

Designing of Attire in Bharatanatyam : A Journey from Ethnic to Global Culture

Niyanthari M.

Abstract

Bharatanatyam, the classical dance form of Tamilnadu, arguably has its roots in temple rituals. The costumes of Bharatanatyam have been redefined over time according to the changing socio-political and ultimately the economic climate of the State, accommodating every demand of a changing society and changing needs of the practitioners themselves. This paper aims to throw light on the transition that the Aharya (costuming) has undergone from the temple to global platform. The focal point of the paper will be the changes in the design, material, stitching style, and accessories and the role of the urban audience's aesthetics and understanding in these changes. The paper aims to understand the role of contemporary tastes, aesthetic preference, sophistication, and globalization as deciding factors of the final look of a Bharatanatyam dancer on stage.

Keywords : Aharya; Bharatanatyam; Costumes; Cultural history; Globalisation.

Introduction

Colours, shades, fabric, contour, and the very appearance of what we wear are a representation of where we come from. It quintessentially creates the identity of not only the cultural background of an individual but serves as the very identity of an art form like dance. The making and designing of costumes and ornaments have been recognized as not only an independent art form but also a major integral of a comprehensive art form like dance and dramaturgy. So much so, that ancient India possessed texts written exclusively on the art of costuming and jewelry making as one of the pivotal components of expression. Natyashastra, a treatise on dramaturgy written by Bharata Muni (2nd B.C.E. - 2nd C.E), classifies modes

of expression into four and unsurprisingly, the art of costuming is one among the four. Termed as Aharya in the ancient language Sanskrit, it not only consists of costumes but also ornaments, make-up, hairdo, and stage props. Bharata Muni mentions Aharaya as a blank canvas upon which the other modes of expressions are projected (Ghosh 410). Without the canvas, the other aspects lose value. Another treatise, Kamasutra by Vatsyayana (4 B.C.E. – 3 C.E.), lists the art of clothing, and jewelry making as one of the, 64 royal arts. The importance given to costume designing in the works of ancient India reflects the Indian society's focus on costuming as an integral unit of its cultural backbone.

Every corner of our country boasts of an ancient dance form that dates back a few hundred centuries. Be it Kathak of the Northern region or Odissi of the East, the sub-continent consists of eight classical dance forms apart from hundreds of folk-dance forms. At the southernmost tip of the country, we have the state of Tamilnadu, known for its ancient dance form, Bharatanatyam. Textual evidence of Bharatanatyam dates back to the pre-Christian era. Sangam Literary corpus contains details of the dance form of Tamil region through various texts such as Silapadikaram, Tol-kappiyam and many of the Agam poetry (Subrahmanian 337). Apart from literary sources, we can trace the evolution of the art form based on temple inscriptions and sculptures. From being a dance form solely performed in temples to one that has aesthetically adapted itself to the proscenium stage, this dance form has undergone different stages of metamorphosis on its way from Koothu to Bharatanatyam.

History

Bharatanatyam was performed solely by a community called Devadasis. Pran Neville describes devadasis as "The Devadasi, a servant of the Gods, was ceremoniously married to the deity of the shrine with the symbolic tying of a necklace" (Neville, 10). The Devadasi community is a community of women, dancers, who were employed to be a part of temples to carry out ritualistic and non-ritualistic services to God. Their counterparts, Rajadasis were dancers (women) employed at the royal courts of the Tamil rulers. Though there is no mention of a Devadasi system as such in the Sangam literature, there are evidence of dancers who were a part of the Temple ritual and also public performances. Both the sects will be collectively referred to as the Devadasis henceforth in this paper. The grandeur of the dance form practiced by the Devadasis, Sadir, can be observed primarily in the Rajadasis who performed in the royal courts. Even though the dance form has been in practice for more than 2000 years, the

devadasi system flourished under the Chola (9th C.E.), Nayaka (16th C.E.), and the Maratha (17th C.E.) rule. In this paper, we aim to analyze the transformation of the costuming of the dance form from the Maratha period, all the way to the post-revival period of the dance form, that is after the intervention of revivalists like E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale. We are starting the spectrum from the Maratha period (15th C.E.), as the dance form of this period closely resembles that of the present-day Bharatanatyam, both in repertoire and costuming. The changes are seen in five aspects of the Bharatanatyam Aharya, costume draping, fabric material, stitching style, make-up, and ornaments.

Tamilakam

In order for us to get a stark image of the various changes that have occurred in the historic course of Bharatanatyam's costuming, we need to pay due attention to the socio-economic needs of the time that demanded these changes and also an elementary understanding of the traditional attire, handlooms, and jewellery of Tamilakam, the land of Tamils. Historically, the people of Tamilnadu wore cotton and silk both locally woven and sourced from other regions of the country and the world. They dressed scarcely due to the high temperature of the region but both men and women preferred adorning themselves with precious stones, flowers and perfumes nevertheless as inferred from writings of travelers from the West (Subrahmaniam, 354). The women of Tamilnadu wear an attire called '*selai*' in the vernacular language, Tamil, and known as 'saree' on a pan-Indian level. A saree is a single woven piece that is ready to wear as it comes off the loom. It is usually 6 to 9 yards long and 45 to 48 inches wide (Ramani 12).

The saree is draped to form pleats around the waist and secured on the left shoulder with the loose end of the material hanging loose or tucked at the waist. It is usually paired with a blouse covering the upper body leaving the midriff bare. The material of this attire in Tamilnadu is either native-grown cotton or silk both of which are handwoven by weaver communities. Both the cotton and silk boast of rich thread count, and as early as the Sangam period, the cotton was as light as smoke and the silk equally heavy (Subrahmaniam, 354). Cotton material of the ancient Tamils, had gold and silver thread interwoven and the silk was a magnificent sight with golden thread work throughout the body and the border. Coming to jewellery, the native Tamil population were seafaring merchants resulting in a huge boost in the economy of this ancient society. They used pearl and conundrum which was locally available and precious stones

like ruby, emerald and diamond were imported. All of these were artistically placed in gold ornaments. The traditional jewels are still in use in Tamilnadu except a few which have been lost in time.

Sadir Aharya

One should understand that the attire of a court dancer is nothing but the reflection of what the women of higher economic strata wore at that particular period. Dance costume can be seen as a symbol of status for the ruler since it highlighted the Kingdom's material richness. We see the traditional saree drape being the model of costumes for the court dancers prior to the Maratha period, the Nayaka Period, as seen in mural paintings. But the *Kaccham* (a pant style drape) can be observed in the sculptures of the ancient temples of Tamilnadu. Considering the economic status of the Maratha rulers, the court dancers of the Maratha period reflected the luxuriance of their patrons. The *Devadasis*, being an integral part of royal processions, events and rituals, were treated as a symbol of the wealth of the ruler and therefore their costumes resembled those worn by the women of royal stature except few rules that they were bound by (Radhika, 83). *Bharatanatyam* costume, during the Marathas, was made with native *Kanchipuram* silk and also had the additional detail of the Maratha fame *Tuyya* silk (tissue). Dancers of the Maratha period wore these sarees on top of a pant (*pyjama*) and tucked the free end to form either a "side fan" or a "front fan".

The dancers wore the sarees in either a *Kaccham* style or a *Saree* style thus enabling free body movement. The downside of these drapes was that they made the dancer look bulky and did not serve as a mode of accentuating the body form like it did in the sculptures of temples in Tamilnadu. It is difficult to pinpoint one style of draping as the fixed style of a period due to factors like *Sadir* was not a solo performing repertoire like its successor *Bharatanatyam*. A *Sadir kutcheri* consisted of classical items such as an *Alarippu*, *Varnam* and *Thillana* while also being interspersed with items such as a *Jakkini* and *Perani*. The confluence of various cultures such as the *Telugu* community, the *Maratha* speaking community and the constant flux of foreign delegates in *Tanjore*, also aided in the dancers borrowing saratorial aspects from these traditions and making it their own which then became the *Sadir* costume. The rulers of *Tamilakam* had trade relationships with other kingdoms resulting in a colourful transaction of merchandise that got adapted into the lifestyle of the citizens of their land. One of these exceptional mercantile reaches of these kingdoms was the use of fabrics such as *Satin* from *China* and *Organza* from *Persia* in the

Sarees used as costumes by the courtesans (Ganesh, 10).

From the Devadasis to Smt. Devi

The Bharatanatyam Aharya retained the grandeur all the way till the British Raj decided that this century-old art form was a shame and had to be put to an end. The Christian roots of the Raj made the public dancing damsels a direct opposition to their spiritual beliefs. The downward spiral of the dance form can be noted once the British deemed the dance form unfit to be performed in the public sphere towards the end of the 19th century. The Devadasis who cherished the patronage of mighty kings were now forced to either go under the radar or look for alternate avenues of income. Both the Devadasis and the Rajadasis were now equal to the common *Vesi* (a prostitute). Though the lives of Devadasis were always on the sensual path, eroticism did not overpower their image as the only women of the society who were educated. This ban on their performing avenues shook their financial stability.

This is a notable point as this shows us that they were not in the financial state to afford what they were once able to and therefore resulting in using materials that were cheap as opposed to the silk and satin. While few of them married men from high castes and “settled down” in life, few resorted to performing at private gatherings for the visiting British officers and local *Zamindars* which were mostly erotic and sensual in nature. This led to them tweaking the costumes in order to catch the eye of the men. More revealing costumes were adapted by the devadasis as recorded through the writings of many of the British officials who found these performances “gaudy” (Kunjukrishnan, 145). All through this mishap, few dancer families retained the traditional costume of draping a saree and continued the practice of their ancestors like the legendary dancer T. Balasaraswathi. At the fair end of the British rule, when the nationalist movement was gaining momentum, the call of the hour was to uphold the cultural richness of the country that the British rule had managed to strip the nation of. But an unfortunate offshoot of this effort is the representation of Bharatanatyam in Indian cinema that, in the name of highlighting the culture, hyper-sensitized the female dancers in the movies by parading them in loud, garish, and vulgar costumes (Khokar).

By 1930, a bill that demanded the abolishment of the Devadasi system had been introduced in the Parliament of India. As a part of reviving and revitalising the art form and also for ridding Sadir of its despised image, the costume of Bharatanatyam was given a complete makeover by Smt.

Rukmini Devi Arundale who, along with E. Krishna Iyer, spearheaded the campaign to bring back the lost glory of the dance form of the Devadasis. Along with reconstructing the pedagogy of the dance form by weeding out any sensual element in the art form's body movement grammar, Rukmini Devi Arundale set about designing an entirely new costume that was a stark contrast to its predecessor in both the draping style and the materials used. The new costume was inspired by the temple sculptures designed and stitched by Rukmini's Theosophist friend, Madam Cazan, a seamstress from Italy (Kothari). This also brings to one's notice that the changes made to revive the costumes were either inspired by or done in collaboration with westerners. Rukmini Devi is attributed to having worn the first-ever fully stitched costume. It is evident in Rukmini Devi's costumes that she had a saree cut and re-stitched into different pieces, that when put together form a complete costume.

Some of the costumes sported by Rukmini Devi lacked a drape over the chest. The blouse was clearly visible (as opposed to the traditional saree) and had a small fan or drape-like design on it in place of the usual upper drape called 'Melakku'. Rukmini also went for various styles of sleeves. The contributions of Rukmini Devi Arundale to the reconstruction of the Sadir Aharya can be understood as stemming from her Theosophical upbringing, her association with Nationalist leaders such as Annie Besant, and also her exposure to Western Classical dance forms such as Ballet. The revival of costumes as a prime aspect of the renaissance of Bharatanatyam signifies the role of Aharya in establishing the cultural identity of the nation through a visual medium in the wake of independence. The change in costumes and the new proscenium set up for the performance of Bharatanatyam was a step towards obliterating the image of Sadir and its ugly past from the collective cultural memory of the society and replacing it with a corporeal representative of our spiritual ancestry.

Bharatanatyam Post-revival

With Sadir christened Bharatanatyam and given a make-over, Rukmini Devi successfully institutionalised the art form by establishing Kalakshetra Foundation under the patronage of Theosophical Society. The art form in its new package was accessible to students from every class of the society, especially the Brahmin and other elite classes of the period. Smt. Rukmini Devi also launched the project of revitalising native weaves and weavers in the Kalakshetra campus both of which had been replaced by fabrics from the imperial looms in Manchester and Lancashire. With the initiative taken by Rukmini Devi, many dancers of post-colonial India

followed in her footsteps. The main material used for the costumes was Kanchipuram silk, which replaced the flashy fabrics used by the Devadasis of the early 20th century. But few, like Rukmini Devi herself, also experimented with materials such as Banaras silk. This can be seen as an effect of increased mobility within the country. The dancers of the '60s and '70s wore stitched costumes that either looked like a saree or like a pant with a front fan till the knee. Few still maintained the upper drape but few let go of it. And few also used translucent material as a decorative drape over the chest. Examples of these can be seen in the posters of Indian tourism with pictures of dancer Kamala. This revived costume became the face of "Indian Culture" that was being printed in posters and tourism brochures (Natarajan, 236).

With India becoming an independent country and with growing demands to establish the cultural roots of the society, the Indian Government sent dancers beyond borders to represent the country. Every effort was taken to take away any remaining trace of the not-very-glorious past and to replace it with the spirituality and the spirit of independent India. With Bharatanatyam attaining the status of the representative of the identity of free India, every aspect of the dance form, especially its physical outlook, was given special care. Leading dancers of the time customised the costumes according to their body type and their comfort. It is then that we see the costume become what it is now. Smt. Indrani Rehman, former Miss India, decided to do away with the pant worn underneath the saree drape costume to show the beauty of the dancing legs. The pant was cut above the knee so as to stay hidden under the costume. Smt. Yamini Krishnamurthy altered the hemline of the costume by raising it from almost ankle-length to just below the knee. She also chose to wear the costume below the navel. (Shyam). Even though all of these contributions of various dancers caused a significant stir in society, the dance form has managed to internalise all of these changes positively, claiming it as its own.

The costume of Bharatanatyam has constantly evolved to what it is today; free to move within the boundaries set by tradition. We see that dancers today design their costumes based on the style of performance, a solo, duet, thematic solo, or dance drama. In the case of solo performances, the dancers still maintain the traditional costume patterns (post-independence) though a significant change in material and colours used have occurred. Materials such as tissue silk are being used by dancers along with silk and silk cotton from other states of India apart from the local weave of Tamilnadu. In an interesting circle, back to the pre-revival days,

one can also notice a significant shift in preference to synthetic materials such as tested silk and art silk over pure silk. Many young dancers, who are self-made in the competitive field of Bharatanatyam, feel that spending huge amounts on pure silk for a single performance is impractical. In the case of thematic group productions, the costumes are designed based on the need of the character portrayed. Few dancers like Leela Samson, Rukmini Vijaykumar, Shijith, and Parvathy Nambiar have designed their own costumes for their solo performances which have now become their trademark.

In the case of ornaments, the pure gold with rubies, pearls, and emeralds were long replaced with what is known as Temple Jewellery. Temple Jewellery or Kemp are ornaments made using silver that is then gold plated. These are studded with green and red stones called 'Kemp' and artificial pearls. This art of jewellery making has been in vogue in Tamilnadu for centuries as the jewellery is also the primary style donned by the brides of the state. But with the uprooting of the dance form from its traditional practitioners, students from all strata of social and economic classes learn the art form and temple jewellery is not affordable by all due to the cost of Silver and the craftsmanship. Therefore, we see replicas of the same being made with cheaper material. Though it does not match up to the original temple jewellery, the dancers make do with the replicas. But most dancers with a solo performance career, religiously use temple jewellery in their performances due to its aesthetic appeal.

Make-up does not seem to be a part of the Devadasi Aharya as inferred from the available photographs of the late Maratha performers. This could have been due to the proximity of the audience in the performing spaces of the early practitioners. Nevertheless, the use of collyrium has been a Tamil tradition as inferred from the data available in the Sangam literary corpus. With the Victorian influence on the coastal state of Tamilnadu, basic rouge and setting powder might have been accessible to the Devadasis who were in the profession of performing for the public. In the process of adapting the dance form to the proscenium stage, Smt. Rukmini Devi has added the accentuated eyes and elaborate make-up few aspects of which seem to be borrowed from Kathakali which had immense influence on the body movements of the Kalakshetra Bani as well. The present make-up routine has been adapted to meet the requirements of performing with high-intensity stage lightings and the advent of videography and photography. Globalization has played a major role in this element of Bharatanatyam Aharya since the materials used in the present-day make-up are not native to India. Looking at omissions and major changes, we

seldom see the *naththu bullaku* (worn on the septum) worn by dancers of the younger generation. The traditional *jadai naagam* has been completely done away with. The ankle bells once strung to a thread that was tied around the ankle have been replaced by brass bells stitched onto leather or cloth belts.

Co-dependant Fields

The post-independent nurtured Bharatanatyam as a performing art to a great extent that it managed to commercialise practically every allied industry that was involved in its Aharya. Saree being the main component of a Bharatanatyam costume, Silk sarees and demands for specific motifs such as 'rudraksham' and 'gopuram' has been on the rise, thus aiding the weavers. Costumes for Sadir were traditionally draped but with the advent of Rukmini Devi and the idea of stitched costumes, tailors who specifically worked with Bharatanatyam costumes became a profession in itself. The costumes are designed keeping in mind the individual comfort and needs of the dancer. Special 'temple jewellery' is used by the dancers of Bharatanatyam and there are designers, goldsmiths, and vendors who specialize in dance jewellery. The make-up of Bharatanatyam dancers is not similar to the everyday makeup of women. The proscenium stage and heavy professional lighting demand heavy, exaggerated make-up that enhances the facial details of the dancer and also stays for the duration of the performance under heat. Therefore, companies such as Mi-fi (primarily used in Cinemas of yesteryears) manufacture cosmetics such as pancakes which are widely used for dance make-up. An adept sect of make-up artists specialised in dance make-up and hairdo are in high demand in Chennai, the cultural hub of Tamilnadu apart from mainstream make-up artists.

Conclusion

We do not know if this is the pinnacle of the evolution of Bharatanatyam Aharya. Some experts feel that the heights of innovation in Bharatanatyam costuming have already stagnated post-independence as the nationalist vigour to establish a unique cultural identity has slowly faded. But post-2000, the onset of the internet and the influence of global culture at our fingertips have rekindled the spark in artists to innovate especially with costumes and stage lighting techniques. With changing thoughts and increasing global awareness, more can be expected from the practitioners of the dance form. Change for the good or bad, change signifies life. Through various changes, the dance and its costuming have withstood the test of

time. It is an undeniable fact that through various social settings, the costume of Bharatanatyam has always evolved to meet the demands of the ever-morphing taste of the public. And right now, there are changes being made to make the costume suitable for the changing times, to make it relatable to the millennial mindset of the audience, and for the costumes to, once again, serve as a blank canvas upon which the ideas of creative minds can be reflected.

Works Cited :

- Chatterjee, Ashoke, et al. *Dances of the Golden Hall*, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1979. Print.
- Ganesh, Swarnamalya. "Through the Sheer Gossamer", On Stage, NCPA. Web. May 2021.
- Ghosh, Manmohan. *The Natyashastra Ascribed to Bharata-Muni*, Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951. Print.
- Khokar, Ashish mohan. "Aharya." *Attendance*, 2016, pp. 15–21. Print.
- Kothari, Sunil. "Revolutionising Sadir", Narthaki. Web. August 2004.
- Kunjukrishnan, Sadasivan. *Decay and Decline Devadasi System in Medieval Tamil Nadu* CBH Publications, 1993. Print.
- Natarajan, Srividya. *Another Stage in the Life of the Nation: Sadir, Bharatanatyam, Feminism*, University of Hyderabad, 1997. Print.
- Neville, Pran. *The Nautch Girls of the Raj*, Penguin Books, 2009. Print.
- Ramani, Shakuntala. *Sari, the Kalakshetra Tradition*, Craft Education & Research Centre, Kalakshetra Foundation, 2002. Print.
- Sarada, S. *Kalakshetra-Rukmini Devi: Reminiscences*. Kala Mandir Trust, 1985. Print.
- Shaym, Sangeetha. "Some Historical Snippets of BN - Part 17 - Dance Costumes." *Sangeethas.wordpress.com*. Web. 16 Nov. 2013.
- Subrahmanian, N. *Tamil Social History*, Institute of Asian Studies, 1997. Print.
- Viswanathan, Lakshmi, and Krishnaswamy, Usha. *Bharatanatyam: The Tamil Heritage*, Lakshmi Viswanathan, 1991. Print.