

From Antiquity to Artistry: Tracing the Evolution of Indian Dance

Soumya Guradi

PhD (Dance) Research Scholar
Department of Dance
University college of Fine Arts
University of Mysore
Mysore –570006

Guide: Prof. Dr. Sheela HK Sridhar

Department of Dance
University College of Fine Arts
University of Mysore
Mysore -570006

Abstract

Dance in India has a rich history, tracing back to prehistoric rituals and evolving into sophisticated art forms. This article examines its journey from tribal expressions to classical traditions, highlighting its role in cultural and religious contexts. During the Vedic era, dance was integral to rituals and worship, evolving into classical forms associated with celestial beings. The medieval period saw the emergence of temple traditions and courtly performances, influenced by religious movements and royal patronage. In the modern era, efforts to preserve and promote Indian classical dance have been significant. Despite diverse influences and regional variations, dance continues to be a powerful form of expression and cultural identity. By exploring its evolution, this article provides insights into the enduring significance of dance in Indian culture.

Keywords: Prehistoric Dance, Vedic Era, Classical Forms, Medieval Transformation
Modern Evolution, Cultural Diversity.

Introduction

Dance in India traces back to prehistoric times, serving as a means of communication and expression long before the advent of writing. From its origins in tribal rituals to its evolution into sophisticated classical forms, dance has played a central role in Indian culture and society. Over the centuries, it has reflected the changing lifestyles, beliefs, and artistic sensibilities of the Indian people. This article explores the rich history of Indian dance, from its pre-Vedic roots to its modern-day manifestations, highlighting key developments and influences along the way.

Dance in Pre-Vedic India: A Window into Early Communication

In prehistoric India, long before the advent of writing (c. 1200 BCE), dance served as a primary mode of expression and communication. These dances encompassed a diverse range of purposes, from mimicking animals and hunters to performing rituals and practical drills. As societies transitioned from hunter-gatherers to agriculturalists, these dances evolved to

reflect the changing way of life. Early dances, often categorized as tribal, integrated elements of daily life and hunting successes. With the shift to agriculture, themes of planting and harvest were incorporated, demonstrating a thematic evolution alongside cultural developments. This period laid the foundation for the rich tapestry of regional folk dances that continue to flourish in India today. Although written records are scarce from that era, evidence such as cave paintings and sculptures crafted by the people of that time provide insights into their lives and culture.

Dance in the Vedic Period: A Flourishing Art Form

During the Vedic era, ancient sages engaged in ecstatic dancing while performing yagnas. Dance was considered a means to connect with the divine. Various celestial beings such as Indra, the Aśvinis, Apsaras, and Goddess Usha were also associated with dance. In the Vedic period, dancers were referred to as "Nṛtu." The concluding sections of the Vedas, known as Upanishads, briefly discuss philosophical principles and religious concepts in India. Terms like Nṛtta, Natya, and Nṛtya are mentioned in these Upanishads as branches of knowledge. In the epic Ramayana, many words related to dance like Nātaka, Gīta, Vādyā, and Nṛtya are mentioned. Buddhist and Jain literature provide detailed information about dance techniques. Ancient temples and sculptures of dancing figures show that dance has been around since ancient times. It was mainly performed by women in temples and royal courts. Women who danced in temple sanctums as part of rituals were called "Devadāsi" or servants of God, leading disciplined lives for religious reasons. The word "Agama" means tradition, and it includes "Tantra," a practice related to it. Agama Śāstra covers various topics like cosmology, yoga, mantras, temple construction, and deity worship. The custom of associating devadasis with temples started around the 3rd century and is mentioned in works like Kālidāsa's "Meghadūta." Kālidāsa was a court poet of the Gupta empire. The Cōḷa empire also supported devadasis. Male members called Naṭṭuvanārs were involved in dance performances. Inscriptions show that Naṭṭuvanārs taught the Cola princes. As the Cola empire grew wealthy, they built more temples, inspiring other rulers to do the same and support the Devadāsi system. Devadasis were later invited to perform at joyous events in different kingdoms. Dance became a popular form of entertainment in Indian courts. The Gupta period was known as a golden age for culture, art, and literature, where dance also gained recognition. The Vedas and Upanishads inspire devotion, while the Agama Śāstra guides Hindu worship and temple rituals. "Āsthāna Nāṭyam" or "Court Dance" emerged, with dancers known as Raja Narthakis educated in various fields and esteemed in royal courts.

The Aṣṭādhyāyī, a Sanskrit grammar book written by Pāṇini in the 6th to 5th century BCE, talks about actors. The 'Artha Sastra,' an ancient Indian political treatise by Canakya (also known as Kouṭilya) from the 4th century BCE, and Patanjali's Yoga Sutra from the 2nd century BCE, mention dancers, actors, and singers. Matanga's "Brihaddeśi," an early work on classical Indian Music from the 9th century A.D, is believed to be the first to discuss the 'Desi' style of music and dance, although the chapter on dance is missing. Puranic literature like the "Viṣṇudharmothara Purāṇam" from the 8th century A.D and the Agnipurāṇa from the 10th century AD also discuss the fundamentals of dance in relation to painting techniques and performance. During the rule of the Eastern Chalukyas from the 7th to the 11th century A.D., there were inscriptions that mentioned donations made for dance and music performances known as "aṅgaraṅabhōga." This was a ritual performed in front of deities in temples. The curriculum of that time included the teaching of dance and singing, known as Gāndharva

Vidya. From this period onward, people began dedicating dancers to temples. Dance and music became essential parts of worship in the Hindu religion, known as "Rangabhoga."

During the Aryan Period, Aryans have linked nritya to yoga, to connect it to spirituality. During this period, Nāṭya Nritya (dance drama) Geet Nritya (dance and song) Rūpa Nitya (abhinaya and dance) Bhāva Nritya (emoting through dance) were developed which enriched and elevated the level and content of dance. Nritya was more considered as an expression of beauty. It is known from the Valmiki Ramayana that people belonging to both high as well as lower strata of society in this period were skilled in all the three arts of music i.e., singing, dancing and instrument playing. Rāma was also skilled in music, playing instruments and painting. Rāvaṇan, the king of Lanka also used to worship Lord Shiva with song and dance. Lord Krishna performed 'Raas Nritya' with Gopikas. The great grandson of Krishna, Anirudh and his wife Usha learnt 'Lasya' style of dancing from Goddess Parvati (wife of Lord Shiva) and then propagated it in Dwarka. Similarly, Arjuna (One among the Pandavas) learnt the art of dancing from Urvashi, a nymph from heaven and during the period of his banishment when the Pandavas were required to live in disguise, he transformed himself as Brhannala, a Eunuch and taught the art of dancing to Uttara, the daughter of King Virat. Thus, even the main characters of Mahabharata were quite skilled in the art of dancing. Buddha encouraged the male as well as female dancers to participate in social functions and when women went darshan of Buddha, they praised him through the medium of singing and dancing. The art was also used for propagating Buddhism and bringing it closer to common folk.

In the great ancient Indian theatre, one can find various theatrical forms existing from vedic period. Bharata's Natyashastra is the first text on Indian dramaturgy. The techniques, rules, and symbols of theater and performing arts are well-structured and documented in an ancient text called the "Nāṭya Śāstra." The term "Śāstra" doesn't only refer to the Vedas; it denotes a disciplined approach leading to liberation. It provides clear instructions for prosperity and well-being, discouraging reckless behavior in the name of freedom. Therefore, Indian classical dances must adhere to the guidelines of the NatyaSastras, with a history, literary connections, and authenticity in structure and presentation, along with artistic and enduring qualities.

The entire text of the Nāṭyaśāstra focuses on the presentation of drama, or rupakam. Bharata states that "*rūpam dṛśyata yocyate*" meaning that various forms or characters from the seven worlds, such as Devas, Danavas, Manavas, Rakshasas, Pannagas, Urugas, Gandharvas, and Apsaras, are depicted in a drama. The audience can recognize these characters or their forms, allowing them to truly enjoy the performance. Bharata explains ten types of rupakam in the Nāṭyaśāstra under the chapter titled "Daśa Rūpaka." Bharata describes ten types of drama in the Nāṭyaśāstra in a chapter (xviii) called "Daśa Rūpaka"

*nāṭakam sa prakaraṇamaṅko vyāyoga evaca |
bāṇaḥ samāvakāraśca vīthiprahasanam dhimaḥ |
thamṛgaśca vijñeyo daśamo nāṭya lakṣaṇe |*

Bharata called Nāṭya (drama) "Rūpakam" because it presents various forms or characters from different realms like Devas, Danava, Manava, Rakshasa, Pannagas, Urugas, Gandharva,

Apsara, which the audience can recognize and enjoy. He explains ten types of Rūpakam in Nāṭyaśāstra. These include nāṭaka (full-length drama), prakaraṇa (drama with a specific theme), aṅka (one-act play), vyāyoga (play involving fights), and others. According to legends, the evolution of drama includes stages like Bāṇa (single-character play), Vīdhi (play with one or two characters), Prahāsana (comedy), and others. These forms gradually developed into more elaborate ones like Dhīma, Īhamṛga, and Samāvakara, eventually leading to full-fledged dramas like Prakaraṇa and Nāṭaka. Each stage introduced more complexity in plot and characters, allowing for richer storytelling experiences. Bharata thoroughly explained the theory and practice of drama in 36 chapters of the Nāṭyaśāstra. He believed that Nāṭya, or drama, is created by Brahma, incorporating elements from various Vedas (literature from R̥gveda, expressions from Yajurveda, music from Samaveda, and aesthetics from Adharvaṇa Veda. He called it Nāṭyaveda or Pañcama Veda). The goal of Nāṭya is to convey supreme values and provide entertainment while reflecting life's customs and manners. Bharata emphasized the importance of mimicking human or divine deeds in drama, distinguishing between realistic (Lōkadharmi) and conventional (Nāṭyadharmi) aspects. Nāṭya combines elements from the real world (Lōka-dharmi) with those unique to drama (Nāṭya-dharmi). The dramatist must understand both realms to create compelling performances.

Over time, dramas evolved with new elements while preserving Bharata's ten rūpakas, leading to sub-classifications. Additionally, traditional dance forms from different regions adopted classical elements like hand gestures, intricate movements, and music through long-term mentorship in a '*Guru-Shishya Sampradaya*'.

Ancient Indian theater evolved into two main types: Rūpakas, major dramatic forms, and Uparūpakas, minor forms emphasizing music and dance, often dance dramas. Dramas used words, gestures, costumes, makeup, songs, and dances, with regional variations. Over time, dance gained prominence over dialogue, leading to the development of Uparūpakās, emphasizing dance and music alongside drama. Drama, dance, and music were all important parts of a performance. Around the 10th century, regional dance styles began to develop, using local languages.

Evolution of Dance in Medieval India: From Temple Rituals to Royal Entertainment

During the Medieval Era, dance underwent significant transformations, evolving from its sacred roots to becoming a form of entertainment in diverse settings. In the realm of play production, ensembles known as "Bṛṇḍam" or Mēḷam, consisting of actors, dancers, singers, and musicians, were instrumental. These groups, categorized into Bāhya and Abhyantara, encompassed both male and female artists or exclusively female performers, respectively. By the 12th century, the classic Sanskrit drama format, Nāṭaka, began to wane, leading to clearer distinctions between Nṛtta, Nāṭya, and Nṛtya, with dance seamlessly integrated into performances alongside music. Devadasis, traditionally associated with temple rituals, expanded their performances beyond temples, participating in deity processions and showcasing more expressive storytelling, albeit at the cost of some spiritual significance. With increasing royal patronage, dance found a new home in courtly settings, transitioning from praising gods to entertaining kings and scholars, while still emphasizing the importance of technical proficiency. As Islam rose, dance and music became vehicles for spreading religious stories, adapting to accommodate changing religious dynamics while safeguarding ancient traditions. In Southern India, Nāṭyamēḷam and NaṭṭuvaMēḷam emerged as prominent dance forms, featuring elaborate dance dramas based on Puranic stories to disseminate

religious and cultural values. The Bhakti movement played a pivotal role in popularizing devotion rituals, with poets like Ramadas, Suradas, Kabir, and Meera spreading Vaishnavism through their compositions, alongside works like Jayadeva's *Gīta Govindam* inspiring musical dance dramas. Inscriptions from the eighth to tenth centuries reveal the vibrant tradition of theatrical performances, highlighting the rich cultural heritage of medieval India through troupes like *Bhāgavata mēḷam* and artists known as *Bhāgavatārs/Bhāgavatulu*.

Evolution of Dance in the Modern Era

After Independence, the Government of India formed the Sangeet Natak Academy in 1953 to preserve and promote Indian art forms, initially recognizing four dance traditions as Indian Classical Dance: Kathak, Kathakali, Bharatanatyam, and Manipuri. Later, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Mohiniāttam, Sattriya, and Chau were added. These dances reflect Indian culture, customs, and religion. Each tradition has its own distinct style, rooted in the customs and traditions of its region of origin. These include Bharatanatyam from Tamil Nadu, Kuchipudi from Andhra Pradesh, Kathakali and Mohiniāttam from Kerala, Odissi from Orissa, Manipuri from Manipur and West Bengal, Kathak from Northern India, Sattriya from Assam, and Chau from eastern Indian states.

In the last century or two, there has been a significant process of 'reconstruction' in classical dance forms, allowing for full-length performances. While these dances all follow ancient treatises like Bharata's *Nāṭya Sāstra*, they have evolved separately due to unique historical, political, and regional influences. Despite sharing common aesthetic principles and mythological backgrounds, each style has its own distinct characteristics and technical features, especially in costume and makeup. Although they stem from the same roots, India's diverse states with different languages, traditions, and customs have led to the development of various dance styles. This diversity allows for storytelling in different languages and dress codes, making it easier for audiences to connect with the performances.

Conclusion

In conclusion, dance in India has a rich history that spans from ancient times to the modern era. It has evolved from its sacred origins to become a vibrant form of entertainment and cultural expression. Through various periods, from prehistoric rituals to medieval courtly performances and contemporary reconstructions, dance has remained a vital part of Indian culture. Despite diverse influences and regional variations, dance continues to serve as a powerful means of communication and storytelling, reflecting the customs, traditions, and values of the Indian people.

References

1. Narayan,S.(n.d). Evolution of Indian classical dance since independence.
Retrieved from URL
(https://www.academia.edu/87923658/Evolution_of_Indian_classical_dance_since_independence_by_Shovana_Narayan)
2. Babol, R.(n.d.). Chapter 1: Historical origins of dance.
Retrieved from URL
(https://www.academia.edu/34929015/CHAPTER_1_HISTORICAL_ORIGINS_OF_DANCE)
3. Shankar, J. (2013). Approaches on the Devadasi System of India - A Review. *Indian Historical Studies.Vol. XIX (2)*.
4. Bhaduri, A. (2016). The Dancer, Her Dance & The Temple Within: Exploring the sacred links of Indian dance with the Hindu temple.
5. Jonnalagadda, A. (1996). Tradition and Innovations in Kuchipudi Dance (Doctoral dissertation, University of Hyderabad).
6. Stevens, C. (n.d.). Defining Traditions of Indian Dance.
Retrieved from URL
(https://www.academia.edu/95463072/Defining_Traditions_of_Indian_Dance)
7. Devi, R. (2017). Histrionic Expressions in Kuchipudi Dance. *Padinjyarayil Publications*.
8. Rama Krishna, N. (2016). A History of Dance in South India. *Natarajaramakrishna Andhra Natyam Trust*.
9. Appa Rao, P. S. (1997). Abhinayadarpanam of Nandikeshwara. *Natyamala Series*.
10. Bose, M. (1989). The Evolution of Classical Indian Dance Literature: A Study of the *Sanskritic Tradition* (Doctoral dissertation). Somerville College, UK.