



Traditions of Indian Classical Dance

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TEXT & ILLUSTRATIONS



Peter Owen London

ISBN O 7206 0574 1
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Traditions of Indian
Classical Dances

Peter Owen Limited
73, Kenway Road, London SW5 ORE
First Published 1980 in Great Britain
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Printed and bound in India





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Bharata Natyam

SADIR * BHAGAVATA MELA NATAKA * KURAVANJI

It is temples, temples all the way, down South. And though they were erected essentially to lodge the gods and goddesses dearest to the hearts of the people, it did not take long for these temples to become the very focus of the corporate life of the community. Indeed it is because of these temples that some of the greatest poetry, literature, architecture, sculpture, painting, music and dance indigenous to the region came to be created. Much credit for this also accrues to the rulers, many of whom were not only devout men but also avid worshippers of the finer things of life. And it well needed a setting of this order for an art of the spiritual intensity and aesthetic disposition of Bharata Natyam to take seed and blossom.

The earliest evidence we have of dancing in temples is that connected with the institution of the *devadasis*. It is not known for certain exactly how this institution came into existence, but it can be presumed that the *devadasis* came to be attached to temples mainly to provide entertainment for the Lord and to render him routine service. Among the earliest references we have in this regard are those found in the Puranas. For example, the Padma Purana, which is believed to have been compiled about the 4th century A.D., states that "one who offers a beautiful woman to god attains Heaven for one full kalpa." In the Skanda Purana, written about the 7th century A.D., Rishi Markandeya says: "In the course of my supplications to Shiva, as I offered oblations to fire, there came out seven beautiful maidens, whom I employed in the service of the Lord." And the Shiva Purana, as we have noted earlier, clearly advises that pretty maidens who can sing and dance should invariably form part of the equipment for any temple raised in honour of Shiva.



In history, too, we find several references to the practice of dedicating dancing-girls to temples. Some of these notices we have examined in an earlier section. What is important for us to know further is that right through the history of formal worship in India there has been a community of dancing-girls, known as *devadasis*, attached to temples, and one of the principal functions of these *devadasis* was to dance before the image in the temple. The dance they performed varied from region to region, but the one for which they are most remembered, assuredly, is the Bharata Natyam. This was performed in temples of Shiva, primarily in Tamil Nadu and, to a lesser extent, in Andhra and Karnataka. The entire dance was conceived as a supplication, and for this reason strict and orthodox rules governed every aspect of the art, including the training of the dancer and the method of presentation.

Any attempt to trace the evolution and development of Bharata Natyam must begin with the earliest period known to Tamil history. And this takes us to the Sangam Age, which extended from about 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. In this Age came to be written a number of literary works, of which two of the most important are the twin epics, the *Silappadikaram* and the *Manimekhalai*. Both these deal with the life of a dancing-girl and, in the unfolding of the story, say a good deal about the technique of the dance and the presentation of the art. Later, in the 12th century A.D., one *Adyarkunallar* wrote a learned commentary on the *Silappadikaram*, which apart from elucidating several matters that were obscure in the original also throws light on earlier Tamil texts such as the *Agattiyam*, *Jayantam*, *Gunanool*, *Bharatam* and *Isai Nunukam*, which deal with dance and music but of which little trace now survives. It is significant that though the *Natya Shastra* too was written about this time, none of the Tamil works of the period carries any reference to it. Nor does the technical terminology they use betray any significant borrowing from that text. This probably means that at least in its early stages the dance tradition that developed in Tamil Nadu did so independently of such Sanskrit treatises as the *Natya Shastra* which, in a way, belonged more at that time to the Aryan north than they did to the Dravidian south. Of course this tradition came to be influenced later and quite palpably, not only by the *Natya Shastra* but also by a number of other relevant Sanskrit texts, ample evidence of which is available in the dance-form as it obtains today.

In all early Tamil works, the dance is known as *Koothu*, and of this there are two main divisions: the *Santi Koothu*, representing a refined and organised style, and the *Vinoda Koothu*, intended for the laity. The tradition of classical dance, which possibly developed from the *Santi Koothu*, in course of time came to be known as *Bharatam*, and it is from this that the present name *Bharata Natyam* is derived. The appellation *Bharatam* has no link with *Bharata Muni*, author of the *Natya Shastra*. Nor does it pertain to *Bharat* as another name for India. In the sense that it is used here, *Bharatam* is compounded from the syllables *bha*, *ra* and *ta*, which denote



bhava, *raga* and *tala*, that is, emotional projection, melody, and rhythm, respectively, which are recognised as the three indispensable ingredients of the dance art.

On turning from literature to chronicle, we find that the Bharata Natyam tradition has all along been linked with the institution of the *devadasis*. However, though the system of dedicating dancing-girls to Hindu temples is a very old one, the earliest specific evidence we have of the existence of this cult in the Tamil country does not take us beyond the 7th century A.D.

The Pallavas, who ruled over Tamil Nadu from the 4th to 9th centuries A.D., have not left any historical record to show that *devadasis* were attached to temples in their time, but the existence of certain frescoes in Sittanavasal and of certain carvings in the Pallava temples at Kanchipuram, both of which show dance figures in formal and stylised attitudes, leads us to conclude that the art of dancing must have attained a high degree of perfection by the time of the Pallavas. Then, it is seen that some of the *agamas*, which are sacred texts governing the mode of worship to be adopted in various temples, prescribe the consecration of dancing-girls in honour of certain deities, in particular Shiva. As the rules enjoined by the *agamas* were strictly followed in Tamil temples, it can safely be assumed that the *devadasi* system must have been in vogue in Tamil Nadu from the time of the *agamas* if not earlier, and this takes us to the 7th century A.D. When we come to the time of the Cholas who were in power from the middle of the 9th to the late 12th century, we find positive and substantial evidence of the practice of the *devadasi* cult in Tamil Nadu. The Cholas not only built massive and magnificent temples but also ensured that these were provided with all necessary staff, including dancing-girls and musicians. Epigraphical inscriptions reveal that some of the major temples of the period had hundreds of *devadasis* attached to them. The vogue set by the Cholas was continued in Tamil Nadu by their successors the Pandyas, Nayaks and Marathas, and in course of time the tradition representing the *devadasi* system as well as its concomitant the Bharatam dance spread to Andhra and Karnataka.

Because of its close association with the *devadasis*, the Bharatam dance also came to be known as Dasi Attam. The entire art was viewed as a sacred offering. The dancing was done in front of the image of the Lord, within the temple, as part of regular ritual, and outside on festive occasions, when the Lord was carried in ceremonial procession. Later, the dance also came to be performed in royal courts and on such occasions of social importance as weddings, and this gave rise to two additional types of *dasis*, the *rajadasis* and the *alankaradasis*.

The technique of Bharata Natyam took centuries to evolve and develop, but the chiselled form in which we see it today was attained only in the first quarter of the last century. The credit for this goes almost entirely to the four famous Tanjavur brothers—Chinniah, Ponniah, Vadivelu and



Sivananda, all great masters of dance and music who served in the court of Raja Serfoji II of Tanjavur. They not only systematised and codified the technique of the art but also framed its present repertoire.

Some preliminary rites connected with the former, orthodox method of presenting the dance in temples have now been given up, but the basic mould of the art largely continues as it was in the time of the Maratha rulers of Tanjavur. One such rite was the Melaprapti, in which the *nattuvanar*, or conductor of the dance, and the supporting musicians together recited set passages of rhythmic syllables, as a prelude to the dance performance proper. Another was the Navasandhi, in which certain privileged *rudrakankas*, a sect of *devadasis*, offered oblations and sang and danced to propitiate the different deities presiding over the nine junctions punctuating the processional path round the temple.

Until about three decades ago, a performance of the Bharatam dance was also known as Chinna Melam—literally, 'small concert,' as opposed to Periya Melam, or 'big concert,' used for musical sittings. An even more common name was Sadir Nautch, or Sadir Kacheri, or simply Sadir. The name Bharata Natyam, which has now totally replaced all earlier designations of the art, came into existence only in the first quarter of the present century. Although it is commonly used to signify the particular mode of dance that was performed as a routine by the *devadasis*, in its broader sense the label Bharata Natyam is taken to include at least two other forms of dance as well—the Bhagavata Mela Nataka and the Kuravanji, both of which also stem from the parent Bharatam tradition. The cult of the *devadasi* was abolished by law about the middle of the present century, and since then Bharata Natyam is being performed, not as a ritual, but as an art. The performers in Bharata Natyam today are both women and men, and they do not belong to any special or exclusive class or community.

Bharata Natyam has a rich and varied repertoire, and this embraces all the three acknowledged aspects of Indian classical dance, namely, *nrita*, *nritya* and *natya*. *Nrita* and *nritya* are available in ample measure in the Sadir aspect of the art, while *natya* has its representation in the dance-drama form of Bharata Natyam, the Bhagavata Mela Nataka and, to a lesser extent, in the Kuravanji, which is a sort of dance-opera.

The basis of *nrita* in Bharata Natyam is the *adavu*. This is a phrase, or unit, of dance, slick and spruce, composed of a specific opening stance, followed by a prescribed coupling of step and movement. Each *adavu* is designated by the rhythmic syllables that govern its rendering. There are some fifteen families of *adavus*, each with a number of varieties. In their use, *adavus* are linked together in various combinations. Passages of *adavu* combinations, known as *jatis*, set for the most part to intriguing patterns of rhythm, are harnessed to adorn certain items of *nrita*. There are also sequences, in the form of brilliant rhythmic flourishes, that are injected at key positions in the format of some *nrita* compositions; these are known as *teermanams*. It must not, however, be presumed that the *nrita* part of



Bharata Natyam consists only of *adavus*, *jatis* and *teermanams*; there are also other movements, steps, poses and sequences, but their number and variety make them of little significance.

In Bharata Natyam, *nrita* and *nritya* both have equal importance. *Nrita* is all design and artistry. It gears *adavus* and related action to release constantly-shifting patterns of dance—of dance that is without theme or mood but that is visually fetching and aesthetically gratifying. The key posture of the body requires the upper part to be erect, the legs bent halfway down with the knees spread out and practically in line with the rest of the body, and the feet positioned like a half-open fan. All the movements and steps in the style, which involve a wide range of bends, extensions and leaps radiate from this stance as the central and recurring motif. In terms of line, angle, proportion and symmetry, *nrita* in Bharata Natyam is endowed with what may be described as geometric exactitude. The action throughout is crisp and kinetically exciting. Practically every member of the body has its own significant role to play; the eyes, eyebrows, neck, shoulders, hands and the like all have their distinct movements, and most of these are used in clever juxtaposition.

Nritya is given place in Bharata Natyam through a wide variety of items of expressional dance, often loosely referred to as *abhinaya*. In these a song is sung and its interpretation rendered by the dancer. The song is sung either by the dancer or the supporting musicians. The face of the dancer becomes the register of the flitting feelings and passions that well up in response to the words of the song and their emotionally charged musical release; the eyes, eyebrows, mouth, lips and cheeks all become potent instruments of suggestion and insinuation. Concrete ideas and images are, of course, externalised and communicated with the hands, or *hastas*—in this, as in several other aspects of its technique, Bharata Natyam follows the classical *Abhinaya Darpana* text. The dominant emotion in Bharata Natyam is *sringara*, love, and in projecting this in all its rich coloration Bharata Natyam makes free and full use of the *nayak-nayika*, or lover-beloved, precept of Indian aesthetics. *Nritya* numbers in Bharata Natyam also extensively employ *sanchari bhava*. This implies that the dancer gives the meaning or interpretation of a single line or piece of song not in just one way but in a number of ways. *Sanchari bhava* gives ample opportunity to a dancer to show her virtuosity, and some of the great *devadasis* of the past are still remembered for their mastery over this unique and challenging aspect of the art.

Bharata Natyam, as has already been stressed, is in essence a dedicatory dance. This attribute is evident in most of the items that constitute the repertoire of the art. The very first item, the *Alarippu*, is a dance of invocation, which is patterned to give the effect of the body offering itself, through movement and rhythm, to God. The *Alarippu* is a composition in *nrita*, and to the same category belong two other items: the *Jatiswaram*, which presents parallel and synchronized patterns of rhythmic beats and



musical notes, and the Tillana, in which varying patterns of rhythm and pose and movements are interlaced with a sequence of dance syllables which is rendered in the form of a musical refrain.

Nritya is represented through dances like the Sabdam, Padam, Javali, Keertanam and Slokam. The Sabdam, Keertanam and Slokam generally describe the qualities or attributes of some god or recount some incident in the life of a god. The Padam, on the other hand, is a love lyric, which, though pregnant with the erotic mood, is invested with symbolic and spiritual meaning. The Javali, too, is erotic in content, but it deals with the theme in a more earthy manner than does the Padam. The majority of Padams and Javalis deal with the amorous diversions and escapades of the deified heroes of Hindu mythology, such as Krishna and Kartikeya.

The longest and most trying dance of Bharata Natyam, however, is the Varnam. This differs from the preceding forms in using both *nrita* and *nritya* in equal measure. Though it has now been reduced to about twenty minutes, in former times this number alone took about three hours to perform and afforded a real test for the skill and capacity of the performer. The composition consists of a song in praise of a deity, hero or king, and when it is performed, *abhinaya* is rendered to the words of the song. The song, however, is not sung as a whole but in pieces, in couplets or verses. At the beginning of the composition and between the different pieces, sequences of *nrita*, mostly in the form of *jatis* and *teermanams*, are introduced. These *nrita* pieces serve no purpose save that of embellishment, but they are nevertheless an integral part of the arrangement. Another Bharata Natyam dance item very much allied to the Varnam is the Swarajati: this also consists of alternate sequences of *nrita* and *nritya*, but the *sahitya*, or text, is given a somewhat greater importance here.

It is to be noted that the songs used for *abhinaya* in Bharata Natyam are not necessarily compositions which were especially created for the art. In fact, apart from the Varnams and Swarajatis, many of which were composed specifically for Bharata Natyam, the lyrical content of the art consists of material that has been borrowed from the whole range of poetical literature in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit, and to a lesser extent, Kannada. In this wide range are included songs excerpted from the classics as well as from the inspired effusions of the numerous saint-singers of South India. The music accompanying Bharata Natyam is in the pure Karnatak style. Formerly the dancer herself used to sing and at the same time render the meaning of the song through dance, but at present the singing is for the most part left to the supporting musicians. The leading musician, who is known as the *nattuvanar*, is the conductor of the performance, and usually he is also the guru, or preceptor, of the performing dancer. He sings and at the same time beats out the rhythmic patterns of the dance with a pair of small metal cymbals. Next in importance to him is the percussionist, who plays the drum known as *mridangam*. Others who provide the musical support generally include a



singer and musicians who play instruments such as the flute and violin. During the time of the *devadasis* the musicians used to stand behind the dancer; now they simply sit, unobtrusively, on one side of the stage.

Bharata Natyam is intended to be danced solo, but sometimes two dancers perform together. The formal presentation of the art, which follows the pattern evolved by the Tanjavur foursome, has been very ingeniously devised. The programme opens with the Alarippu, which offers in a neat, compact package the essence of *nrita* in the style and also serves as an appetiser for the demonstration that is to follow. Then comes the Jatiswaram, which instantly injects a liveliness into the programme with its eye-catching tracery of movements and its unanimity of dance and musical phrases. Next is the Sabdam, with which *nritya*, or expressional work, is introduced. This is done in a sober, frugal manner; there is nothing loud here, it is all a whisper. Then follows the ponderous Varnam or Swarajati, an enthralling experience but one that also taxes the concentration of both the dancer and the audience. After this, the tempo of the performance suddenly lets up and there is a series of Padams, Javalis, Keertanams, and the like, enacted in a placid, leisurely way that is restful to both the eye and the mind. And then, again, all at once there is an outburst—like a whiplash comes the Tillana, a joyous, exuberant coda that brings out, in a dazzling display, all the sparkle and ebullience inherent in *nrita*. But that need not be all, for often, to round off the whole, the Slokam, a paean of pure adoration or exultation, is presented.

Aharya in Bharata Natyam is uniform, which means that no matter what theme or role or character the dancer is portraying, there is no difference in the dress or adornment. The *devadasi* costume consisted of close-fitting pyjamas encased in a long sari of shimmering silk or brocade one end of which was taken from the front and between the legs and tucked in at the back and the other stretched across one shoulder to cover the breasts. The blouse was generally short, with half sleeves, and loud in colour. Since the present revival of the art, dancers generally wear a version which is in the form of a sari stitched to sheath the legs from the hips down to the ankles and having an array of pleats in front which unfold like a fan when the knees are lowered to adopt the recurring basic stance. This is coupled with a brief *choli*, or bodice, over which is sometimes pulled a veil, generally of gossamer texture. The face is made up in the normal way, but the eyes are given prominence by rimming them with a thick layer of kohl. The palms and soles are dyed red. There is a profusion of ornaments—necklaces, head pendant, ear pendants, nose-rings, finger rings, bangles, armlets, waist-band, and the like. Flowers too are used generously; beginning with a sizeable spray at the nape, they are artistically intertwined all the way down the plait. And then there are the ankle-bells, some fifty to hundred on each leg, which are not only an integral part of the dancer's accoutrement but also indispensable for the articulation of rhythm.

Natya lives in Bharata Natyam through the Bhagavata Mela Nataka, a



form of dance-drama that has been in existence for nearly 400 years. From what all we can cull from history, it appears that the climate for the flowering of the Bhagavata Mela art was created when, consequent on the fall of Vijayanagar in 1565, the Telugu Nayak principalities of Tanjavur and Madurai, which had been established earlier, became havens of refuge for displaced artistes of the Imperial Court. The Nayaks of Tanjavur, who held sway for about 125 years, proved in particular to be great patrons of learning and to one of them, Achyutappa, goes the credit of having endowed a village to 501 Brahmin families for the avowed purpose of nurturing and promoting the arts and letters. This happened around 1575 and the village, then called, significantly, Achyutapuram, later came to be known as Melatur.

We know nothing, however, of what dances or dance-dramas, if any, were performed at Melatur till we come, some two centuries later, to the time of one Venkatarama Sastri, a Telugu Brahmin and a senior contemporary of the saint-singer Tyagaraja and who is credited with having created single-handed the Bhagavata Mela art—at least in the form in which it is recognised today. It seems plausible, nevertheless, that in their zeal for transplanting their language, art and culture in the country of their adoption, the Telugus might have carried their tradition of dance-drama, the Kuchipudi, too and that, later, this might well have served Venkatarama Sastri as the inspiration for his work.

Having taken root at Melatur, the Bhagavata Mela art gradually found support and encouragement at some other places as well and, eventually, its performance came to be associated with six villages in the district of Tanjavur. There is evidence to suggest that since the beginning the Bhagavata Mela plays have been performed only at these villages. It also deserves to be noted that the Bhagavata Mela has, since its inception, been intimately associated with religion, and that throughout its career, it has always been performed as a votive offering in temples and never for the purpose of entertainment. There are only certain temples where the plays can be staged, and each of the six privileged villages—Melatur, Soolamangalam, Saliyamangalam, Oothkadu, Nallur and Teperumanallur—has one such temple. All the temples are Vaishnavite and the plays can be staged here only once a year—on the occasion of the annual temple festival in May or June.

Relative to the other five villages, Melatur has, from the outset, enjoyed a special status. Venkatarama Sastri, the author of the plays, was born here, and he lived and died here. Natesa Iyer, the great master of this art of the last generation, spent his days at Melatur; and Balu Bhagavatar, the foremost contemporary exponent of the Bhagavata Mela tradition, too, belongs to Melatur. And then there is the temple of Varadaraja Perumal at Melatur which has an importance all its own; this springs from the fact that Venkatarama Sastri composed his most important dance-drama, Prahlada Charitram, in honour of the deity of this temple. Venkatarama Sastri, incidentally, wrote twelve plays, and it is only these that have been performed



at Melatur, the more popular ones among them being Harishchandra, Markandeya, Usha Parinayam and, of course, the Prahlada Charitram. The plays are all in Telugu, and to this day they are performed in their original language before spectators more than half of whom know nothing of Telugu. But this apparently poses no problem, for hundreds of people come from all around Melatur to witness these plays each year.

The Bhagavata Mela programme at Melatur begins each year with the Narasimha Jayanti celebrations at the local temple, which take place in May or June and last from two to ten days. A thatched pandal, or covering, about 150 feet long, is constructed in the street facing the temple, the portals of which are kept open so that the deities within may have a good view of the proceedings and bless the participants as well as those who assemble to witness the plays. The show commences each night about 10 o'clock and closes in the early hours of the morning. The plays are performed exclusively by local people and the participants, none of whom is a professional actor or dancer, come to Melatur at the time of the festival, no matter where they may be staying the rest of the year. The performers, as in the case of Kuchipudi, are all men, and moreover they are enjoined by convention to observe certain austerities in their personal and social life for the duration of the festival. The musicians who conduct the plays are also from Melatur and, like the actors and dancers, they take part in the performances not for any gain, for nobody is paid a fee, but from a sense of moral obligation.

The performance begins each night with the appearance on the stage of the *konnangi* or the buffoon. He prances and dances for a while till the attention of the audience is fully arrested. He is followed by the *nattuvanar*, or conductor, and other musicians who stand in a cluster and recite the Todayamangalam, an invocation in the form of *slokas* interspersed with phrases of rhythmic syllables. Then enters a boy disguised as Ganapati and the musicians sing in his honour while he shuffles his feet, shows a few *hastas* and then makes his exit. Finally appears the *kattiyakaran*, the herald, who, through song and gesture, introduces the play and the characters and exhorts the audience to witness the proceedings with patience and understanding. Then begins the play proper, which is unfolded strictly as it was written by the author, Venkatarama Sastri.

The play proceeds with the musicians singing the text and the dancers interpreting this through gestures and facial expressions. Each principal character makes his or her first appearance with a *daru*, which is a song, in the text of the play, intended specifically to introduce a character. Each performer goes through his part and then either vacates the stage or sits on one side of it, in full view of the audience, only to get up and perform when his role demands it again. The dance and *abhinaya* follow the technique of Bharata Natyam. Most of the action is done to the accompaniment of songs, but occasionally there are prose passages in the form of dialogues or monologues meant for the main characters and also *sandhivachanas*, connecting links, and *dwipadas*, couplets, which are recited by the *granthika* or



prasangi, the prompter.

The music is classical Karnatak, and the manner in which the author has used various *ragas* for different situations and also, sometimes, for various parts of the night at which particular sequences of a play are expected to be performed speaks a lot for his musical genius.

No curtain is used before or during a play—or at least such was the tradition—but it is customary to introduce the heroine by first presenting her behind a stretched sari held by two volunteers. She executes a short dance item, usually the *Alarippu*, behind this screen, and then it is pulled away, leaving her in full view of the audience. The costumes as at present show a curious mixture of the past and present. Some of the female characters wear the *devadasi* ensemble, while others prefer the ready-to-wear attire used by most Bharata Natyam dancers. The male characters wear pyjamas and knee-length coats or *dhotis* and jackets and some of them also wear turbans and sport beards and moustaches. Masks are used in the representation of Ganapati, Narasimha, Brahma and the *rakshasas*.

The mask of Narasimha used in the play Pahlada Charitram is, however, of very special import and is held in much veneration by the people of the village. An ordinary *papier mache* mask it is, but years of worship have imparted to it a particular sanctity. It is removed from the temple once a year—on the night of the enactment of Pahlada Charitram—and for the rest of the time it remains in a special case which is fixed to the wall above the sacred images. The performer portraying the role of Narasimha wears the mask in the final scene. The climax to the play is reached when, having keyed himself up to a pitch of impassioned fury, the actor representing Narasimha becomes hysterical and finally falls into a trance. When he eventually comes to, he is taken to the temple in a procession and with songs all the way. The mask is then removed from the performer's face and ceremoniously replaced in its case in the temple, and it is only after this that the people repair, bleary-eyed but morally uplifted, to their homes.

Apart from Melatur, the Bhagavata Mela art has, over the years, been staged fairly consistently in two other villages as well—Saliyamangalam and Teperumanallur. Here, too, the participants are all local people, Brahmin, and non-professional. As in Melatur, the principal play in these villages is Pahlada Charitram, but while at Melatur are mounted five or six plays, here more often than not Pahlada Charitram is the only presentation. Again, here also the event is tied up with the celebration of Narasimha Jayanti, and a mask of Narasimha, which is regularly worshipped in the village, plays a key role in the offering. The plays, it hardly needs repeating, are in Telugu; however, they are written not by Venkatarama Sastri but by some local celebrity of the past. It may also be averred that if the Bhagavata Mela Nataka is today surviving in Melatur or in any of the other favoured villages, it is for no reason other than that the practitioners of the art are possessed with the conviction that it is their bounden duty to perpetuate a tradition hallowed by usage and of which they are the sole custodians.



Finally, the Kuravanji, a form of presentation in the Bharata Natyam style which, in the matter of technique, suggests a marriage between the dance and the opera.

Like the Sadir, the Kuravanji was also for centuries exclusively in the hands of the *devadasis*. However, unlike the Sadir which was rendered solo, the Kuravanji, being modelled as a play with a narrative theme involving a number of characters, was usually presented by a team of four to eight women.

Like the Bharata Natyam of the *devadasis*, the Kuravanji plays were also originally strictly a feature of temple service, conceived in a spirit of devotion. The Kuravanjis, however, were not presented frequently but, as is true of the Bhagavata Mela Nataka, only at the time of the annual festivals of certain temples in Tamil Nadu. They were performed as all-night shows and generally in the open air. Some temples, such as the Brihadiswara at Tanjavur, had special platforms meant for staging Kuravanjis alone.

The Kuravanji tradition came into existence about 250 years ago. The earliest known composition is the Tirukutrala Kuravanji. After this several other pieces came to be written and they are all in the form of lyrical plays. The Kuravanjis are generally of high literary and artistic merit. They consist of couplets and verses which are intended to be sung by different characters and some of the cantos also have the *raga* and *tala* in which they are to be rendered mentioned against them. The appropriate *jatis*, or sequences of rhythmic dance syllables, are mentioned in certain compositions and this makes it evident that they were all written specifically for presentation as dance.

The stock theme is the fruition of the love of a girl for her hero, who is either a deity or the patron-king to whom the work is dedicated. Apart from the heroine, the gypsy-woman is an essential character in these plays; her role in fact is the pivotal one, for it is she who brings about, or promises, the union of the lovers. It is for this reason that these plays are known as Kuravanjis, the appellation being derived from the Tamil word *kuruvan* which stands for a gypsy. Apart from the *kurathi*, the gypsy-woman, there are from two to eight *sakhis*, or friends of the heroine, who provide the supporting cast. The hero is only suggested through the uttered word and he does not come on the stage.

In a traditional performance the *kattiyakaran*, or the herald, announces the theme and the purpose of the play and exhorts the audience to pray for its success. Sometimes a character impersonating the Lord Vighneshwara is also introduced on the stage, and this is done either immediately before or after the appearance of the *kattiyakaran*. His appearance is short, for he simply does a few dance movements and takes a few steps forwards and backwards before making his exit. Then appears the heroine who is seen playing with her *sakhis*. Next comes the *kurathi* who, learning of the plight of the heroine deeply in love, reads her palm and assures her that she will soon succeed in her plans. After this the *kurathi* departs, laden with the many gifts given her by the heroine, and with this the play usually comes to a close. But sometimes a subsidiary love theme is also introduced by presenting



the *kurathi* as being in love with a *kuruvan*; when such is the case, the play generally ends with the happy union of these two, who are then seen singing ditties in honour of the hero.

All the roles in a Kuravanji except that of *kattiyakaran* are taken by women. The story, though usually quite simple, is unfolded and presented in an elaborate manner. The heroine is given ample scope to portray *sringara* rasa—the erotic mood—and to delineate its manifold contours. The *kurathi*'s lines provide descriptive poetry of lands and peoples. The melodies used in the Kuravanjis are based on the Karnatak system of classical music and the songs are expected to be rendered by the dancers themselves. The orchestral accompaniment is similar to that of Sadir and Bhagavata Mela Nataka.

The Tirukutrala Kuravanji is the work of a poet of note, Tirukuda Rajappa Kavirayar, born at Melakaran, a village near Kutralam, in the Tirunelveli District. Apart from this Kuravanji, written in honour of the Lord Tirukudanathar, he has to his credit thirteen other literary compositions of merit. As intended by the poet, this Kuravanji was indeed performed at the Kutralam temple, though only at the time of the annual festival, but for about seventy-five years now the tradition stands discontinued. For many years it was also staged, during Navaratri, at the Brihadiswara temple, Tanjavur, until the abolition of the *devadasi* tradition.

Apart from the Tirukutrala Kuravanji, there are about a dozen other Kuravanjis considered important, and among these are the Sarabhendra-Bhupala, Azhagar, Viralimalai and Kumbesar. The Sarabhendra-Bhupala Kuravanji was composed by Kottaiyur Sivakozhandu Desikar, an eminent court poet at the time of Raja Serfoji II. The hero is the Raja himself and the heroine is Madanavalli, a fictitious character. Known also as the Sarabhoji Kuravanji, it was for many years regularly staged on the eighth day of the Chitra festival, at the Brihadiswara temple in Tanjavur. All the Kuravanjis are in Tamil, but there is at least one which is written in another language. This is the Devendra Kuravanji and it is in Marathi. Its author is Raja Serfoji II. He was a versatile scholar, a great patron of art and literature, and the author of several works in Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Marathi. In his Kuravanji, Serfoji reveals his scholarly mind by presenting an outline geography of the world through the *kurathi*.

Its popular connotation leads one to associate Bharata Natyam today exclusively with the familiar Alarippu-Jatiswaram-Varnam-Padam-Tillana order of dance concerts; actually, as we have seen, Bharata Natyam is not a dance-style but a dance technique—a 'system', if one may use that word, and one that is capable of presentation in three related forms: Sadir, Bhagavata Mela Nataka and Kuravanji. It can also be said, in this context, that in the tradition of classical dance and dance-drama there are at least three forms—the Orissi, Mohini Attam and Kuchipudi, that betray elements of the Bharata Natyam technique in their structure. Having borrowed and assimilated these elements and given the outcome a regional colouring, these latter forms presently enjoy an identity and individuality all their own.

