

From the Temple to the Stage – The Evolution of Bharatnatyam

“The name Bharatnatyam is derived from four words - *bhava* (mime), *raga* (melody), *tala* (rhythm) and *natya* (dance). It is an art form that combines mime, melody and rhythm in an incredibly articulate genre of dance”, says National Award-winning performer, teacher and choreographer of Bharatnatyam Radhika Shurajit.

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The lithe body movements, dark eye make-up, *diverse mudras*, expressive facial expressions, and impeccable timing of footwork makes the art form one of its kind. Bharatnatyam flourished in the temples of Tamil Nadu, where dancing was performed as a ritual by *devadasis*, women who dedicated their entire lives to serve the gods. After it was conceived in the temples, it moved to royal courts, and it can currently also be seen on stages.

Even three thousand years after its inception, Bharatnatyam has not only remained as esteemed as it used to be, but it has also been able to accomplish something many art forms could not- it has maintained its malleability. “Bharatnatyam is like a mirror- it starts reflecting whatever is shown.”, says Shurajit. Traditional Bharatnatyam, *margam*, was strictly based on devotional subjects such as religious mythology and *bhakti* poetry. With time, however, Bharatnatyam has come to encompass many contemporary subjects. “If you look at North Indian dance forms such as that of Kathak, you’ll notice that they don’t gel very well with Tamil or Malayalam poetry. People experiment with it, but it just doesn’t work”, says Shurajit, “Look at Bharatnatyam instead, you can throw anything in the mix- from Hindi poetry to Sanskrit literature- and it will still turn out to be beautiful.” The growth of Bharatnatyam has to be seen in relation to the growth of Indian classical music since they grow and complement each other.

Since Bharatnatyam is flexible in nature, it has survived in a fast-paced, highly-urbanised metropolitan city of Chennai. This city has an affinity for culture, which is reaffirmed in the fact that UNESCO has now made it a part of its ‘Creative Cities Network’ for its contribution to music. Bharatnatyam performances occur throughout the year and increase manifold during the *margazhi* month. Tamizh Mugil, a postgraduate student of Bharatnatyam, has been receiving training in the dance form since she was five years old. She says “I have been dancing for the past 14 years. My mother laid a great amount of focus on making us, cultured individuals. My sister and I went through intensive training in Bharatnatyam for years.” Recently, Tamizh was also a part of ‘*Sathir 10000*’, a spectacular event where 10,000 Bharatnatyam dancers performed on a single stage in an attempt to set a Guinness World Record.

“Bharatnatyam has been relatively more successful in maintaining authenticity than its North Indian counterparts. North India was repeatedly invaded by foreigners until it was drained of its culture but Bharatnatyam remains untainted through the passage of time”, says Lakshmi Prasanna, a Bharatnatyam teacher at the Bharatha Shiksha. However, this doesn’t imply that this dance form never faced the whips and scorns of time. The period of Victorian conservatism didn’t spare Bharatnatyam. “Devadasis were banned from performing in temples when the British arrived. Since they didn’t have any other source of income, they resorted to prostitution. Just a hundred years ago, respectable families did not want their women to be attached to Bharatnatyam”, says Shurajit. Bharatnatyam was, however, revived during the nationalist movement in India. Ever since, Bharatnatyam has flourished.

Although it started with Devadasis, Bharatnatyam has now gained the impression of being elitist in nature. Lakshmi denies this and says “I work with poetry and literature, which people understand so that I can

bridge the gap between young people and Bharatnatyam and make them appreciate it. Youngsters do not go to watch classical dance performances because they do not understand it. For the initial 10 minutes, they are absolutely enamoured of the costumes, the makeup but then they lose interest just as quick. We have to pique their interest and educate them about the significance of Bharatnatyam.”

“Earlier people in Tamil Nadu used to wear saris, now that has changed to jeans. Westernisation has been absorbed everywhere but people do visit temples. So, why should Bharatnatyam lose its importance?” asks Lakshmi, questioning why new absorptions should replace the glory of heritage arts.