

Article on Bharata-natyam by Dr Raghuanth Manet

“Dance does not require any meaning. It has been created for the simple reason that it is beautiful. Its purpose is only to give pleasure”-Nâtya Shastra.



Raghunath Manet in Chidambaram temple. Photo Chandru Elango



'Bharata Natyam' or 'Sadir' is a classical dance form which hails from south India, dating back to 1000BC. Descriptions of Bharata Natyam are found in Sanskrit scriptures, such as the 'Nâtya-Shâstra' written by Bharata Muni, a compilation of ancient texts dating back to between 200 BCE and 200 CE, also disputed to be between 800 BCE and 500 CE.

Shiva - Photo Pandy Ashok

Ancient tamil epics such as Tolkappiam (1st millennium BCE or earlier) or Silapapatikaram (2nd century) also describe the dance and music. Exotic postures manifesting this art form can be found in sculptures and carvings of Hindu deities in the temples South India. Most renowned is the Chidambaram temple, built in the 10th century. Its origins date back to an era of ancestral traditions performed during religious ceremonies in temples or royal courts by temple dancers, who were predominantly women referred to as Devadasis (Dēvar-adiyâr). Such women performed the art of dance for Gods (Devas) or Kings.

Whilst the origins of this dance form are attributed to literature addressing Lord Shiva, a male deity in the Indian pantheon, it was primarily performed by women, they who exclusively enjoyed the privilege of being taught dance and music. Young girls in matriarchal communities were handpicked and sent to a “Nattuvanar” (the dance master) to prepare them for their lifestyle as a Devadasi. They were taught dance, music, languages as well as religious vocal melodies.



Raghunath Manet. Photo Bruno Requentel

Once the young girls were ready to perform as solo dancers, they were presented to the temple and received a sacred cord or “tali”, which symbolised their union to the temple God. The dance form was deeply associated with a higher purpose of performing a divine service, offering flowers, performing rituals and dancing as a form of worship to the Gods. The temple dancers, as with most other artists, were maintained under the patronage of the Maharajas (Kings).



Nattuvanr & dancer - Photo Raghunath Manet

In South India, the 'nattuvanar' or dance master is responsible for the dance repertoire as well as the daily lives of the temple dancers. Only they were permitted to teach dance and accompany dancers during their performances or temple rituals as a music conductor and vocal percussionist.

During the dance performance they recite rhythmic patterns (sollukattu) with a pair of small hand-cymbals (kai-tâlam), following the footwork executed by the dancers.

They have been mentioned in temple sculptures, along with the dancers for centuries. The most renowned 'nattuvanars' of the seventeenth century are the Thanjavur Quartet. However, each temple has their respective nattuvanars. Their community became stigmatized during the social reform movement. Overcoming this, nattuvanars played a pivotal role in tamil cinema, organising as well as producing mainstream dance compositions for musicals. Until today, the presence and role of a nattuvanar is absolutely necessary during barata natyam performances.



Chidambaram sculpture
Photo Raghunath Manet

In Pondicherry, the French called them “bayadère”. Ananda Ranga Pillai (1709-1761) mentioned them in his works. There were many devadasi in Villenour temple in Pondicherry.



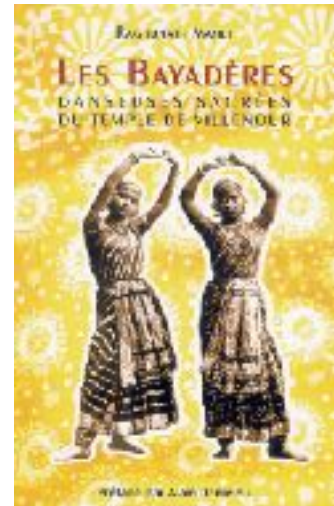
Villenour temple
Photo Raghunath Manet

Bharatanatyam remained exclusive to Hindu temples through the 19th century. Until the 1930s, only the community of professional temple dancers and court artists (Rajadâsî) and nattuvanar were performing.

During the colonial era, this dance form was largely suppressed for what was seen to be its “erotic” nature, by a conservative and Victorian sense of morality brought in by the British colonizers. It experienced resurgence in the mid 1900's when its “disreputable” associations were challenged and championed by Rukmini Devi in the 1930's and other progressive artists of the post-colonial era. Such a dance tradition has been changed in the last century into a form known as Bharata-natyam.

In Pondicherry, this law of suppression could not be applied since Pondicherry, was a French state. It was after the transfer that this law was extended to Pondicherry and became applicable. So, here, the institution of bayadères continued roughly until 1960 to 1968.

I wrote a book on this subject "Les Bayadères".

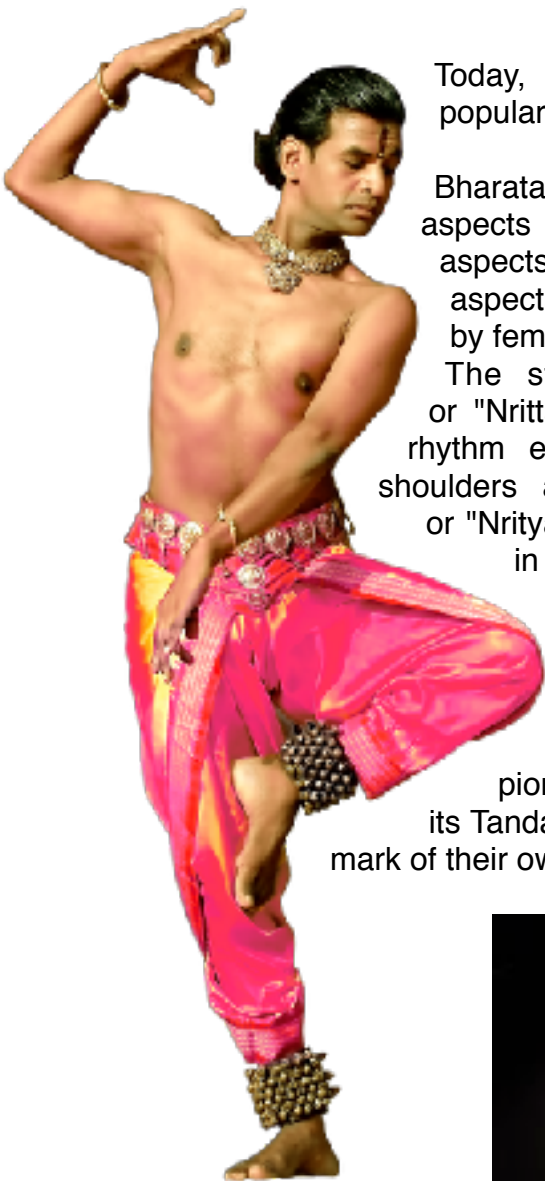


Today, Bharata Natyam has grown to become one of the most popular Indian classical dance forms both in India and abroad.

Bharata Natyam has two broad aspects: "Tandava" or masculine aspects that are traced to Lord Shiva, and "Lasya" or feminine aspects which evolved later in the 18th century. The "Lasya" aspects of the dance are what we see performed copiously today by female professional dancers.

The style consists of two technical elements; Pure dance or "Nritta", which represents purely abstract and often exhilarating rhythm expressed through movement of the eyes, neck, hands, shoulders and the feet. The second aspect, expressive dance or "Nritya", combines hand gestures or 'mudras', a codified language in and of itself with facial expressions or "abhinaya" and body movements to narrate stories that evoke deep emotional and spiritual responses in the audience.

Given its history and evolution, Bharata-Natyam in modern times may be a female dominated art form, but a few male pioneers like me and others, inspired by and recognizing its Tandava or masculine aspects have come forward and surely left a mark of their own.



Raghunath Manet & dancers. Photo Bruno RequeneI.

