

CHAPTER - VCONTRIBUTION TO NRITTA AND NRITYADISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF KALAKSHETRA STYLE

Today all over the country several noted Gurus and Nattuvanars are teaching Bharata Natya, and many of their pupils have attained considerable popularity and publicity. But out of these artists, a dancer trained at Kalakshetra can be easily marked out by a distinct stamp of a unique style and training. It may be rather difficult to precisely define the special features of the Kalakshetra style of Bharata Natya, but in a general way it can be said to be characterised by three main features.

1. The crispness and precision of various movements.
2. Distinctive and exclusive positions of shoulders, elbows, hands and feet.
3. Very rigorous training.
4. Complete elimination of erotic and sensual elements.

Rukmini Devi having learnt the art under noted

teachers, evolved a style of her own. As she emphasised the Bhakti element in Bharata Natya, she has so improvised a technique that typically radiates astuteness and sublimity.

Considering both the Nritta and Nritya aspects, the Kalakshetra style of Rukmini Devi, typically shows following characteristics.

1. An erect posture, with no undue bending of the body at any angle.
2. Shoulders kept straight, neither raised nor stopped.
3. Movements of hands always flowering out in line with shoulder, and all positions of hands and feet in balanced straight lines.
4. No breaking or bending of elbows and wrists.
5. Hip movements avoided.
6. All angles made by hands and feet so precisely laid down that there will not be a slightest variation between two or more Kalakshetra artists.

The author has endeavoured to explain the above aspects with the help of a few illustrations. She has

selected a few 'Adavus' and Nritya poses, to bring out the special features of Kalakshetra style.

With the help of five main Adavus an attempt has been made to highlight the obvious differences in the styles of presentation. Plate V 1 and 2 illustrate two Nattadavus as performed by two different artists. One, Smt. Saroja²¹ a pupil of Mutthukumar Pillai, the other Kum. Lalitha a student of Smt. Anjali Merh. In the first one, the poses of latter clearly show (i) Straight hands (ii) No twisting of wrists or bending of knees and (iii) a rather subdued overall curvature of the body. In another Nattadavu the same features can be clearly seen, of course with different positions of hands and feet. Further there is difference in the position of the head. Instead of throwing the head backward, in Kalakshetra style, the head is kept erect, Another characteristic is that instead of Aindra mandala, there is Ekpada Sthanaka without any curvature of the body.

The difference in the style of presentation is brought out quite clearly in the Adavu ''Tat Tai Tam''.

The Plate V 3 illustrates the Adavu as performed by Smt. Indrani, Rehman,²² (Student of Chokkalingam Pillai), Smt. Saroja²³ and Kum. Lalitha. Here in addition to the

PLATE V. 1



Smt. Saroja



Seventh Nattadavu



Kum. Lalitha



Smt.



Kum. La



aroja



litha

ttadavu

PLATE V. 3

Smt. Saroja



Tat Tai Tam Adavu



Kum. Lalitha

difference in the positions of hands, feet and wrists, one more striking variation is that in the position of the 'Griva' and the face is fully turned towards the hand, in the third one, the dancer has a half turned face at a very graceful angle.

Almost identical variations so far as the breaking of wrists and the position of head are concerned, can be seen in 'Kudittu Mel¹tu' Adavu. Plate V 4 shows the difference.²³

The Adavu 'Tat Tai Ta Ha' illustrated in the Plate V 5 shows Smt. Saroja²⁴ and Kum. Lalita again. It brings out the conspicuous difference and the characteristics of a Kalakshetra dancer. The latter performs the Adavu, keeping the hands, shoulders, neck and elbows in such harmonious positions that the total posture always exhibits a blending of straight lines at various angles.

The distinctive stamp of Rukmini Devi pervades in Nritya also. One can discover the subtle differences between the Kalakshetra and the other styles only by seeing the actual performance. A few selected illustrations of Nritya poses will very clearly show the difference. Plate V 6 depicts a beautiful woman or Nayika. One is that of danseuse

PLATE V. 4

Smt. Indrani Rehman



Kum. Lalitha

Kuditta , Mettu Adavu

PLATE V. 5

Smt. Saroja



Kum. Lalitha

Tat Tai Ta Ha Adavu

PLATE V. 6

Ratnapapa

Kum. Gauri



Nritya - A Beautiful Woman

Ratnapapa²⁵ (a student of Smt. Sarasa, herself a disciple of Guru Ramayya Pillai) and other photograph is that of Kum. Gauri (a student of Anjali Merh). Plate V 7 shows a King, while Plate V 8 shows Lord Krishna. The former is depicted by Anuratha Govindachan²⁶ (student of Ramaiah Pillai) and Kumari Gauri, while the latter shows Aditi Mehta²⁷ (student of Smt. Jayalakshmi Alva). The differences are quite obvious in gestures and postures.

NRITTA

To Rukmini Devi goes the credit of introducing a methodical approach to the teaching and execution of the various Nritta items. She not only systematised the teaching of Adavus, but also introduced quite a few new ones also. She enriched the Bharata Natya repertoire by composing a number of new Thirmanans, Jathisvarams and Thillanas. Her contribution in this direction has been briefly discussed in the following pages.

Adavus

Rukmini Devi for the first time introduced a systematic teaching of all the Adavus, in a fixed sequence. Earlier, the traditional teachers and Gurus preferred to teach in such a manner that the learning of Adavus was not

PLATE V. 7



Anuradha Govindachari



Kum. Gauri

Nritya - A King

PLATE V. 8

Aditi Mehta



Kum. Gauri

Nritya - Lord Krishna

in any fixed sequence, but was based on the requirement of a particular dance item which the pupil was learning. So the Adavus were taught itemwise, and as a result, a dancer would be able to learn only those Adavus which were needed for performing the various items of Nritta, they wished to learn and perform. This in turn, gave rise to considerable variations in the content of teaching between one Guru and the other. As an examples may be taken two artistes learning from two different teachers. One may have learnt Alarippu and Kalyani Jathisvaram, while the other may have learnt Alarippu and Saveri Jathisvaram. On comparison it will be seen that the two will have learnt different sets of Adavus within the same training period. Even the same Jathisvaram composed by two different teachers may contain different sequences of Adavus.

Rukmini Devi made a very critical study of the various Adavus, and worked out a logical sequence based on increasing complexity of movements. Starting with simple movements of feet, gradually the artiste is introduced to increasing varieties in hastas, and then finally all combinations of hands, feet, shoulders, neck, head, eyes and total posture. The sequence of Adavus worked out by her, and now followed by most of the Bharata Natya teachers is as under.

- (1) Tatta
- (2) Natta
- (3) Ta Tai Tai Tat
- (4) Kudittamittu
- (5) Tat Tai Tam.
- (6) Tat Tai Ta Ha.
- (7) Taiya Taiyi
- (8) Tadiginatom
- (9) Kitatakadharikitatom
- (10) Tai Tai Dhata.
- (11) Dhitaindata Tai.
- (12) Mandi.
- (13) Sarrikal
- (14) Takkita
- (15) Tai Tai Tai Tai Dhi Dhi Tai.

Rukmini Devi has also introduced variations in a number of Adavus. The most conspicuous ones pertain to Mai Adavu , Natta Adavu and Ta Tai Tai Tat adavu. The Mai adavu in the Natabhairavi Thillana composed by her varies in respect of hasta, and feet. In addition to the conventional Alapadma, Chatura, Kapitha hastas, the Chandrakala Hasta is also introduced. Simultaneously with the Hasta, the feet are alternately raised (Plate V 9). In Paras Thillana composed by her, Nattadavu incorporates Swastika Pada (Plate V 10). In Todi Varnam (Rupamu Juchi),

PLATE V. 9

Chandrakala Hasta in Mei-adavu

PLATE V. 10

Swastika Pada in Seventh Nattadavu

Rukmini Devi has introduced Rama hasta in Ta Tai Tai Tat Adavu (Plate V 11).

In the her various Dance Dramas, Rukmini Devi has introduced a number of new Adavus; each pertain to the character being depicted. For example in Ramayana, Jatayu is shown performing Adavus with ^{Doia Hasta and 28} Garuda Hasta (Plate V 12). Similarly, in the same dance-drama, Adavus performed by the 'Apsaras' have been so constructed that the dancers seem to float and give an impression of their dance being performed in space. The dance-drama Krishnaman Kuravanji includes Adavus that resemble snake movements. These snake like movements though fully simulate the forceful movements of a snake, yet totally avoid vulgur hip movements.

New Tirmanams

Rukmini Devi has composed a large number of Tirmanams exclusively for the items performed by the Kalakshetra artists. Her Tirmanams always indicate a new and purposeful approach. Unlike the routine inclusion of certain Tirmanams in various dance items, She has composed exclusive Tirmanams appropriate to the theme and character being depicted. This pertains more to the numerous Tirmanams in her dance-dramas. For example, in Ramayana, Surpanakha enters the stage with

"*किंकिडं विकिंकिडं विरिंकिडं विरिंकिडं भ्रमं चरिं किटलकं*",

PLATE V. 11

Rama Hasta in Ta Tai Tai Tat Adavu

PLATE V. 12

(a)



(b)

(a) Dola Hasta and (b) Garuda Hasta

"Takkida dhikkida dhinnakkitta dhinnakkita jhamtari
kitataka".....

A Tirmanam whose Shollu Kattus are hard and suitable
for the character of a demon.

Also it is noteworthy that she rarely repeats her
Tirmanams. For each production or item, she composes always
new Tirmanams. Only those who know this art, can appreciate
how difficult is this achievement

NRITYA

To Nritya aspect too, Rukmini Devi has contributed
substantially. Her Nritya innovations can be grouped as
under:-

- (1) Borrowed gestures (Aastas and eye movements) from
Kathakali.
- (2) Created new gestures.
- (3) Totally eliminated erotic and sensual elements from
all her Nritya items.

Gestures borrowed from Kathakali

In many of her Nritya compositions, Rukmini Devi
has adopted Kathakali gestures sometimes when appropriate
gestures in Bharata Natya are not available, or the
Kathakali gestures are more suited to the theme of Nritya.

Bharata Natya does not provide appropriately elaborate gestures for many day to day subjects of life. Especially, the description of the natural beauty of forests, ponds, lotus, bees etc. find much better expression through Kathakali gestures. By incorporating these and many others, Rukmini Devi has considerably enriched the Nritya element in Bharata Natya.

The Kathakali style also has its origin in the Natya Shastra, so she did not find it difficult to incorporate Kathakali element in her Bharata Natya and this she did without sacrificing the traditional aspect as well as the aesthetic beauty of Bharata Natya.

Though, it is not possible to provide a full and complete list of the Kathakali gestures. Plate V 13 illustrates the point. It depicts different elements of a forest with a pond.

- (a) Branch of a tree, flower bud and deer
- (b) Fish in a pond, Lotus and monkey.

Another Nritya aspect which Rukmini Devi borrowed from Kathakali is in respect of facial expressions, particularly the usage of eyes and eye-brows. By tradition in Bharata Natya the Viniyoga of Drishti (eyes) and Brukuti (eye-brows) are done in rather subdued manner--both in Lokdharmi as well as Natyadharmi Abhinayas. Rukmini Devi

PLATE V. 13

Fish in a pond,

Lotus, monkey

Branch of a tree,
flower bud and deer



Kathakali Gestures

on the other hand, has utilised effectively exaggerated movements of eyes and eye-brows to convey the desired impact. For example, one of her most noted Sanchari compositions of Slokam from ''Krishnakarnamritam'' (Vadane Navnit Gandha Vahanam) depicts the various childish pranks of Lord Krishna, like that of stealing butter etc. as narrated by a devotee. Here the facial expressions play an important role and appropriately depict the various situations (Reader is referred to the photographs in the chapter on Dance--Dramas.)

New Gestures

Rukmini Devi in the course of composing various dance-dramas, also introduced numerous new gestures which did not find place originally in Bharata Natya. Though resembling to a certain extent to Kathakali gestures, they are her own innovations. Of course it is not possible to give a full and complete list of her innovated gestures, and the author has, described only a few to bring out the creative talent of Rukmini Devi. In the following lines, gestures finding place in her famous compositions a Varnam ''Rupamu Juchi'' and Shabdam ''Iyar Seriar'' have been given as representative innovations.

In the Pallavi part of the Varnam (second Kandikai) the artiste, while depicting the anger of Lord Siva and the burning of Manmatha, uses gestures that are traditionally

found neither in Bharata Natya nor in Kathakali. In the Anupallavi of the Varnam 'Tapa Traya Harudai..... the artist is expected to depict as following---

'The misery of living being starts from the moment it enters the womb. This misery is taken away by you O Lord! Even the sins committed in the previous birth and the resulting miseries are also removed by you.' Now, there are no appropriate gestures for (i) being in the womb and (ii) previous birth. Rukmini Devi has depicted these very appropriately as illustrated (Plate V 14). In the Charanam part of the Varnam 'Markoti Sundara Kara,' the Dinkara Hasta with an appropriate foot work, has been effectively improvised to depict the brilliance of Sun (Plate V 15). Similarly, the gestures of Sun and Moon going round the Isa (Lord), are also new gestures.

The Sabdam 'Ayar Seriar' also has many new gestures, e.g. (i) the graceful and swift running gait of a Gopi (ii) ~~Gopi taking bath~~ and (iii) grazing deer enraptured by the hypnotic flute of Krishna (Plate V 16). Such innovations are too many and beyond the scope of the present work.

A worth mentioning fact in this connection is, that such innovations initiated by Rukmini Devi provided a

PLATE V. 14

(i) Being in a womb

(ii) Previous birth



New Gestures

PLATE V. 15

Dinkar Hasta

PLATE V. 16



Grazing deer enraptured by the hypnotic flute of Krishna



The graceful and

swift running

gait of a Gopi

New Gestures

precedent to be followed by the subsequent dance exponents.

ASCENT ON BHAKTI

One of the major contribution of Rukmini Devi to Bharata Natya, as already stated earlier, is the upliftment of the dance form from a depth of moral and sensual degradation. In the course of last several centuries, dance having become the exclusive preserve of the Devadasis and courtesans, had degenerated into a vehicle of entertainment for Kings and noblemen, leaning heavily on Shringar Rasa. Even the devotional element in the various Nritya items were so composed and structured that they emphasized only the Shringar aspect, though depicting Radha-Krishna, or Shiva-Parvati themes. Under the pretext of depicting these themes, the dancers in reality performed to please their Kings and benefactors. Bharata Natya, thus danced in the temples, courts and marriage functions, had thus degenerated itself.

Rukmini Devi, took upon, herself the difficult task of uplifting this art, and the first thing that she did was the wholesale reintroduction of Bhakti element in the purest and noblest form. Shringar was pushed to background. The spiritual and divine aspects of the Radha and Krishna themes, completely devoid of the cheap sensual and

erotic elements, were brought back to the forefront. This in fact, is her greatest contribution to Bharata Natya.

As such Bharata Natya has always been a dance of dévinity, a vehicle of expressing human devotion to the Almighty. All its items abound in Sahitya dealing with one or the other events pertaining to Lord Shiva or Krishna. The degeneration of this art, brought in its wake, a conspicuous change in the attitude of the dancers, and their exposition of this art. The Dasis chose to perform items which would entertain their patrons, and quite often to cater to their baser instincts. Devotional themes were interpreted through such gestures which could hardly be considered respectable much less devotional. The entire concept of the Lord and the Devotee was depicted as that of Nayaka and Nayika, and accordingly the gestures for the words of the songs were presented. Rukmini Devi brought back the original devotional meaning. An example here will adequately illustrate the point.

Bharata Natya dancers are all familiar with the famous Tamil Varnam 'Sakhiye. inde..... which when translated in English reads as under.

'Friend do not torment me with playfulness
Delay not, bring my beloved unto me.'

'Lead to me the Divine One who bears the conch
and the discus that I may dance with Him in ecstasy in
the white radiance of the moon on the earth covered with
falling flowers.'

'O beautiful one | I burn with love for my Lord.
Tormented am I with the arrows of Kama.'

'The night is long and the sweet song of the Kuyil
is heard. In my unhappiness I need the soft speech of your
consolation.'

'Friend, ask my Lord to come that, adorned with
fragrant flowers, I may dance with Him to the sound of sweet
music.'

The depiction of this Varnam, on taking the literal
meaning of the words tends to be full of Shringara element,
but the interpretation given by Rukmini Devi, has completely
shifted the emphasis to Bhakti. The same theme when presented
in Shringara and Bhakti differs so much.

She interpreted the words of the song differently with appropriate gestures and at places, even the interpretation of the words were made differently. The net result was that a love theme as above, depicted not the Nayaka-Nayika theme but yearning of a Devotee for the Lord.

Kritis of famous saint poets of South India in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit, like those of Gopal Krishna Bharati, Arunachala Kaviyar, Varaguna Pandya, Ghanam Sinayya Kshetraya and Thyagaraja were revived by Rukmini Devi, and now they find a prominent place in the Bharata Natya repertoires of Kalakshetra. In this context Thyagaraja Kritis need special mention. The devotional songs of the saint poet were never danced by the Dasis. It is said Thyagaraja disliked the degraded form of the dance in his days and hence, he was always averse to the dancers also. Rukmini Devi for the first time realised the depth and beauty of his compositions and used them in Bharata Natya. Following her, other dancers have also now started performing on the devotional themes.

Thyagaraja was a devotee of Lord Rama and on his various devotional poems abhinaya items have been composed by Rukmini Devi. The more famous devotional compositions (Padams) of Thyagaraja over which Rukmini Devi has composed dance are --

'Rara Sita ramani manohara -- Rupaka Tala - Hindol
 Vasatha Rag
 'Ela - m - daya - Adi Tala - Atana Rag.
 'Nannil - Vidach - Trisra Tripata Tal -
 Ritigaula Rag.

GROUP ITEMS

Traditionally, Bharata Natya has been a Solo dance, a single artiste performing all the Nritha and Nritya items. Rukmini Devi introduced a change in the tradition, and started presenting more than one dancers at a time, performing various items in twos and threes, and even in larger groups. By this innovation, she made the dance more picturesque and attractive. The various Nritha items (like Alaripu) (Plate V. 17), Jathisvaram (Plate V.17), Thillana (Plate V.18). etc.), when danced by more than one artiste in complete harmony and unison, create certainly a more profound impact on the audience. Moreover, it is in group items, that the training and proficiency of each artiste is easily judged. All the participating dancers have to be so perfect that at one particular moment of dance, all have the exactly identical postures, so much so that one gets the feeling of a single dancer performing that item.

In Nritya too, group items have been composed. Here

PLATE V. 17

Jathiswaram performed in Group

PLATE V. 18

Thillana performed in Group

she has introduced two variations. In one, all the dancers depict the same character, while in other they may depict different characters (Plate V.19).

The other experiment in group dancing pertains to the dance-dramas, and these have been discussed in the next chapter.

PLATE V. 19

(i) Kum. Gauri and
Kum. Trusha depicting
the same character
(Nayika)

(ii) Kum. Lalitha and
Kum. Gauri depicting
different characters
(Yashoda and Krishna).



Abhinaya in Group