of wealth and diffusion of fame; it will be richly endowed with the topics dealt with in all the scriptural texts and it will demonstrate all types of arts and crafts.' Fully recalling to his mind all the *Vedas* after this resolution the holy lord created *Natya-Veda* born out of the four *Vedas* and their ancillaries.

(17) He took the *pathyam* (recitals) from the *Rg-Veda*; *gitam* (music) from the *Sama-Veda*; *abhinayas* (histrionic and gestural representation) from the *Yajur-Veda* and the *rasas* (sentiments) from the *Atharva-Veda*.

(18) In this manner the charmingly graceful *Natya-Veda* having its origin and connection with the *Vedas* and *Upavedas* was evolved by the noble-souled holy being Brahma.

(19-20) After evolving the *Natya-Veda*, the Creator instructed Indra as follows, - 'Historical legend has been got ready by me. Put it to practical use among the *suras* [godlike people]. May this *Natya-Veda* be passed on to those among them who are proficient, shrewd, mature and indefatigable'.

(21) On hearing what has been mentioned by Brahma, lord Sakra joined his palms in reverence, bowed down to Brahma and replied thus.

(22) - 'O divine Sir, the *devas* [demigods] are unworthy of the theoretical art because they are incapable of receiving, retaining, comprehending and putting it into practice.

(23) These are the sages conversant with the esoteric mystery of the *Vedas* and perfect in the observance of holy vows. They alone are capable of receiving, retaining and putting it into practical use.'

(24) On hearing the words of Sakra the lotus-born lord said to me [Bharata], - 'O sinless one, accompanied by your hundred sons you shall be the one putting this art to practical purpose'.

(25) Thus commanded I studied *Natya-Veda* from Pitamaha [Brahma] and taught it to my worthy sons along with its proper practical application.

(26-39) [Names of the hundred sons of Bharata]

(40) At the bidding of Brahma the hundred sons were engaged by me in such of the roles as suited them. My idea was to see that the people are benefited by it.

Three styles at the outset

(41-42) Everyone was engaged in that activity where he was found most suitable. O *brahmanas*, theatrical performance is based on the three *vrttis* (dramatic styles), viz. *bharati* (verbal utterance), *sattvati* (grand conception of the mind) and *arabhati*

(vigorous physical activity). Approaching and bowing down to him I submitted to Brahma about my activity.

(43) Then the leader of the *sikas* said to me, - ‘Add *kaisiki* (the charmingly graceful), too. O excellent *brahmana*, tell me the material befitting it’.

(44) I had been asked thus. The lord then was replied to by me, - ‘O holy Sir, may the material contributory to the performance of *kaisiki* be given to me.

(45-46) I have witnessed the *kaisiki* style during the dance of the blue-throated lord [Siva]. It consists of *mrdu-angaharas* (gentle gesticulation and movements of the limbs). *Rasa* (sentiment), *bhava* (psychic state) and *kriya* (activity) constitute its soul. The dress should be charmingly beautiful and the erotic sentiment [*srngara-rasa*] is its basis. It cannot be adequately portrayed by men. Except women, none can practise it properly.’

(47) Then the highly resplendent lord mentally created the celestial damsels who were extremely proficient in heightening the beauty and charm of the dramatic art and dance performance. He then gave them to me for the purpose of performance.

(48-50) [The names of the celestial damsels, *apsaras*]

Svati and Narada to assist Bharata

(51) Along with his disciples Svati was engaged by the self-born lord on the musical instruments, Narada and other *gandharvas* were engaged in the *natya-yoga* (activity of dance) and *gana-yoga* (in singing songs).

(52-53) After being convinced that this *bhava natya* (dramatic art and gesticulation of emotions) had been perfected because it is based on the *Vedas* and *Vedangas*, I approached the lord of the worlds (Brahma) accompanied by all my sons as well as Svati and Narada with joined palms for the purpose of demonstrating it, ‘The dramatic art has been acquired. Tell me, what shall I do?’

(54-55) On hearing these words, Pitamaha [Brahma] said, - ‘A grand occasion for the production of the play has arrived. Here the festival of the flag of Mahendra [Siva] is going on. May this *Natya-Veda* be produced here now’.

After the first performance the *devas* were delighted and gave the actors all sorts of requisite articles by way of gift. Brahma gave the *kamandalu* (water pot), Varuna gave a gold pot. Surya gave the umbrella; Siva fulfill of desires; Vahyu, the god of wind, gave a fan; Lord Visnu gave the royal throne and Kuvera a crown. Goddess Sarasvati bestowed the quality of audibility to what is to be seen. The remaining ones, viz. the *devas*, the *gandharvas*, the *yaksas*, *raksasas* and serpents in the assembly gave the sensitive feelings (*bhavas*), sentiments (*rasas*), good form and the activity of a powerful hero, all these intended to be portrayed based on different classes and possessing different qualities. Thus the performance portraying the slaughter of the *danavas* and the *daityas* began.

The *daityas* who had gatecrashed into the place of performance became excited and created havoc. After inspecting the playhouse Brahma said to all the *suras*, ‘This pavilion of dance and dramatic performance should be protected by you all taking up the responsibility of the different parts separately’. Brahma occupied the centre of the stage. Hence flowers are regularly scattered there before the performance starts.

(96) “[Lord Brahma said,] ‘May the actor who adopts the role of the *nayaka* (hero) be under the protection of Indra. Goddess Sarasvati shall protect the actress in the heroine’s role; Lord Omkara shall protect the *vidusaka*, the jester, and lord Siva shall protect the other characters in the play.’

Characteristic features of the dramatic art

(106) Being the representation of the [psychic] states of all the worlds it does not exclusively depict *daityas* or the gods.

(107) In it there is reference to *dharma* (piety), *artha* (wealth), peace, laughter, fighting and even slaughtering. Lovemaking, too, is depicted.

(108-109) The drama teaches the path of virtue to those who carry on their duty; the modes of love to those eager to get it fulfilled; it admonishes the uncivilized and the ill-natured ones; encourages self control of those who are amenable to discipline; makes the coward bold; the heroic ones are given more incentives; the men of poor intellect are enlightened and the wisdom of the learned is enhanced.

(110) The play entertains kings and the affluent ones, those who are sorrowing can receive solace therefrom; those who want to acquire wealth can understand ways and means thereof; and men who become agitated can derive composure and comfort from it.

(111-112) Imitation of the conduct of the people full of emotional fervour while depicting different situations is the main item in the type of drama evolved by me. All sorts of people whether good or bad have been represented in it, in order to accord encouragement, amusement and pleasure along with sound advice to everyone.

(113) Thus the play becomes an agent for educating people through the *bhavas* [psychic states] and *kriyas* [activities] found depicted therein, through the *rasas* [aesthetic tastes] expressed and implied.

(114-115) Persons of bad fortune can overcome their afflictions due to sorrow and surmount the fatigue of overwork and strain. Thereby, the art of drama is conducive to the observance of duty, acquisition of fame, long life, intellect, all-round good and learning in every aspect.

(116) No wise utterance, no means to achieve learning, no art or craft and no useful device is omitted or ignored in it.

(117-118) All the branches of learning find a place in the drama devised by me; different arts and actions converge therein. Hence, O *daityas* [‘bad guys’], do not become offended with the *suras* [‘good guys’] because imitation of everything taking place in the world of seven continents is an invariable feature of the dramatic art.

(119) Vedic anecdotes, stories from *Itihasas* and other sources are so utilized as to give pleasure to those who witness. This is the beauty of drama.

(120-121) A close imitation of the gods, *daityas*, kings, householders, etc. and their day-to-day activities represented through gestures, etc. is called drama.

Adoration and floral offerings

(122-123) Brahma then said to the gods, - ‘In the playhouse you must have adoration with offerings, performance of *homas* [type of fire sacrifice] with *mantras* and *japas* and *naivedyas* (food offerings) should consist of all types of foodstuffs hard and soft.

(124) There shall be a happy adoration of the world. The dramatic performance shall not be held without the stage adoration.

(125) He who conducts the dramatic performance without floral offerings and adoration will find his knowledge ineffective. He is likely to be reborn as a lower animal.

(126) Producers of plays of entertainment shall not conduct them without a previous offering of *pujas* [ritual bathing] to the presiding deities of the stage. This is on a par with the Vedic *yajna* [fire sacrifice].

(127) Whether it is the *nartaka* (dancer) or the *arthapati* (lord of wealth, sponsor), if he does not perform the *puja* himself or through others he is found to sustain loss as a result of the omission.

(128) Those who offer the adoration in accordance with conventions shall definitely attain splendid wealth and heavenly pleasures later.’

(129) Then Brahma and the gods said to me, - ‘May everything be thus. Offer the *puja* to the stage’.”

The gist of the topics dealt with in the First Chapter

The poet composing the literary piece for depiction in dance or drama should have the qualities and abilities of Brahma the Creator of the universe; the sponsor of the dramatic performance as well as the stage manager should be a man of organizing ability like Indra; the dramatic preceptor should be as versatile as Bharata himself; the sons of Bharata, viz. Sandilya and others should be the ideal for the ordinary actors; the celestial damsels for the women participants; the expert in charge of the musical instruments should have the vast knowledge, experience and ability of Svati; the officer in charge of the music section should be like Narada; it is the duty of the organizers of dramatic performance to accord all safeguard and means of security so that the performance

concludes without any disturbance; occasions of jubilation should be utilized for the performance of dramas and dance items; the people who visit the theatre should not have prejudices this way or that way; they must have the full aesthetic sense in order to rise above petty personal gains or losses. Finally *ranga puja* is an essential item in a society that meticulously follows the noble ideals of the Vedic seers of *mantras* and philosophers irrespective of the schools of *darsana* they may be specially interested in.

•

Natya-vatara

(Incarnation of the Science of Dramatic Performance)

Natya Sastra, Chapter Thirty Six

(1-6) The sages assembled were the following [among many others] Atreya, Vasistha, Pulastya, Angiras, Gautama, Agastya, Manu, Atmavan, Visva-Mitra, Brhaspati, Kasyapa, Dhruva, Durvasa, Markandeya, Raibhya, Valmiki Bhagavan, Narada [...] These delighted sages said these words to Bharata who knew everything, with eagerness.

(7-15) - ‘You have explained in detail the science of dramatic performance and we have fully comprehended it with concentration of the mind. But, O venerable Sir, we have certain doubts which you will kindly clarify. [...] Now do expediate exhaustively the mystery of drama. [...] what is not fully revealed to the laymen may kindly be explained. O excellent, twice born, mention the characteristics of the deity appearing in the *purvaranga* [worship of the stage]. Why is *ghosa* (sound of musical instruments) supposed to be relevant? [...] Which god is delighted thereby? The *sutra-dhara* [reciter] is performing cleaning rites again, why? O Sir, how did *natya* descend to the earth from the heaven (How your race became established in the name of *Nata*?).’ On hearing these words of these sages, the saintly Bharata spoke again to them for the purpose of clarifying the confidential matter. Bharata said,

(16-29) - ‘I shall explain, O *brahmanas* of excellent vows, what you have enquired regarding the *purvaranga*. Listen and understand. Earlier I had mentioned it as the thing that causes the destruction of obstacles. In continuation thereof the *purvaranga* had been described. The body is covered with the coat of mail for avoiding the attack of missiles. So also *homa* is performed to subdue the sin present in all. By worshipping gods with *japa*, *homa* adoration of the deities, utterance of words of blessings and eulogy I warded off the sins and destroyed obstacles - songs about their benign activities were sung. The instruments were played. The gods were delighted and they said, - ‘Your performance has pleased me. Since it pleases the people after propitiating the deities and the *asuras* [enemies of God] this performance shall henceforth be known as *nandi* (verse of benediction)’. If the *kakusvana* (emphetic mutter) in initiation and succession of vocal and instrumental music is auspiciously made it shall quell sins and be conducive to auspiciousness in the whole region. Neither the *raksasas* [malevolent geniuses] nor *vighnavinayakas* [creators of obstacles] will ever stay in the region covered by the sound of the instruments. On the utterance of *nandi* people hear it in the course of *avaha* (marriage ceremony at the groom’s place) and *vivaha* (the same at the bride’s place) & *yajna* performed for bringing in the prosperity of the being all types of violence are always destroyed. The *pathya* (passages recited), *natya*, *geya* (song) and *vaditra* (instrumental music) will be on a par with the exposition of the meanings of Vedic *mantras*. It has been heard factually from Sankara, the lord of the *devas*, that the sacred song and instrumental music are more conducive to the welfare than thousand of

holy ablutions and *japas*. No inauspicious thing will ever occur in that place where are dramatic performances and the auspicious sound of the instruments and vocal songs. It is for thus that I devised *purvaranga* ceremony consisting of the eulogy of the deities and verses and *mantras*.

(30-35) I shall now explain how dramatic performance happened to descend to the earth from the heaven. I have to mention everything without withholding anything. Bharata's sons offended the sages. All these sons of mine became naughty due to their mastery of the *Natya-Veda*. They began to practise in course of time an art that vexed all the people by means of *prahasanas* intended to provoke laughter. In an assembly of spectators they performed a play caricaturing the sages. It was not approved because it was unacceptable and replete with incked acts encouraging obscene and rustic activities. The poem was a ruthlessly inauspicious one.

The sages curse the sons of Bharata

(36-42) On hearing thus the sages became excessively furious and agitated. They spoke to the *bharatas* [main actors] as though they were burning all of them, - 'O *brahmanas*, enough of these pranks. It is not proper that we should be caricatured in this manner. What is this insult for? Why is this act disapproved by us? You have become maddened due to your professed knowledge. You have become rude and impolite. Hence this biased knowledge will get destroyed. You will become persons with activities similar to those of *sudras* after having left off all brahminical rites in the group and assembly of sages and *brahmanas* you are sure to become mere *sudras* [laborer class] taking up their activities. Those successors in your line will also become impure. The posterity of the all will turn out to be dancers worshipping other deities along with their womenfolk and sons'. On coming to know of the occurrence of this curse on my sons, the gods became worried. They rushed to the sages.

Gods plead on behalf of the sons of Bharata

(43-54) The *devas* with Indra as their head averred, - 'A great calamity has happened now. This science of dramatic performance is doomed. The songs said, - "This will not perish, but everything also will transpire in the manner uttered by us".'

Bharata's sons approach the father

On hearing the words of the sages of fiery brilliance my sons became bewildered and wished to kill themselves. They came to me and said, - 'We have been utterly destroyed by you. As a result of the deficiency of drama we have been converted into persons with *sudra* behaviour and activity'.

Bharata consoles them

By way of assuaging their grief, Bharata said, - 'O sinless ones, do not be grief stricken. This arrangement has been caused by *krshnta* (fate) in regard to us. The words of those sages will never go in vain or be untrue. Thus consoled by me avert your minds from the thought of self-immolation. You know fully well that the *nrtya* (dramatic) science

has been initially propounded and set in motion by Brahma himself. By demonstrating the same, give instruction therein to the disciples and others. Dramatic art has been evolved and set in practice with great difficulty. Let it not be ruined. Actually it has a great basis. It is highly meritorious. It has originated from the *Vedas*, their ancillary *angas* [branches] and their further subdivisions. Impart unto the celestial damsels this *natya*, explained by me on the basis of what has been heard by me and thereafter perform atonement rites’.

Nahusa invites divine artistes to the earth

(52-63) As time elapsed an earthly king named Nahusa obtained the lordship of the divine kingdom thanks to his political acumen, intelligence and exploit. After attaining divine prosperity he administered the same duly. He witnessed the dramatic performance and the musical programme of the *gandharvas* and so pondered thus, - ‘How can the performance of drama demonstrated thus by the *devas* be held in my houses?’

With palms joined in reverence the king said to the *devas* for the sake of performance thereof, - ‘Let this drama of the *apsaras* [celestial damsels] be performed in our abode, too’.

Gods reject

He was duly given a reply by the *devas* with Brhaspati as their leader.

‘There cannot be an association of the divine damsels with human beings here. Since your highness is the lord of the heaven what is beneficial and befitting must be mentioned by us. May the *acaryas* [spiritual masters] go there. After going there let them carry out what is beneficial to you.’

Nahusa pleads to Bharata

The king pleaded to him with palms joined in reverence, - ‘O venerable Sir, I wish that this dramatic art should be established on the earth. Earlier it has been assured to me that your service as instructor is possible. O excellent *brahmana*, now it has been manifestly obtained from your presence.

Urvashi and the dramatic performance

In the mansion of my grandfather (Pururavas) the performance of a drama based on the composition of my grandfather had been demonstrated by Urvashi before the inmates of the harem [Urvashi is the topmost *apsara* and friend of lord Siva’s wife, Parvati. Urvashi descended on the earth by marrying one of Krsna’s cupid-like sons.] When she vanished, the king (my grandfather) died of sheer madness and the inmates harem, too, died. So this art got lost. We wish that this esteemed art should be manifested on the earth again. It shall be conducive to auspiciousness at the rites of the *yajnas* performed on different lunar days, plays comprising of many characters shall be produced in my abode with the graceful movements of women. They will add to your renown.’

Bharata concedes

I said to king Nahusa, - 'Let it be so'. My sons were called together along with the *devas* [demigods]. They were consolingly told thus by me. 'This king Nahusa requests me with palms joined in reverence that you all should go to the earth in a body in order to perform the dramatic compositions. Once the drama is performed there I shall see that the curse upon you, too, is ended. You will no longer be despicable unto the kings and the *brahmanas*. Go therefore to the earth and perform the art duly on the earth. I cannot say nay to the importunity of the king. Lord Brahma has already said that we and the noble king Nahusa will achieve fulfilment through authoritative instructions. What remains further to be related will be narrated by Kohala in the *Uttara-tantra* (the supplementary treatise) including the demonstration, mnemonic verses and proper derivations of terms used. As an instrument of pastime this treatise has been established by me in the heaven through the collaboration of the celestial damsels and the sages Svati and Narada.'

Demonstration of the dramatic art on the earth

Then, O twice-born ones, they descended to the earth. In the abode of Nahusa they fixed programmes of the woman in due order. My sons procreated through human bodies many sons and fixed many other programmes with diverse themes. After begetting sons and arranging dramatic performances duly my sons returned to the heaven with the permission of Brahma. Thus, evidently due to a curse the dramatic art was brought into vogue on the earth and the future race of *bharatas* [actors] was set in motion.

(75-83) By Kohala and others along with Vatsya, Sundilya and Dhurtila this *sastra* was adopted and furthered. As man they stayed there for some time and promoted the *sastra* that increased the intellect of human beings. This *sastra* dealing with the activities of all the three worlds can be considered a model for all other *sastras*.

The greatness of Natya Sastra

This *sastra* with its practical application has been uttered by the self-born lord Brahma. It is meritorious, sacred and destructive of sins. He who listens to this, he who performs this and witnesses it with attention shall attain that goal which is reputed to be the goal of the Vedic scholars, that goal of those who perform *yajnas* and the goal of those who make gifts befittingly. Of all charitable and pious rites this has been mentioned as the producer of great benefits. Indeed, the gift of a visual art is praised more than all other gifts. When worshipped with scents, unguents and garlands, gods do not get as much pleasure as with the performance of dramas. The man who perfectly looks after the arts of music and dance attains the meritorious goal along with brahminical sages. In connection with the dramatic performance we have described many other sastric rites. If any thing is left unsaid it should be understood by people conversant with practices imitating the usage in the world. Let the earth be full of greenery. Let it be free from ailments. Let there be peace of cows and *brahmanas*. Let the king rule the entire earth, *Natya Sastra* concluded."

The Natya Sastra of Bharatamuni, translated into English by a Board of Scholars, Raga Nrtya Series No. 2. Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi – India.

•

Historical Background of Vedic Temple Dance

Although the performing arts existed on earth since Treta-yuga in an oral tradition through the agency of his sons, Bharata Muni systematized and recorded a variety of sciences, like literature, medicine, music, dance and drama, only 200 BC. His treatise on the performing arts is called *Natya Sastra*.

Medieval Hinduism, between 600 and 1565, can be divided in three periods. In the first stage the Indo-Aryan Brahminical civilization of North-India allied with the Tamil-Dravidian culture of South-India in a mutual attempt to revolve the influences of the Jains and Buddhists. This cooperation was established during the reign of the Pallavas and the Pandyas between 550 and 850.

The second stage of Medieval Hinduism comprises the reign of the Cholas between 850 and 1279 characterized by wealth and territorial expansion which brought great prosperity to the temple communities in general. Religiosity and devotion flourished in poetry, which was performed according to indigenous traditions in South-India. The majestic rock temple of Lord Nataraja (the dancing Siva) in Chidambaram was further excavated and progressively enriched with sculptures and ornaments.

The last period of Medieval Hinduism was inaugurated by the invasion of Muslim rulers towards the South of India. To cope with the threat of total subordination three allied states created a considerable defense against the invaders. This Imperium was called after their metropole, Vijayanagara, and lasted from 1336 until 1565. In the first half of this period the music was developed. In the second half Vaisnava kings came to rule the Southern states and Vaisnavism was proclaimed to be the state-religion.

Interesting to know, that Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu journeyed South-India approximately 1510. In almost every temple the *murtis* of lord Siva were replaced by Visnu-Venkatesvara (Tirupati) and Sri Ranganatha (Srirangam). Court life became glorious under the worship of Sri Rama and Sri Krsna. Music and dance art also experienced a revolution. Their themes of fight and heraldry characteristic of the Sivite temple culture were taken over by the *madhurya-bhakti* of Sri Krsna, the devotion of erotic sweetness or *srngara-rasa*.

The *devadasis* (servants of God)

The duty of the temple dancer (*deva-dasi*) was to protect the king against malevolent influences from the external world by her ritual expertise. Furthermore, she was just an ornament to his court. The *devadasis* were economically, artistically and religiously exchangeable by the temple communities and the kings. The female artistes engaged by these *brahmanas* and kings for the cultivation of the dance art attained the top of their artistry during this period. They danced in front of the *murtis* in processions and others performed *abhinaya* (mime) to the music. These girls were called *visnu-dasis* (servants of God), *raja-dasis* (servants of the king) and *katumurai* (those who offered the water

pot on the altar). This is the period in which the *karnatic* music system was developed and in which Telugu was the national language of South-India.

The end of Medieval Hinduism coincides with the fall of the Vijayanagara Imperium in 1565 by which the Hinduistic territory shrank further southwards. Three courts attained independence and from their preceding rulers they inherited the duty to defend the Hindu culture. They were Madurai, Tanjore and Gingee. The kings of these states decided to spend their resources meant for military defense to the renovation of temples, the cultivation of religion and the fine arts, instead. The three states became cultural centers attracting musicians, artistic leaders and the intelligentsia from all over India.

The period of cultural and devotional advancement lies between 1565 and 1856. In the dance art two main styles can now be distinguished, the *nrtta* [technique] and the *nrtya* [meaning]: the pure dance technique with an emphasis on aesthetism, rhythms and forms – and the mime in the expression of epic or histrionic events, respectively. In the latter the *bhavas*, psychic states or spiritual emotions have been developed. This form is called *catir* and *dasi-attam* [*dasi* means servant of God; *attam* means elevated, high].

Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu, who was inspired by Sri Ramananda Raya in their discussions on *gopi-bhava* and *vraja-bhava*, exemplified these highest spiritual emotions when they met in South-India. It was Lord Caitanya who bestowed humankind with the attainment of the pure spiritual *raganuga-bhakti* (spontaneous love) in *madhurya-rasa* (jugal love) for the first time in history. Ramananda Raya in South India educated two *devadasis* in the art of *bhavas*. Ramananda Raya is Sri Visakha Devi in Goloka-Vrindavana.

This is the period in which the repertoire of the *devadasi* developed into a full program, as it is performed on stage today. This traditional recital consists of several prayers, glorifications, flower offering, introductory dance, technical dances, story-telling dance, virtuous love dance, devotional love dance, lullaby, the final technical master piece of ultimate speed and rhythm, a last prayer and the traditional conclusion. Such a traditional recital is called *catir keccari*. This is also the repertoire of the student who performs her *arankerram*, first programme on stage by which she is initiated in the dance art as a performer and teacher and as the wife of lord Nataraja, the god of dance.

Since all of the artistic and religious culture had been dependent on the wealthy kings of Tanjore (Tanjavu), these traditions fell apart soon after the annexation of South-India by the British in 1856. ‘The aristocratic values of the art, the devotion and the age-old tradition were lost. Merchandizing, raids after patronage by individuals and aggressive publicity became prominent, instead’, concludes S.C. Kersenboom in *Nityasumangali*. This led to a final degradation of the *devadasis* who often were purchased as prostitutes. Soon the girls were addressed as ‘nautch girls’. Heavily influenced by the British the ‘Anti-Nautch Act’ [‘Devadasi Act’] launched by the Indian Government terminated the brahminical occupation of the *devadasis* on November 11th, 1947.

The occupation of *devadasi* being the last position of woman on the brahminical platform was definitely expelled from the temple communities; male priests took over their altar duties and also many of the female roles in dance dramas on stage.

Except for the pastimes of Lord Caitanya, much of the above-mentioned scientific knowledge about the history of the *devadasis* in South India has been found in *Nityasumangali, De Devadasi-traditie In Zuid-India*, dissertation, S.C. Kersenboom Ph.D., Motilal Banarsidass, 1987, 1998.

•

Indira-dasi's teachers (guru-parampara)

In the last period of the Golden Age of Tanjore between 1800 and 1850 four brothers called the **Tanjore Quartette** took the rehabilitation of the temple dance at hand and contributed a great deal to its revival in advance. Two of their grand-children, Ponniah Pillai and Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai made the authentic *catir* suitable to the mundane stage. This endeavor was coordinated by the foundation of the Kalaksetra Academy of Fine Arts in Madras, 1920. On stage the dance can be watched by a multitude of spectators sitting in front of the danseuse as it is performed today.

The tiny village Pandanallur in Tanjore produced the gracious **Pandanallur** style taught by another descendant of the Tanjore Quartette **Vidvan Kitappa Pillai**. Two of the main characteristics of this style are the deep sitting postures which give the stature of the danseuse an elegant, bent silhouette; secondly, the Pandanallur performs on three levels: ground-work; sitting, standing postures and dancing in the middle region; jumping features, high en low.

Vidvan Kitappa Pillai educated **Srimati Rajamani** at an early age. She was seven years old when she performed her *arankerram*, the initiation as a dancer and the first performance before connoisseurs. In her youth she journeyed the South of India in the 'Ram Gopal Company'. Later, she directed her own 'Abhinaya Academy' in Bombay for fifteen years. In the seventies she performed in Europe and started to give classes in Germany, later in Holland. Indira met her when she once performed at the University of Nijmegen with her first Dutch student, **Liesbeth Bennink**. Indira took classes from 'Raji didi' and learned the basics of Bharata Natyam from her and Liesbeth. After an interval due to the cultivation and practice of *krsna-bhakti* in the temples of Europe and India, Indira finished her last two years of dance education under guidance of Rajamani's second student, **Guru Srimati Madhuri Jagmohan**.

Indira became a specialized dancer of *krsna-padams* in India. She found a professional dancer in Bombay, **Srimati Chandan Kanchan** and **Master Madanmohan** a brahmin in the renounced order; furthermore she was taught by **Jyoltsana**, a teacher of **Bharata Kalaksetra Academy** in Madras. In that way it took ten years of research, study and spiritual realization before she performed her *arankerram*, in 1995, accompanied by an assembly of singers and musicians from India and the United Kingdom.

Bharata Natyam worldwide

In 1920 Kalaksetra, the sophisticated Academy of Fine Arts, was founded at Madras by the Vaisnavite Srimati Rukmini Devi Arundale, Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, Muthukumara Pillai and Gauri Amma. One of the greatest Indian dancers and the last authentic *devadasi* Srimati Balasarasvati was often invited to cooperate in their attempts to revive the classical temple dance and to promote it worldwide. They started with one student. Today the Academy's fame is worldwide.

Actually, the masters of Kalaksetra established the temple dance called *catir* (also *sadir*) under its modern name '**Bharata Natyam**', called after Bharata Muni. Later, the son of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, as the prime minister of India added the personal name of Bharata to the Academy, as well. Its official name is 'Bharata Kalaksetra Academy of Fine Arts'.



Bharata Natya

The following excerpts are from the articles by Smt. Balasarasvati d.d., the last authentic *devadasi* and one of the greatest dancers of India. We can offer no better tribute to her than to ponder over her concepts of Bharata Natya as expressed in her own words published in *Quarterly*, Journal of the National Centre of Performing Arts, Bombay, 1982.

‘To create the most perfect realization of *rasa* (aesthetic taste) in a performance, all elements must be in balance. Although *tala* (rhythm) provides a wonderfully strong backbone, it is undoubtedly *raga-bhava* (spiritual emotion) which evokes this *rasa* in all its varying shades and infinite variety. The rhythmic forms and its mould should be such as to augment the *raga-bhava*. The more the *raga-bhava*, the more does the *abhinaya* (facial expression of consciousness) shine. We should never forget that in deriving *bhava-raga-tala* from the syllables of the word **Bha-ra-ta**, there is an underlying concept of the equality of these three elements.’

‘The masters have created separately compositions especially suited for the dance. The hundreds of songs useful for music-concerts are of a different kind. Apart from these, the masters had separated the dance-music; we should inquire into their idea in doing so. Their main ideas are (1) the *raga* and *tala* should stand inter-twined; (2) the *raga* and *bhava* should go hand in hand in *abhinaya*; (3) the *raga* and the words of the song should mingle together in the *abhinaya*.

‘Songs suited to concert-singing afford no scope for the full creative unfolding of *abhinaya*. This is my experience. *Padas* (divine love songs) and *pada-varnas* (virtuous love songs) are indeed the jewels of dance-music. The masters of dance have so set their creations that the sequences involving strenuous physical movements alternate with relaxed passages of *abhinaya* (bodily and facial expression). Similarly between the *pada-varna* and the *thillana* (technical masterpiece), they placed *padas* for quiet *abhinaya*. *Natya-rasikas* (lovers of the dance) may see this arrangement of fast and slow tempos alternating, affording a quickening and relaxation following each other. The students of dance who are to come up in the future should acquire an equal mastery of the twin arts of music and dance, understand the subtle aspects of both and abide by the underlying principles of the art as it had been developed by our ancestors over the centuries.’

‘It is the stream of *sringara* (divine jugal love) that swells into the mighty river of the lover-beloved songs of the Vaisnava and Saiva saints, the *astapadis* of Jayadeva and the compositions of Ksetrajna. In Bharata Natya, too, when it comes to *abhinaya*, *sringara* has been the dominant mood. [...] The *sringara* we experience in Bharata Natya is never carnal; never, never. For those who have yielded themselves to its discipline with total dedication, dance like music is the practice of the Presence; it cannot be merely the body’s rapture.’

‘Bharata Natya is an art which consecrates the body which is considered to be in itself of no value. The *yogi* by controlling his breath and by modifying his body acquires the halo of sanctity. Even so, the dancer, who dissolves her identity in rhythm and music, makes her body an instrument, at least for the duration of the dance, for the experience and expression of the spirit.’

‘I believe that the traditional order of the Bharata-*natya* recital viz., *alarippu*, *jathisvara*, *sabda*, *varna*, *padas*, *thillana* and the *sloka* is the correct sequence in the practice of this art, which is an artistic *yoga*, for revealing the spiritual through the corporeal.’

Alarippu

‘The greatness of this traditional concert-pattern will be apparent even from a purely aesthetic point of view. In the beginning, *alarippu* [*ala-* is flower; *-rippu* is small; *alarippu* means budding flower], which is based on rhythm alone, brings out the special charm of pure dance. The movements of *alarippu* relax the dancer’s body and thereby her mind, loosen and coordinate her limbs and prepare her for the dance. Rhythm has a rare capacity to concentrate. *Alarippu* is most valuable in freeing the dancer from distraction and making her single-minded.’

Jathisvara

‘The joy of pure rhythm in *alarippu* is followed by *jathisvara* where there is the added joy of melody. Melody, without word or syllable, has a special power to unite us with our being. In *jathisvara*, melody and movement come together.’ [*Jathi* is foot-work; *svara* is melody]

Sabda

‘Then comes the *sabda*. It is here that compositions, with words and meanings, which enable the expression of the myriad moods of Bharata Natya are introduced. The Bharata-*natya* recital is structured like a great temple: we enter through the *gopuram* (outer hall) of *alarippu*, cross the *ardhamandapam* (half-way hall) of *jathisvara*, then the *mandapa* (great hall) of *sabda*, and enter the holy precinct of the Deity in the *varna*.’ [*Sabda* means ‘verbal testimony’. In the *sabda* one *gopi*, girlfriend of Radha, testifies to the naughty activities of Krsna in his childhood pastimes.]

Varna

‘This is the place, the space, which gives the dancer expansive scope to revel in the rhythm, moods and music of the dance. The *varna* is the continuum which gives ever-expanding room to the dancer to delight in her self-fulfillment, by providing the fullest scope to her own creativity as well as to the tradition of the art.’

Pada

‘The *padas* now follow. In dancing to the *padas*, one experiences the containment, cool and quiet, of entering the sanctum from its external precinct. The expanse and brilliance

of the outer corridors disappear in the dark inner sanctum; and rhythmic virtuositities of the *varna* yield to the soul-stirring music and *abhinaya* of the *pada*. Dancing to the *pada* is akin to the juncture when the cascading lights of worship are withdrawn and the drum beats die down to the simple and solemn chanting of sacred verses in the closeness of God.’

Thillana

‘Then, the *thillana* breaks into movement like the final burning of camphor accompanied by a measure of din and bustle.’

Mangala

‘In conclusion, the devotee takes to her heart the god she has so far glorified outside; and the dancer completes the traditional order by dancing to a simple devotional verse.’

‘At first, mere metre (*alarippu*); then, melody and metre (*jathisvara*); continuing with music, meaning and metre (*sabda*); its expansion in the centrepiece of the *varna*; thereafter, music and meaning without metre (*pada*); in variation of this, melody and metre (*thillana*); in contrast to the pure rhythmical beginning, a non-metrical song (*sloka*) at the end. We see a most wonderful completeness and symmetry in this art. Surely the traditional votaries of our music and dance would not wish us to take any liberties with this sequence.’

‘The greatest blessing of Bharata Natya is its ability to control the mind. Most of us are incapable of single-minded contemplation even when actions are abandoned. On the other hand, in Bharata Natya actions are not avoided; there is much to do but it is the harmony of various actions that results in the concentration we seek. The burden of action is forgotten in the pleasant charm of the art. The feet keeping to time, hands expressing gesture, the eye following the hand with expression, the ear listening to the dance master’s music, and the dancer’s own singing – by harmonising these five elements the mind achieves concentration and attains clarity in the very richness of participation.’

‘The inner feeling of the dancer is the sixth sense which harnesses these five mental and mechanical elements to create the experience and enjoyment of beauty. It is the spark which gives the dancer her sense of spiritual freedom in the midst of the constraints and discipline of the dance. The *yogi* achieves serenity through concentration that comes from discipline. The dancer brings together her feet, hands, eyes, ears and singing into a fusion which transforms the serenity of the *yogi* into a torrent of beauty. The spectator, who is absorbed in intently watching this, has his mind freed of distractions and feels a great sense of clarity. In their shared involvement, the dancer and the spectator are both released from the weight of worldly life, and experience the divine joy of the art with a sense of total freedom.’

Singing

‘Another notable feature of Bharata Natya is that the songs are vocally rendered by the artiste and the background musician. It is not dancing just to the tune of instrumental music, but dancing to the words set to music. Yet it is not just dancing to the words in their superficial meaning alone, nor is the music detached from the words and their full (inner and outer) meaning. My point is that the songs must be vocally rendered by the danseuse herself while she dances. Since she cannot do the singing with gusto because of the physical exertion of dancing, a background musician sings with her, and usually her dance master himself renders the drum syllable. Yes, these drum syllables must also be vocally rendered, even when they are not set to music as in the opening piece, *alarippu*.’

‘The artiste has to bring out through gesture not only the outer meaning of the words of the songs, but has also to interpret all their implications and inner meanings, sometimes even building up episodes around a single line. But all through this she must not change the actual words of the song that she is vocally rendering. Yes, even while she is enacting, in gestures, monologues and dialogues that are far removed from the actual words of the song, she must not utter the words fit for those situations, but only repeat the same actual words of the lyrical text. That is, whereas she is bodily, facially and figuratively gesturing myriad changing moods and environments, she vocally adheres to the same unchanging phrases in the text.’

‘One more interesting feature here is that, though the words are the same, she makes endless variations (of sound or *abhinaya*, facial expression) called *sangatis* in the music set for the words, variations which help to bring out the many shades of the inner meaning of the text. It is only when the artiste is a true musician and enters into the spirit of the song through music that she can interpret in gesture the song to perfection by simply keeping the movement of her hands and eyes in consonance with the ups and downs, curves and glides, pauses and frills in the music, irrespective of the actual words of the song but in keeping with the dialogue woven in gesture around them. This is justified by quoting the dance-scriptures which, of course, admit *vacika-abhinaya* [expression through words]. But I sincerely feel that *vacika-abhinaya* belongs to drama and dance-drama and not to dancing sui generis. For I consider that this feat of achieving perfection simultaneously in the variation (in gesture and music) and non-variation (in the sung word) help greatly in achieving strength and clarity of mind – which again is an important factor in *yoga*.’

Abhinaya

‘Another remarkable aspect of Bharata Natya is the great scope it affords to the artiste’s imagination especially in the *abhinaya* (facial expression). She can improvise ad infinitum moods and situations to bring out the full content of the song. Even in the *nrtta* part of the rhythmic foot-work, where the unity of music prevents her from taking

too much liberty, she can to some extent express her native imagination in improvisation. As for the gestural part of *abhinaya*, her wings can soar to the very skies of freedom.'

Gestures

'Another noteworthy feature of Bharata Natya is the quality of the gestures. These gestures must never be taken to be the gestures used in everyday life or in drama and cinema acting. *Abhinaya* is as far from acting as poetry is from prose. No feeling, no emotion, no mood, no experience, no locale is gestured in a realistic, matter-of-fact way. They are all expressed in the suggestive language of the imagination. Forceful contortions and violent movements are out of place in Bharata Natya. Yet it does not just portray the soft side of life. The deepest and weightiest subjects are conveyed by suggestion in a more striking manner than through direct stage-acting. Dignified restraint is the hall-mark of *abhinaya*. Even in the best of laughter, there is a restraint on the mouth movement, even at the height of wonder, there is a limit for opening the eyes; even in the white-heat of amorous sport, the danseuse has no use for movements of the torso but gestures only through the face and hands. It is this decency, decorum and dignity that imparts to Bharata Natya its divine character.'

'Bharata Natya gestures eliminate all the inessentials and depict concepts and objects strikingly by creating minimal semblance to the originals mainly by virtue of the *mudras*. For example, in the other dancing systems, including the Indian systems other than Bharata Natya, an elephant is gesturally depicted only with a fund of details like its high and bulky size, pillar-like legs, winnow-like ears, resilient trunk with its different movements, majestic gait, etc. But see, how with the simple *mudra* of the four fingers – the stiffly bent first and fore-fingers signifying the tusks and the drooping middle two fingers denoting the trunk – the elephant is unmistakably suggested in Bharata Natya. Similarly a cow has to be gesturally presented in the other systems rather laboriously. But in Bharata Natya those same two fingers which stood for the elephant's tusks become the horns of the cow when tilted up perpendicularly, and the other three fingertips joined together picturize the face of the cow, and with a wave of the right hand the danseuse also represents the cowherd who drives it.'

• • •