

Bharatnatyam

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Introduction to Semiotics Bharatanatyam A journey from temples to the proscenium An introduction Bharatanatyam is a Sanskrit word, which means the dance of Bharata (India). True to its name, it is one of the oldest and most popular dance forms of India. It originated in the temples of Southern India and was later codified and documented as a performing art by the Tanjore Quartet. It is now the most popular Indian classical dance and is appreciated worldwide. Bharatanatyam is a language in itself. Like Sanskrit language, bharatanatyam follows strict rules and is technically sound. The grammar of the steps is followed rigorously.

It is danced to Carnatic music and the mathematical precision of the dance equals the Carnatic music measure of measure. The three significant ingredients of bharatanatyam are: bhava (emotion), raga (music) and taal (rhythm); governed by Bharata muni's Natya Shastra and Nandikeshwar's Abhinaya Darpana. Hence, the interpretation BHAVA + RAGA (music) + TALA + NATYAM (dance) = Bharatanatyam. The technique and presentation " Bharatanatyam in its highest moment, is the embodiment of music in a visual form" -Balasaraswati The three major attributes of a Bharatanatyam performance are Nritta (technique), Nritya and Natya (drama).

Nritta is pure dance. It is the movement of hands and feet on the rhythm and speed. It is a collage of rhythmic lines, forms and shapes. The movements, mudras or gestures do not signify anything. Then why nritta? Indian music and dance forms are based on the concept of cyclic rhythm or taal. Various musical patterns are woven with the musical notes and rhythmic patterns which can be beautifully executed through nritta. Nritya is interpretative dance. It is used to exhibit the underlying meaning of the song and the

emotion attached with it. It is a combination of nritta and abhinaya or expressions.

The meaning of the song is expressed systematic gesture language and facial expressions. Natya is equivalent to dance-drama. It is a language of gestures, poses, dialogues and mime. It depicts a story usually from the Indian mythology like Ramayan or Mahabharata. Here, the emphasis is majorly on abhinaya or expression rather than the rhythmic movements. The Abhinaya is divided as: Angikabhinaya: Expression through the limbs and body like the Head, Hands, and Legs. Vachikabhinaya: Expression through narrations and voice. Aharyabhinaya: Expression through dress, ornaments and other aids.

Satvikabhinaya: Mental expression of feeling and emotion by facial expression and use of eyes. Bharatanatyam: The Journey The journey of Bharatnatyam from the temples of south India to the proscenium of the world is a very exciting one. Dasi-attam (Origin and decline) Bharatnatyam as a very ancient and traditional art form has been associated with the temples of South India. It is believed that Bharatnatyam used to be known as the “ temple dance”. Bharatnatyam was also known as the dasi-attam (dance performed by the dasis - the servants of God) or the sadir-attam (court dance).

It was choreographed to be performed solo by the devadasis in the temples as an offering to the deities. These women, called devadasis, are said to have devoted their lives to God. They were considered to be united with the Gods. Infact, they were considered so close to the gods and so pure, that a

pearl from their necklace was considered auspicious for the mangalsutra of a woman. They performed useful functions at temples like cleaning, lighting lamps, dressing the deities etc. They also sang devotional songs and danced in devotion to the deities. Apart from this, they taught music and dance to young girls.

These devadasis were accomplished artistes who could play many musical instruments. They were well versed in Sanskrit and other languages, which helped them to interpret the compositions that they would perform. They were instrumental in developing a tradition of classical music and dance in South India. The devadasis were celibate and were not allowed to have a family as they were considered to be married to the Gods. Therefore, initially most of the dances in Bharatnatyam were choreographed to be in praise of God. Many padams (narrative pieces) depicted the love story of a nayak (hero) and a nayika (heroine).

In most cases, the nayak was in the form of Lord Krishna, or Shiva or any other mythological hero. While Shiva was said to be serious, Krishna was full of pathos and love. Thus, the choreographies mainly concentrated on Sringara rasa (love). Gradually the devadasi system started getting plagued with several notorious ills. Around this time, it was customary for the Indian people hailing from royal or aristocratic families to invite a devadasi to a celebration, to sing and dance and perform. The best dancers were invited to the royal courts to perform, in return which they were provided with a shelter.

In this period, the position of the devadasis could be compared to that of an apsara (celestial nymph) who danced in the courts of the Gods in order to please them. Eventually, the rich men and the aristocrats attracted the devadasis with good money and luxurious lifestyles and lured them into being their mistresses. The devadasis were easily enticed to the kind of lifestyle offered to them. Thus, the sringara rasa in their choreographies converted into eroticism and they danced merely to appease the rich men. As a consequence of which, these devadasis who were held at par with the temple priests lost their respect in the society.

By this time, the Europeans had arrived to India. Their advent was like addition of fuel to the fire of the already deteriorating dance form. The Europeans ridiculed this entire system of dancing to please the lords and considered this to be no better than prostitution. Under the British rule, propaganda prevailed against Indian art, misinterpreting it as crude and immoral. Also other factors like loss of patronage due to the unstable political conditions, lack of recognition in the education system and lack of appreciation as compared to that given to ballet; played a major role in the set back of the dance form.

Due to the degenerated status of the devadasis, the Indian reformers started a movement against the devadasis. Thus the devadasi tradition was banned. The government started working with various non-governmental organizations to help reinstate these women into the society, as well as raise public awareness of the demeaning nature of their life work. Thus, the devadasi tradition and with it the performing art (bharatanatyam) took a

back seat in the history of Indian art and culture. Revival Against all odds, a few families preserved the knowledge of this dance form.

These included individuals from varied backgrounds: Indian freedom fighters, Westerners interested in Indian arts, people outside the devadasi class who learnt Bharatanatyam, and devadasis themselves. The pioneers in reviving this art for are: E. Krishna Iyer, Rukmini Devi, Balasaraswati etc.

Bharatanatyam now attracted young artists from respectable Brahmin families. Initially met with shock, their participation ultimately helped to shift public opinion in favor of reviving the art. An association of devadasis joined the effort to revive Bharatanatyam.

Its ranks included an eventual teacher of Rukmini Devi's, as well as the family of the legendary dancer Balasaraswati. Rukmini Devi's debut performance in 1935 was a milestone. Her efforts won over much of the orthodox community of Madras. Her reforms of costume, stage setting, repertoire, introduction of dance drama, musical accompaniment, and thematic content, overcame the objections of conservatives that Bharatanatyam was vulgar. She went on to found the Kalakshetra institute, to which she attracted many great artists and musicians, with whom she trained generations of dancers.

Balasaraswati promoted the traditional art of the devadasis, maintaining that reforms were unnecessary and detracted from the art. Staying true to her devadasi lineage, she achieved great renown for her excellence. The renewed awareness of Bharatanatyam in Indian society allowed many nattuvanars to resume their training activities, and many artists to enter the field of classical dance. Rukmini Devi's desire to restore the full spiritual

potential of the dance motivated reforms that led to what was known as the Kalakshetra style of Bharatanatyam. Bharatanatyam soon became the most widespread and popular of the Indian classical dance forms.

It wasn't long before it achieved international recognition as one of India's treasures. Rukmini Devi versus Balasaraswati Differences in the similarity of trying to revive the Indian traditional art form The two towering figures that played a major role in the revival of das-attam as bharatantyam: Tanjore Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi. Balasaraswati was affiliated with the school known as Tanjore court style while Rukmini devi was associated with a style that she developed at Kalakshetra. By focusing on these two dancers, we can throw light on the historical event of the upgradation of bharatanatyam.

They were contemporaries. Balasaraswati gave her first performance in 1925 in a temple and Rukmini Devi gave her first performance in 1935 for the Theosophical Society's anniversary celebration. Both performed Bharatanatyam regularly on concert stage and considered it a means of salvaging the endangered dance form. In the Indian dance world, both of them are legendary figures. Their names have become synonymous to classicism and traditionalism. Around both of them instructional communities have developed, which led to idea of development of various styles in Bharatnatyam.

They led on to take Bharatnatyam on a whole new international level, in their own way. Despite the similarities and the oneness in the agenda of working for the up gradation of the lost dance form, the difference in their ideologies held them in opposition - which has affected the background of

Bharatanatyam ever since. Rukmini Devi was a Brahmin who was married to an English Theosophist, George Arundale at the age of sixteen. She came in contact with the famous ballet dancer, Anna Pavlova who accepted her as a student. Pavlova later suggested Rukmini Devi to train in her 'own dance from'.

Following her advice, Rukmini Devi returned to Madras and trained under a traditional guru in the classical dance form, Bharatanatyam. She defied the orthodox custom that upper and middle class girls should not learn dance and set up Kalakshetra to train dancers from the upper and middle class families. The establishment of Kalakshetra played an important role in bringing Bharatanatyam from the temples to the concert stage.

Balasaraswati on the other hand hailed from a family of devadasis. She was born in a lineage of women who were associated with the Tanjore music and dance since generations.

Her mother and grandmother wanted her to become musician considering the social stigma linked to dance at that time but she decided to become a dancer against all odds. She gave her first performance, arangetram at the temple of Ammanakshi in Kanchipuram, marking the beginning of her legendary career. Rukmini Devi entered and Balasaraswati had carved their positions in the world of dance with a radically different perspectives. Rukmini Devi had a very clear goal of purifying the dance form. According to her, the dance form was precious but degraded because its reigns were in the hands of people with 'ill repute'.

She wanted to eradicate the stigma associated with it by passing it on to the hands of people from the upper or middle class. She thought that everything about Bharatnatyam needed to be purified so that it could regain its respectable position in the society. Also, she believed that the main reason for the degradation of this art form was the fact that sringara rasa (love) was the centre of the choreographies. The sringara rasa had led to the degeneration of the art form as it introduced eroticism and sexuality in the art to the extent to make it vulgar. "To depict such things is unthinkable for me", she said.

She was not against the sringara rasa as such (she had performed love poems by Jayadeva and Kalidasa in her natya), but against the choreographies performed by the devadasi. The actions, mudras and movements included by them in their choreographies had become earthy from beautiful. She strived hard to replace the sringara rasa by bhakti rasa or 'devotionalism'; devoid of any sexual referent. Bhakti Rasa Rukmini Devi held Bharatnatyam as a national art form and worked towards its purification and propagating this art form in India and the rest of the world.

She established the Kalakshetra - international school of performing arts, to fulfil her goals. Here, students from various upper and middle classes were trained in Bharatnatyam and also some other dance forms. She also set up a theatre which gave a platform to her students and also to her innovations in the dance form. Thus, she made reforms to take Bharatnatyam to a whole new international level. Balasaraswati on the other hand, was very proud of her mother, grandmother and her devadasi ancestors. She was

very proud of the achievements of the devadasis in the world of Bharatnatyam.

Unlike Devi, she foregrounded the South Indian nativity and stood by the Tamil roots associated with the dance form. She advocated preserving the tradition, and also keeping it in the hands of the devadasi community. Her argument was that the art would die if separated from the caste. She believed that Bharatnatyam was in its purest form and it required no modernization or reformation. At many occasions she reprobated efforts to purify the dance form saying, " Indeed the effort to purify Bharatanatyam is like putting gloss on a burnished gold or painting a lotus".

This proves how high Balasaraswati's respect and love for Bharatanatyam (in its existing form) was. She urged to adhere to the custom of Bharatnatyam being performed in temples and courts. She also urged taking Bharatnatyam on the concert stage. This gave a new dimension to the revival of the dance form. She also defended the maintenance of originality of the dance form, by supporting the long, solo performances being an important component of the dance form. She emphasized the importance of such elements in to context to maintain classicism, integrity and aestheticism of the dance form.

She also believed that abiding by the Tanjore Quartet's format was an important way of honouring the contributions of the court practitioners. Sringara Rasa Balasaraswati was particularly critical of the reformers who believed in transforming the sringara rasa of the form. She was quoted as saying, " Sringara is bhakti and bhakti is sringara". She believed that there is an intricate relationship between the expression of love (sringara) and

feeling of devotion (bhakti). She believed that sringara is the supreme emotion and that no other emotion could express so beautifully the mystic union of atma (soul) and the paramatma (The almighty).

This rasa gives the dancer a wide scope of introducing artistic innovation from within herself. Balasarwati thus, believed that she was entrusted with the task of safeguarding the dance form by not allowing it to be modernized and easily accessible for corruption. In spite of all the discouragement faced from the world, she continued to protect the dance form, the purity and the originality of the dance form. A similarity in the differences In spite of all the difference and such radically opposite perspectives, both Rukmini Devi and Balasarwati had the same agenda- of saving the dying dance form.

They both strived in their own way to protect the dance form and to take it to a whole new level. Their efforts in bringing Bharatnatyam to the concert stage or proscenium against all the opposition and hurdles from the society are commendable. A choreographer should be thankful to the endeavours of these two torchbearers towards the revival of the Bharatnatyam. History was therefore selective. Rukmini Devi and Balasarwati presented their understandings by emphasizing on some aspects and eschewing the others.