

bharatanatyam

by Denise Robinson

SUMMARY and HISTORY

Bharatanatyam (pronounced ba-rata-na-tiam) is a classical dance style from South India performed by both men and women. It is called the "fifth veda", and is widely considered to be the oldest dance form in India. It is one of the most highly refined developed systems of dance, and is recorded as far back as the 9th century, although it was known as Sadir until the early 1900's. The name Bharatanatyam is explained two different ways. The first is that it is composed of related words:

BHAva (expression)
RAga (melodic mode)
TAla (rhythm)
NATYAM (dance)

The second is that the name comes from a combination of the name of the sage Bharata Muni who wrote the "Natya Shastra" the principles of this dance, and the word for dance "natyam". Bharata is believed to have lived between the 1st and 2nd century AD. He wrote a detailed account of the art of dance, and many people credit his work for the fact that Bharatanatyam remains much the same today as it was long ago.

Another factor in the preservation of the art form are the devadasis. The devadasis or "handmaidens / servants of god" were temple dancers. They enjoyed high status and prosperity, and were encouraged by public funds to pursue their arts. They performed in the temples in praise of the deity as part of daily worship. The devadasis eventually fell into disrepute due to economic and social pressures. While the British ruled India (1858 – 1947), they banned Bharatanatyam, confusing it with nautch dance which was performed by prostitutes. Rukimini Devi, a member of an influential Brahmin family, is credited with reviving the art form and bringing it to the stage during the early 1900's.

Besides the devadasis, dance was also very popular in the courts. The court dancers of the Maratha rulers are also considered to be responsible in part for the present day repertoire of Bharatanatyam. They composed and directed many dance items, and to this day their contributions are held in high esteem and are performed in present day dance recitals - the format of which remains largely intact.



Indira Seetharam

"When we behold the dance, the world is seen as it truly is, sacred."

COSTUMING

Bharatanatyam is a very demanding art form especially recognized by its sculptural poses, rhythmic footwork, and intricate hand and eye movements. The costuming is also distinct. The dancers wear bells around their ankles to accent the footwork, jewelry around their waist and neck (at a minimum), and makeup to enhance the eye and facial expressions. The costumes are designed for freedom of movement and to showcase the signature half-seated posture (called *aria mandi* or *ardhamandal*) so characteristic of Bharatanatyam dance. The costumes can either be a sari (wrapped in various ways) or they can be stitched from sari fabric. The most common style of stitched costume consists of 3+ pieces for males, 4 pieces for children, and 5 pieces for females:

- a pair of loose pants
- a large pleated length of fabric that attaches to the inseam of the pants – this creates a beautiful fan between the dancer's legs during any half-seated or full-seated postures
- a sash that goes around the waist
- a choli blouse (women and children)
- a sash that covers the choli blouse (women)

MUSIC

Bharatanatyam is performed to traditional South Indian Carnatic music. In addition to a singer, some common instruments are violin, mridangam (double headed drum), and flute.

DANCE

The dance itself is largely a storytelling dance. Most of the stories are from the epics and Hindu mythology. The intimate association with Hindu religion from its origins as a temple dance has been preserved through the centuries.

The dancer uses poses, facial expressions, and hand movements to communicate the story to the audience. Like fresco painting in Christian churches, the original purpose of Bharatanatyam was to educate the public about the scriptures. Because of its intricacy and specificity, Bharatanatyam could be used to tell any story in any language.

Bharatanatyam performances are about 2 hours long and the dances are generally performed in a specific order:

Pushpanjali
Alarippu
Jatiswaram
Shabdham

“When we behold the dance, the world is seen as it truly is, sacred.”

Varnam
Padam
Tillana
Managalam

The dance is composed of sets of movements called adavus. When sets of adavus are combined, they create korvais. The movements and adavus are the same for men and women. There are three major elements to the dance: Nritha, Nrithya, and Natya.

Nritha

Pure dance – abstract or “pure” movement. This category does not express a story, it is dance for the sake of creating beauty using the movements of the body, the geometric patterns of the dance, and the dynamic energy caused by the rhythmic footwork.

Nrithya

Abhinaya – interpretative dance where the dancers express the lyrics of the song, evoking emotion.

Natya

A combination of both nritha and nrithya.

Hand movements also play a major role in Bharatanatyam. Hand movements that convey meaning are called mudras, while hand movements that do not have a specific meaning are called hastas.

CREDITS

Many thanks to Kala Seetharam for sharing your knowledge, for continuing my training, for your advice concerning this document, and for your friendship.

IN HER MEMORY

Indira Seetharam taught Bharatanatyam in the Fingerlakes region of New York for many years. She sacrificed tremendous amounts of her time, talents, and finances to promote the dance form she loved and Indian culture in general. She loved performing and teaching, and regularly traveled great distances so that students in surrounding cities could learn the art form. A dedicated teacher, a deeply compassionate woman, and a truly lovely individual. I honor her memory.

“Essentially a solo dance, the sculptural poses of Bharatanatyam have the chiseled sophistication of the great temple carvings of Tamil Nadu in South India. A dedicatory dance, Bharatanatyam was considered a divine art which celebrated, beyond the rapture of the body, the purification of the spirit. The dancer who dissolved her identity in rhythm and music, made her body an instrument for experience of the soul.”

Unknown Source

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