

Classical dance art in South

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Thanks to the emergence of umpteen television channels across South India and many newspapers, especially the largest circulated English Daily of the South, The Hindu, and the largest circulated vernacular Eenadu, there has been an accelerated momentum in art field. They allot good space to keep classical dances of the South and other art forms in focus.

With the advent of a daily tabloid supplement of Eenadu, circulated alongwith the main paper with a page allotted for exclusive reporting of daily events in art field, cultural events that occur in Hyderabad city and districts, attracted more and more readers. The rest of the vernacular newspapers too followed the same procedure. This step, taken by the newspapers, kickstarted many cultural organizations all over the state. New cultural venues opened. No wonder, one can see groups of journalists and fleet of television cameras reporting on all these events. A number of sponsors have sprung up which was never the case before.

The media is now after entertainment too, not only covering the art forms but also reporting speeches made by some important personalities. Entertainment media has now spread far and wide. According to reports from other states in South, a large chunk of press is giving space for this entertainment medium and is still growing far and wide. We watch rare personalities from dance, drama, music, folk arts and films appear on and off sharing the stage as chief guests or to preside over the festivities with some of them

speaking on art forms.

Serving the social cause

With the upsurge in art industry and media, some among the present generation of young artistes are trying to adapt the classical styles of dance and music to social cause. Till now, the heroes and heroines of the themes of classical dances were Gods and Goddesses, as the performers felt the art was meant to please the Almighty. Thyagaraja kirtanas were focused on Srirama. Jayadeva's Madhura Bhakti brought out themes on Radha and Krishna; Kshetrayya penned themes on Lord Krishna and Annamacharya's sole concentration was on Lord Venkateswara (Balaji) and his consort Alimemelu Manga. Thus go many examples. All these songs are the subject in all the styles of South Indian and even North Indian dance styles.

Thanks to the media and demands of the society, veering away a bit from this system, some dancers like Sobha Naidu, a renowned Kuchipudi dancer took to Buddhist theme in her dance 'Chandalika' a low cast woman, ill-treated by upper castes, finally surrenders to Buddhism after a monk, named Anand, did not show such unsocial behavior. This ballet was quickly taken by the Andhra Pradesh state government which gave her financial support to present it across the state. This medium thus served social cause.

Many other dancers followed this new idiom. Sarala, the first 'Hamsa' awardee of Andhra Pradesh government came out with different themes on the colors of a rainbow. She then produced and presented

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a ballet titled as 'Bhama Vilapam' (The cry of women) on the theme of oppression of women. This piece, written and composed in Kuchipudi meter by Palagummi Viswanatham was even broadcast over Radio and Doordarsan.

'Sapta Nritya Manjari' was a dance composed by noted dancer Rama Devi, connecting all these dance forms. She introduced 'Kerala Nartanam', a recently developed dance form of Kerala. Kuchipudi, Kerala Nartanam, 'Bharatanatyam', 'Kathak', 'Odissi' and 'Mohini Attam' figured in this experimental ballet. She has even composed a dance as comparative study of Kathakali and Kuchipudi, both emanating from Yakshaganam.

Russian girls were so attracted to Kuchipudi dance style that they instantly became disciples of Sobha Naidu during her tour of Russia sometime back. The impact was such that these girls came to Hyderabad city, learned the art and gave a performance. This drew massive attention of the media.

Dance ballets were also created stitching together important events in India's freedom struggle like the war against British by Rani Lakshmi Bai, Balgangadhara Tilak, Tanguturi Prakasam, Bhagat Singh and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. Mahatma Gandhi's preaching for mutual love was also part of it. The sequence depicting the British leaving our country was the highlight of the show. Alekhya, an accomplished Kuchipudi dance exponent, used the art to bring forth some historical moments, surrounding 14th century court, dancer Lakuma. Lakuma Devi was associated with the rule of Kumaragiri Reddi, a lover of arts and literature.

Kuchipudi ballet 'Prakriti' by Deepika Reddi and disciples, highlighted Mahatma's concern for Environment. Kreesthu Bharati surprised every one for adapting the dance art to present the story of the birth

of Jesus, first of its kind. This was named as 'Yesu Jananam'. All these experiments and events go to prove how this medium of art influenced the society and vice-versa. Recently a Kuchipudi ballet on the subject of the ancient 'Classical Status of Telugu language' was produced by the State Language Commission.

In the field of Bharatanatyam too, different artistes came out with similar themes, some abstract, using modern techniques. Ananda Sankar, a Bharatanatyam, exponent, created a ballet basing on an English theme. Even she went to present Suri's Sanskrit work 'Pancha Tantra' in dance ballet format. In recent times, another renowned Bharatanatyam artiste, Rajeswari Sainath had taken up subjects on subjugation of women. She also presented yet another ballet showing how another set of women of different international religions change the society as well. This was titled 'Peace on Earth', established by these women. Both the ballets were written in English by a reputed women's activist Vasanth Kannabiran. A ballet with the title of 'Pancha Kanya', penned by a known poet of Andhra Pradesh, Kavita Prasad, was staged in recent times. There were such attempts even in other dance styles too.

Kathakali

Kathakali dance, owing its origin to Dravidian culture, uses rich costumes and heavy make-up to represent super human beings. Born out of the efforts of Brahmins, Kathakali has changed over years. The exponents are mostly Nayers. Abinaya is an integral part of this dance form, with Nritta (pure dance) gelled with Lasya and mood. King of Kottarakkara, who lived between 1575 and 1605, was the first composer and originator of Kathakali, drawing inspiration from the episodes of Ramayanam. It flourished in Kerala under Royal Patronage of the Maharaja of Travancore

maintaining a Royal Troupe of talented Kathakali actors. It reached its peak during 1758-98.

Maharaja Uthram Thirunal Marthanda Varma (1847-60) first organised a full-fledged Palace Troupe to serve as a pattern for the rest of Malabar. This dying art was revived by Mahakavi Vallathol, a poet of Malabar. Kerala Kala Mandalam evolved a new type of dance on Srirama, known as the Ramanattam, considered as the origin of Kathakali with substance, depth and dynamism. Raja of Kottayam was the next person to develop Kathakali further on the themes of Bharatham between 1665 and 1743 AD. He was the author of four Kathakali plays and was the pioneer in improving upon the Ramanattam.

The technique of Kathakali ranks high among the Indian dance forms. The actors interpret their emotions through highly sensitive and vivid mudras and impressive gestures, graceful and rhythmic movements and wealth of imagery. Kathakali is predominantly a male art. Actors never stand erect while acting; knees spread out and legs spread and flat on the ground. Vachika, drama text in verses and songs are recited and sung by vocalists. Satvika Abinaya and Aharya and costuming in this style can be rarely found in any other dance forms. It lays emphasis on Nritha, Nritya, and Natya, like most of the other classical forms. The geetham, vocal support, is accompanied by accompanying instruments, together contributing to its theatrical form added with 24 basic Mudras with complete control of the eyeballs and muscular movements in the face, for which they undergo intense physical training and oil massaging of the body for flexibility. The training is based on Kalari Payttu, ancient martial art of Kerala.

Music in Kathakali is “margi”(classical) type, following Raga code, purest form of South Indian Carnatic music. Angikabhinaya dominates in

presenting the Nava Rasas - Shringara, Vira, Karuna, Adbhuta, Raudra, Hashya, Bhayanaka, Bibhatsa and Shanta, common to other styles too. The early stalwarts of the music of Kathakali were: Kottayath Tampuran, Unnaayi Varier and Irayimman Tampi and others. Maddelam and Chenda are used for percussion. Another percussion instrument, Edakka replaces Chenda for female roles. In general, it is a virile dance form.

According to Uday Shankar, the renowned Indian dancer, Kathakali is a perfected art form and interprets human sentiment, thoughts and emotions. The body language is very powerful than spoken words and the effect is realistic.

Mohiniyattam

Performed as a solo recital by women, also hailing from Kerala, this dance art has gained popularity in recent times. “Mohini Attam” means a woman enchanting us with “aattam” and sensuous body movements. In mythology, Maha Vishnu takes the form of Mohini to lure the demons away from the Amrita, nectar of immortality, obtained during the churning of the Ocean of Milk in the scene of ‘Ksheerasagara Mathanam’.

Devadasis used to perform Mohiniyattam, with drama and verse, in temples. The influence of Kathakali and Bharatanatyam is vivid in this dance form of Mohiniyattam. This was formulated in the court of King Swati Tirunal. It is full of gentle movements. The artistes wear white saris embroidered with bright golden brocade called ‘kasavu’ at the edges. The dance follows the classical text of ‘Hastha Lakshana Deepika’ with elaborate Mudras, hand gestures. The vocal music of Mohiniyattam involves Chollukattu (vocal rhythmic syllables). The lyrics are a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam.

The Mohiniyattam dance is full of subtle gestures and simple footwork patterns. It enchants the mind without enticing the senses. It has sensual themes. Maddelam, Mridangam, Cymbals, Saraswathi Veena, Violin, Kanjira, Tambura, Venu are found in the musical ensemble and the dance is in medium tempo, contributing to aesthetic effect.

Bharatanatyam

This is a highly cultivated art, handed down over the centuries by teachers called nattuvanars and ritualistic dancers called devadasis, who performed in temples of South India, especially in Andhra coastal region. Since the fall of Vijayanagara Empire in the middle of 14th century, the Devadasis, performing Kacheri Aata (Court dances) and temple dances, migrated along with their dance literature to the Nayaka Kingdom, now in Tamilnadu in south, where they found patronage. It took its perfect shape with the contribution of the famous Pillai quartet — Ponnaiah, Chinnaiah, Sadasivam and Vadivelu. Today, Bharatanatyam is mostly associated with Tamilnadu. There is a Mysore school of Bharatanatyam too that retains the traditions of temples and courts of the ancient Andhra Pradesh state. This is the reason why the Telugu language of Andhra Pradesh forms a substantial part of the music score for Bharatanatyam.

The 'karana' sculptures in the Chidambaram's Nataraja temple and Kumbakonam's Sarangapani temple show a rich history of stylised dance. Dr. Padma Subramanyam, a great Bharatanatyam danseuse of the present times studied these sculptures. These karanas are added to this dance tradition. The performers were either travelling bards and dancers or performers belonging to different courts. Their contribution is reflected in the long tradition of women dancers dedicated to temples. These devadasis (handmaids of god) were dedicated to the both Shiva and Vishnu temples. They were part of the daily ritual of worshipping the deity through dances. Unfortunately,

over a period these devadasis fell into disrepute due to social changes and because these practitioners were in an untenable situation. Devadasi system was banned sometime later by various governments. The devadasis of the royal courts of those days also carried on with this tradition of dance. Besides the Tanjore quartet, there appeared many great composers who were employed in the court of Sarabhoji, a noteworthy and most prominent Maratha ruler. These learned men gave proper shape to Sadir Natyam, court dance in Tamil. The format remains the same but for a few changes here and there.

The pioneers

In the 1930s, pioneers like Rukmini Devi, the first family woman artiste of Chennai, jumped into the fray and E. Krishna Iyer who revived dancing traditions set the tone for the Bharatanatyam dance art. E. Krishna Iyer learnt dance and performed them which led to awareness of the richness of these traditions among the art loving people. It was during this time that the style culled by E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmimi Devi came to be called Bharatanatyam.

Rukmini Devi who loved classical Carnatic music and dance took one step further. She acquired land outside Madras at Adyar and established 'Kalakshetra' an institution for dance, music and allied arts. The institution has become synonymous with high standards expected of Bharatanatyam dancers and practitioners of today. Many noted performers and gurus emanated from this institute.

Madras was a composite state with Andhra and Karnataka parts. Many dance schools came up all over India. They have kept to the rigorous discipline demanded by the style. Smt. Mrinalini Sarabhai also established Darpana in Ahmedabad, where the great traditions of classical dance are still continued by her equally famous daughter Mallika Sarabhai. One of the greatest performers in the last century have been Balasaraswati, whose ancestors belonged to the Andhra

coastal belt. She has been almost as influential in popularizing Bharatanatyam, as much as Rukmini Devi and others. Since Balasaraswati, there have been other 'greats' like Kamala, Vyjayanthimala Bali, Padmini and her sister Ragini, Indrani Rehman and Ritha Devi.

The 'greats' that followed them are Yamini Krishnamurthy, Sonal Mansingh, Chitra Visweswaran, Sudha Rani Raghupathy, Lakshmi Vishwanathan and others. More recently, we have Malavika Sarukkai, Alarmel Valli, Leela Samson and Srinidhi Chidambaram and Dhananjayans, Guru Adyar Lakshman and Kalanidhi Narayanan from Chennai. From Mumbai, we have Gurus Mahalingam and Kanak Rele. In Andhra, the first Bharatanatyam artiste was Vasireddi Kanaka Durga of Vijayawada, trained by one of the descendents of the Pillai quartet. In the current scene, Rajeswari Sainath is top Bharatanatyam artist of Hyderabad.

In fact, Bharata Muni was said to have been the originator of the classical dance of India providing the grammar to it. In Bharata's opinion, Natya meant drama that deals with stage construction, music, poetry, prosody, and costumes - all part of his Natya Sastra. Most of us believe that the name Bharatanatyam is born out of the term 'Bha' 'Ra' 'Ta' implying the triple components of bhava, raga and tala—all of which are judiciously combined in this beautiful dance style. From then onwards, individual variations can be found in the presentations of some contemporary Bharatanatyam dancers.

A Bharatanatyam dancer wears specially made costumes of brightly colored silk, bordered by gold thread work. The hair is made into a single long braid and decorated with flowers. The ankle bells worn by the dancer make musical sounds that emphasize his or her foot beats. Mridangam, Ghatam (the earthen pot) tapped rapidly; Kanjira (a leather bound tambourine) and other drums constitute the percussion. A flautist and violinist also feature in the orchestra. Veena finds

place sometimes. But the pride of place is occupied by the conductor, popularly known as Nattuvanar (a Tamil word) of the orchestra. Generally, the guru (teacher) is the conductor, who coached the dancer, wielding a pair of brass cymbals and claps together, uttering rhythmic sound-syllables matching with the foot beats of the dancer.

Kuchipudi

This is essentially a traditional dance belonging to Andhra Pradesh. It originated in the village of Kuchipudi of Andhra. This village was called, in ancient times, as Kuchelapuram. For a long time, the art was presented only in temples. According to tradition, Kuchipudi dance was originally performed only by men and they all belonged to the Brahmin community and known popularly as 'Bhagavatulu' of Kuchipudi. The very first group of Brahmin Bhagavatulu of Kuchipudi was formed in 1502 AD.

In the 15th century, a saint called Siddhendra Yogi, codified the movements and enriched the repertoire of the Kuchipudi dance form. Siddhendra Yogi championed the cause of redefining this dance form aiming at eliminating exploitation of women. But Kuchipudi was enriched by the advent of the female dancers. Renowned gurus like Vedantam Lakshmi Narayana Sastry, Chinta Krishnamurthy and Tadepalli Perayya, broadened the horizons of the dance form. The reforms brought in have led to the women playing even the male role in a dance drama.

The Kuchipudi dance begins with worship rituals. A dancer moves about sprinkling holy water, and then incense is burned. Indra-dhvaja (the flagstaff of the god Indra) is planted on the stage to guard the performance against outside evils. This is followed by the worship of Ganesha, God of obstacles, who is traditionally petitioned for success. The Sutradhara, a stage managing singer rendered invocations to the goddesses, the three spouses of the Thri-Murties, Brahma Vishnu and Maheswara, chanting drum

syllables. Then each principal character introduces him or her on the stage. It is called 'Pravesa Daruvu' a small composition describing the identity of the character he or she is playing.

There are nearly 80 'Parvesa Daruvus' in Kuchipudi repertoire of various dance dramas put together. An ornate curtain held by two persons, in Krishna and Sathyabhama themes, enters the stage with her back to the audience and her braid hanging from the curtain. Kuchipudi number is very pleasant to watch because of the inbuilt drama with songs tuned to a unique rhythm. Bharata's Natya Sastra, again, is the source even for this drama. Kuchipudi is basically a dance drama, narrating different Godly episodes. Thanks to the efforts put in by Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, it also acquired a status of a solo performance. This helped many women too to learn the art and present as solo numbers.

Make-up and costumes are the unique characteristics of Kuchipudi dance form. Apart from the make-up, the female characters also wear ornaments and jewellery, such as Rakudi (head ornament), Chandra Vanki (arm ornament), Adda Baasa worn to the nose and Kasina Sara (neck ornament) and a long plait decorated with flowers and star like formations representing the 27 stars.

Among the numbers in Kuchipudi repertoire we find Narayana Teertha's Tarangams, in which a dance on brass plate carrying a pitcher, filled with water, on head, testing the balance of the artiste never stepping out the rhythm and water never spilling out of the pitcher draws curiosity. Bhama Kalapam, Gollakalapam, Prahlada Charitam, Sashirekha and Parinayam are some of the famous dance dramas in Kuchipudi.

The Kuchipudi artistes Padmasri Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, P.V.G.Krishna Sarma, Padmabhushan Dr. Vempati Chinna Satyam, Pasumarthi Ramalinga Sastry come from the lineage of Kuchipudi families. Yamini Krishnamurthy, Anita

Krishna, Padmasri Sobha Naidu, Alekhya and Kerala born but brought up in Andhra Ramadevi are some of the women we come across on the present day Kuchipudi scene. The teaching is imparted in Guru Shishya Parampara style. Each student is personally trained under the able guidance of the guru. These days many dancers are coming out with many themes some of which are social application of the art. This art has earned name for itself throughout the world.

The script is in native language, Telugu. A dance school exists now in Kuchipudi, where festivals are being held regularly. Figure Dancing is part of traditional repertoire of Kuchipudi dance, that entails the dancer dancing on a white screen placed on the floor with colored powder sprinkled. After the dance is over and the screen is lifted, the audience will find a figure imprinted on the blank screen with the colored footprints of the dancer. C.R.Acharya (the late) takes credit for reviving this form.

Devadasi dances

Padmasri Nataraja Ramakrishna and Padma Bhushan Swapnasundari, revived these Devadasi dances after doing research into ancient dance forms and in revival of the long lost dance art forms, practiced by women artistes of east and west Godavari districts after meeting the surviving dancers of that tradition. Nataraja Ramakrishna called this as 'Andhra Natyam' and Swapnasundari named it as Vilasini dance. They collected lyrics and their musical forms, learned from them their choreographic skills and content, marked by unending 'sancharies' contributing to the astounding abhinaya. The sancharies are so vast that an artiste of that time could carry the entire night presenting a single varnam. These original dancers belonged to the then existing Devadasi system, serving temples, following rules of Agama Sastra. This was base for the now developed Bharatanatyam. Kalakrishna pursues this art and is recently given the central Sangeetha Nataka Academy.