The Influence of Hinduism on the Classical Indian Dance of Bharata Natyam

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Abstract

Bharata natyam is a form of dancing that originated in the temples of Tamil Nadu, India. From the beginning, this classical Indian dance has been intertwined with Hinduism. It is one of the oldest dances in ancient history, but is still widely performed by dancers today. The principles and traditions of bharata natyam are derived from the Hindu treatise *Bharata: The Natya Shastra.* This is a branch off of the fifth Veda of the Hindu scriptures: the Natya Veda. Although it is such an antique dance, it was not until the twentieth century that bharata natyam became a world-known dance. The choreographer Sri Rukhmini Devi Arundale revolutionized the dance by combining contemporary elements of ballet with the traditions and standards of bharata natyam.

Bharata natyam is the fusion of multiple arts. It combines drama, music, poetry, rhythm, stage, and style. The musical elements are usually of Hindu influence, as they are about a Hindu deity or refer to a story in the Hindu scriptures. Most of the performances today still honor Hinduism as it did throughout its history. Because the pieces are usually about the ancient Hindu stories, bharata natyam reflects the era of early life in India. Bharata natyam is more than a dance, but it is an expression of Hinduism.

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Introduction

Bharata natyam is one of the most prestigious forms of classical dancing in the country of India. The word, “Bharata natyam,” is made of Tamil syllables that translate its meaning almost directly: “bha” is short for bhavam which means expression, “ra” is short for ragam which means music, “ta” stands for talam which means the rhythm, and “natyam” means dance. It is a dance of stances, expressions, hand gestures, and sculpturesqe poses. Not only is it a dance of beats and music, but it is a spiritual dance with roots in religion. Hinduism plays a large role in Bharatantayam in that it derived and evolved the dance to what it is today. As one of the oldest dances in ancient history, today it is widely practiced and performed by male and female dancers.

Bharata natyam is comprised of three major divisions: *nritta, nritya,* and *natya. Nritta* means pure dance. It consists of body movements and patterns. *Nritya* is the meaning of the dance: the expressions conveyed through hand gestures, facial expressions, and actions. *Natya* is the element of drama; the stories the dancer tells alongside the music and body language. The basic dance unit of *nritta* is called the *adavu.* The *adavus* are combinations of steps and gestures in dance. When combined, *adavus* create dances. The pure dance pieces, or *nritta pieces¸* of *adavus* in Bharata natyam are the *alarippu, jathiswaram, and tillana. Adavus* “are so woven in an artistic manner forming the sequences of pure dance that they create fascinating patterns of great visual beauty (Kothari, 38). Together, these three elements form Bharata natyam.

*Hastas* are the decorative hand gestures that add to the beauty of *adavus.* The *hastas,* or *mudras* convey the meaning of the choreography through *nritya* and *natya.* Each *hasta* represents something else, for example *alapadma* (fingers outstretched as if asking why) represents the fully bloomed lotus flower. When *alapadma* is performed with the right hand and placed on top of the head, it becomes a pot that a young lady is carrying atop her head. When *alapadma* is placed high above with the left hand, it represents a full moon. Many *hastas* were made to express the Hindu religion—the *hastas* to portray a god or goddess. The god Krishna can be portrayed in a dance with the Krishna *hasta.* Two *Mrigashirsa mudras* (fingers are bent from the knuckles except for the little finger and the thumb which are held straight) are placed next to each other on the right side of the mouth. The back of the left hand faces the audience with the thumb right next to the mouth. The hands connect at the left pinky and right thumb again to give the illusion of the flute that the Lord Krishna is known for playing. The Lord Shiva is a “thumbs up” sign with the right hand placed rested on top of a flat left hand at center chest level. Whenever the *shivalingam hasta* is performed in a dance, it is referring to Shiva. Shiva can also be referred to with an alternative *hasta:* *mrigashirsa* with the left hand at chest level and *tripataka mudra* (all the fingers are held straight and close together like the stop sign except for the ring finger which is bent at the knuckle) with the right hand. The left hand represents his wife Devi Parvati and the right hand represents his mode of transportation—Nandi the bull. There is at least one *hasta* per god or goddess in Bharata natyam. When combined, *nritta, nritya, and natya* create the *abinaya* pieces: *shabdam, varnam, keerthanam,* and *padam. Abinaya* refers to the facial expressions and body movements that evoke emotion (onlinebharatanatyam.com). These pieces are a combination of pure *adavus* and storytellings of the gods and goddesses of Hinduism.

Origins and History

The origin of Bharata natyam is traced to Hinduism. The treatise *Bharata: The Natya Shastra* is a composition written between the second century BC and the second century AD which describes the beginning of the dance and its roots in Hinduism. The Hindu god, Bramha, creator of the universe, was requested to make a fifth Veda for the enjoyment of the senses (the Vedas are a sacred collection of Aryan hymns and the basis of the Hindu principles.) Bramha integrated the expression of the Yajur Veda and the aesthetics of the Atharva Veda and created the Natya Veda. Bramha then taught this to Bharata, a disciple and the author of the *Natya Shastra*. Bharata held a performance which employed vocals, grandeur, energy, and grace to create a composite dance style (Devi, 26). Here, Lord Shiva saw the dance and was so impressed that he choreographed the Tandava, the masculine dance, to Bharata and taught his wife Parvati Lasya, the feminine dance. Together, they danced and this became the dance of India; it was passed down from generation to generation. Only in the twentieth century, this dance was given the name “Bharata natyam” (artandculture.com). Bharata natyam has many factions in the dance. When it first began in the temples, it was limited to divine men and women known as *devadasis.* Eventually this evolved to be limited to only women. They only performed in temples and all their dances were devoted to a Hindu deity. These dances were meant to honor the gods during processions of the deities. When the British imperialized India, they converted the dance from its religious, spiritual form to an entertainment as they began to hire the *devadasis* to perform in their homes as patronage to the wealthy men. This evolved form of temple dancing was considered *nautch* (an Anglican version of the Hindi word *nach* which means to dance) because these women were not only dancers, but they were prostitutes as well to fund themselves. An Anti-nautch movement began in South India in 1892. Although the anti-nautch movement identified itself as an “anti-dance” movement, it focused on the status of women and the social structures around ritual dedication. They sought to abolish the entire form of dance because it “supported a system that institutionalized prostitution; moreover, courtesanship had cultivated a lascivious dance form” (O’Shea, 30). Revivalists, conversely, were activist intending to maintain ancient Hindu traditions; therefore, they supported the *devadasi* system. They argued that temple dedications and dances do not need to result in prostitution; however, they maintained that they would be left with no source of income without added element. In 1947, the anti-nautch activists finally secured legislation against the *devadasi* courtesanship system. Although the temple dance was still practiced, it was highly disparaged. In the 1920s and 1930s, a new generation of dancers began taking up the *devadasi* form, most of whom were not from the *devadasi* communities. These new dancers justified and remodeled the dance form. By the western intellects, the “idea of dance as a ‘high art’ rather than as a diversion in turn inflected the recontextualization of bharata natyam” (O’Shea, 32). The name bharata natyam was coined during the regrowth of dance. The term *natya* associated the dance with the *Natyasastra,* Indian classical music, and Indian dramatic traditions. The term bharata natyam is in Sanskrit, so the name carries the prestige of the language and nationalizes the dance.

One of the most famous revivalists is Sri Rukhmini Devi Arundale who evolutionized bharata natyam by creating the Kalakshetra School of Dance in Chennai, India. Devi learned to dance the English ballet before she learned bharata natyam. The ballet dancer Anna Pavlova encouraged Devi to “‘revive the art of [her] own country’” (O’Shea, 38). This inspired Devi to learn bharata natyam. After three years of learning, she began to create a modified, refined form of the dance. Her performances allowed for the anti-nautch activists to be convinced of the new form of dance. Devi took the dance of bharata natyam and combined the form and grace of ballet with the tenets of bharata natyam. She allowed for bharata natyam to be pan-spiritual, as she combined the eastern traditions with western techniques to develop the faction of bharata natyam, or the Kalakshetra school of dance. Rukhmini Devi “strove to salvage bharata natyam and to erase its stigma, purifying it while also aligning it with modern aesthetic values” (O’Shea, 40). Although the new style primarily stuck to the devotional pieces to the Hindu gods and goddesses, Kalakshetra opened the gates to other schools of dance and dancers of other religions. Moreover, Hinduism still is most associated with bharata natyam as the majority of choreographed dances are dedicated to a Hindu deity.

Attire

Not only is the dance with Hindu roots, but the costumes and make up are of Hindu influence as well. The costumes are made of silk saris, a cloth most often used to adorn statues of the Hindu deities. The colors of the costumes are generally bright and vibrant to congruent the divine *apsaras,* females of the heavens who were experts in music and dance. The jewelry is reminiscint of a divine goddess. It is made of gold-plated silver and adorned with semi-precious red and green stones. The head wears a rakodi, a tikka, and two smaller ornaments on either side. The two smaller ornaments *surya* and *chandra* represent the sun and the moon. There are two nose rings that a dancer wears: one ring on the outer nostril and one hanging ring in the septum. The dancer wears large earrings called *jhumki* with multiple necklaces of various lengths. A gold belt is worn around the waist. Bangles and rings are also worn on the wrists and hands. A leather strip with about fifty small bells is worn around each ankle, so when the dancer beats, the bells jingle along with the music. Except for the ankle bells, the goddess Laxshmi wears all of these jewelries; however, this is only because her ankles are never shown in pictures or statues. The bharata natyam dancer mimics the goddess of wealth, purity, and generosity. The final, and most important, touch of the bharata natyam dancer’s attire is the bindhi. It is the symbol of the third eye located between the eyebrows. The bindhi is considered the point of total concentration, according to Hindu traditions. The concentration in the bindhi is analogous to the concentration needed in the dance. (Prahlad, 85-87).

The Lord of Bharata Natyam

Although the Lord Bramha is said to found bharata natyam, the Lord Nataraja is accredited with this dance. The very pose of his sculptures is in a bharata natyam position. His pose (in statues and pictures) is of him dancing: his right foot supports the body in *aramandi* as his left foot is raised elegantly. He has four arms: one is pointing to his raised foot, another has its palm out meaning “do not fear,” and he holds a drum and a flame in his other two hands. The River Ganga flows from his hair and a cobra slithers from under his right forearm. He wears a garland of skulls on his chest, because he is an avatar of the Lord Shiva. Under his right foot is a demon, on which he dances on. A dancer honors the Lord Nataraja by performing a *namaskaram—*or a tribute to the gods by requesting to dance for Lord Nataraja—before beginning to dance. In the *namaskara,* the dancer will place both hands on the floor then touch their own eyelids. This is a common way to seek blessings from an elder or, as in this case, a god. One acquires this by touching the divine’s feet and asking for homage and sanction. Usually, a dancer will also show gratitude to the musicians, the stage, his or her guru, and the audience for their observance and obedience during a performance (if applicable). There are many variations, but all honor these five subjects.

One prayer that is commonly read before a performance is the *Dhyana Sloka.* The significance of these poems is to offer one’s respects to the deities and other divinities that made the work possible.

*Angikam Bhuvanam Yasya, Vaachikam Sarva Vaangmayam, Aahaaryam Chandra Thaaraadee, Thum Numas Saathvikam Shivam*

We bow to that Lord Shiva, whose body is the whole Universe, whose speech is the entire world’s languages and whose ornaments are the moon and stars.

The Lord Nataraja is worshipped as the God of dance in bharata natyam in this *slokham,* or prayer. The prayer is recited in order to extol the values of the divine Lord Shiva. Because Shiva is the avatar of the Lord Nataraja, dancers ask for the blessings of the god of dance before beginning.

Lord Shiva is not only the god of dance, but he is the god of creation, preservation, destruction, concealment, and blessings. He is a common figure of many dances and the focus of many devotional pieces.

Dance as a Story-Telling

Bharata natyam is considered a fusion art; it combines the art of the “stage, drama, music, poetry, colour, and rhythm” (Devi, 25). It not only appeals to the senses and gives enjoyment, but it expresses the soul of the dancer to the perceiver. Bharata natyam is meant to be a dance of spiritual expression. Not only is it a religious dance, but it is considered a “temple art” as “great artistes call themselves *devadasis* (servants of god)” (Devi, 25). Although in modern times, Bharata natyam has been universalized to many religions by contemporary artists, the majority of choreographies remain instilled with Hindu beliefs. The dance is intended to be a vehicle for all the portrayal of all the emotions. One of the keynotes is to portray the stories of the Hindu scriptures: *Mahabharata, Ramayana,* the Puranas, and others. To portray these stories, the dancer must become the characters; he or she must reenact the stories; he or she must understand the gods and goddesses; he or she must demonstrate the spectrum of human emotions and actions.

In the Hindu scriptures, gods and goddesses can be considered as divine humans, as they commit human actions and errors and have human thoughts and processes. Their divinity is shown be the way they surpass above the human spirituality to a transcendental level.

“While Krishna steals butter from the *gopis* [young ladies] like any other child might, he at the same time gives us the beauty of the diving play and can charm us into the fantasies of the spiritual life” (Devi, 26).

The purpose of bharata natyam is to portray these stories the divine gods and goddesses. This is a popular story of the Lord Krishna which has been written and composed into many songs with many tunes in many languages. The sage and composer Sri Jayadeva wrote an epic poem on the love story between Krishna and his love partner Radha. It is in *adi* talam and in the ragam *Yamuna Kalyani.* It is broken into eight sections—hence *ashta-pathi (eight-parts).* One excerpt of this poem

*Keli chalanmani kundala mandita gandayu gasmita saali radhe*

shows the relationship between Krishna and the many girls that are entranced by him. The line translates to:

*The Lord Krishna plays with the beautiful gopis as his earrings sway in the wind; and between those cheeks, a smile is showing on his proud body, oh come look at him my friend Radha.*

In the choreography by Vannadil Pudiyaveettil Dhananjayan and Shanta Dhananjayan, (a famous husband and wife dancing duo better known as “the Dhananjayans”) this line is enacted through the song. They jump twice from side to side with outstretched arms crossed at the wrists to show how Krishna played with the ladies. For the next line, the dancer changes the *muthra* to show small earrings, and then shows how they dangle in the wind by moving his or her neck from side to side. Two fingers are placed on one cheek and the other, then a smile forms to mimic Krishna’s actions at that time. Then the dancer transforms into a gopi and admires the lovely Krishna as she invites her friend Radha to come watch him too.

Another excerpt of the epic poem by Sri Jayadeva tells the story of the Lord Krishna and one of the gopis.

*Kaapi vilaasa vilola vilodchana, kelana janita manojam*

There is a girl who is so happy. Her eyes move side to side watching you. Krishna plays and dances with her, which makes him happy as well.

A curved palm placed on the left side of the body, as if petting a child, shows a beautiful girl. The muthra *alapathmam* shows the joy from the heart that the beautiful girl is feeling. With the index and middle fingers of both hands, the eyes are pointed to. The eyes then move side to side with the rhythm of the music to show the foolish passion in her eyes. The dancer becomes Krishna, shows his flute, and plays it beautifully. Then he holds the girl’s hands and dances with her.

Through the muthras, abinaya, ragam, talam, and poise, the Dhananjayas were able to transform the composition of a Hindu guru into a universal way to understand the Hindu stories. By taking the fundamentals of Bharata natyam, they choreographed the entire ashtapathi. The choreography successfully portrays the playful side of the Lord Krishna. Usually gods and goddesses are celestial and divine, but Krishna represents the humorous, mischievous side of the heavenly beings. If performed in its entirety, the *ashtapathi* times to approximately two hours; however, usually only one of its eight parts is performed at a time.

As stated in the ancient Hindu scriptures, one of the most common ways to honor a god or goddess is through penance: a long period of meditation with the repetition of a mantra. Sages would sit under a banyan tree and repeat a saying. If they were trying to tribute Lord Rama, they may repeat his name; these periods of meditation could last anywhere between a few hours to decades. Dance is also a meditation. It requires focus and concentration. A single performance averages at two hours, which demands for no diversions. The meditation required in bharata natyam parallels to that of yoga, which is why there is a branch of this exercise called *natya-yoga.* It combines the static poses of conventional yoga with the movements and rhythm of dancing. Practitioners often continue for the elevated spirituality and the transcendental state of mind (boldsky.com). “Self-control and focus are the two essential factors in order to successfully perform” and the “fusion of the ears, eyes, hands, feet and singing is the main goal of Natya Yoga” (abc-of-yoga.com). The natya-yoga practitioner dances for the blissful state whereas the bharata natyam dancer practices for the actual dance.

Bharata natyam was made to reflect the era of ancient life, not to reflect modern times. Bharata natyam, like the Vedas, the Upanishads, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Dhammapada*, “is a method of spiritual learning for human ends” (Devi, 26). The body gestures, the rhythm, and the music collaborate to become one unified language of dance, which expresses the poetry in a “realization of intense feelings” (Devi, 26).

Conclusion

Today, bharata natyam is more than just a dance—it is an expression. The aspects of bharata natyam allow for freedom in performance. Most performances are still rooted in Hinduism, but there are choreographies of books, plays, and other religions in bharata natyam. The book *The Man in the Iron Mask* by Alexander Dumas was adapted into a bharata natyam performance in 2006 by choreographer Sheejith Krishna. The choreography in “Masquerade” proved that “the vocabulary and grammar of Bharata natyam can be harnessed to evoke any kind of ambience. The show is a beautiful presentation of a French story with a subtle fragrance of Indianness pervading throughout” (sheejithkrishna.com). Bharata natyam has also been fused with Christian themes. Usually in an Indian language, stories from the Bible have been performed in bharata natyam pieces. Bharata natyam dancer Divya Vasanth performed a Biblical piece in 2012 about Moses parting the Red Sea. With mudras, she depicted the rolling seas, the splitting of the water, and the high walls of water. She is a member of the Christu Dance Center which is an organization that focuses on Biblical adaptations of bharata natyam (thehindu.com).

Bharata natyam is more than a classical Indian dance; it is the epitome of Hindu culture. This dance has helped Hinduism survive throughout history, as it is the oldest religion of the world. Although the dance has struggled to keep its traditional values, the modernization of bharata natyam has allowed for a new movement in the history of the dance. With the contemporary idea of pan-religious dance, bharata natyam is unique. It is irreplaceable as it is one of the only dances that is spiritual and tolerates freedom in choreography. Today, bharata natyam is being taught and performed worldwide by people of all ages.

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