

Role of Nattuvanar in Bharatanatyam

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Research Paper

Bharatanatyam as we know was an integral part of an oral tradition. It is one of the most popular, highly respected and acknowledged classical dance forms of the country. The dance form was handed down by the *Nattuvanars* (*gurus*) and the *Devadasis* (dancers) through the oral tradition.

A basic knowledge of rhythm and music is a must to become a nattuvanar. Music is important because the nattuvanar has to provide vocal accompaniment during practice and rehearsals. In the early days it was customary to have two nattuvanars in an orchestra. Both the nattuvanars used to play talams and sing but the junior one would play initial items like Alarippu, Jatiswaram and Shabdam while the senior nattuvanar would play Varnam, which had complex rhythmic passages. There has to be excellent coordination between the dancer and the nattuvanar.

Nattuvangam at first was not taught in an organized way. The nattuvanars just did it. "The teaching of nattuvangam became institutionalized after 1944, when it began to be taught at dance schools as Kalakshetra."^[1]

The Nattuvanars added their own interpretations to the existing treasure of compositions and choreography and the dancers embellished these further with their individual talents. This enriched the dance form and prevented it from stagnation. It encouraged the absorption of new influences, integrating them in the dance as it went along, sustaining a vibrant performing tradition in its wake.

The Devadasi and her dance, and the Nattuvanar and his teaching are without doubt, very important links in how Bharatanatyam in its traditional form has come down to us. In fact, they were the first professionals in this performing art to hone their artistic and performing skills to high levels of competence and perfection so that they

could earn a decent living from the practice of their art. Bharatanatyam enjoyed both temple and royal patronage. This helped it flourish and develop over many centuries.

By *Chola* times, the biological or adopted daughters of the devadasi-s were trained in music and dance from an early age and followed their mother's occupation of temple service. The sons were trained from boyhood to become Nattuvanars- teachers, directors and musical accompaniments to dance. Performance was restricted to women, the conduction of the dance as also its teaching was in control of men – the Nattuvanars. Both were sponsored and protected with generous grants from the temple, court, nobles and wealthy merchants. There are records that indicate that the dancers and the Nattuvanars enjoyed great respect and honour from their royal and temple patrons and the common public. They also enjoyed privileged positions in the social hierarchy and their dance was greatly appreciated.

Just like the gharanas in the classical Indian music, different schools of Bharatanatyam developed because of the royal patronage or a distinguished guru. The major four schools were Pandanallur, Mysore, Vazuvur and Tanjavur. Kalakshetra got added after 1940-s. These schools are also known as banis. The features of different banis are apparent when one closely studies the emphasis on certain movements, rhythmic sequences, and modes of expression that highlight the strength of each one. Such recognizable traits are developed over a number of years by the great Nattuvanars as well as the dancers of the bani that singles it out from the rest. They are continuously perpetrated by later Nattuvanars and the dancers.

A study of inscriptions from south India also reveals that almost every major temple complex also maintained dancing masters or the Nattuvanars. These Nattuvanars came from traditional musician families with impressive

credentials and these families were the best repositories of the art of Bharatanatyam. The term nattuva is seen in these inscriptions as also someone who actually conducted the dance performances in the temples. Thus the Nattuvanar was the most important member of the accompanying musical ensemble to the dance, proficient in teaching the dance, choreography and performance on every formal occasion, as well as being extremely well-versed in the accompanying music - the sahitya - Bhava, Raga, Tala,. He was thus invaluable to the Nartana Seva in the temples. It was usual for two Nattuvanars to be a part of the ensemble, chinnamelam, at the time of the performance. While the apprentice Nattuvanar conducted the earlier, simpler items in the performance, the older Nattuvanar would take over the complex pieces, e.g. the Varnam.

Outstanding among them all, was Late Meenakshisundaram Pillai of Pandanallur village and son of Suryamurty Nattuvanar, a renowned musician and scholar. Meenakshisundaram's art was so great that his style came to be known as Pandanallur School of Bharatanatyam. "It has many salient features: broad sweeping movements, an inherent beauty of lines and postures and an austere quality. His genius lay in composing Jatiswaram, Padavarnams and Padams for dance." [2]

Another well-known Nattuvanar was Mutthukumar Pillai. He was a great teacher also. "His style was very pure with clear arm movements which were firm without being rigid, and soft and rounded without being sloppy. In abhinaya he laid stress on details and strictly followed the principles laid down by his gurus and the shastras he had studied. He was a repository of a vast repertoire of padams and javalis." [3]

There is no record to suggest that the nattuvanars followed any written or documented syllabi or choreography either for training or performance. It is believed that the best Nattuvanars composed on-the-spot or extempore. In such a creative situation, composition of the same item changed for each devadasi, making it almost difficult to perform it together. One of the reasons believed for such a strategy was that each Devadasi was taught according to her capabilities and talent. R. Sathyaranayana gives a graphic image of the dance training in his book, *Bharatanatyam, A Critical Study*. [4]

Where the older generations were concerned, their training in dance and music was invariably the

responsibility of a teacher who was generally a member of their own family. In most families with a tradition of teaching dance over several generations, the sons (future nattuvanars) studied exclusively with their fathers or with a blood relation. They were taught the basic dance steps and the vocal accompaniment. Training in nattuvangam was attained by conducting classes for the junior members of the family learning dance from the master. "Most dance teachers of the older generation had no professional qualifications other than their artistic credentials". Uma Dandayudapani from a hereditary family is a university graduate. She commented on her relatives: "long ago in our family nobody studied or did anything else outside of the tradition, just music and dance. I don't think they could read or write. From the moment they were five they were taught music or dance" Very few traditional dance teachers actually got up and demonstrated the movements to their students. The Nattuvanars taught the movements and provided the rhythmic accompaniment for the student by beating the tattukuzi.

Even today most of the teachers whether belonging to the traditional or non-traditional families, usually teach sitting cross-legged on the floor. The highly codified and symmetrical nature of the dance makes it possible to demonstrate the movements with one or both hands while remaining seated. For example as Shanta Rao, one of the best-known non-hereditary dancers of the early period of the revival explained: "In his teaching of this tradition, P S Minakshisundaram (of the Pandanallur school) would never demonstrate a movement or gesture for imitation by his pupils. He sat in the corner of the room beating the tattukuzi...sometimes his face would express joy, sorrow or love, according to the mood of the song...he might make the slightest gesture of the body or hands, giving one just a hint. It used to surprise me how much I could learn without following any actual movements demonstrated by the teacher." [6]

Rukminidevi and others realized the fact that the basic technique of the original dance of the *devadasis* had to be acquired from existing hereditary nattuvanars and dancers, the *devadasis* themselves. She herself started learning dance from *Pandanallur Minakshisundaram Pillai* and founded the internationally acclaimed dance institution Kalakshetra in 1936.

The same time 'Sadir or Dasi Attam' came to be known as Bharatanatyam, the dance of Bharata, India. This was

the crucial juncture where the dance form moved from the earlier temple, then the court and now into the secular arena. By 1940s, it was successfully re-established as one of the India's most highly developed living art forms. Instead of temple or court, it now got performed in the theatres, halls, *sabha-s*. Most dancers came from higher castes, usually academically well educated, and often from wealthy and influential families. It is surprising to note that the teaching continued to be dominated by the men of the '*isai vellala*' community. They were perceived as the true repositories of authenticity because their families had been associated with music and dance for generations.

Some *devadasis* also taught, some founded schools for Bharatanatyam and girls from the '*isai vellala*' community began to perform on stage as professionals. An important reason for the sustained interest in the art by these dancers and their families was believed to demand for performances outside the temple due to the revival movement. Most of the *nattuvanars*, having lost their devadasi pupils, turned to teaching dance to whoever was interested. Many *nattuvanars* moved out of their villages to the larger urban centres such as Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai and some of them even as far north as Delhi. A few worked at the film industry in Chennai since whenever the early Indian films featured dance it was usually classical. They also established their own schools or went to student's homes to give tuitions.

As the dance moved out of the Temple and the Court and onto the more secular Art Stage, the need for technical development, precision as well as the ability to reach out to a large and at times uninitiated audience increased. Without losing the ethos of the art of Bharatanatyam, successfully reaching out to the audience, and being creative is the test of today's dance teachers and dancers. Earlier these roles were separated clearly in the *Devadasi-nattuvanar* system but are now no longer distinct.

Foot Notes:

1. Anne-Marie Gaston, *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*, p. 111
2. Anne-Marie Gaston, *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*, p.109-110
3. *Bharatanatyam*, edited by Sunil Kothari, Marg Publications, p. 128/129
4. *Bharatanatyam*, edited by Sunil Kothari, Marg Publications, p. 129/130
5. A. Srinivasan, SNA Journal, Nov.1998, issue 129-130, p.14
6. Ashok Chatterjee 1979, *Dances of the Golden Hall*, ICCR, p. 47

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