



Chapter - 1

Bharatanatyam: A Short Historical Overview



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When one is examining a dance form that traces its antiquity back to numerous centuries, it is only natural that considerable effort is spent on addressing its historical development. This takes us back over the hundreds of years as it struggled, evolved and enriched itself to reach the form it presents to us today. Such an effort is even more important when one considers that the dance form was an integral part of an oral tradition. This oral tradition was constantly adapting, creating and re-orienting itself to suit the needs of the age and circumstance, to help itself and its practitioners to survive. When classically structured formats of dance and its related music are handed down as part of an oral tradition, an elaborate and technically detailed study becomes necessary to help us understand their present state. This is even more important if we are modern practitioners of that dance form ourselves and intend to pass on these traditions to future generations.

The antiquity of the classical Indian dance traditions has already been proved beyond doubt. Such evidence is available from existing *Sanskrit* classical texts, copious references to dancers and dance in regional and classical literatures and travelogues, temple sculptures and inscriptions on public monuments, dance expressions of Bharatanatyam in murals, paintings, songs and musical traditions. Even though the present form is of relatively recent origin, it represents a continuous, if occasionally eclipsed, tradition traceable to distant past. The *Tolkappiyam* of Tamil *Sangam* literature (early centuries AD) as well as *Shilappadikaram* (ca.600AD) testify to a variety of dance

traditions that flourished in Tamil society. There are several evidences in literary texts such as the *Natyashastra* of *Bharata*, *Sangita-Ratnakara* of *Sarangadeva*, *AbhinayaDarpana* of *Nandikeshwara* and the sculptural and painting traditions of ancient and medieval India supporting the hypothesis that what we see as Bharatanatyam today, a solo dance is recognizably the same dance that previously formed part of both religious and secular celebrations in south India.

From available records, it has become apparent that most of our classical dance traditions drew sustenance from royal and temple patronage. The support was not just in terms of money and land but also in applauding the dancer's innate skill and talents. The dancers, and their gurus, thus nurtured and continued to practice their art. Today Bharatanatyam is one of the most popular, highly respected and acknowledged classical dance forms of the country. The dance form was handed down by the *Nattuvanars* (*gurus*) and the *Devadasis* (dancers) through the oral tradition. The *Nattuvanars* added



Devadasis of Chidambaram

their own interpretations to the existing treasure of compositions and choreography and the dancers embellished these further with their individual talents. This enriched the dance form and prevented it from stagnation. It encouraged the absorption of new influences, integrating them in the dance as it went along, sustaining a vibrant performing tradition in its wake.



Devadasis by Tilly Kettle

The *Devadasi* and her dance, and the *Nattuvanar* and his teaching are without doubt, very important links in how Bharatanatyam in its traditional form has come down to us. In fact, they were the first professionals in this performing art to hone their artistic and performing skills to high levels of competence and perfection so that they could earn a decent living from the practice of their art. But how did they pass on their art, in the oral tradition, from one generation to the next? Had they developed a system of notation, which could have been written down or memorized? Can answers be found in the available

literature on the technique of the dance? Were the techniques modified from time to time to suit the demands of society? There is an urgent need to examine whatever documentation is available to us to throw light on these issues and show us the way.

There are many kind of sources which testify to the presence of *Devadasis*



Sarbendra Bhopala Kuravanji, Tanjore Temple

from one end of India to the other. Perhaps the earliest mention to these women is by Kalidasa who refers to them being attached to the *Mahakala* temple of *Ujjain*. There is a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim report on *Devadasi* in Multan in the 7th century. Later Marco Polo, and a Portuguese traveler named *Paes* and various Muslim accounts, refer to the system of *dasis* attached to the temples and rituals, as observed by them in their travel accounts.

Scholars believe that the present-day style and presentation of *Bharatanatyam* can be traced back to the “*Ekaharya Lasyang*” a performance where a single dancer, with the same *Aharya* i.e. costume, make-up, setting etc. plays many roles in a song. As an example, in the *Kirtanam* “*ni uriappa Hanumane na....*” the dancer plays role of *Rama*, *Hanumana*, *Sita* all in the first line itself. Because here it is *Rama* telling *Hanumana* the way to introduce himself as the messenger of *Rama* to *Sita* in the *Ashoka Vatika*. Though the solo dance was the only one of the many dance forms prevalent in South India, practiced by the *Devadasi*, *Rajadasi* or *Alankardasi*, her technique followed the patterns practiced, refined and used for ages. The only difference between the three was that of the attitude. The literary content of some of the pieces was different. The dance of the courts did come to have passages in which the king rather than the deity was being adored. But none of these differences was important from the point of view of the development of the essential dance technique.

Bharatanatyam enjoyed both temple and royal patronage. This helped it flourish and develop over many centuries. It was popularly known as

Dasiattam in Tamil Nadu, the main state in south India to support this dance form. In earlier times any dance activity was also known as “*Koothu (Kuttu)*”. *Dasiattam* meant dance of the *Dasis*. They were women ‘married’ to the temple deity and they were hence known as *Devadasis*. As such it was the temple’s duty to look after them. In turn, they offered dances in praise of the God of the temple, especially on various religious festivals and *utsavs* celebrated by the temple. Because the Lord was her husband, the *devadasi* was always looked upon as auspicious – *nityasumangali*. They occupied an important position in the society because of their wealth, power, skill, charm as well as literary and artistic taste. One of her important duties was to perform the *arati* ceremony, an important religious ritual in the temple.

The *devadasi*’s training began at a very tender age. For training, the public demonstration of skill in her art, subsequent to apprenticeship to her teacher was the necessary preliminary to a professional career. The *Arangetram* or the initiation ceremony, was arranged after five to seven years of vigorous training not only in dance but in music as well from the guru and other experts. For initiation, a special ceremony of marriage was arranged for the *devadasi* which marked entrance into the profession and was compulsory for the attainment of privileges associated with temple. The *devadasi* was ‘dedicated’ or married to the temple deity before the onset of puberty. Celibacy was demanded on her part by prohibiting her access to the *grihastha* way of life. The ceremony of initiation into the temple simultaneously declared a woman’s availability for liaisons with patrons as permitted by the

temple. But it was not necessary for the male artiste to observe and go through the same rules of initiation. They could marry and lead a regular life.

The *devadasi*'s main function in the temple was to perform her dance. The deity was honored and worshipped with dance which was listed as the fifteenth in the sixteen ritualistic acts of homage supposed to be paid to the deity. The State Inscriptions of *Pudukkottai* (1929 :20, no.169) includes an inscription dating to the reign of *Kulottunga* III (1205-18) which refers to fixed structures of time during the day when the *devadasis* presented the dance in temples and which dancer could dance when. "When the Brahmin priest did the *puja* the dasis performed the same actions using hand gestures to show the bell, the light, the fly whisk, etc."¹.

By *Chola* times, the *devadasis* became a part of a distinct caste. The biological or adopted daughters of the *devadasi*-s were trained in music and dance from an early age and followed their mother's occupation of temple service. The sons were trained from boyhood to become *Nattuvanars*-teachers, directors and musical accompaniments to dance. Performance was restricted to women, the conduction of the dance as also its teaching was in control of men – the *nattuvanars*. Both were sponsored and protected with generous grants from the temple, court, nobles and wealthy merchants. There are records that indicate that the dancers and the *nattuvanars* enjoyed great respect and honor from their royal and temple patrons and the common public. They also enjoyed privileged positions in the social hierarchy and their dance was greatly appreciated. It is common knowledge that in the 12th century,

Rajendra Chola, the *Tanjore* ruler ordered four hundred temple dancers to be brought from the nearby places to be attached to the *Brihadisvara* Temple in *Tanjore*, which was the main Shiva shrine in the kingdom. The inscription recording the event names all the temples, both *Saivite* and *Vaishnavite*, that had dancers attached to them.

The dance traditions which developed around the city of *Tanjore* made it a focus of culture in south India and its influence was extensive, spreading over



The Tanjore Nautch Party

several centuries. Generous patronage to musicians and dancers by the *Tanjore* court, and the *Brihadisvara* and other temples in *Tanjore* attracted very good performers. There is hardly a *Chola* temple and *Chola* inscription which does not refer to the temple dancers, some of the more distinguished among them even by name. The *Chola* kings who established the tradition of the temple-supporting dancers was carried on, nurtured and sustained by successive *Pandya*, *Nayaka* and *Maratha* rulers right till the end of the 19th century. *Sadir* was part of the bhakti worship without which no major shrine

could function. It can also be strongly assumed that the *Bhakti* movement (11-12th centuries), the *Vaggeyakaras*, the poet-saints, the sundry composers and musicians helped keep the dance alive.

It was during the Maratha rule (1674-1854) that the dance of the *Devadasis* in the temples moved into the court of the kings. The dance became a kind of formal presentation and its name changed accordingly to *Sadir* or *Sadir Kacheri* from the Marathi word, '*sadir*' which means 'to present' This change



Devadasis Gawri and Kantimathi

of name being indicative of the change in public attitude to the performance too. This word obviously had courtly connotations – a dance to be presented before kings or royalty. The praises sung and danced here were no longer in favour of the temple deity only, but of the king as the provider and protector of his people. Very often, there was really no distinction between the court

dancers and the temple dancers, as a number of important temple complexes were themselves patronized by the rulers.

A path-breaking development took place in the history of this dance form during the time of Maratha ruler, *Raja Sarfoji II* (1798-1832). He was a scholar and patron of fine arts, music and dance. His active interest in literature led to the establishment of the *Saraswati Mahal Library* at *Tanjavur*. In his time in *Tanjavur*, four famous musicians and dance gurus, *Chinnaya*,



The Tanjore Quartet

Ponnaiya, *Shivanandam* and *Vadivelu*, the sons of *Nattuvanar Subbaraya*, the court musician of *Tulaja*, shaped the Bharatanatyam Margam as we know it today. This *Margam* includes *Alarippu*, *Jathiswaram*, *Sabdam*, *Varnam*, *Padam/Javali*, *Tillana* and *Shloka*. Many of these dance items were composed specially by *Ponnaiya Pillai*. As he was a musician, the names for the dance items follow those of musical forms. They are also generic terms, for there can be numerous *varnams*, *sabdams*, *tillanas*, each choreographed differently and what's more, each school of Bharatanatyam can interpret them to suit their style.

Just like the *gharanas* in the classical Indian music, different schools of Bharatanatyam developed because of the royal patronage or a distinguished guru. The major four schools were *Pandanallur*, *Mysore*, *Vazuvur* and *Tanjavur*. *Kalakshetra* got added after 1940-s. These schools are also known as *banis*. The features of different *banis* are apparent when one closely studies the emphasis on certain movements, rhythmic sequences, and modes of expression that highlight the strength of each one. Such recognizable traits are developed over a number of years by the great *nattuvanars* as well as the dancers of the *bani* that singles it out from the rest. They are continuously perpetrated by later *nattuvanars* and the dancers.

The *Tanjavur* school is often considered the most illustrious because much of the Bharatanatyam repertoire as it is practiced today was composed by their ancestors. The artistic skills to be a professional dancer were passed on within the family. *Pandanallur Minakshisundaram Pillai* was the amongst the most well-known of the *Tanjore* Quartet descendants. He and his family members have taught most non-hereditary dancers in 1940s, 50s, who then opened their own dancing schools such as *Mrinalini Sarabhai*, *Leela Ramanathan*, *Tara Chaudhury*, *Shanta Rao*, *Ram Gopal*, *U S Krishna Rao* and *Chadrabhaga Devi*, to name a few.

A study of inscriptions from south India also reveals that almost every major temple complex also maintained dancing masters or the *Nattuvanars*. These *Nattuvanars* came from traditional musician families with impressive credentials and these families were the best repositories of the art of

Bharatanatyam. The term ‘*nattuva*’ is seen in these inscriptions as also someone who actually conducted the dance performances in the temples. Thus the *Nattuvanar* was the most important member of the accompanying musical ensemble to the dance, proficient in teaching the dance, choreography and performance on every formal occasion, as well as being extremely well-versed in the accompanying music - the *sahitya* - *Bhava*, *Raga*, *Tala*,. He was thus invaluable to the *Nartana Seva* in the temples. It was usual for two *Nattuvanars* to be a part of the ensemble, *chinnamelam*, at the time of the performance. While the apprentice *Nattuvanar* conducted the earlier, simpler items in the performance, the older *Nattuvanar* would take over the complex pieces, e.g. the *Varnam*.

There is no record to suggest that the *nattuvanars* followed any written or documented syllabi or choreography either for training or performance. It is believed that the best *Nattuvanars* composed on-the-spot or extempore. In such a creative situation, composition of the same item changed for each *devadasi*, making it almost difficult to perform it together. One of the reasons believed for such a strategy was that each *Devadasi* was ‘taught’ according to her capabilities and talent. R. Sathyanarayana gives a graphic image of the dance training in his book, *Bharatanatya, A Critical Study*⁴. He describes the rooms in the teacher’s homes where dance was taught, and its special features such as the floor which was of clay and mud, firm, smooth and level. This room was treated as the *sanctorum sanctum* of the house, shown all the reverence due to a temple and no footwear was allowed inside. The teacher

would mostly keep time and enunciate the rhythmic structure of the kinematics, rather than teach *abhinaya* or *nrtta*. The idea was ‘practice makes perfect’ and all concentration would be on rigorous practice. Sometimes his senior students would assist him in demonstration. The meaning of words of the *padam* or *varnam* or any item with *sahitya* would be explained during the practical training. The author has also focused attention on ‘*Abhyasa*’, a method of work-out to make all parts of the body supple, flexible and to bring them under voluntary control. The learning of dance involved the learning of music too.

Where the older generations were concerned, their training in dance and music was invariably the responsibility of a teacher who was generally a member of their own family. In most families with a tradition of teaching dance over several generations, the sons (future *nattuvanars*) studied exclusively with their fathers or with a blood relation. They were taught the basic dance steps and the vocal accompaniment. Training in *nattuvangam* was attained by conducting classes for the junior members of the family learning dance from the master. “Most dance teachers of the older generation had no professional qualifications other than their artistic credentials”. Uma Dandayudapani from a hereditary family is a university graduate. She commented on her relatives: “long ago in our family nobody studied or did anything else outside of the tradition, just music and dance. I don’t think they could read or write. From the moment they were five they were taught music or dance”⁵.

Very few traditional dance teachers actually got up and demonstrated the movements to their students. The *nattuvanars* taught the movements and provided the rhythmic accompaniment for the student by beating the *tattukuzi*.



Guru Muthukumaran Pillai Teaching M.K. Saroja



Gotipuas being Taught

Even today most of the teachers whether belonging to the traditional or non-traditional families, usually teach sitting cross-legged on the floor. The highly codified and symmetrical nature of the dance makes it possible to demonstrate the movements with one or both hands while remaining seated. For example as Shanta Rao, one of the best-known non-hereditary dancers of the early period of the revival explained: “In his teaching of this tradition, P S Minakshisundaram (of the Pandanallur school) would never demonstrate a movement or gesture for imitation by his pupils. He sat in the corner of the room beating the *tattukuzi*...sometimes his face would express joy, sorrow or love, according to the mood of the song...he might make the slightest gesture of the body or hands, giving one just a hint. It used to surprise me how much I could learn without following any actual movements demonstrated by the teacher”. Smt. Rukminidevi Arundale has also reported how Minakshisundaram would often have one or two of his senior students demonstrate, specifically his devadasi students, P. Jayalakshmi and P K Jivaratnam, for his benefit.

By the 19th century however, the *Devadasi* system had begun to face a number of problems. With the coming of the East India Company, the French, the Dutch and the Portuguese to India and their gaining political and economic power, the local rulers became increasingly impoverished. In such conditions dance and music lost their traditional patronage that stemmed from the court and the temple. With no patronage available, the *Devadasis* peddled their dance to whoever was willing to pay, resulting into gross corruption, degradation and finally moral turpitude. Under the British rule the status and fortunes of the *Devadasis* declined drastically. In many instances they were reduced to poverty and at times resorted to prostitution.

The wave of reforms that swept the country in the late 19th and early 20th century interpreted the *Devadasi* culture as symbolic of immoral behaviour without being sensitive to the fact that they were the final repositories of classical Indian dance forms that had come down from Vedic times. The Madras Legislative debates on the abolition of the *Devadasi* system and the controversy surrounding it, raged from 1920 to 1947. A number of influential people formed a reform movement in order to abolish the *Devadasi* system of dedicating the girls to temple. Such bills were introduced in several south Indian states in Mysore in 1910, Travencore in 1930 and finally in Madras Presidency (which included both Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh at that time) in 1947 when the *Devadasi* Act, banning the practice of dedicating young girls to temples was finally passed.

Until the 1920s, Bharatanatyam was exclusively practiced by the female members of the *Isai Vellala* community. It must be remembered that *Isai Vellala* is an honorific title adopted by members of this community only in 1948. According to Anne-Marie Gaston in *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*, the *Isai Vellala* families were totally involved with dance and music until the 1940s. By the 1940s and 1950s, many of these hereditary families stopped training their children in both dance and music. From the early 1950s to the late 1970s, few girls from the *isai vellala* families studied or performed the dance.

Along with the reform movement, there was simultaneously an awakening of interest towards Indian cultural practices. Members of the respectable Brahmin families such as Smt. Rukminidevi Arundale and E. Krishna Iyar, dedicated themselves whole heartedly to the rescue of the dance of the *dasis* from degradation and disrepute. In the 1930s, E Krishna Iyer (1897-1968), a lawyer, took on the cause of Bharatanatyam trying to encourage audiences to attend 'respectable' performances in Madras. He himself studied and trained to perform, wearing female costumes, his long-term goal being to involve high caste and influential social groups in their support for the dance. His efforts paid off when the first dance recital was presented by the prestigious Madras Music Academy by two devadasis, P K Jivaratnam and P K Rajalakshmi, on March 15, 1931. It was during this time that the non-hereditary dancer, Rukmini Devi, developed her vision of a more philosophical, less sensual dance, returning the spiritual qualities that the dance was supposed to have as a

temple dance. She was influenced by visionaries like Annie Besant the theosophist, was well-travelled and in close touch with international dancers like Anna Pavlova who encouraged her to study and learn classical dance from her own country. For the 'revivalist' Bharatanatyam to be properly created, Rukminidevi and others realized the fact that the basic technique of the original dance of the *devadasis* had to be acquired from existing hereditary nattuvanars and dancers, the *devadasis* themselves. She herself started learning dance from *Pandanallur Minakshisundaram Pillai* and founded the internationally acclaimed dance institution Kalakshetra in 1936.

The same time *Sadir* or *Dasi Attam* came to be known as Bharatanatyam, the dance of Bharata, India. This was the crucial juncture where the dance form moved from the earlier temple, then the court and now into the secular arena. By 1940s, it was successfully re-established as one of the India's most highly developed living art forms. Instead of temple or court, it now got performed in



Dancer on the stage

the theatres, halls, *sabha*-s. Most dancers came from higher castes, usually academically well educated, and often from wealthy and influential families. It is surprising to note that the teaching continued to be dominated by the men of the *isai vellala* community. They were perceived as the true repositories of authenticity because their families had been associated with music and dance for generations.

Some *devadasis* also taught, such as *Swarna Saraswati* (in Chennai and Delhi) and Mylapore *Gauri Ammal* (in Chennai) while establishing a dance school. But there was a self-imposed censorship in the items selected from their repertoire and style that they decided to teach since the *devadasi*'s dance was often full of erotic intent. At least one *devadasi* (*Kamalambal*) founded a school for Bharatanatyam in Tanjavur. Girls from the *isai vellala* community began to perform on stage as professionals. An important reason for the sustained interest in the art by these dancers and their families was believed to demand for performances outside the temple due to the revival movement. Several *devadasis* became prominent stage performers between 1930 and 1950. Some amongst these were *P. Kalyani*, *K Bhanumati*, *T Balasaraswati*. Most of the *nattuvanars*, having lost their *devadasi* pupils, turned to teaching dance to whoever was interested. Many *nattuvanars* moved out of their villages to the larger urban centers such as Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai and some of them even as far north as Delhi. A few worked at the film industry in Chennai since whenever the early Indian films featured dance it was usually classical. They also established their own schools or went to student's homes to give tuitions.

With the changed social system, there was a corresponding need for more teaching institutions as well as platforms for performance. The zeal to learn Bharatanatyam for girls from non-hereditary families in the pre-Independence era often had its source in the nationalistic emotion of their families, responding to pride in our own cultural calling and values. The first documented occasion on which three women conducted a dance recital was in 1943 in Kalakshetra, and they were Rukminidevi, Radha Bernier (dancer) and S. Sarada (musician and Sanskrit scholar). Today a number of women dancers - gurus conduct the recitals, with performing *nattuvangam*, run schools and teach dance.

Moving from Temple to Theatre in the last almost 75 years, there have been tremendous changes in all the areas of this dance form from the points of view of communication, structure, content, theme, presentation, technique, teaching. One sometimes wonders whether it is the same dance form. It became more



Devadasi Swarnasaraswati



Prof. Dr. Parul Shah

democratized and received the full-hearted support of the upper middle class. Bharatanatyam became one of the most attractive classical dance styles to learn, not only in India but also abroad where the Indian diaspora has spread. Added plus points included the dance's technical advancement and its hoary lineage of a temple art.

Basically as part of temple ritual offering to the god, the dance communicated *bhakti* and devotion of the community as well as the power and wealth of the royal patron and the temple authorities through the medium of the *Devadasi*. People went to the temple daily, as well as on the occasions of festivals. It was a religio-social center of Hindu activity where dance was an integral part and where it was watched with a religious feeling. Here the prime importance was not the dancer but the dance. Now on the secular concert stage, the communication is of an individual to the self and the supreme; there is a personal involvement of the artist with herself and the audience. The audience is always watching a specific dance as well as the dancer. So the dance and the dancer become equally important and mesh into each other. Though the dancers often have an image of the god in a corner of the stage and the stage becomes a temple floor, it still does not correspond to the same feeling and ambience of the temple.

As the dance moved out of the Temple and the Court and onto the more secular Art Stage, the need for technical development, precision as well as the ability to reach out to a large and at times uninitiated audience increased. The actual dance space in the temple was limited, the performance area had people watching from perhaps all sides and at close range. Now there are large halls,

with performance areas of 20'x 30' at least. The audience at such a performance, may often come with little or no idea of what to expect, they may not necessarily be from and of the same cultural context, and are expected to sit and watch the formal time-bound presentation. In this context the preparation that the performer is required to do multiplies manifold. This includes well-structured and disciplined training not only in the dance form but also in the areas of aesthetics, production values and stage presentation. Without losing the ethos of the art of Bharatanatyam, successfully reaching out to the audience, and being creative is the test of today's dance teachers and dancers. Earlier these roles were separated clearly in the *Devadasi-nattuvanar* system but are now no longer distinct. The dancer today is the teacher, choreographer, director, conceptualizer as well as the troupe manager. Without any temple or royal patronage, along with creative pursuits, the dancer herself needs to raise funds for sustenance and performances. Also, today's dancer may often be married with a family, as it is allowed in the secular art. These are added responsibilities. And yet the stigma of being a professional dancer continues to haunt. It is a paradox that most Indians want their daughters to learn dance. While Arangetral becomes a lavish family affair, dance is indulged in more as a hobby than as a serious career option.

With a number of prominent dancers and gurus establishing major dance institutions, with a few universities with long-term vision and understanding of the importance of art education, Bharatanatyam does stand on a solid ground. Its reach, awareness, popularity and serious study are being pursued as never before. However it has undergone many significant changes too. By

the early 1960s, Bharatanatyam had traveled outside southern India. To reach out to the other vast northern Indian sub-continent and across the seas, subtle changes started being incorporated in the teaching methodologies, performance context by using regional languages, group and dance-drama performances. Though performing a solo full-length program, most dancers now deviate from the structured “*Margam*” format. Different subjects, relevant to the modern times are often selected, using poems and *sahitya* of contemporary poets. The *Puranas* and *Epics* are reinterpreted with present relevance. The serious interest and need to understand India through its cultural traditions has prompted many youngsters to go in the field of dance research at a national and international level. Similarly in the present day and age, with globalization that allows easy access to dance data and information on television and the Internet, exchange of dancers between countries allows exposure to various dance forms and experimentations across countries. These may influence certain aspects of the dance form but the basic trunk is too strong for any movement to bend it out of shape.

When Bharatanatyam was performed as a form of worship in the temple or entertainment in the court, its parameters were limited and identified. Its



Tanjore Nautch Party at the Baroda Court

themes, content, vocabulary, presentation conformed to the limits of the ritualistic function it was supposed to perform. But as a 'performing art' form, presented on the stage, there came a major shift in perception of the dance and its aesthetics by both the dancer and the viewer or the *rasika*. The first need here was structuring an academic syllabi that would inform the theoretical and practical training of the student of dance, and which would be spread over an institutionally acceptable time frame. Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra made the first efforts to formulate a syllabi and structure the teaching to suit a classroom format without losing the essence of the dance. *Adavus*, the building blocks of Bharatanatyam's movements, were identified and correctly grouped according to body movements. This kind of structuring created a need for written notation of dance movements as well as the choreography of complete items as they are taught and learnt. The earlier dependence on oral tradition was no longer enough. The Department of Dance at the M.S. University of Baroda, the first of its kind, created courses from beginning Diploma level to the most serious study at the Doctoral level covering all aspects of dance both in practical and theory.

Being part of an oral tradition, nothing of Bharatanatyam that was performed and taught, or its *devadasis* and *nattuvanars*, hardly exists any more. Except for a few sculptures, paintings, support of technical texts, it seems that we have lost a major part of our performance heritage. For a student of Bharatanatyam sitting in New York or Tokyo, the need to see and feel the *abhinaya* of Balasaraswati or the teaching of *Pandanallur Minakshisundaram Pillai* is now just a dream. Yet, even now, nowhere is a proper and reliable documentation of

dance training or dance performances recorded. Students finish training and those who take it up seriously either as professional dancers or as teachers, rely on the notes they had made as students to carry them along.

There have been successful attempts in the West in the area of dance documentation through notation since at least the 15th century. Very little work in this area has been done in India, except a few, with majority of them just an beginning attempt; such as that by Shri G.Venu of Kathakali Hastas, Dr. Padma Subrahmaniam with using tonal musical notes, Prof. Judi Van Zile and associates with using Laban Notation etc. As dance is oral tradition and because of its ephemeral nature, one can never repeat what is done once. Also the common belief in many dancers, dance gurus, theorists and critics that dance documentation will take away the creative aspect of dance as well as the detailed, at times tiring and boring intense study has not been a very motivating factor for the most of the practitioners of the art to seriously attempt to create a notation system. But in our unawareness we have lost the vast heritage which will never be fully understood or recreated for the benefit of posterity. Dance documentation only provides the structure and technique of the dance but the *prana* can be breathed in by the performer only.

Notes:

1. Anne-Marie Gaston, Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre, pg.34
2. R. Sathyanarayana Bharatanatya, A Critical Study
3. Anne-Marie Gaston, Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre, pg.117
4. Ashok Chatterjee 1979, Dances of the Golden Hall, ICCR, pg.47
5. A. Shrinivasan, SNA Journal, Nov.1998, issue 129-130, p.14