

## The Dance Of Bharat Natyam

Religion in India has influenced many aspects of its culture throughout history. It has played a particularly significant role in shaping the arts in numerous ways. An example of religious inspirations within art can be seen in the dance tradition known as Bharat Natyam. Originally known as Dasi Attam, this dance was performed in temples and royal courts by *devadasis*. The *devadasis* were women who received extensive training in the dance form, which began in their youth (Gaston 26-60). This paper will examine Bharat Natyam in practice and theory from its origin as Dasi Attam to contemporary times. It will also explore the *devadasi* tradition and their roles in society. Finally it will examine the presence and significance of Hindu religious gods and goddesses within Bharat Natyam.

The term Bharat Natyam was introduced by E. Krishna Iyer in the nineteen thirties. Prior to this time, the dance was known as Dasi Attam and was associated with a long-standing tradition of extensively trained female dancers (Devi 49). These were the *devadasis*. Initially they were servants of the temple who were required to become well versed in Sanskrit and the art of Dasi Attam. Being dedicated or “married” to a temple well before puberty, the women led lives of celibacy and devotion to their religion. The purpose of the dance was to honour the gods and temples. Local kings invited *devadasis* to dance in royal courts; this gave birth to the *rajadasi*, a dancer who would perform for the purpose of entertainment (Kersenboom 90-111). As the *devadasi* surrendered to gods, the *rajadasi* would surrender to kings. After the eleventh century AD the *devadasi* tradition disappeared as many temples were invaded and destroyed. The fall of the tradition forced many *devadasis* into poverty and often prostitution (Gaston 38-44).

The colonial era brought about social movements relating to the *devadasis*. The Reformists and Abolitionists regarded the tradition as evil and every *devadasi* as a prostitute. Under the influence of Christian values, these movements urged the abolition of the entire practice. The Revivalists favored the ancient view of the *devadasi* as a sacred, chaste devotee and set out to revive the dance form of Dasi Attam as Bharat Natyam (Devi 45,58). This revival allowed a girl or woman to practice the art form without necessarily being involved in the historical cultural practices of the *devadasi*.

The myths of the initial arrival of dance in Indian religion involve the great gods of the cosmos. In one such myth, the ancient gods and goddesses pleaded with Lord Brahma to create a fifth Veda. This Veda would be one that would appeal to the common man. In response Brahma created the *Natya Veda*. He took words (*pathya*) from the *Rg Veda*, communicative movements (*abhinaya*) from the *Yajur Veda*, song (*Gita*) from them *Sama Veda* and sentiment (*rasa*) from the *Atharva Veda* to form the *Natya Veda*. He then commissioned the sage Bharatha to write it down as the *Natya Shastra* and perform it to Lord Siva. Bharatha then propagated the dance on earth (Gaston 206-220). From the spreading of the dance on earth, emerged many forms of dance that are still practiced in contemporary India such as, Odissi, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Mohini attam, and Bharat Natyam.

Another proposed mythical origin of the dance involves the Goddess Parvati and her daughter. It is said that Parvati taught the dance to Usha, her daughter with the demon Banasura. Usha then went on to teach the art of dance to the *gopikas* of the city in which Lord Krsna was born [The *gopikas* were milkmaids in Hindu mythology. They were young women who were enamored with Krsna and vied for his affection; Krsna often had romantic affairs with the *gopikas*.]. This version of the legend acknowledges Lord Siva as the Supreme Dancer, the universe being his divine dance. He

dances with Parvati and together they teach the other gods and goddesses the art (Kramrisch 78). The heavenly dance gradually passed through into the human world and resulted in the forms of dance practiced in India today. Bharat Natyam, which originated in the Southern Indian State of Tamil Nadu is one such form.

Just as the tradition of the *devadasi* underwent gradual change, so did the tradition of Bharat Natyam. Originally practiced in temples as a sacred form of devotion it is now a form of entertainment for many in India as well as other parts of the world. Many people study the dance as a hobby and some adopt it as a lifestyle and become professional dancers or teachers. Dancers devote a substantial amount of time studying purpose and theory of Bharat Natyam. There are several fundamental components of the dance that remain unchanged. These components usually include those involving facial and physical movements as well as their purpose. Divine figures such as gods and demons are still present in the dances just as they were in centuries past.

Bharat Natyam encompasses three elements. *Nritta* are repetitive rhythmical aspects; *Natya* is the combination of gestures and poses, which forms the dramatic element; *Nritya* is the combination of the two. Throughout training, a dancer is taught various body movements involving the feet, legs, arms, hands, fingers, torso and neck. They are also taught several facial expressions and dramatic gestures (Bhagyalekshmi 7,8). The combination of all of these elements creates the many traditional dances that one performs. While some dances are performed in devotion to the gods others are stories depicting the gods themselves in which dancers characterize the gods.

The first dance learned by a student is *Pushpanjali* or *Alarippu*. These dances are based on pure rhythm. They incorporate movements of each and every body part. Dancers often regard them as efficient warm up dances. Traditionally, they were performed in order to greet

the gods in the temples and later on to greet the audiences in recitals. The next dance is known as the *Jatiswaram*, which involves a complex set of dance steps. The *Shabda* is a dance that is performed in praise of the Lord Krsna. It is in this dance that Abhinaya or Drama is introduced; the dancer depicts the childhood and adolescence of Krsna. The presence of Krsna is quite significant in the dances along with his relationships with Radha and *gopikas* of the city. The next two items, *Varnam* and *Padam* are pieces involving an abundance of dramatic art. The dances typically employ themes of betrayal, love and heroism. The item that is the main devotional piece to Lord Krsna is the *Ashtapadi*. The dance is performed in twelve cantons, which contain twenty-four songs sung by Krsna or his lover Radha; the songs are derived from famous poetry compositions. The final two dances are the most complicated with respect to physical movement as well as dramatic ability. They are known as the *Devaranama* and *Tillana*. The final traditional piece studied by a student of Bharat Natyam is the *Mangala*; it involves a salutation to the gods, *gurus* and the audience (Massey 11-16).

The appearance of divine characters in dance pieces is quite apparent. Many dances depict stories of Krsna, Radha, Rama, Sita, Visnu and Brahma among others. Perhaps one of the most significant figures in Bharat Natyam is Lord Siva. It is said that Siva assumed the form of Nataraja (Lord of the Dance), one of his many images and danced the Tandava. In the legend, Siva noticed that the sages had grown corrupt and indulgent so he set out to humble them. The sages responded violently and vainly attempted to destroy Siva. It was then that he began the Tandava, crushing his challengers beneath his feet. The purpose of his dance was to lift the illusory veil from the sages' perception (Gaston 134-135, 315-319).

Bharat Natyam can be seen as involving three distinct components that are observable to an audience. These are footwork (*adavus*), hand gestures (*hasthas*) and facial gestures

(*abhinaya*). Footwork typically follows a set rhythm that may change several times during a dance (Kothari 52). The musical element of the dance usually rests in the dancers foot movement. Hand gestures are the main feature responsible for the story telling component; the gestures are reinforced with facial expressions, which increases dramatic effect. Each of the twenty-eight hand gestures is representational of characters and events in the mythical stories told in the dance pieces. The gestures may depict animals or elements of nature associated with specific gods such as the tortoise, fish or serpent. Other symbolic gestures include the Siva linga, which is a phallic symbol associated with Siva or the *trisula*, the trident which is also exemplifies Siva (Kramrisch 36).

Religion inspires many areas of life. From daily schedules to annual celebrations to education and art. Art is an outlet for religious myth to be portrayed to a vast audience. Forms of this art are seen in the dance and drama. Bharat Natyam combines the two in a manner that results in elaborate and intricate pieces of dance that convey religious myth for the purpose of entertainment. This was not always its purpose; as an ancient form of dance known as Dasi Attam, it was an art form that allowed individuals to devote themselves to their religion and values. Regardless of its evolution from temples to royal courts and eventually to theaters, it has remained the oldest extant form of dance in the world today (Gaston 345-350).

## References and Further Recommended Readings

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[www.nadanam.com](http://www.nadanam.com)

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