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## **A Discourse on Understanding Dance and the Dancer: A Bharatanatyam Perspective**

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### **Abstract:**

Classical dance in India is well researched and studied both practically and analytically. But the cultural history of our nation is spread across centuries, there is abundance of information still under covers. Simultaneously, awareness on the significance of performing arts and its history is fragmented.

This paper is an exploration of a Bharatanatyam Dancer's journey from becoming a student of dance to a performing artist. Drawing from personal experiences and textual sources, it examines the gravity of understanding history and theory of Bharatanatyam and distinguishing the same from mythology. The article emphasises on building a student-

teacher association, the importance of foundational training in dance and the conviction needed to keeping one's mind open to the world around. The study contributes to understanding how classical dance remains fluid and adaptable despite structural codification.

## **Introduction.**

Learning of Indian performing arts, specially a classical dance or theatre form, can be done on different levels. In which, the student needs to keep themselves open to multiple convergent points for deeper exploration and understanding. This includes the history, tradition, culture, format, language, skill, craft, technique, creativity, etc.. All of these can be investigated separately but to be called a performing artiste, one needs to be equipped with more than a cursory understanding of all of the above streams. Considering Bharatanatyam as an example, as somebody becomes a student of the dance form, it includes informing oneself with several aspects of arts in general. Rooted in foundational treatises such as the *Natyasastra*, *Abhinayadarpana*, *Koothanool* etc, oral and performance traditions, Bharatanatyam represents a dynamic interface between aesthetics and embodied learning. Therefore, the route of approaching Bharatanatyam as a professional choice is evidently different from choosing it as a hobby with equal passion and curiosity.

Despite a growing body of studies and conversations addressing Bharatanatyam's historical trajectory, socio-political shifts and contemporary innovations within tradition, there remains a gap in literature that articulates the dancer's internal journey from student to performer in terms of embodied practice and pedagogical transformation. Adopting a mixed methodology, integrating qualitative, descriptive, and observational approaches, this paper investigates the process of learning, the synthesis of foundational training, theoretical grounding, performing and teaching Bharatanatyam in the contemporary times in comparison with the long standing tradition without undermining its values. It explores how dancers construct and reconstruct their identities through technique, mentorship, and performance, while negotiating tradition and contemporary demands. The ultimate aim of this paper is to have a discourse on the journeying into becoming a Bharatanatyam dancer.

## **Understanding classical dance tradition.**

Indian Classical Dance traditions owe their recordal origin to the period of *Natyasastra* accredited to sage Bharata. Being a treatise on dramaturgy, *Natyasastra* discusses dance and drama in an interlinked fashion. Vatsyayan observes, *"The theory of Indian dancing cannot thus be studied in isolation; it has always to be comprehended as a complex synthesis of the arts of literature, sculpture and music. The writer of the Natyaśāstra is fully conscious of the all-*

*embracing quality of the art of drama (natya, which includes dancing) when he states at the very beginning of his treatise that "this art will be enriched by the teaching of all scriptures (sastra) and will give a review of all arts and crafts."* (Kapila, Vatsyayan, 1968, p 23). This amalgamation of techniques and form makes the classical tradition unique and vibrant. In the Indian context 'Natya' (drama) comprises 'Nritya' (expressive dance). It establishes that dance as a solo tradition is deeply embedded with elements of theatre that is executed in a codified fashion. In the case of Dance, 'Nritya' and 'Nritya' (abstract dance) constitute the entire form. Nritya or the abstract dance technique is an element that is considered an aesthetic addition apart from being the initial training resource. But today, narrative aspects of Nritya are explored by practitioners who adhere to traditional texts and theories. This evolution of dance as a solo tradition points to the freedom that exists within art forms. One must also awake to the need of closely analysing the tradition itself in a rapidly transforming society.

Several treatises like Nandikeswara's Abhinayadarpanam, Arangetrukathai (Silappathikaram of Ilango Adigal), Sathanar's Koothanool, Jaya Senapati's Nrityaratnavali, Dharma Raja's Balaramabharatham have been written focusing on dance as well. For students of Classical dance, these records serve as valuable textbooks in their process of learning. One needs to understand that these treatises are all written documents on our practical and oral traditions. These traditions started to take shape before any of the written records came into existence and continued to evolve as they were being written. Henceforth, what we have are not rule books but records of what was once practised. This opens up avenues for experimentation and analysis for the practitioners of any art form. None of these documents restrict the dancer from engaging their creative muscle. Rather they set forth guidelines that could make the process of creation and learning that much more enticing. These guidelines have created a universal language and grammar for Bharatanatyam. Hence this form presents itself as cordial as its vocabulary has the capacity to be cemented yet fluid.

One can see that the history of Bharatanatyam is spanning across centuries and it possesses an inseparable relationship with the temple and royal traditions. But the time span between Natyasastric era and Sadir practising Devadasis is too huge to be comprehended. The mythological status of these documents stand in the way of proving the origin of Classical Indian arts scientifically. Verses that accredit the creation of Natya to Brahma and the ambiguity in its own period of origin are hard to bypass. Natyasastra reads, *"On hearing the request of the sages, Bharata began to explain the Natya Veda thus. Let the origin of the Natya Veda evolved by Brahma be heard by you all after being pure and attentive?"* (Board of scholars, 1986, p 1). One has to focus on the tangible data and anecdotes on traditions and practices for better understanding from a purely historical perspective. Oftentimes myth is

inseparably interwoven with history. This causes one to circumvent information from a scientific point of view. A practical ability to distinguish between myth, theory and practice is vital when embarking on exploring a dance tradition which has such a rich history. One has to develop the potential to decipher mythology to uncover concepts and theories to enrich the practice of the art form.

### **Dance technique and the individuality of a dancer.**

The universality one wishes to achieve in Bharatanatyam is often misinterpreted as rigidity in form and orthodox in its mentality. This can only be cleared with thorough analytical and practical understanding of the form. For performing arts the practise takes priority. The analysis of the form has to happen through this training and embodied practise. It is only when one performs the task at hand they truly begin to apprehend the notion behind a movement or an expression. The dancer's body becomes both the medium and the archive of tradition, technique, and personal expression. E. Krishna Iyer observes, "*The over-developed technique of the art, admirable as it is in much of the details of abhinaya and adavujathis has to be kept within limits and desirable proportions so as not to obscure or interfere with the natural grace of movements and poses*". (2006, p. 98). Even though this can be received or ignored as an opinion, the predominant flavours of any artform is best articulated when the foundational techniques are retained. These could be aspects like basic posture, alignment, exploration of space, rhythm, continuity, symmetry and asymmetry etc. Mere theoretical analysis without internalising on a practical level makes the performance of the dance form mechanical and lifeless. For example, when the same piece of choreography in Bharatanatyam is performed by two dancers it can look entirely different in its presentation and appearance. Vatsyayan says, "*The themes which the Indian dancer portrays are not only the raw material of literature, but are also the finished products of literary creation; the music which seems to accompany the dance is actually the life-breath of its structure and, indeed, dance interprets in movement what music interprets in sound; the postures and the stances it attains are the poses which the Indian sculptor models: all these the dancer imbues with a living spirit of movement in a composition of form which is both sensuous and spiritual*". (Kapila, Vatsyayan, 1968, p. 17). The movements performed, the emotion of the music and choreography can be identical in nature. Yet, the understanding of the body performing it brings in unique qualities. This identity is established through systematic training and discipline that leads the way to creating one's own process on and off stage. As a performing artist myself I have realised that the moments of analysis happen at random but when you are aware during practise. It may be the angle of your wrist for a certain 'adavu' (step), balancing of the body during difficult footwork or even the subtle movement of the eyes to achieve a Bhava during abhinaya. I might have danced these very same movements a hundred times before. Yet with every

practise there is a discovery of body placement. That sometimes becomes a domino effect uplifting the whole choreography. Or just correcting a long standing mistake. Either way it happens with internalised physical practise.

On another instance, when a dancer becomes an audience, critical or analytical review of the performance is part of the viewing experience. Rather than trying to absorb the aspects of physical presentation it is more valuable to interpret their inner dialogues and monologues that developed into their final performance. This way, one's uniqueness is maintained during performance yet there are multiple perspectives open for exploration minimising imitation of others and boosting one's creative attitude.

### **Importance of foundational training.**

Starting one's Bharatanatyam training at an early age can physically favour the dancer. But the aptitude and curiosity in any adult wanting to begin their practise will make up for the vigour they might lack compared to an eight year old. Vaiyapuri pillai explains that in Silappathikaram-Arangettru kaathai, “.....சில நாடக மகளிர் ஏழாவதாண்டு முதல் ஐந்து ஆண்டு நாட்டியத்திற் பயின்று அரசன் முன்பு தமது திறத்தினைக் காட்டி, அவனால் அபிமானிக்கப் பெற்றுத் 'தலைக்கோலி' என்ற பட்டம் பெற்றுத் தம் தொழிலிற் புகுந்தனர். இது மாதவி சரித்திரத்தால் நன்குணரப்படும்....” (எஸ். வையாபுரிப் பிள்ளை, 1995, 32)

Which explains that it is understood from Madhavi's history that some performing girls started dance training at the age of seven continuously for five years and exhibited their talents in front of the king and then were awarded “Thalaikoli” to become a dancer by profession. Starting to learn Bharatanatyam at the age of eight has made me analyse my understanding of the technique now. A younger mind grasps information without questioning the intent. Later as an adult those information paves way for a rock-hard foundation. Somebody who starts their learning process after eighteen does not have that luxury of the mind. As a Bharatanatyam teacher I spend more time explaining movement disposition to adult students. While children tend to focus more on the sequence and mimic their teacher in order to learn. Neither is good or bad but the latter is more efficient.

The aspirant's first task at hand is to find the right teacher. The different schools and styles of Bharatanatyam or any other classical form does not interfere with the learning process. But having a teacher who understands one's psychological and physical abilities and limitations, more than the student themselves, is a boon. If built with care and trust, that is a relationship which will uplift the experience for the both involved. The teacher should be confident enough to openly share and acknowledge their shortcomings and insecurities as a dancer. At the same time acquire an

assuring influence on the student in matters of training and rectification without letting them judge the teacher's abilities. The student on the other hand has a corresponding responsibility to learning. Preconceived notions and immature analysis can disrupt the training process. One has to completely, almost blindly, imbibe what is being taught, practise it enough for the body to memorise it and then get into movement analysis and inner meaning of the poetry of the choreography. Before questioning the patterns and portrayal in dance, the learning has to be completed. The trust in the teacher and the training process will prove to be vital as the student reaches an advanced level of learning. There is an unspoken but palpable understanding between the two. The student becomes proudly aware of the teacher's technique, making the process of learning come alive. The teacher grows confident of the student's abilities to bring life to their vision in mind. It is as precious as any other bond one forms in life.

The history of the temple dance tradition of South India paints the picture of dancers whose purpose and occupation was to perform while the Nattuvanars or teachers of the clan focused solely on mentoring. This allocation has nurtured the tradition in terms of opportunities where possibility of a performance always reaches the performer and not the teacher. Therefore the Gurukulam system functioned on a steady mechanism to bring out the skill and creativity of the student. In today's times, with no one's fault, there is a competition between the performer and teacher themselves as the teachers are also active performers. This scenario can draw a wedge between the student-teacher relationship. It is upto the students to believe in the process and hard work enough to journey towards becoming true artistes and to the teachers to not withheld knowledge but inspire through their training and performance equally. As a teacher I have to guide my students and let them know when they are ready to go on stage. I grow with them and not by obstructing the opportunities they want to explore. Through my years I have learned that this day and age demands visibility and that sometimes equates to success. This helps in encouragement. It is upto individuals to find the balance between learning and showcasing.

This is exactly how a student will also be successful in creating one's own discipline and process on and off stage as a dancer. Knowing theories and philosophies about a practice can assist you in cross examining the health of your performance habits and techniques as a dancer. This includes anything from a warm up and cool down routine to getting into character before the performance. It is as internal as it is external and physical. One needs to witness and browse through multiple processes followed by others before moulding one's own. In doubt, it is best to start with the external disciplines like health and eating habits, warm up routines, regular practice, stamina etc which can ultimately lead one towards internalising the character or the dance form itself. Because it is a performing art and one's body is the tool, the physical confidence one holds matters. Your doubts on stamina, breathing, fluidity in movement and

alignment, uncertainty in choreography etc will obstruct your embodiment of the dance form. The performer experiences bliss and satisfaction when these external factors are in sync with the mind. There are still factors like music, light, costume and sound that can deviate but when the performer finds harmony within body and mind, there happens a heartfelt communication.

### **Dance and the dancer.**

Like discussed before, Indian dance traditions as a whole are greatly related to mythology that is inseparable from the history of these dances themselves. Even though written documents in the form of Sanskrit treatises are available for study, the true origin traces back to the period where oral traditions were prevalent. What is at our disposal today for study and analysis is the more refined version of traditions and history which have imbibed from sister traditions and forms. Bharatanatyam has managed to achieve a certain level of universality in its training and practice through generations of dedicated practice and sharing of knowledge. Even with the diversity within Bharatanatyam, it is truly possible to communicate and collaborate using the existing vocabulary. The differences are mostly only diversities in the form. This can be imbibed as creative versions of similar expressions like widening one's vocabulary by learning synonyms of a word in a verbal language. The learning process for a classical dance like Bharatanatyam is a journey from the external to the internal. It always is initiated by learning the physical alignment and movements and then transitioning into expression of emotions. The curriculum for Bharatanatyam has become so organic that one cannot differentiate these stages in the learning process. Starting from learning the basic postures to maintaining the alignment during movement is a natural progression. This has to be followed devoutly before one can get introduced into deep emotional expression. The stylisation in form is accomplished through training the physical body first. Angika abhinaya or expression of the body involves the whole human body rather than only the face. The Abhinaya darpana accredited to Nandikeswara prescribes 10 qualities of a dancer as Patraprana Sloka which says;

“जवःस्थरित्वं रेखा च भ्रमरी दृष्टरिश्रमः॥

मेधा श्रद्धा वचो गीतं पात्रप्राणा दश स्मृताः।” (Manmohan, Ghosh, 1975, p. 80)

“Javah Sthiratwam Rekha cha Bhramari Drishtirshramah

Medha Shraddha Vacho Geetham Paatra praanaa Dasha Smrutah”

It explains the qualities a dancer should possess are agility, steadiness, alignment, circular movements, movements of the eyes, endurance, intelligence, concentration, good speech, ability to sing or understand music. All of these pertain to the physical body and its abilities. Training to refine them is the way to attain engaging emotional expression.

Music, literature and rhythm takes the forefront to an extent when it comes to the allied topics related to dance. Dancer has to have a discernible knowledge on the practical implications of these topics equivalent to their understanding of the dance form itself. In her book 'Classical Indian dance in literature and the arts', Kapila Vatsyayan says, *"As was pointed out at the very outset of this study, the inter-relationship of the Indian arts is a significant and rewarding study from the point of view of both spirit and form: in the art of the Indian dance different aspects of spirit and technique merge harmoniously to make a beautiful synthesis. It is significant that treatises on dance seldom, if ever, discuss the technique of this art form in isolation: both literature (or at least an aspect of it) and music (sangita) are invariably discussed. Conversely, the treatises on sculpture, natya (drama), music and painting invariably devote a portion either to dance itself or discuss certain elements of the technique of these art forms in terms of the technique of dance (nrtya or nr̥tta) (1968, p. 17).* Music and rhythm and its aesthetic application into movement comes from training and regularly witnessing performances and choreographic process. Other's influences might take over at first but with constant trials and working on creative abilities one can bring forth a style of their own into practice.

We, as individuals and as a society, have multiple likes and dislikes. Recognising these interests as the reason for the existence of so many cultural and art traditions is the starting point towards achieving harmonious cultural diversity. It is as simple as recognising one's contrasting interest from a loved one. This idea becomes profound when one registers the artistic quality of those varieties. Renowned Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer, Leela Samson in her biography of the founder of Kalakshetra Foundation, Rukmini Devi Arundale, quotes, *"Genius exists everywhere in India... We have only to open our eyes to see it. For the most part it is unconscious; we must bring it out of the background into the foreground of our lives. As long as there is a slave mentality in India, this Indian genius will surely be submerged. We must rid ourselves of this mentality.. The word 'modern' is not Indian. It is an English word, expressing an English spirit. Our word is Eternity"* (2010, p. 110)

It is in the hands of the practitioners to devote their efforts in maintaining the identity of the art form they propagate without compromising its journey towards inviting a global audience. When it comes to art forms, language and cultural barriers break loose once the quality of performance and communication excels. Human emotions have remained the same from time immemorial and its practicality when it comes to performing arts is that verbal language barriers cease to exist after a certain point. That point where the artistic expression reaches out to the audience from any part of the world should be the excellence one must seek. It is as innocent as a newborn's cry the mother instantly connects to and as relatable as the love one can perceive in their partner's eyes. It is overwhelming as the joys of life



and rooted as the truth of death. Then the meaning of the written word is overpowered by the meaning of the expression. The passion to seek this excellence in arts and artistry makes one a better human being already, one who positively influences others abundantly. Therefore all the streams of arts culminate into a single point and emerges out into their own unique pathways. It introduces conflicting ideas about a topic and challenges to dive into one's training and practice to emerge with a solution that is aesthetic and satisfactory to the onlookers and the artist themselves.

### **Conclusion:**

Indian mythology and history of Bharatanatyam shape the character of the art form itself. One has to have the aptitude and willingness to learn and explore this history and characteristics to ultimately open up to the artistic experience. It is this consciousness that allows the dancer to interpret codified grammar of Bharatanatyam not as a constraint but as guidelines enabling any modern framework sustaining both its cultural specificity and global adaptability.

In practical terms, both the teacher and student of a classical dance form needs to recognise the ever evolving social circumstances and have a mental note of the distance that has been travelled by these traditions in order to have a wholesome journey as a performing artist. Developing a personal yet informed practice model rooted in discipline, reflection, and adaptability is crucial to navigating the complexities of modern performance landscapes. It is only the artist's belief in their form and hard work that can surpass the conflicts and arguments that might come their way. A journey into becoming a Bharatanatyam dancer is also the one towards seeking excellence, continuous process of embodies learning and the realisation that the destination is the experiential enrichment and artistic fulfillment.

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