

# TRAJECTORY OF POWER IN PERFORMING ARTS IN THE CONTEXT OF HERO WORSHIP AND BHAKTHI

**Dr. Nisha Joseph**

Assistant Professor, PG Department of History, Henry Baker College, Melukavumattom, Kottayam, Kerala, India, PIN-686652.

## Abstract

The paper is an attempt to understand the socio-cultural influence of Arya Brahmin ideology in Dravidian culture and arts. Bharatanatyam is the oldest classical dance tradition of India and is the artistic expression of Tamil Nadu. It originally formed during the Sangam period but due to the influence of various cultures on Dravidian culture changed their original form. Now it is an admixture of polity and bhakti. Until the 1920s the dance was performed in the temples and was the exclusive preserve of the women called *Devadasis*. The *Devadasis* and her dance were important adjuncts to the religious and secular life of the Tamil people. However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the socio cultural factors such as Westernization, Mobilization of social movements and urbanizations resulted in the transition of the dance from within the temple precincts to the urban city. Thus the Sangam age art and cultures merged in heroism and romance, when Bhakti movement came to south India that influenced the entire culture of the region which is very clear in their expressions and it is the key concept of this study.

**Keywords:** Sangam literature, power of chieftain, hero worship, Sadir, Bhakti, Bharathanatyam,.

## Introduction

In South India, the classical dance of Bharatanatyam was greatly influenced and well entrenched in the social and cultural milieu of the society. Information about ancient indigenous Tamil culture is found in the *Sangam* literature spanning from Ca. 100 B.C to 300 AD onwards.<sup>1</sup> The literature of this period was dominated by two secular elements namely '*Aham*' dealing with love and romanticism and '*Puram*' dealing with the external world of heroism and generosity. The poetry was recited by male and female bards who were employed at the court of kings and chieftains. The male bards called the '*Panar*' (singer) '*Porunar*' (dancer) '*Paricilar*' (an artist who receives wealth from the king after praising him) and the female bards called the '*Virali*' (dancer) and '*Padini*' (singer) formed the innermost circle of the king<sup>2</sup>. The content of song and dance was a product of a feudal society in which the king, the nobles and the aristocracy of warriors and chieftains formed the subject matter of cultural expression. Their function was to sustain the glory of the king and expunge the evil spirit in society. The theme of the dance and song was in extolling the king for providing security to the people, or in praise of the spoils of a victorious king. Thus on one hand, the role of the artistic community was to sing love poetry and maintain the powers of the king along with dancing and playing the lute<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, outside the courts the bards danced, fore told the future and played an important role in the society.<sup>4</sup>

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are many *Pazham Tamil* songs describing the *virali* (dancers), their body structure, dance and art in which they were interested. These dances are mainly used to play for pleasing the village chieftains. They are *Urkizhanmar*, *Malirmannan*, *Vendan*. They had peculiar political structure for implementing their powers.<sup>5</sup> "Very powerful chieftains were emerged through warfare's and competitions between *gothras* were quiet common in lineage societies. These chieftains were known as *Muvendan*. Such *vendan* is namely *Cheran* whose power was established in middle Kerala

which was extending to *Thrissinappilly*. Other *vendans* included *Pandya and Chola* have collected wealth through wars. They are known as *Velirkal*. Their functions include the distribution of wealth of *Maravar, Vettuvar and Panans* who led with wars and sang songs praising the king” (Rajan Gurukkal 319). As earlier stated, the *virali's* were interested in required to maintain their beauty of body structure and danced in presence of chieftains. The term *viral* indicates the emotions which absorbed in mind and expressed thereafter. The chieftains always were making wars for gaining *Maruthu* which included paddy field.

Further during the *Sangam* period texts such as the *Silapathikaram* (Ca. 450 A.D) describe the nature of classical dance. Dance was known as *koothu*.<sup>6</sup> It was classified into two “*Santhi Koothu*” (Classical dance) and “*Vinoda Koothu*” (Popular dance).<sup>7</sup> *Santhi Koothu* referred to the classical dance and *Vinodakoothu* referred to the popular form. The performing of artists of this period was considered the likely antecedents of the later *devadasi* dancer of the temples<sup>8</sup>. The change in dance from the bardic milieu of the sangam period to the devadasi dance of the medieval period was due to Scio-cultural factors such as the *Bhakti* movement and the institution of dance in the temples. In *Chilappathikaram* the dance is divided and called as '*Eruvakaikoothu*'.<sup>9</sup> In *Pathittupathu* the body structure of dancers was praised by the poets.

*Natyasastra* of Bharatha was considered as the fifth Veda after four Vedas. It was written to keep Gods amused who were fed up with the philosophy of other Vedas. In Aryan culture and art *Natyasastra* plays a significant role. It is the basic text of Indian dance tradition and provides details of *Abhinaya, Nritha, Bhavarasas*, and even dress and ornaments. The text is considered to be written during the later Vedic period. At first the theme of this *Natya* was Deva and Asura war and final victory of Devas. Later Asuras contempt the performance and Bharatha changed its theme to good and evil in our life and sorrows and happiness in our life. Thus dance became a theatric of emotions, romance, anger and pain.

## METHODOLOGY

The main issue which is to be analyzed in the context that south Indian performing art are structured within the rule of hero worship. While analyzing the historical aspect of the dance is the reflection of human emotion and its essence are developed upon the physical actions linked with each other which vary from region to region. A kind of regional element was clear in the theme of songs and style of dance. Rulers were the great patrons of these arts, and a kind of power over performing art is very clear in this context. The power as a tool interferes in every aspect of epistemology of society. A trajectory of this power relation can see in the case of transformation of *Sadir* into *Bharathanatyam*.

## FINDINGS

### Contextualizing the context of changes

In continuation with the dance convention of the *sangam* period, the dancers of the early medieval period continued to sing and dance the glory of the king after a victorious battle. However, during the medieval period failure to integrate the country politically resulted in an attempt to integrate it culturally. This heralded the *Bhakti* movement during the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D<sup>10</sup>.

The *Bhakti* movement was a protest against the dominating influence of *Jainism* and *Budhism*. From the period, 3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century, Tamilnadu was ruled by the *Kalabhras* and influenced by Jainism. The *Jains* wielded enormous political influence and they tried to gain much influence in the Tamil Society through ethical works that stressed on austerities<sup>11</sup>. As a revolt against this ideology the Dravidian Tamil population and the Indo – Aryan Brahmins together evolved the culture, of Hinduism. In the process of Brahminization, local manifestations of the divine were incorporated into the

“Ritual – Cosmic” base provided by the Aryan Sanskrit based culture<sup>12</sup>. The incorporation and assimilation of local gods gave rise to a large corpus of myths and legends and were popularized by the Hindu saints through the medium of songs.

Further, economically the money from agricultural surplus was used for large – scale temple building<sup>13</sup>. In the temples the divine formerly represented by the king, was replaced by the god. Also in an attempt to popularize Hinduism the saints derived from the Sangam literature the two popular elements of love, romanticism and heroism incorporated them<sup>14</sup>. They glorified the god as a generous patron and equated the deity in the temple as the king. The ‘King – god’ concept legitimized sensuousness in divine worship and entrenched dance in the temples. The sensuous offering to a munificent art – loving king – god formed the main theme in dance and music<sup>15</sup>. Thus the *Bhakti* movement encouraged the institutionalization of dance of the temples.

In the temples, as a result of the institutionalization of dance, the culture of sensuous offering of the arts was further entrenched. It was during the reign of Chola kings (985 – 1279 A.D), south Indian cultural life and social life were mould in a pattern that continued for centuries. The Chola kings sustained the king – god concept and became the permanent patron of the arts in the temple<sup>16</sup>. The glory of the king was represented by the dancers in the court and the temple<sup>17</sup>. During the Maratha rule, the dance was known as ‘*Sadir*’ and ‘*Dasiattam*’<sup>18</sup>. In the court, the term, ‘*Sadir*’ was the nomenclature used for the presentation of dance. The king employed thousands of dancers for the entertainment of the guests. A Chinese author of the early 13<sup>th</sup> century *Ju – Kua*, stated that “at state banquets the prince employs fully myriad dancing girls... (Who) break into music, song and dancing...?”<sup>19</sup>. In the temples, the term *Dasiattam* was used to represent the dance of the *devadasis*. The performance of dance in the temple was held in a stage decorated with beads called “*Maniarangal*”<sup>20</sup>.

### ***Dasiattam***

In the later period one can see the changes in the dance, the rulers gave land grants to the performers of dance and music. The gift of land to the singers was called “*Padaliyarkani*” and the dancers were called “*Nattuvakani*”<sup>21</sup>. In the temples the aspect of appointment of the dancer and the dance master was that their service was hereditary provided they were skilled<sup>22</sup>. Accomplished dancers were given the titles such as “*Talaikoli*” and “*santhi kutti*”<sup>23</sup>. Thus, the support of the temple as a permanent patron ensured the cultural reproduction and the transmission of cultural values through generations.<sup>24</sup>

### **Impact of Socio-Cultural Factors**

In the temples during those times the artistic community was organized into *Chinna Melam* and *Peria Melam*. *Chinna melam* consisted of the female dancers and the male teacher, and the *Peria melam* consisted of the *Nagaswaram* (Wind instrument) players who were all men<sup>25</sup>. Further the *Devadasis* of the temple were associated with communities such as the *Melakarar* and the *Nayanakarar* who trained and recruited them for temple service. The social organizations of the artistic community evolved its own customs, laws of inheritance, rules of etiquette and its own Panchayats<sup>26</sup>.

During the Maratha rule the influence of Sanskrit and Brahmanas increased in the realm of Bharatanatyam along with social domination by them. Their domination resented the non – Brahmin resentment in the temple. The use of Sanskrit also made changes in the artistic expressions. The division between the writers and the performers allowed the continuity of dance with little change, until the advent of the British<sup>27</sup>.

Within the palace and in the temples the arts of music and dance were encouraged. Proper learning and training were the conditions stipulated for the dancers. However, no references are contained in the inscriptions regarding the method of teaching<sup>28</sup>. According to literary texts such as the *Silappadikaram*, strict training is necessary in order to

become a professional dancer. Dance and Music formed an essential part of the *devadasi* training<sup>29</sup>. Therefore for the purpose of dance and music masters for both vocal and instrumental were appointed<sup>30</sup>. Sometimes, the music makers imparted in both dance and music<sup>31</sup>. In a few temples the drummers were employed to train the dancers<sup>32</sup>. Dance was generously supported by the kings and special attention was given towards the training of dancers. For the purpose of their training a special hall was built in the palace<sup>33</sup>.

### Changes in the form and content of dance

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards the Tamil cultural milieu was marked by intensive change in all spheres of culture<sup>34</sup>. The assimilation of different cultures into Tamil Culture brought forth changes in the dance form and content. Firstly, the Vijayanagar kings placed deputies belonging to Telugu and Kannada nobility. Therefore the language of Telugu and Kannada was incorporated into the content of dance<sup>35</sup>. Secondly, Tamil literature of this period was a fusion of Tamil and Sanskrit cultures. The compositions contained a mixture of classical Tamil compositions, folk songs, Sanskrit descriptive poems, and auspicious songs which were an important part of the *devadasi* repertoire<sup>36</sup>. Thirdly, in the literature, old and archaic forms were retained and adopted to the cultural influence of the period. Classical songs such as the *Kirtana* (Song of Praise), *Kuravanji* (song of the gypsy) and *Unjal* (Swing song) were presented as independent literary compositions during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century under the Maratha rule, the influence of Kannada and Telugu cultures on the local indigenous culture continued. The content of the dance dramas composed by the Maratha King Sahaji II included songs and dance from the concert repertoire, and also of the ritual offerings by *Devadasis* in the temple<sup>37</sup>. Thus a dance from tradition practiced in the temples, with the aesthetic and cultural sophistication of the courts.

### Conclusion

Bhakti movement and Aryan domination over Tamil culture made lots of changes in art and culture of the region. One of the best instances was that the regions performing art, which fostered with the support of chieftains and kings, Sadir now came to be known as Bharathanatyam. The main theme of this theatrical was love, romance and heroism of the chieftains and kings of the Sangam literature transformed into Bhakti. Brhamanization transformed Dravidian Tamil literature from their day today life and hero worship to Bhakti. Once their bhakti was to heroes and now it replaced with Aryan gods.

### END NOTE

<sup>1</sup> C. Nachiappan, **Rukmini Devi Bharatha Natya**, Kalakshetra Publication, Thiruvannamipur, 2003.pp. 5-9

<sup>2</sup> Saskia C. Kersenboom , “**Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India**” Motilar Banassidas, New Delhi, 1987 p.17.

<sup>3</sup> **Porrunar Atturpadi**, Vardhamanan Padhipagam, I Edition, 1999, p.109

<sup>4</sup> **Akananur**, Vardhamanan Padhipagam, I Edition, 1999, p.155.

<sup>5</sup> Rajan Gurukkal, Myth, Charithram, Samooham, Kozhikode: Prasakthi Books,2004.p325

<sup>6</sup> Adiyarkkumnallar commentary, “**Silapadikaram**”(ed.) G.V. Swaminatha Iyer, Madras, 1978,pp.3 -13

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp.3-12

- <sup>8</sup>Kersanboom, Op.cit., p.54
- <sup>9</sup> Nirmalapanikkar.Keralaththinte Lasya Peruma.Thrissur:Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy.p 39
- <sup>10</sup> P.C. Joshi, **Culture Communication and Social Change**, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1989. p.7
- <sup>11</sup> Jayalakshmi Eshwar, **Bhrathanatyam How to.....**, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi,2002.pp45-69
- <sup>12</sup> Kersenboom p.17
- <sup>13</sup> Prasad A.K., **Devadasi System in Ancient India ;A Study of Temple Dancing Girls of South India**, H.K. Publishers, Chennai, 1991.p. 56-70
- <sup>14</sup> V. Subramaniam (ed.), **The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts**, Ashis Publishers, New Delhi, 1980, pp. 18
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. pp. 19-46.
- <sup>16</sup> A. Swaminathan, **Temple Lands and Society (with Special reference to the Chola Period)**, in Journal of Tamil Studies, 1981, No. 20, pp. 22- 23.
- <sup>17</sup> K. Sadasivan, **Devadasi system in Medieval Tamilnadu**, BH, 1993, p-166
- <sup>18</sup> Padma Subramaniam, **"Indian – Dance – Past, Present, and Future"**, Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> Natya Kala Conference, Chennai, December 1990, pp.1-5
- <sup>19</sup> Nilakanta Sastri, **A History of South India**, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1955, p.192
- <sup>20</sup> **St. Manikavacagar**, Mani edition, 1966, pp.31-35
- <sup>21</sup> Swaminathan, op.Cit., pp.23-25
- <sup>22</sup> **Inscription of Madras Presidency**, Vol. 306 of 1907.
- <sup>23</sup> **South Indian Inscription**, Vo. XVII (ed.) K.G. Krishnan, Delhi, 1964, No. 455, 593 and 606
- <sup>24</sup> V. Subramaniam, **Origins of Bhakti in Tamil Nadu** in G.M. Bailey and I. Kesar Codi – Watson ed., **Bhakti Studies**, Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1986, pp. 11 - 51.
- <sup>25</sup> Annie – Marie Gaston, **Bharatanatyam**, Journal of the Madras Music Academy, Vol. LXI, 1990, pp. 116 – 118
- <sup>26</sup> Edgar Thurston, **Caste and Tribes of South India**, Vol. II, Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 1975, p. 25-28
- <sup>27</sup> Leela Samson, **Rhythm in Classical Indian Dance Traditions**, Luster Press, Calcutta, 1987,p 102
- <sup>28</sup> Gurusurthy, S., **Education and Fine Arts in South Indian Inscription**, Journal of Madras University, Vol. XLIX, No. 1, Part ii, January 1977, pp.73 – 74
- <sup>29</sup> **Adiyarkkunallar Commentary, "Silappadikaram"**(ed.), U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, 1978, p.17
- <sup>30</sup> **South Indian Inscription**, Vol. II, (ed. Trans.) by E. Hultzsch, Archaeological Survey of India, Madras, 1895, Part iii, No. 66.



- <sup>31</sup> **South Indian Inscription**, Vol. V (ed.) H. Krishna Sastri, ASI, Madras, 1925 No. 705
- <sup>32</sup> **South Indian Inscription**, Vol. V, No. 150.
- <sup>33</sup> T.V. Mahalingam, **Administration and Social Life Under Vijayanagar**, University of Madras, 1975, p.15
- <sup>34</sup> Sewell, A. A. **Forgotten Empire**, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1980 pp. 20 – 21
- <sup>35</sup> Padhma Subramaniam, **Bharata's Art Then and Now**, Published by Nithyodaya, Madras, 1979, pp.18-20.
- <sup>36</sup> Zvevehil, K.V. **Tamil Literature**, Weishaden, 1974, pp. 110 – 111
- <sup>37</sup> Sambamoorthy, P. (ed) **Pullaki Seva Prabandam**, Madras, 1955

## REFERENCES

1. **Akananur**, Vardhamanan Padhipagam, I Edition, 1999.
2. **Bharatha Muni's Natya Sastra**, (Trns.), Pisharoty, PKP Narayanan, Vol.I & II, Kerala Sahithya Academi, Thrissur, 1987.
3. **Inscription of Madras Presidency**, Vol. 306 of 1907.
4. **Porrunar Atturpadi**, Vardhamanan Padhipagam, I Edition, 1999.
5. **"Silapadikaram"** (ed.) G.V. Swaminatha Iyer, Madras, 1978.
6. **South Indian Inscription**, Vol. II, (ed. Trans.) by E. Hultzsch, Archaeological Survey of India, Madras, 1895, Part III, No. 66.
7. **South Indian Inscription**, Vol. V (ed.) H. Krishna Sastri, ASI, Madras, 1925 No. 150
8. **South Indian Inscription**, Vol. V, (ed.) H. Krishna Sastri, ASI, Madras, 1925 No. 705.
9. **South Indian Inscription**, Vo. XVII (ed.) K.G. Krishnan, Delhi, 1964, No. 455, 593 and 606
10. Edgar Thurston, **Caste and Tribes of South India**, Vol. II, Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 1975.
11. A.K., Prasad, **Devadasi System in Ancient India ;A Study of Temple Dancing Girls of South India**, H.K. Publishers, Chennai, 1991.
12. Bailey, G.M., Codi, I. Kesar & Watson ed., **Bhakti Studies**, Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1986.
13. Eshwar, Jayalakshmi, **Bhrathanatyam How to.....**, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 2002.
14. Gurusurthy, S., **Education and Fine Arts in South Indian Inscription**, Journal of Madras University, Vol. XLIX, No. 1, Part II, January 1977.
15. Joshi, P.C. **Culture Communication and Social Change**, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1989.
16. Kersenboom, Saskia C., **"Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India"** Motilar Banassidas, New Delhi, 1987.
17. Mahalingam, T.V. **Administration and Social Life Under Vijayanagar**, University of Madras, 1975.
18. Marie Gaston, Annie, **Bharatanatyam**, Journal of the Madras Music Academy, Vol. LXI, 1990.
19. Nachiappan, C. **Rukmini Devi Bharatha Natya**, Kalakshetra Publication, Thiruvannamipur, 2003.
20. Nirmalapanikkar Keralaththinte Lasya Peruma Thrissur: Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy.

21. Rajan Gurukkal, Myth, Charithram, Samooham, Kozhikode: Prasakthi Books, 2004.
22. Sadasivan, K. **Devadasi system in Medieval Tamilnadu**, BH, 1993.
23. Sastri KA, Nilakanta, **A History of South India**, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1955.
24. Sambamoorthy, P. (ed) **Pullaki Seva Prabandam**, Madras, 1955.
25. Samson, Leela, **Rhythm in Classical Indian Dance Traditions**, Luster Press, Calcutta, 1987.
26. Sewell, Robert, **The Forgotten Empire**, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1980.
27. **St. Manikavacagar**, Mani edition, 1966.
28. Subramaniam, V. (ed.), **The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts**, Ashis Publishers, New Delhi, 1980.
29. Subramaniam, Padma, **"Indian – Dance – Past, Present, and Future"**, Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> Natya Kala Conference, Chennai, December 1990.
30. Subramaniam, Padhma, **Bharata's Art Then and Now**, Published by Nithyodaya, Madras, 1979.
31. Swaminathan, A. **Temple Lands and Society (with Special reference to the Chola Period)**, in Journal of Tamil Studies, No. 20, 1981.
32. Zvevehil, K.V. **Tamil Literature**, Weishaden, 1974.

