

## Traditional Devadasi Sadir (Bharata Natyam)

### Sacred Temple Dance of South India

*"Bharata Natyam is the embodiment of music in its visual form... If we approach it with humility, learn it with dedication and practice it with devotion to God. ... the dancer universalizes her experience, all that she goes through is also felt and experienced by the spectator".*

– Srimati Balasaraswati

Bharata Natyam simply means "Indian Dance," but the name itself reveals three distinct components of the dance:

Bha = Bhava (mood) - Ra = Raga (melody) - Ta = Tala (rhythm)

Bharata is the ancient name for India as well as the name of the sage that codified the performing arts in a scripture, written in Sanskrit, around 200 B.C., called 'Bharata's Natyashastra'. Natyam is the Tamil word for the art of dance-drama. The Natyashastra tells an epic story of the celestial dancers (Apsaras) and musicians (Gandharvas) who enacted and celebrated, with dance, music and drama, the Deva's (God's) victorious battle against the Asuras (demons). This divine dance was then brought to humanity as Devadasi Sadir (the dance of the Devadasis, Servants of God). Bharata declared that dance, "Shall be the happy adoration of the world."

Lord Siva (pure consciousness) was pleased with the celestial performance and offered a gift of his masculine forceful dance (Tandava), while his consort, the goddess Parvati (everything we can see, taste, smell, hear and feel) offered her feminine graceful dance (Lasya), thus creating a harmonious balance of embodied blessing. Tandava is a metaphor for the dancing forces of creation, preservation and dissolution. In the context of Bharata Natyam, it is the substratum and essence on which the dance is built. From the microcosmic play of each atom to the macrocosmic spin of the galaxies, each element is orchestrated and contained in Lord Siva's dance. Lasya means 'to shine'. It is Parvati's gentle glow and the expression of her love for Lord Siva.

As Nataraja (King of Dance), Lord Siva is the source of all the movement and rhythmic energy that expands, contracts and swirls in the universe. The damaru (small two-headed drum) that he holds in his upper right hand is the beating of our hearts, the ebb and flow of each breath, and the sound that vibrates through the entire universe. He dances on Mount Kailash (the top of the head) and dwells in Chidambaram (the heart). His right foot is placed on the demon of ignorance as a reminder that his grace dispels darkness and bestows wisdom.

Devadasi Sadir is the embodied expression of devotion and love for the divine and is one of the oldest dance forms in existence today. For at least 2,000 years these dances were offered as embodied worship (puja) by the Devadasis. These women were highly regarded as holding and bestowing a blessing force on humanity. They lived in the temples and were formally married to the temple deity. Their dances were a vital part of the daily offerings and celebrations of the divine, as well as an integral facet of the rights of passage and festivals that took place. They possessed the ability to cultivate and participate with Rasa (a shared epiphany of exalted unity between an artist, the audience and the divine), making them 'Nityasumangali' (eternally auspicious).

The creation and experience of rasa being the aim of all Indian arts requires that the artist surrender his or her identity to become a vehicle for the experience and expression of ecstatic grace. No separation exists between music, dance, sculpture, painting, poetry and architecture; all are expressions of the same dynamic force of devotion, beauty and consciousness. The profound depth of Devadasi Sadir stretches far beyond time and place making it a complete expression of the human experience.

Devadasi Sadir is performed to traditional Karnatic (South Indian) music. Sound, being the primal force from which all of creation springs forth, has the power to unite us directly with the divine. The heart is the thousand-stringed instrument that is plucked with infinite subtleties and dimensions, all of which point our attention towards the divine. The Karnatic music evolved in the temples and courts of southern India as a mode of prayer and ecstatic expression. During the 19th century, four brothers known as the Tanjore Quartet codified the musical compositions that form the bulk of the Devadasi Sadir repertoire today. The musical ensemble is comprised of a vocalist who sings the poetic text (Sahitya), a Nattuvangamist who intones the dance syllables

(Solkutta) and keeps the Tala with two small symbols, a mrdangamist who plays the two-headed drum and either a violinist or flutist who follows the Raga laid out by the vocalist.

Devadasi Sadir blends abstract pure dance with emotional and devotional elements in a fusion of two key elements: Nritya (pure dance, much like Hatha Yoga in motion) and Nritya (expressive dance). Nritya is comprised of Adavus (basic dance units) strung together in complex rhythmic sequences. Each Adavu contains three essential elements: a basic standing position (Sthanaka), movement of the legs and feet (Chari) and hand gestures (Nritya-hasta or Mudra). The Nritya element is achieved by using Abhinaya or gestural dance. The poetic text is portrayed with hand, body and facial expression creating a fully embodied prayer. The student must learn over one hundred and thirty Adavus before the first complete dance is taught. Devadasi Sadir demands a complete balance of body, mind and spirit. Without the total surrender of one, the others cannot bloom.

A traditional Devadasi Sadir performance has a set progression of dances called the Margam (path). The Margam carefully prepares the dancer and audience for a gradual increase in tempo, emotion and exaltation, creating a wonderfully complete and symmetrical art. Traditionally performed solo, the dancer leads the audience through an entire spectrum of experience, creating an intimate conversation between the observer and the observed. Each element of the Margam can be viewed from the most mundane and relative orientation--mere details of day-to-day life--to the most profound and absolute expressions of the dancer's love and longing for undifferentiated communion with divinity.

Smt. Balasaraswati gave this beautiful analogy comparing the structure of the performance to that of the journey a devotee takes through a temple:

*"The Bharata Natyam recital is structured like a great temple: we enter through the Gopuram (outer hall) of Alarippu, cross the Ardhmandapam (half-way hall) of Jatiswaram, then the Mandapam (great hall) of Shabdham and enter the holy precinct of the deity in the Varnam. In dancing to Padams, one experiences the containment and the simple and solemn chanting of sacred verses in the closeness of God. The Tillana breaks into movement like the final burning of camphor accompanied by a measure of din and bustle".*

### The Traditional Margam:

#### Ganapati Vandana

The opening prayer sung to honor and entreat the elephant-headed god, Lord Ganesh, to remove any obstacles that might hinder the performance. Lord Siva requested that all performances begin with this prayer in praise of his son, Lord Ganesh.

#### Alarippu

The main element of this dance is Tala (rhythm). This short invocational dance welcomes the audience, divine and mortal. Alarippu means to 'flower forth; the dancer is the flower that is opening and offering her petals to God.

#### Jatiswaram

In this abstract pure dance, the element of Raga is introduced. Seven or eight Jatis (sentences of Adavus) are strung together and separated by a soft welcoming gesture that provides a moment of calm reflection for the dancer and the audience. The lilting melody has the ability to unite the audience with the dancer in a more subtle dimension.

#### Shabdham

This dance uses the Tala and the Raga of the previous two dances while adding the element of Abhinaya. The emotional component of this dance is often very light, so as to gently awaken the audience to the spectrum of expression and feeling.

## Varnam

The crescendo of a performance is the Varnam. It is the longest dance (30-60 minutes) punctuated with intricate pure dance choreography alternating with demanding emotional complexities. The mood of the Abhinaya is often intense, communicating themes of longing (Sringer), yearning and love.

## Padam

A Padam is a short lyrical poem or song that is expressed through Abhinaya. The dancer "speaks" of her love for God and the multitude of circumstances that can arise from longing, separation, jealousy, anger, betrayal, delight and sublime bliss. This creates a multifaceted portrayal of love that encompasses the entire scope of human experience and is observed, participated in and conveyed through dance.

## Tillana

Tillana is the final dance. It is a celebratory closure to the performance comprised of several pure dance segments (Corveys) and ending with one final prayer that sends the audience back into the world with a simple reminder of their unification with the divine.

## Mangalam

This auspicious prayer is sung at the end of the Margam, asking Lord Vishnu to bestow his blessings. It gives the dancer a moment of calm reflection and an opportunity to bow before the audience and the Gods. It is the final bead that is strung on the Margam, uniting the beginning and the end with a prayer and bringing the performance back to the stillness where it began (Sama).

Dance had been a vital element of temple worship in South India until the "Devadasi Bill" was passed in 1947. This law made it illegal to dance on temple grounds, in effect destroying all support for the Devadasis to continue learning and sharing their art. During the British occupation of India, confusion and fear had taken hold, and a group of influential elite pushed the law into effect the same year that India gained independence from Britain. A small number of dedicated artists continued to carve a place for the dance survive amidst the extremely charged political landscape. During that time, Srimati Balasaraswati, an extraordinarily brilliant dancer and musician, brought public attention to the importance of maintaining dance as a sacred communion with God. Others, such as Rukmini Devi, founded schools that promoted a revised version of the dance that was more suited for the stage as its venue rather than the temple.

The Koothambalam School of Traditional Devadasi Sadir, founded by Srimati Shyamala, is one of the few schools that values the original inspiration of this sacred art as communion with the divine. Shyamala, a master of the Balasaraswati Style, trains her students under the traditional Parampara (Guru to student) system, each dance being a transmission of the grace that is held by the entire lineage. The students of the Koothambalam School teach, lecture and perform the traditional Tangore Quartette Margam, offering audiences the experience of dance as an authentic expression of embodied devotion.

Any sacred art that has weathered the sands of time will contain a vast depth and wisdom of human evolution and understanding. Devadasi Sadir is a vital force of Satyam-Shiva-Sundaram (truth, consciousness, beauty) that one can step into like a luminous river of full-body intelligence. Surrendering to its flow invites the exquisite play of life (Lila) to wash over and through the world as a celebration of the divine.

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