

Bhava, Raga, Tala

Bharata Natya is considered in modern days to be the dance of South India, particularly of the Tanjore school. But the name signifies it to be the dance of Bharata Varsha or India as a whole, though all schools of Indian dance, except the South Indian, have deviated, through the blending of other influences. Even in South India, the dance called Bharata Natya is the particular presentation of the art as given by a single dancer and based on the concert arrangement. This method of presentation came into existence about a hundred years ago during the reign of the Maharashtra Rulers of Tanjore who gave much encouragement to this art. Many other styles have almost, if not entirely, disappeared and they need to be revived and re-created.

There is no doubt that Bharata Natya is a gift of the highest order. In the old days in South India, great musicians studied this art, for it enriched the *Bhava* and *Tala* of their music.

The "*Sangita Ratnakara*" states that dance is essentially an aspect of *Sangita* or music and therefore one finds the same origin, the same essential principles in both the Arts. The musician and the dancer must study the same books which give not only the rules and principles of these arts but also a vision of the vistas of imagery that make Art real. Hardly any dancer of today is learned and even in the immediate past most dancers were not given much general learning. But the of dancers, if they are of a high order, must be learned and must be musicians of real merit of well. It is the lack of study of the dance that narrows down the perception of the dancer and limits the creative spirit. This may sound strange, for many think that the study of the *Sastras*

limit the dancer's imagination. On the contrary, great books such as the "*Bharata Natya Sastra*" and the "*Sangita Ratnakara*" lead you into a world of imagination and reality and make you understand the spirit of Bharata Natya. Natya is derived from the Vedas and is itself a spiritual expression and philosophy of life. There seems hardly any detail that was left out for the dancer to decide. But, when you go beyond a superficial study, you realize that the artist is free; as free as an architect who plans a house, a temple or a city, but within the boundaries and limitations of the landscape with its rivers, forests, and mountains. This dance is equally an architecture that is built within the framework of that spirit of India which is embodied in her arts, her *Sastras*, and her philosophy. But how does freedom come from limitation? Firstly, the very limitation in the *Sastras* of *Sangita* frees you from form. They tell you that *Natya* is an *Avatara* of the Divine Spirit and paint before your eyes the picture of Sri Nataraja Himself, the Cosmic Being who dances as the worlds dance with Him. The highest and most eternal bliss, the joy of the innermost being of man which knows no truth but in joy; this is the essence of the dance. He who has transcended the reign of the emotions and has burnt them to ashes. He who protects all by His divine compassion. He dances like an ordinary mortal. With Him dances Parvati who is part of Him and who is the very incarnation of divine pity and gracious Motherhood, She who is above every woman, every queen, She, too, dances like an ordinary mortal. Is there a greater conception of art anywhere, and is not this conception one that transcends the physical?

With this magnificent picture before us and having lifted our very being into this spirit, India takes us to the next step, the description of the dancer and her sense of dedication to this sacred art, for it is a scripture to those who find religion in beauty, transcending its physical expression, beauty translating the spirit in terms of movement.

The learned authors of the *Sastra* knew that essentially form and sound are one and so laid down *Bhava*, *Raga*, and *Tala* as the three great essentials of dance as well as music. The heart of all expression is the feeling from which it

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springs and so *Rasa* as feeling, with all its manifestations, is also the heart of the dance and is so subtle in its essence that the expression of it is not something that can be learnt from a teacher but has to come from the maturing of a gift with which the dancer herself is endowed. In these days, only South India lays emphasis on this aspect of the dance. In South India no dancer, however skilled, however young and beautiful, is appreciated for long unless her art is so enriched.

In *Natya Sastra* all components which make up the dance; the movements of the body, the expression, the rhythm and overall presentation on stage are codified and laid down as a grammar for the dancer to learn and master. After mastering this basic grammar the dancer becomes proficient to convey the nuances of a beautiful literature. Only after such mastery and inner meditation can a dancer reach the sublime heights for which this art was created.

Raga is melody and is necessary to every form of dancing and *Tala* is rhythm or time. *Tala* is also necessary to all forms of dancing, but is specially emphasized in all its intricacies in *Nritta* which is physically the most difficult part of the dance. Bharata Natya of the Tanjore School excels in *Nritta*. Even in South India there are different schools in which there are variations of technique, where the *Adavus* or basic steps are different. A *Nattuvanar* or dance teacher must be an expert in the *Tala* aspect of music in order to compose dances that are beautiful in rhythm. Dances that are composed to *Swaras* and to drum syllables, called *Tirmanams* in South India and *Bols* in North India, are extremely beautiful but are difficult to execute perfectly. There are *Tirmanams* to all the thirty-five *Talas*, although in these days very few people use them all. The equipment of the dance teacher consisted of a knowledge of music in all its intricacies, the *Talas* and the practice of the dance itself. He also had a knowledge of the *Sastras*, a capacity to play the different musical instruments used in the dance as well as the ability to be a good singer. He was like the conductor of an orchestra and without him no dance could take place. Every dancer was also dependant on him to conduct a recital, for he had to say the *Tirmanams* in a particular way and to play the bell metal cymbals according to the composition and steps of the dance.

The *Sastras* have clearly laid down even the type of instruments and the

number to be used, but in latter years the accompanying music consisted of the Drum and the Clarionet and sometimes the Violin, over and above the vocal music. The Clarionet is most unsuitable instrument of foreign origin and during the last few years the Flute has taken its place. The Violin, though foreign, has been beautifully adapted by South Indian musicians but it is obvious that in the very olden days the Sarangi was the stringed instrument even of South India and this would be far more suitable for dance accompaniments. Unfortunately hardly any South Indian musician is able to play it.

Bharata Natya is a *Sadhana* which requires total devotion. This means many years of study. Till lately, the dancers of South India were all temple dancers and belonged to a particular caste. But there were many fine geniuses among them, some who have shone brilliantly in *Abhinaya* and singing. Their service to this art was for an entire lifetime. They began their career of dancing very young and continued till they were even seventy years of age, inspiring audiences. This again proves the freedom from physical attributes and emphasis on spirit which is considered important in a dancer. With maturity of expression even the age of a dancer ceases to matter. The physical form disappears when the spirit is true and sublime.

The art of Bharata Natya, shows that its greatest message is its teaching, the teaching of a philosophy of life, the teaching of great truths through the portrayal of the lives of the Great ones, through the compositions of those who were inspired, the blending of limbs and movements to music, and the lifting of the emotions through voice and gesture to the One Being to Whom you dance.

This was, and is, the eternal spirit of the dance, but in Bharata Natya this high level was not maintained. Out of the nine *rasas* to be expressed *sringara* became predominant. *Sringara* or love can be portrayed in its most beautiful aspect, as I am sure, for example, was meant by the great Kshetragna whose songs are among the most beautiful ever composed for the dance. At the same time *sringara* can become coarse and vulgar. India's gift is spirituality and when some dancers forsook the ideal of dancing to the Deity in the temple and began to dance to the ruler or patron, then the dance became personal and

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gradually deteriorated to such an extent that it came to be considered a degrading thing to see or to learn.

In the days of the Chola Kings all arts flourished and the greatest dancers and musicians were encouraged and respected by the rulers. Artists were never in want, but in latter days and even today art has become commercial and artists have to adapt themselves to the problem of earning a livelihood. Taste has changed, so that cheap art has become expensive and good art is starved of interest. Until the ancient spirit is revived, until great artists are encouraged by the State, we cannot expect the pervading of true culture which alone is the link between the higher and the lower worlds. Among the greatest gifts of the world is Bharata Natya, for this dance is not merely for audiences, a mere entertainment, but is an offering to the Highest.

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