

CHAPTER - III

ELEMENTS OF BHARATA NATYA

INTRODUCTION

In earlier two chapters, the author has attempted to give a fairly comprehensive idea of the origin and evolution of Bharata Natya. Obviously this classical dance form, having a very ancient origin, during the course of past several Centuries, gradually got restricted to a relatively small part of South India i.e. Tamilnad. Here too for Centuries, it was in the hands of the Dasis and thus more commonly known as Dasi Attam. Other names like Sadir Attam, Sadir Natya or Sadir, perhaps came into vogue only during the last two Centuries. Prior to the revival of this dance form, Dasi Attam or Sadir Attam comprised Solo dance performed by women. Having been danced by the Devdasis alone, by tradition, this dance form became an exclusive monopoly of women, such that male dancers had no place in it. It is an interesting phenomenon to note that this dance form was originally performed in the form of dance-dramas (perhaps a tradition nearest to the Natya Shastra,) but gradually with its increasing association with Dasis, and a progressive secularisation of this dance as performed by Devdasis, Rajdasis or Alankaradasis, more with a view to entertain-humans-Kings and other rich people, the devotional aspect was mainly preserved in the form of

dance-dramas (Kuchipudi, Bhagvat Mela Natak) performed exclusively by males.

The Solo Bharata Natya (Sadir Natya to be precise) that is traditionally accepted as a typical repertory, came into vogue about 100 years ago during the time of King Sarfoji of Tanjore. The famous quartet brothers--Chinnaya, Ponnaya, Vadivelu and Shivananda, the great exponents of this dance-form, re-edited the prevalent dance items and gave the form, which was later on traditionally danced by the Dasis for over a Century.

This art having been exclusively in the hands of Devdasis had lost its respectability because in practice, the private lives of these repositories of art, were of doubtful morals. Their dance lost its devotional element and became sensual. The Bhakti was replaced by Shringara.

Quite a few Devdasis followed a profession of prostitutes and this brought odium upon them and their art. The untiring efforts of the pioneers like E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi brought about a renainssance and lifted up this noble dance form from the depths of degradation, and raised it to a high pedestal of repectability and dignity. With this revival, it was realised that this

exquisite dance form essentially comprised many more variations than those practised by temple dancers only.

According to E. Krishna Iyer¹³ 'Bharata Natya has two other still extant forms namely, the dance drama of the Bhagvata Mela tradition and the Kuravanji Ballet. Since these two have been revived and brought to public notice only recently, many people may not have known about their existence and importance. Hence correctly viewed Bharata Natya is a vast and comprehensive generic system of highly developed classical dance in India, the principles and technique of which are closely applied and applicable to three chief surviving species among others, namely (1) the typical Solo Sadir Natya of the Nattuva Mela handled in the past mostly by Devdasis and now by respectable family women. (2) The heavy dance-drama of the Tanjore Bhagvata Mela tradition and (3) The lighter Kuravanji Ballet. All these three use only Bharata Natya technique through naturally they may differ in purposes and effect.'

Rukmini Devi was also included in Bharata Natya all forms of dance and dance-dramas which are in accordance with the Shashtra as laid down by the Sage Bharata. She¹⁴ writes that the 'Bharata Natya has many branches and variations of it. In the Tanjore district and elsewhere,

dance-dramas were regularly performed and are to be seen occasionally even today in the temples. In these, all parts were exclusively taken by men and the presentation came to be called the Bhagvata Mela. Naturally, these dramas are religious in character as is indeed all Indian dancing. Then there is the Kutchipudi system of dancing, coming from the Telugu Districts, dance-dramas danced by men. This form derives its name from the village of Kuchipudi in the Krishna District, where it originated and became famous. Both these styles of dance-dramas were performed by Brahmins who were priests musicians, scholars and dancers. Both these forms come under the category of Bharata Natya. In the district of Tanjore, Kanchipuram and other places, where many talented Devdasis dedicated themselves to the services of the temple as dancers, a system of dance presentation developed in which there was only a single dancer who gave a Solo recital even as a singer would be responsible for a whole concert. Just as a concert would be called Sangita Kacheri, a recital of this type of dance was generally called Sadir Kacheri. So Bharata Natya is a comprehensive word. Even other forms of dancing, like Kathakali and Manipuri are obviously variations of Bharata-Natya, though they have changed in character in accordance with the environment and the atmosphere of their surroundings. There is no doubt that the spirit of Bharata

brooded over the whole of India and that India because a land where the teaching of the Rishis and Saints was imparted not only through learning and philosophy but through the plastic arts-music and dance."

SPIRITUAL BACKGROUND OF BHARATA NATYA

Bharata Natya is a divine art an embodiment of sound and rhythm which creates a poetry of spiritual expression. According to Rukmini Devi, dance cannot be divorced from religion and philosophy, for in India, religion, philosophy and art all pertain to that one spirit which is indivisible and obtainable to the sage and saint as well as to the meanest human being.

To Rukmini Devi, the dance is Yoga, and the first glimpses of the dance are given by Shiva himself the Yogi of Yogi's. The Lord has demonstrated that the highest yoga is in the complete oneness of soul and body, and the oneness can be attained through dance.

The Bharata Natya as Rukmini Devi has visualised, is a living art which still can be presented according to the Natya Shastra of Bharata. She has always believed that the essence of the Shastra is not to limit the dance

by rule and regulations. She writes¹⁵,

"There is often a misconception that tradition or traditional teaching is uncreative and narrow. If the place of tradition is properly understood the exact opposite will be found to be the truth. For those whose minds are limited and who lack creative imagination everything is limited, including especially the Shastras because such people are unable to see into the deep meaning of the art and behind the mere words of the scriptures. But for those who are truly creative artists, there is the meeting place of individual experience with the experience of those who wrote the Shastras. It is amazing to see how limitless an art Bharata Natya is. For if one can depict the Mahabharata or Ramayana through Bharata Natya, this means that one can express all human emotion and thought through it, for these epics and the other puranic stories, portray every possible human experience. Naturally, the gestures, postures, etc. do not belong to our modern civilization which is mostly western. The art was conceived in India, taking its root in the highest spiritual level almost like the Banyan tree that grows and grows endlessly but whose roots seem to spring from heaven. Like the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, Dhammapada and other scriptures, Bharata Natya is

a method of spiritual learning for human ends. Therefore, it is not to be expected to reflect modern life and its ways, which are based essentially on surface expression and are thus artificial and base. Its gestures, music and rhythm are like a language which is meant for all time and resembles poetry which is the realisation of intense feeling through words. Bharata Natya is, therefore, an art that gives spiritual beauty to the flesh and lifts one from temporal to eternal values. It has meaning for the present day, because even today there are many devotees who respond to this. As long as India's basic philosophy survives it may live.''

MAIN ELEMENTS OF BHARATA NATYA

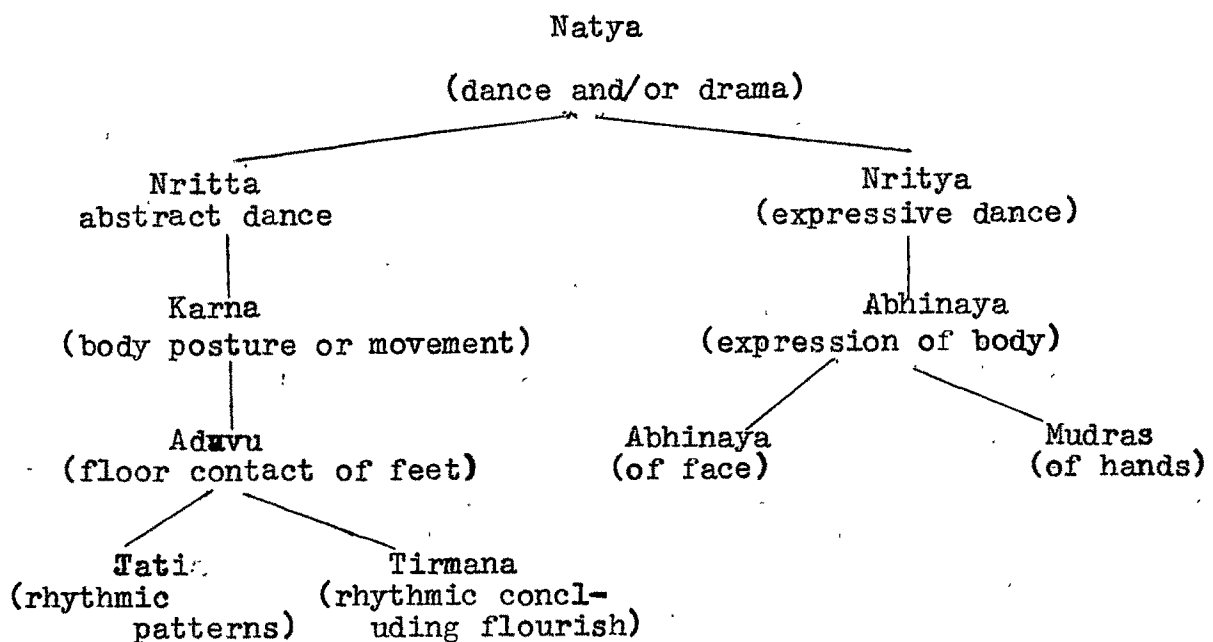
According to the Natya Shastra and other ancient dance scriptures, the art of dance can be divided into three categories--Nritya, Nritya and Natya. Nritya implies pure and simple dance or dance comprising movements of body and limbs that do not convey any meaning. Nritya does not express a mood or sentiment or tells a story and therefore uses no facial expression. It visualises and reproduces music and rhythm by means of abstract but exquisite gestures of the body, hands and feet. Nritya on the other hand, is a dance which is essen-

tially expressional, performed specifically to convey the meaning or import of a theme. It is linked to specific words of songs through which mood, feeling and emotion are conveyed by means of interpretation. The third category, viz. Natya is something identical to Nritya consisting of facial expressions and gestures accompanied by spoken words.

The traditional structure of Bharata Natya mainly concerns with Nritta and Nritya. Faubian Bowers¹⁶ has ideally summarised the main elements of Bharata Natya as following.

Technique of Bharata Natya.

Its Elements and their component Subdivisions.



The Nritta and Nritya aspects of Bharata Natya, can be classified on the basis of two main emotions-- Tandava (masculine) created by Lord Shiva and Lasya (feminine) created by Parvati. Tandava - Lasya classification however, is more or less theoretical and the two are convenient ^{ndz}disignations for showing the difference between the essentially virile and vigorous and the essentially feminine and voluptuous.

Nritta

Bharata has described 108 dance units comprising positions of the body, the movements of the feet and legs and gestures of the hands. He used the word Karna to describe the unit. Karna can be described as a long or short series of postures involving a coordination of any or all combinations of specific parts of the body. According to Bharata, a varied sequence of Karnas comprises an Angahara, while a Rechaka combines a number of Angaharas. Faubion Bowers¹⁷ has very aptly called Karnas as the phonetics of dance like letters of an alphabet, letters with which all words of Bharata Natya must be spelled. They can be any number of movements making letters to be spelled into words (longer units--Angaharas) and eventually used to create sentences (a chain of dance movements--Rechakas).

Karna is an ancient term which has been partly supplanted in dance vocabulary by the term Adavu. Thus the latter is the prevalent dance unit, and though at present there is little direct resemblance between the two, it is quite obvious that the Adavus have developed out of Karnas.

An Adavu can therefore be described as a 'dance unit' of Bharata Natya as it exists today and consists of a short rhythmic sequence of co-ordinated movements of body, limbs, head, hands and feet. The construction of various Adavus shows extreme precision and rigidity of technique. The position of the feet, the distance between the heels, the flexion of the legs, the position of the knees, the body arms and head, every thing is predetermined and set. For a demonstration to be technically chaste and accurate the performer is expected to pay strict attention to every minute detail of his rendering. Of course there are different schools or traditions of Bharata Natya and there are slight variations in the technique followed by the different hereditary lines of masters, but whatever be the school one is faithful to, there are certain basic principles of stance and posture, of line and movement which are common to all forms of Bharata Natya and which deserve to be noticed by one and all. ¹⁸

'Every Adavu consists of three essential elements,

a Sthanaka, a Chari, and a Nrita-hasta. The Sthanaka is the basic standing posture, the Chari is the movement of the legs and feet and the Nrita-hasta is the decorative hand gesture."

"While there are different theories and opinions regarding the total number of Adavus, it is generally held that there are in all about fifteen groups or families of Adavus. Some of the groups have only one or two types of movement while in others there may be six or even more variations of pattern. Each group has its own phrase of rhythmic syllables, and these syllables are uttered when practising, Each Adavu is rendered in three speeds, single, double and quadruple, care being taken that the movement does not get spoilt in the faster speeds. Adavus constitute the basis of the Nritta aspect of Bharata Natya."¹⁹

Technically, Jati is inseparable from Adavu, but the difference in their points of emphasis must be clear. Adavu, embodies the idea of Karnas and by the movements of the body as a whole to the movement of the leg and the feet. Jatis are complicated rhythmic patterns tapped out by the feet and the ankle-bells in unison with or in counterpoint to the rhythms of the accompanying music. The meaning of Jati is adequately expressed by the Tamil word

Sollukkattu—which denotes syllables (with no definite meaning) chanted by the singer and are spoken imitation of the sound of the ankle bells or the beat of the feet. Jatis can thus be termed as rhythmic punctuations of the dance, and the rhythm of Jati is translated into body rhythm through the Adavu.

Thirmana is a short brilliant succession of Karna-Adavus, and is generally used to conclude a section of dance or to separate a portion in the middle or even sometimes at the beginning. The Adavus are combined in the Thirmana with complicated Jati rhythmic forms. Thirmana could technically be described as a rhythmic formation of alternate long and short phrases repeated three times and performed in increasing speeds. Immediately, after a Thirmana, the dancer hands on hips retreats to the back stage in a characteristic Bharata Natya swaying movement and pauses.

'The composer of Bharata Natya first lays the rhythmic foundation by setting Sollukattu to the given tala. He next translates this into the language of ~~tattakara~~ ^{tattakara}. Then he sets a series of adavus to this into the body of the tala and dance theme. The choice and arranging of adavus constitute the most important phase of composing and reflect the ability and taste of the nattuva. This is

a major factor in determining the magnitude and quality of the aesthetic experience of dance. The finale part of the theme is accented and beautified by setting to these parts tirmanas which offer scope for the dance performer (and of course for the composer) to display skill and accuracy in complex, intricate and temporal rhythm."²⁰

Nritya

Nritya is that element of the dance which suggests Rasa (sentiment) and Bhava (mood), both the Rasa and Bhava being conveyed through facial expressions and appropriate gestures of hands and body. These fall within the category of Abhinaya. According to the Abhinaya-Darpana of Nandikeshwara, the Abhinaya (which is from the point of view of Natya Shastra an important element of both Natya and Nritya) consists of four main types.

Angika - Gestures of body

Vachika- Recitation of poems, songs, music etc.

Aharya - Costume, make up, jewellery

Satvika- Physical manifestation of mental and emotional states.

In traditional Solo Bharata-Natya, the Angika and Satvika abhinaya predominates. The Aharya abhinaya finds a

very restricted place. The Vachika Abhinaya does not find any place.

While the Angika Abhinaya deals with movements of hands (Mudras or Hastas) and other parts of the body to convey a certain meaning, the Satvika abhinaya consists of mostly facial expressions appropriate to the inner feelings that the dancer attempts to depict. So far as the Aharya abhinaya is concerned, the dancer is not supposed to put on costumes and make up according to the character that, he depicts. It is mostly through the Angika and Satvika abhinaya that the appropriate depiction is accomplished.

Natya

Dramatic element in Bharata Natya is not as subdued as made out by many. Depicting different characters on the stage through the medium of different types of Abhinaya, could be taken to fall under the category of Natya, to a considerable extent. Of course in the traditional Solo dance repertory, there is limited scope for Natya element in its wider sense. Here, only the miming aspects of the Natya, the Angika and the Satvika Abhinayas, find extensive use. The Solo dancer, only through gestures and moods, very often depicts more than one roles. This is certainly drama

element.

Another dramatic or Natya element seen in Bharata Natya programmes, is of a more recent origin. An innovation by Rukmini Devi, followed later on by many other exponents, the dance is performed by two, three or even, four artists, and it is not uncommon to find depiction of a theme--an event or a situation, involving more than one dancer. This is done mostly through Angika and Satvikabhinaya, but even the Aharyabhinaya could also be brought in. By ^{and} ~~en~~large the Vachika Abhinaya the most important requisite of Natya, is not used traditionally.

It is now widely accepted that the dance-drama forms of Andhra (Kuchipudi) and Tamilnad (Bhagvat Mela) are the varieties of Bharata Natya and according to many authorities, these represent the original form, out of which the Solo Dasi-Attam has evolved. These dance-dramas predominate in Natya element. The dramatic aspects are interwoven with dance in these dance-dramas, and all the four types of Abhinaya, including Aharya and Vachika, find extensive use, side by side with dance.

The dance-dramas have been discussed at length in chapters to follow.

BHARATA NATYA REPERTOIRE

Ordinarily, a Bharata Natya programme means a series of Bharata Natya dance items . Traditionally a solo dance, it comprises following seven items, each coming in a fixed order.

1. Alaripu
2. Jathisvara
3. Shabda
4. Varna
5. Pada.
6. Thillana
7. Sloka.

Alaripu : Alaripu is the opening item, and serves as an invocal dance. The meaning of the word Alaripu is not precisely known, but it is supposed to mean enfoldment and flowering of the dancer's body and limbs. It is a short dance of pure Nritta with simple poses and movements accompanied by equally simple time and rhythm. In a way Alaripu is the most important item on the programme, since it contains all the root elements of dance and by this item the dancer introduces her proficiency in the form and technique.

Jathisvara: Jathisvara follows Alaripu, and again is an item of pure dance (Nritha), more difficult than the former. It comprises a sequences of rhythmic Jathis and does not convey any mood or sentiment. Vocal accompaniment consists of successive passages of Sollukkatu and swara and the dancers movements, alternate crisp rhythms with smooth flowing melodic interludes.

Sabda: Sabda is an abhinaya item. It is generally a short piece, performed with accompaniment of a song, and is designed to introduce the element of abhinaya in to the programme. The song (Sahitya) is generally in praise of the glory of god or king. The dance begins with a brief prelude of pure dance movements a thirmana, immediately followed by the song. This song is interrupted by a passage of Nritha which serves as interlude.

Varna: Varna is the most elaborate and difficult item consisting of both Nritha and Nritya. It is the piece-de-resistance, seeking to bring out the best in pure dance and abhinaya. As such it represents a tremendous display of virtuosity embracing exquisite melody, complex dance patterns and subtle interpretation. The form of Varna is roughly the alteration of nritha and nritya, floods of pure dance sequences released between

long passages of song interpretation.

Pada: Pada, an item of exclusively abhinaya, generally follows Varna. It is a relatively slow item of leisurely exposition of abhinaya. Padas are generally short seven line lyrics in Tamil, Telugu or Sanskrit, the meanings of which are danced by means of gestures and expressions.

Thillana: Thillana takes its name from the North Indian musical composition Tarana. It is generally the final number, an item of pure dance (Nritha). The Thillana is considered the most beautiful piece of dance with a number of alluringly sculpturesque poses and variegated patterns of movements, executed with grace and elegance. Almost every adavu is rendered in two or three tempos, to bring out the beauty of poses and scintillating thirmanams. Towards the end of a Thillana generally there is a line of praise for god or King. Other than this, there is no abhinaya.

Sloka: Sloka is the concluding item, a piece of abhinaya rendered on a brief Sanskrit Sloka. Without rhythm or music, the dancer stands quietly and acts out with her hands and eyes the meaning of the Sloka.

MUSIC, ORCHESTRA AND COSTUMES

Since Bharata Natya has evolved in Tamilnad, its music accompanying is of South Indian Karnatak style, and in this dance, the music plays quite a dominant role. It is fairly obvious that much of the dance has stemmed from music and many of the dance items of a Bharata Natya programme are musical terms. The traditional orchestra, even in its modern form, comprises mridangam, flute, string instrument (formerly Veena or now violin). The mridangam is the core, most important instrument. Bharata Natya orchestra is led by the principal singer - generally the Guru and Nattuvanar who conducts the entire orchestral proceedings with the help of the Talams. () The Nattuvanar is the centre of the orchestra.

So far as the costumes are concerned the traditional dress worn by Devdasis consists of a pyjama on legs and a sari wrapped round the upper part of the body. The costume now a days very common and popular consists of a specially designed saree that is put on over not so long pyjamas and short sleeved choli. The dress designed by Rukmini Devi is the most popular and attractive and it will be discussed later.