

Bharathanatyam - It's Technique, Margam and Jewellery: A Tantric Perspective

Poornima Rajini¹ & Susheela S. N.²

¹Research scholar, Dept of Yogic Sciences, Bangalore University, Bengaluru.

²Professor, Dept of Performing Arts & H.O.D, Dept of Yogic Sciences, Bangalore University, Bengaluru.

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ABSTRACT:

Any Indian classical performing art is a medium through which one can express a philosophy of life which aims to transcend oneself towards a higher plane and achieve bliss through spiritual expression for the performer and the audience.

“All Indian classical dances are a combination of body movements and facial expressions perfectly synchronized to represent a given context, through the perfect vehicle, the human body. Though it is the body that moves, it is man's inner consciousness or soul that directs his movements. This results in a harmonistic dance form that combines music, rhythm, and movement, all of which cater to the command of man's inner feelings. The philosophy of art aims to manifest the inner self of man which is divine in nature. In a spiritual country like India, where the realization of consciousness or spirit has been the supreme goal of life, it is not a wonder that dance became a form of sadhana.”

Tantra - Tantrayate vistāryate jñanam anena' - i.e., by which knowledge is spread or developed. When art-forms take their being from fundamental cosmic principles, they participate in the essential structure of the universe and contain a natural symbolism to which unsophisticated human beings respond instinctively, unconsciously” (Boner 6, 7).

KEYWORDS:

Tantra, Yantra, Chakra, Bharatanatyam, Yoga, Mudra, Mantra, Hastas, Kundalini, Margam, Allarippu, Varnam, Padam.

In Bharatanatyam, posture plays an important role in facilitating the flow of energy throughout the body and is considered the foundation of the dance form. To adequately understand the true purpose of Bharathnatyam, we need to acknowledge that the structural technique of Bharatanatyam has its foundation in cosmic connection and spiritual direction .

A Bharatanatyam dancer must maintain a straight and upright posture with the shoulders relaxed and the spine aligned. The feet must also be firmly planted on the ground, and the knees must be slightly bent. The correct alignment of the spine and the positioning of the limbs can help create a natural flow of energy or prana through the body, which is important for the proper execution of the dance movements leading to an improved flow of energy throughout the body promoting balance, and improving overall well-being. The use of mudras or hand gestures, and the precise movements of the limbs and body, are also said to help activate and balance the chakras, leading to a harmonious flow of energy. A basic feature of Bharatanatyam is the foot stamping. The stamping continuously re-establishes the center for the dancer. Rhythmical stamping energizes the defined space with its vibrations.

The heat during executing a long session of Adavus in great speed in comparison with the coolness in relaxed tempo, geometric shapes formed with an array of triangles, the emphasis on gravity as well as levitation and dancing without constraints of time, space or any desire to exhibit are steps towards the journey within.

Kumbha refers to an overflowing pot, it also refers to a body filled with knowledge. The traditional Gurus say that an Ardhamandali posture in perfect Sausthavam [back erect posture] held over years can bring in the Maha Kumbha by opening up energy centers, triangular shapes in intersection and balancing them and the Brahmasutra- an imaginary line passing through the centre of the body. .

The language of dance is technical, systematic, orderly and yet flexible. It offers a vast scope for permutations and combina-

tions. In Bharatanatyam, the practice of Nritya develops a sound mind and body. The Nritya helps develop the capacity to feel pleasure and pain. The beautiful balance in the dance postures kindles it.

The ancient traditions of Tantric philosophy, Kundalini yoga and Bharathnatyam is believed to have developed at the same time with evidence of significant contact. Each of these practices emphasizes the use of geometry, Mudra (hand gestures), Mantra and the worship of deities using the human body as the arena for spiritual journey towards union with the divine. Nritya of Bharatnatyam utilizes Mantra, Mudra, and Geometric body positions in a Tantric and Kundalini way.

Mudras are ritualistic hand gestures that act as technical tools used to hold, move and direct divine energy. This direction of energy is used to balance energy of the subtle body and remove energy blocks. Hindu priests can be seen employing mudras in the ritual worship that was initiated in the Agamic period. The aesthetic Hastas in dance have a definite link with Tantric mudras, which are far more ritualistic and austere in practices. Hand gestures used during dance mirror the use of Tantric mudras in ritual to seal, channel and direct energy changing its vibration, hence wavelength in the process. It is interesting to note that commentaries on the Natya Shastra designate a colour and a deity for most single hand gestures.

Yantras are mathematically precise patterns that use basic geometric shapes (circles, squares, triangles, and dots) The Bindu (center dot) creates the focal point for contemplation and represents the source of all creation. This is the point of condensed energy that everything involves into and from which everything evolves out of. This is also the place where Brahman (universal consciousness) resides.

In Bharatanatyam, the posture of the dancer is said to resemble the Sri Yantra. The upright and aligned posture of the dancer is said to represent the central point or Bindu of the Sri Yantra, while the extended arms and legs of the dancer represent the interlocking

triangles of the Yantra.

Thus the physical structure of Bharatanatyam technique forms a yantra within the body, and the choreography creates a yantra within the space of the stage. It is the Tantric belief that the energy of a yantra must be stimulated by use of a Mantra, of sound vibrations in a repetitive nature. The pneumonic syllable with which a dancer learns the Adavus creates an energizing mantra.

The saint composer, Sri Muthuswami Dikshitar, gave initiation to the Tanjore Quartet and were all great worshippers of Devi in the Sri Yantra. Tanjore Quartet gave the Margam in the format of entering a temple [again a Yantric diagram], the Allarippu forming the entrance as Gopuram, the sanctum being the Varnam, Tillana as circumambulation etc..

Margam is the codified formula of presentation that a Bharatanatyam artiste follows to display her/his art.. Bharatanatyam Margam which is the presentational repertoire is a philosophy by itself as it embraces all concepts of human experience, religion and other philosophical systems in its conception.

This structure allows a lot of creativity and room for innovation as it follows the Natya Sastra for its technique of presentation. Thus, all human emotions and human conducts can be portrayed; every social issue and celebration can be dwelt upon. The concept of the Jivatma yearning for the Paramatma is the main theme in the repertoire of Margam denoting the quest for self-realization as explained in Hindu philosophy. Thus it's very essence is spirituality.

The practical aspect of Margam has been expounded as : Margam goes from simple to complex, the artist and the accompanists find it untiring to unfold the ordered sequence. Simultaneously the spectator are taken from simple rhythms and ideas to complex cross rhythms and ideas.

In this analysis of the structure of the Margam, renowned Bharatanatyam exponent Balasaraswati clearly equates completion

of a traditional dance program with the physical journey through a Hindu temple and the spiritual journey of the dancer and the audience. Upon visiting a temple, one enters through a main gate and walks clockwise visiting deities along the way before spiralling into the inner sanctum which houses the main deity.

The temple structure too is designed with specific geometric patterns of squares, circles, and triangles forming a yantra as prescribed by Agamic/Tantric text and these same texts codified the ritual worship performed within these walls, thus linking kundalini yoga, Tantric texts and Bharatanatyam.”

At first, mere metre; then, melody and metre; continuing with music, meaning and metre; its expansion in the centrepiece of Varnam; thereafter, music and meaning with metre; in variation of this, melody and metre; in contrast to the pure rhythmical beginning, a non-metrical song at the end. We see a most wonderful completeness and symmetry in this art.”

In the beginning, Allarippu, which is based on rhythm alone, brings out the special charm of pure dance. The movements of Allarippu relax the dancer’s body and thereby her/his mind, loosens and coordinates the limbs, and prepares the dancer for the rest of the recital. Allarippu is most valuable in freeing the dancer from distraction and focusing the mind.

The joy of pure rhythm in Allarippu is followed by Jatisvaram where there is the added joy of melody. Melody, without words or syllables here, has a special power to unite us with our being. In Jatisvaram, melody and movement come together.

The Bharatanatyam recital is structured like a Great Temple: we enter through the outer hall of the Allarippu, cross the half-way hall of the Jatisvaram, then the great hall of Shabdham and then enter the holy precinct of the deity in the Varnam. This is the space, which gives the dancer expressive scope to revel in the music, rhythm and moods of the dance. The Varnam is the continuum, which gives ever-expanding room to the dancer to delight in self-fulfilment, by pro-

viding the fullest scope to his/her creativity as well as to the tradition of the art.

After the Varnam, Padams (and other devotional songs such as Devaranamas) now follow.

In dancing to Padams, one experiences the containment, cool and quiet of entering the sanctum from its external precinct. The expanse and brilliance of the outer corridors disappears in the dark inner sanctum; and the rhythmic virtuositities of the Varnam yield to the soul-stirring music and Abhinaya of the Padam. Balasaraswati mentions the power of sound. She states that melody without words and without intellectual accompaniment “has a special power to unite us with our being.” She writes “dancing the Padam is akin to the juncture when the cascading lights of worship are withdrawn and the drumbeats die down to the simple and solemn chanting of sacred verses in the closeness of god.”

Here an involution, a journey inward toward union with Brahman is demonstrated. This passage emulates the process of Yantric meditation. The dancer leads the audience, as she moves through the structured program, to taste the sacred union. Then, the Tillana breaks into movement like the final burning of camphor accompanied by a measure of din and bustle.

In conclusion, the devotee takes to his heart the God he has so far glorified outside; and the dancer completes the traditional order by dancing to a simple devotional verse. (qtd. in Raman 1) This suggests that a Bharatanatyam program has the same effect as a Kundalini yogi’s practice and a devotee’s worship in the temple.

Vastusutra Upanishad explains that ornament placement is necessary in order to draw one’s attention from the anatomical structure (Human form) of the image and to emphasize the “geometric or decorative patterns”(Boner). “Ornaments assume a great importance, since they are efficient means for creating a feeling of divine presence”(Boner).

In a performance, the Bharatanatyam dancer adorns each of the seven cakras with specific eye catching jewellery. This jewellery effectively attracts the attention of the audience and dancer to these energy centers. Additionally, golden bangles and shiny bells draw additional attention to points on the wrists and ankles resulting in an overlay of geometric patterns on the dancer's body. Activity of the dance creates a dynamic overlapping of these geometric patterns emphasizing an involution to and evolution from the center. This is the same exercise achieved by the yantra of Tantric philosophy. In addition to the ornaments placed at each of the Chakra centers, the dancer additionally adorns their head with gem-studded ornaments .

The head ornaments of the dancer mirror the lunar (Ida), solar (Pingala) and central (Sushumna) channels described in kundalini yoga. A line of white stones (corresponding to the Sushumna) divide the sun and the moon in a linear pattern, drawing one's attention to the dancer's crown (Sahasrara cakra -abode of united Siva and Sakti) leading to the dominant, circular, heavily stone studded rakkodhi. The rakkodhi is positioned on the crown cakra where Shakti and Siva energies are said to unite. The gems and gold reflect light upward reminiscent of a halo (divine energy).

Rakkodi: The round, stone studded jewel fastened on the crown (seventh cakra).

Bindi (sixth cakra)

Chocker (fifth cakra)

Long Necklace (fourth cakra)

Belt (Manipura chakra- Around the navel.) (third cakra)

Kunjalam: (second Chakra)

(The jewelled tassel attached to the end of the long plait) (first Chakra)

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