

## CHAPTER - II

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### INDIA'S DANCE HERITAGE

All the prevalent forms of classical dancing in India today claim their origin in Natya Shastra, an ancient canonical work outlining the theory and practice of the art of theatre and dance (Natya), written by the sage Bharata. Among all Indian dance techniques, Bharata Natya, as now practised, most closely conforms in spirit and procedure, to the clear outlines of Bharata's Natya Shastra.

"Among the many forms and styles, there is one which is called the ekaharya lasyanga in the Natyasastra. In this form, there is one actor playing many roles. The Natyasastra, in this context, also speaks of the actor as the narrator. Instead of many actors presenting a dramatic story the solo actor presents, through the four types of abhinaya, the particular dominant state (Sthayi bhava). The present Bharata Natyam can be traced back to this form."<sup>6</sup>

Bharata figures in Indian mythology as a combined sage and patron saint of dance and drama, so much so that his Natya Shastra is also referred to as the fifth Veda.

It is not known as to when exactly Bharata wrote the Natya Shastra. The date is placed ordinarily between the 2nd century and 4th century A. D. It is obvious that Bharata who was an authority on the various performing arts, took upon himself the difficult task of collecting, collating and codifying all the authentic data on dance and drama forms all over India, and gave it the name Natya Shastra. As E. Krishna Iyer has rightly mentioned, there must have been earlier writers on the art of dancing. Nandikeshvar's Bharatarnava is supposed to be earlier than Bharata's Natya Shastra. The abhinaya Darpana by the same author, is also said to be a part of Bharatarnava. Bharata has profusely quoted numerous earlier authors in his Natya Shastra, and all this goes to show that the art of dancing had developed into a technically well defined and stylised art, much before Bharata came out with his commentary.

Bharata Natya today is considered to be a dance form of South India. But as the various scholars and research workers have now established, it represents the most ancient and classical dance style that was popular all over the Indian subcontinent till a few centuries back. In fact, in Bharata Natya today one can get the glimpses of the classical dance style, so typical of

the Aryan culture and once prevalent in all parts of the country. It's preservation and development in the Southern parts of the country in the centuries that witnessed successive alien invasions in the North, is mainly due to the fact that these far off places in Tamilnad remained least affected by foreign influence. Thus historically with an all India provenance, Bharata Natya cannot be considered as exclusive Tamil in origin.

Since ancient times Indians danced as per Natya Shastra and what is known today as a South Indian style happens to be nearest to the most prevalent and accepted dance form all over India, at least upto 12th or 13th century.

As the mythological legend tells, Parvati taught her own dance to Usha, the daughter of Banasura, and the wife of Anirudhha, grandson of Shrikrishna. Usha in turn taught it to the ladies of Dwarka in Saurashtra from where it spread to various parts of India. Assuming that such legends have some historical truth in them, it becomes obvious that Aryans learnt much of the art of dancing from predecessor Non-Aryans who have found references as Asuras.

It is also quite logical to suggest that when

Bharata wrote his commentary, dance had already developed into a well defined art having incorporated the elements of the dances of various pre and non Aryan cultures, prevalent in different regions of this part of the world.

The classical dance in India, in the course of last 2000 years has evolved somewhat differently in the North and the South. While the northern part of Indian subcontinent became the home of Aryans, the Southern part continued to be under the influence of Dravidian culture. In fact, what is now being taken as the Aryan culture incorporates many elements of the earlier Dravidian culture. In the words of 'E. Krishna Iyer'<sup>8</sup>

'The prehistoric civilisation of the Dravidians is the bed-rock or foundation on which every invader of India from the Vedic Aryans to the modern Europeans built or tried to build his own cultural edifices. Hinduism itself is the accumulated wisdom of the two main races Dravidian and Aryan, collected for over 50 centuries. Broadly Saivism was the religion and cult of the Dravidians and they excelled in arts and crafts, astronomy, medicine and other sciences.'

'The Aryans who entered India between 4000 and

3000 B. C. absorbed the conquered people and their culture as well and developed a grander civilisation, the two races borrowing a good deal from each other. A civilised race like the Dravidians must have contributed much towards the building up of the so called Aryan civilisation of North India.''

#### SOUTH INDIA A SANCTUARY FOR ART AND CULTURE

The classical Indian dance prevalent in the South today can still boast to preserve many features that disappeared in the North during the various successive cultural and military invasions. Free from the alien invasions, the southern part of the Indian subcontinent uninterruptedly provided a congenial and peaceful environment for the preservation of the ancient Indian dance. So much so that with the successive military set-backs in the North, accompanied by the influx of cultures from outside, the Aryan scholars and artists too found South India to be a safe sanctuary where they could live happily so that their arts could flourish in undefiled and pure forms.

Kapila Vatsyayan<sup>9</sup> has ideally summarised the growth of Indian dance in following words.

Roughly speaking, one may divide the history of dance

into two periods--one from the 2nd Century B. C. to the 9th Century A. D., and the other from the 10th or 11th Century to the 18th Century A. D. During the first period, Sanskrit exercised a firm hold on the intellectual life the people and its rich literature endowed the development of all arts in the country with unity and continuity. In the second period, there was a marked development of regional styles. The latter half of this period coincides with the period of the growth of the various regional languages. One may also say that in the first period, the tradition as formulated by the Natyasastra was fairly strictly adhered to and dance, drama and music could not be disassociated from one another. The available evidence suggests that the sculptors, who produced the remarkable specimens of plastic art at Sanchi, Mathura, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda and finally at Ellora were well-versed in the Natyasastra tradition.

Along with the evidence which one can gather from sculptural reliefs and extant works of Sanskrit literature, there is a third rich source, namely, texts and manuals. It would appear that soon after the writing of the Natyasastra, works on aesthetics concerned themselves mainly with discussions of literature and, occasionally, music. In fact, there are no treatises of any significance on the dance per se in the first period prior to the appearance

of the Abhinaya Darpana by Nandikesvara which is a treatise on dance.

Medieval temples also provide ample evidence that sculptors had considerable technical knowledge of the art of dance. The Brihadesvara temple in Tanjore was built in the 11th Century. It was here that Karanas were first illustrated. The Orissan temples of Vithal Deul, Paramesvara and Rajarani belong to this period i.e., the 9th to the 11th Century. The Charis (movements) and Sthanas (positions) described in the Natyasastra are elaborately depicted in the sculptures on the outer walls of these temples. The Khajuraho temples of the Chandela kings also extend in time from the 11th Century to the 13th Century. Finally there is the whole range of medieval sculpture extending from Rajputana and Saurashtra to Orissa and from Kashmir to Trivandrum also dating from the 13th to the 16th Century. These temples have captured in stone what the chroniclers could not record in words. Each temple portrays a variety of dance poses and movements which are accurate illustrations of either the original style or of texts which were followed by regional artists.

Such examples from the medieval period are not restricted to sculptures in temples alone. There is, besides, a body of critical writing and a sizeable volume of creative writing which supports the view that the art

was widely practised and adored. Sangitaratnakara, Sarangadeva's monumental treatise on music had set the new tone of musical practice. It also includes an exhaustive chapter on the dance. This chapter is of vital importance for understanding the traditions of the dance as they were followed and as they developed in different parts of India. By and large, the writer follows the Natyasastra and occasionally the Abhinaya Darpana. However, he provides significant evidence pointing to the fact that, while the Natyasastra tradition was generally accepted, there were departures and modifications. Among the many new concepts he introduces is the concept of style (paddhati) and the movements. He speaks of basic movements under two categories, viz., the pure (Suddha) and the regional variants (desastha). Once again, he speaks of the purely classical or the academic form under the label of suddha, and the regional variants under the head of desi paddhatis. While Sarangadeva was not the first to introduce this concept, he was certainly the first to give it an authoritative sanction. Bhoja in his Sringaraprakasa and Somesvara in Manasollasa had already spoken of these concepts and had accepted regional styles. The recognition of regional styles contributed greatly to the further development of the individual, distinctive, classical styles of the various regions.



From the 13th Century onwards, one can find manuals on dance from practically every region of the country. There is the Nrīttaratnavali of Jaya Senapati from Andhra Pradesh, Sangitopanishat Sarodhara by Vachanacharya Sudhakalasa of Gujarat, Hastamuktavali of Assam, Govinda Sangita Lila Vilasa from Manipur, Abhinava Chandrika of Mahesvara Mahapatra from Orissa, Sangita Damodara of Raghunath from Bengal, Adi Bharatam, Bharatarnava and Nrītta Adhyaya of the Sangitamakaranda, from Tamil Nadu, Balarama Bharatam and Hastalakshana Dipika from Kerala, the Nrītyaratnakosa by Kumbhakarana from Rajasthan and the Sangitamallika of Mohammad Shah from North India. The list is not complete. In fact, it merely gives examples from the various regions of India.

Even a superficial study of these manuals emphasizes two broad facts: first, that despite regional variations, all schools subscribed to the basic principles of the Nāṭyasastra tradition. The dance continued to be divided into Nāṭya and Nrītta on the one hand and into Tandava and Lasya on the other. The second is that, although they continued to follow these broad principles, many distinctive regional styles evolved and each region ultimately developed a native vocabulary. This second fact led to the formulation of different classical styles in India.

The beginning of the contemporary classical styles--be it Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Manipuri, Orissi, or Kathak--can be traced back to developments in the medieval period, roughly dating from 1300 A. D. to 1800 A. D.<sup>33</sup>

In the North with the advent of Mohammedans, it is observed that progressively the ancient classical dance style that once prevailed all over the country gradually became extinct. Either it got influenced by the culture of the Muslim invaders or got merged with various regional folk dance styles.

The evolution of the various classical dance styles of India has to be seen in the perspective of its unique process of cultural agglomeration of different regions and races through space and time. Though quite distinct from one other in details, the different dance styles of the North and South, have still preserved many factors which ultimately bind them together by a common heritage. It is quite evident that the four main classical dance styles--Bharata Natya, Kathakali, Kathak and Manipuri--each have developed differently emphasizing on one of the four 'Vrittis', as enumerated by Bharata and a following correlation can be very easily established.

Kaiseki (graceful)--Manipuri -- Variety of Charis

Arabati (energetic) - Kathakali - Variety of Utplavanas  
 Satavati (grand) - Bharata Natya - Variety of Mandalams  
 Bharati (verbal) - Kathak - Variety of Bhramaris

In all the four dance styles, it is only the question of emphasis. The other Vritis also find proper places, but the emphasis on one vriti has given each of them a distinct identity. In Odissi dance one obviously sees a combination of the two Vrittis - Kaiseki and Arabati. It is further worth mentioning that, on the whole, the Bharata Natya appears to be nearest to the Bharata's tenets.

The most convincing evidence that once there prevailed an all-India dance style similar to Bharata Natya, comes from the various dance sculptures found in temples all over the country.

As no authentic record of this rise and fall of the ancient classical dance in north is available, the author is not in a position to dwell upon this aspect of Bharata Natya. On the other hand, in the course of last many centuries, the dance to which the study pertains, and which has been an art form of the South, a fairly good account on its growth and development is recorded in the book of history.

As E. Krishna Iyer<sup>10</sup> has very rightly said 'Under Mohammedan invasions in the north from 1100 A. D. and Moslem rule for over five Centuries, patronage for the traditional arts declined there. While under such influences of later period, music got enriched and grew as the glorious Hindustani system, classical dance found itself neglected and died in the North, giving place to the rise of other mixed styles. It is the good fortune of India that the original national and common classical dance tradition was preserved intact and developed with purity and system by sustained patronage from successive generations of Kings and nobles in South India and especially in Tamil-Nad.

#### THE DANCE OF DEVDASI - ITS RISE AND FALL

The following passages from Ragini Devi's book<sup>11</sup>, give a nutshell account of the rise and fall of the South Indian Classical dance.

In the golden era of the Pallava and Chola King (6th to 13th Centuries A. D.) there arose in South India great temples with towering gopurams, vast pillared halls and corridors adorned with sculptured gods of the Hindu pantheon and celestial dancers. In these magnificent Shrines of the gods, Siva and Vishnu, holy ritual and dance were merged in a beautiful temple service--a

sublime synthesis of art and religion.

"The performance of dance as a holy offering is enjoined in the Agama Sastras of South India containing rules for making temple images, and all that pertains to temple rites and festivals. This hieratic dance was rendered exclusively by women called Devar-adiyal or Devdasis, 'votaries of god'. Dedicated to temples in early childhood, they were married to the deity of the temple by the symbolic tying of the marriage necklace (tali) by the temple priest, and the imprint of a flower pattern in sandalwood paste on each shoulder. As child novices Devdasis were taught the arts of music and dance, sacred and classical literature in Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu, and certain religious duties in the temple.

The first day of dance instruction was a holy ceremony, with worship of god, flower offering music and obeisance to the revered dance master of the temple. A bamboo staff wrapped in silk was held horizontally by two Devdasis, which the pupil grasped while stamping her first steps in paddy (seedrice) to rhythm--syllables pronounced by the dance master. Thus the "'seeds of the art were sown in her'". On completion of seven years of practise, the Gajjai Puja or worship of the ankle bells

was performed on an auspicious day when the bells were worn for the first time by the dancer.

The first performance of a Devdasi (Arangetral) took place in the temple in the presence of the King, who conferred the title of Talaikole on the accomplished Devdasi.

There is a legend about Talaikole. Once when the celestial nymph, Urvasi, was dancing at Indra's heavenly court, her glance met the impassioned gaze of Jayanta, son of Indra, and for a few moments her mind was diverted from the dance. The great sage Agastya, observing this, became angry and pronounced a curse upon Urvasi and Jayanta. Urvasi was to be born on earth as a Devdasi and Jayanta was to become a bamboo tree in the Vindhya Mountains. Urvasi and Jayanta fell at the feet of the great sage and begged him to retract his curse. He then decreed that when Urvasi would have her dance debut (Arangetral) on earth as a Devdasi, she would be presented with the Talaikole (Jayanta in the form of a bamboo staff). Then the curse would be lifted. On the day of her dance debut Urvasi was presented with the bamboo staff, and both she and Jayanta were freed from the curse and ascended to the heavenly abode of Indra. Thus the Devdasis of South India trace their art to the celestial nymph, Urvasi.

Talaikole is the earthly symbol of Indira's sacred banner staff. In ancient India the Banner festival of Indra was celebrated for twenty-eight days prior to the rainy season to ensure abundant rains for the crops. On this occasion the Talaikole, a bamboo staff encased in pure gold and set with precious gems, was worshipped and taken in procession. The festival is vividly described in 'Silapadikaram'--the 'story of the anklet', an epic poem in Tamil written in the 2nd Century A. D. It is the story of Madhavi, a dancing girl and her lover.

On the first day of the Indra Festival, Madhavi bathed and garlanded the Talaikole, a holy ceremony, at the royal palace. Blessed by the Brahmans, the sacred staff was placed upon a royal elephant and worshipped by the king and his entourage. The State musicians brought it in a chariot to the dancing hall and placed it on the stage (Arangam) for the performance of Madhavi who danced before the king and a large assembly.

The ancient system of dance training, Arangatru Kathai, is fully explained in Silappadikaram (verse 113 to 159). This great dance tradition, which has existed for more than two thousand years, is the treasured heritage

of the Devdasis, who under munificent royal patronage, maintained the aesthetic perfection of their sacred art with deep religious devotion.

To the temple came hundreds of devotees, sanctified and inspired by the solemn beauty of holy rites and the exquisite mysticism of the dance in the daily twilight rituals.

The Dvajarohanam or flag-staff ceremony that inaugurated the annual temple festivals of Lord Siva was celebrated with votive dances and music. Devadāsīs richly clad and adorned with jewels and flower chaplets, performed the Nava Sandhi Nritya, a dance offering to the presiding deities of the nine junctions, rendered with symbolical gestures and ritual dance patterns appropriate to each god.

When the holy image of Lord Shiva rode forth in festal splendor to the ceremonial bath, Devdasis danced the sacred Malappu Nritta of the Jandava in front of the processional deity. Pancha-Mukha Vadya, a large bronze pot-drum with five drumheads symbolizing the five faces (pancha-mukha) of Siva-Nataraja, accompanied the dance, providing both rhythm and melody on the tuned drumheads.



Ekalam, a brass trumpet, conch and cymbals, accentuated the drum rhythms. The five faced Siva drum is played Solo and in unison with the instrumental ensemble, the Sarva Vadya, in temple rituals that included Sarva Vadya dances of rare beauty.

Temple festivals were special occasions for a display of classical dancing when Devdasis were honoured with titles and gifts for their art conferred by the King. The names of famous Devdasis are to be found in temple chronicles and inscriptions.

In royal durbars dancing girls called Rajadasis danced on state and festive occasions. At marriages and birth celebrations and other communal functions Alankaradasis gave dance recitals, for dance was considered auspicious and therefore indispensable.

The dance masters of South India, Nattuvans, who taught the art of dance to Devdasis and Rajadasis belong to an ancient non-Brahman guild, the Nattuva Mela. Their office in temples and palaces was hereditary and they were known to be great musicians and composers of music and dance.

Devdasis had their own customs and traditions of

social and family life. They were given lands and emoluments by the King, and had certain hereditary rights in law under royal protection. As they were normally married to the temple god, they could not marry according to Hindu religious customs. However Devdasis could a mate, if they so desired, with whom they lived. Their children were considered legitimate and had social status. Daughters of Devdasis usually followed the profession of the mother, and were dedicated to temples. Sons often became musicians in temples and palaces. Some Devdasis preferred to ascetic life and were wholly dedicated to religion.

With the decline of the Southern Kingdoms and the final advent of British rule in India, royal patronage of the arts ceased, and dance and music in temples was curtailed. Rajadasis were compelled to seek remuneration for their art from wealthy patrons and a few Rajas who could maintain their services. Immoral women, calling themselves 'Dasis' exploited the dance.

The British ruling class, who did not understand the art of the Devadasis, nor the customs and social environment of these gifted dancers, began to condemn the dance and publicly criticized Devdasis as immoral. Eventually orthodox Hindu society turned against them, and as result of social

ostracism, some Devdasis gave up their profession''.

During the last 200 years, this dance being exclusively in the hands of Dasis, was variously referred to as Sadir-Natya, Sadir Attam or Dasi Attam.

The Maratha rulers (Sarfoji and Shivaji) of Tanjore during the middle of the 18th Century, were great patrons of dance and music, and it was during their reign<sup>✓</sup> that classical dance in Tamilnad took its existing form. It was then that Chinnaya, Poonaiyah, Vadivelu and Sivananda, the quartet Tanjore brothers completed the process of reediting the programme of Bharata-Natya as it is today. Originally an art introduced into the temples as an act of worship and devotion, in the course of time got degenerated. For the reasons already given above became a subject matter of social stigma. Respectable families drifted away from the art. As a result, at the beginning of this Century, this noble and sublime art of ancient India was in a decadent state. Though there were a few traditional families of dancers and dance masters of distinction, they commanded little respect from the society and became steadily dispirited.

### REVIVAL

It was during such a period of gloom and darkness that the 'ethereal beauty of Anna Pavlova's dances in India

in 1929 re-Kindled the vital spark of enthusiasm for the age--old Hindu dance. The anti-nautch reformers who had banished the dance were suddenly confronted with a pro-nautch movement, which grew into a public controversy through the medium of the Madras press led by a protagonist of the dance, E. Krishna Iyer, an advocate, who was able to demonstrate the beauty of the dance as a convincing argument. Finally the Madras Music Academy took the initiative and staged performances by the Kalyani sisters, Rajalakshmi and Jeevaratnam of the Devdasi community, before a cultured audience in 1936. Captivated a new by the chase beauty of these dances, people began to take an interest in the art of those born to the Devadasi tradition--Balasaraswati, Varalakshmi Bhanumati and Jayalakshmi--were appreciated as accomplished exponents of classical dance. A young girl of a cultured family, Kalanidhi studied the art and courageously gave public performances. Rukmini Devi Arundale of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, Madras came to the stage in 1937, after an intensive course of instruction to dance professionally, and suddenly the dance was reborn.

Aged dance masters were summoned to Madras to teach in newly established dance academies. Eventually the traditional dance of the Devdasis found a secure place in the art-life of Madras under the new name 'Bharata Natya'.<sup>12</sup>