

# The Role of Regional Styles in Natya

[Keynote address by Dr. R. Nagaswamy, in the 8th Natyakala Conference,  
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It must be remembered that regional styles have evolved with set patterns of movements, costumes, expressions etc. much before the compilation of Bharata's Natya Sastra. It is not proposed to go into the arguments, for dating Bharata's work, but I accept the view that the work could be placed a century before the Christian era. In a number of places Bharata refers to regional schools. For example, he states that the southern school Dakshinatyas - makes greater use of Nritta, Gita and Vadya and emphasize love themes. In their Abhinaya they delineate beautiful, sweet, and subtle angabhinayas.

दाक्षिणात्याः तावत् बहुनृत्तगोतवाद्याः कैशिकोप्रायाः चतुर-मधुर-ललित  
अङ्गाभिनयाः च ।

According to Bharata, the Southerners are people who live between Vindhya and the Southern ocean.

दक्षिणस्य समुद्रस्य तथा विन्ध्यस्य चान्तरे ।

ये देशाः तेषु युञ्जोत दाक्षिणत्यां तु नित्यशः ॥

महेन्द्रः मलयः सह्यः मेकलः पल पञ्जरः ।

एतेषु ये श्रिताः देशाः सज्ञेयः दक्षिणापथः ॥

कोशलाः तोसलाः मोसलाः यवनाः खसः ।

द्राविडान्ध्र महाराष्ट्राः वैष्णो वै वनवासजा ॥

At another place Bharata says that the Southerners enter the stage in Pradakshina - that is from the right side.

आवन्तो दाक्षिणात्या च प्रदक्षिण परिक्रमे ।

At another place he mentions that the compositions of the Southerners will have more 'na' karas.

नकार बहुला भाषा तेषु प्रयोजयेत् ।

It is clearly seen that even before the time of Bharata, a well defined schōol of dance was prevelant in the South.

Defining what is Pravriti, Bharata speaks of four developed schools- Avanti, Dakshinatya, Pancali and Odramagadhi.

चतुर्विधा प्रवृत्तिश्च प्रोक्ता नाट्य प्रयोगत ।

आवन्ती दाक्षिणात्या च पाञ्चाली च ओद्रमागधी ।

Obviously, they represent the eastern, the western, the northern and the southern schools of dance, each with their own tradition. It must also be known that Bharata tried to include these traditions and at the sametime emphasized the necessity to preserve their individuality. Thus he is the foremost to recognize the role of regional styles in Indian dance.

Once the Bharatan text was composed, it soon was recognized the very Veda of dance - the Natya Veda. All the subsequent Sanskrit writers on dance have based their work on Bharata's tradition. However, it should be noted that every later writer included invariably the then prevelant regional school as part of their treatises. Thus Matanga, in his *Brhaddeśi*, Somesvara in his *Manasollasa*, Sarngadeva in *Sangita Ratnakara* and Jāya in his *Nrittaratnavali*, to mention only a few well known writers, have dealt with the regional schools, thus recognizing their importance.

Here it may be mentioned that just as the northern tradition has left its great impact on the south, the southern school has been a great source of inspiration to the northern school. Dr. V. Raghavan, one of the greatest scholars of India, wrote in his introduction to *Nritta Ratnavali*, that the circumstance proves the phenomenon borne out by other evidences in the literay history North India, that North Indian writers like Kumbha and others looked to South India as a repository of tradition and a source of textual material' (P5).

It is not out of place to briefly note the Tamil tradition in Natya. That Bharata refers to the employment of Tamil language and tradition in his work prove that the Tamil Natya should be traced to pre Bharatan days.

The earliest Tamil grammar, on a modest estimate is placed in the beginning of the Christian era. The Tamil Natya tradition has existed prior to Tolkappiyam is seen from the chapter on Meypattiyal of Porul Adhikaram. The very chapter is clear proof of the existence of Dance tradition which the grammarian outlines. The great sangam works - like Ahananuru, Kuruntohai, Paripadal etc. were greatly influenced by the dance traditions. No one would doubt that verses of *Kalittohai* as mainly intended for dance (I have already demonstrated this in an earlier lecture at Krishna Gana Sabha.)

By the time we come to the epic age of Silappadhikaram and Manimekhalai, the role of regional forms are very clearly made known. The dancer Madhavi performed first the Tamil dance (called Desi), followed by Margi - the northern form in the Court of the Chola Thirumavalavan. She was able to keep, without mixing up the individuality of each form, as handed down through tradition. The text of Silappadhikaram says:—

கூடை செய்தகை வாரத்துக் களைதலும்  
வாரஞ்செய்தகை கூடையிற் களைதலும்  
குரவையும் வரியும் விரிவல செலுத்தி.

The commentator Perasiriyar says:

தேசியிற் கைத்தொழில் மார்க்கத்தில் புகாமலும்  
மார்க்கத்தில் கைத்தொழில் தேசியிற்புகாமலும்.

The text further shows not only the dancer, but also the dance master, the composer, musicians and the instrument players should be fully conversant with regional dance and music and also the Sanskrit tradition. Silappadhikaram is assigned to 3rd century A.D. By that time we see the division as Tamil Kuttu - also called Desi Kuttu and the other as Margi. Interestingly the Margi dance was also called Vadugu - i. e. the northern school.

Several dance treatises were written in Tamil like *Ceyirriyam*, *Gunanul*, *Bharatasenapatiyam*, *Panca Marabu* etc. Undoubtedly these texts

have influenced the northern texts as well. I shall illustrate the impact of southern school on the north by one illustrious example.

In the earliest strata of Tamil sangam classics we get references to the Kuravai dance - number of women joining hand and dancing. Soon this was associated with the dance of Āycciyar - the Gopis - singing the enchanting beauty of Krishna. This sangam tradition with an emphasis of *Aham* theme i. e. love theme, was later developed by Alvars - the Vaishnavite saints in their hymns, the Divya Prabandham. Towards the close of the age of Alvars, the famous Sanskrit work *Srimad Bhagavatam* was written in Tamil Nadu, and it has now been proved, that the *Bhagavatam* has mainly drawn on Tamil Alvars. Soon *Srimad Bhagavatam* travelled to the north and learned with admiration. It is known that the Senas of Bengal were the descendents of Chola Generals, who stayed away in Bengal after Rajendra Chola's Gangetic expedition. In the Sena court of Bengal, the *Bhagavatam* was known in the 11th century A. D. The famous poet Jayadeva, who adorned the court of a Sena of Bengal was inspired by the Alvar-Bhagavatam tradition and composed his immortal *Gita Govinda*. That *Gita Govinda* - dealing with the loves of Gopis to Krishna, is in fact an extension of the Alvar traditions which in turn is the continuation of the sangam tradition. Thus Rasalila tradition of the east has been influenced by the Bhakti movement of the south.

I shall also illustrate, what an impact the *Gita Govinda* left on temple and devotional tradition. A 13th century inscription found in the famous Puri Jagannath temple refers to the order of Gajapati ruler Prataparudradeva, stating that dances should be performed in the temple of Jagannath daily from the evening dhupa to the night dhupa. It speaks of the deities of Balarama as *Barathakur* and Sri Krishna as *Gita Govinda Thakur*. The order says that all dancers should perform only *Gita Govinda* and no other dance. In fact, they should not even learn other dances. Those who recited or danced any song other than *Gita Govinda* were considered rebels against Jagannath. That is the impact of this marvellous tradition of *Gita Govinda* in Orissa.

There is another record which shows the travel of southern school to the north. The record comes from Warrangal in northern Andhra Pradesh. Rudramba, the Kakatiya Queen, gifted lands in 13th century to a temple built by a teacher Visvesvaradeva. This teacher hailed from Bengal - Gaudadesa, but was a Rajaguru to the Kakatiya and Chola rulers. He established a Suddha Saiva matha near Warrangal and settled Tamil Brahmins, ascetics, and dancing girls near Warrangal. These dancing girls were attached to the temple. There were 8 maddhala players, 14 women singers, 6 karada players and others. The Principal singer was a Kashmiri.

श्री विश्वेश्वरदेवस्य नर्तक्यः दशसंख्यया ।

मुखरीद्वयसंयुक्ताः अष्टौ महलवाचकाः ।

एकः काश्मीरदेशीयः गायन्त्यः च चतुर्दश ।

It is an illustrious example of Indian synthesis of the regional schools - the Gauda, Tamil, Andhra and Kashmiri traditions coming happily together and enriching each other.

The Kudiyaattam and Cakkiyar Kuttu tradition of Kerala may be cited as the ancient Sanskrit tradition, combined with the Tamil traditions surviving to this day. The Kudiyaattam dancers use the margi tradition - i. e. Sanskrit traditions in songs and hastas etc. They have also preserved to this day some of the most ancient Tamil pans - Ragas. For example, they are using 20 ragas among which one is *Puranira*, which is *Puranirmai Pan* of the Tamil tradition. Some modern pan scholars identify *puranirmai* with *sikanti*; but the Kudiyaattam dancers consider these *Sikanti* and *Puranira* as separate ragas.

Kudiyaattam and Cakkiyar tradition is now found exclusively in Kerala but in medieval period, especially during the reign of the Cholas, it was popular in Tamil Nad villages. Inscriptions of the age refer to Cakkiyars in places like Thiruvidadaimarudur, Kiranur, Tanjore and other places, performing dance damas of several angas.

The other day, Kadur Venkataalkshamma giving an excellent demonstration of Mysore school of abhinaya, referred to two important aspects of the tradition - while performing in the hall. The first is the Rangadevata vandana - that is worshipping the Goddess. This was prevalent in the Tamil dance tradition till about 150 years ago. One Tamil version of the Abhinayadarpana for example has this verse :

பரதகுல பாக்யமே பாவரஸாநந்தத்து  
உருவாய் எழுந்த ஒளியே—மருவு சகன்  
மோகனமே, இன்ப முதலே, அரங்க நிலை  
ஆக வளர் அம்மை என ஆள்.

She is obviously Devi Parvati. We have an eyewitness account of the dance tradition in the court of Krishnadevaraya. There was a long hall where the girls learnt dance. The presiding deity of the Rangadevata was made of gold and enshrined in a central niche. Krishnadevaraya himself used to be seated by the side of it and watched the training given to the dancing girl.

The Rangadevata vandana is no more practised in the Tamil tradition.

The second tradition mentioned by Venkatalakshamma was singing the mangalam at the beginning. This was the tradition in Tamil natya as well till recent times. But nowadays it is done at the end.

Thus it becomes necessary to understand the real ancient tradition of a particular regional style, one should study the neighbouring regional styles as well.

The other point that becomes absolutely necessary in the context of regional styles is the attitude of the dancer towards the audience. The dancer should chose such a composition which the audience are capable of understanding. Bharata is very clear on this point.

तस्मात् गम्भीरार्थाः शब्दाः ये लोकवेदसिद्धाः ।

सर्वजनेन ग्रह्याः ते योज्याः ।

If the dancer herself does not understand the meaning, how can she communicate through abhinaya?. The Tamil Abhinayadarpana to a disqualification of a dancer says:

மாறுகண்ணாள் முழிக்கண்ணாள் குழிக்கண்ணாள்  
நீர்க்கண்ணாள் மாலைக் கண்ணாள்  
கூறிய சொல் பொருள் அறியாள் குறிப்பறியாள்  
பொறுமையில்லாள் குருவின் சொல்லை  
மீறிய நடக்கையுள்ளாள் வாத்திய  
காண நிருத்த விதத்தைக் காணாள்  
காறுநிறம் செவிடு முளாள் கண்டமுகம்  
நீட்சியுள்ளாள் கல்வியில்லாள்  
தார்குழலை சபைமுன்னே கோதி முடிப்பாள்  
மெய்யைத்தான் சொரிந்தும்,  
ஈர் நாக்குதனைக்கொண்டு இதழ் தடவுவாள்... ..  
அபாத்ரம் எனவே கூறும் நூலே.

To use a pada or javali, which neither the dancer understands nor the audience understand was considered a defective recital - dosha - by the Bharatan school. In this connection I would like to mention that there exist over 20,000 Tamil songs - over 8000 Tevaram poems - 4000 Divyaprabandams, several thousand sangam works, and several thousand other songs in all that were danced, and suited to dance. This is the only region, which has such a vast collection that has not been exploited for dance. On the other hand what is being mostly danced, are again and again the same which sometimes are not only unintelligible and obscure, but also not of very great merit. Of all the regional styles the Tamil Bharata Natya seems to be the one that suffer from this defect.

Another point that I would like to draw your attention is to the question why the Kings arranged dances in their courts? Was it for entertainment? or delineation of Sringara. The ancient texts, called Samrajya Lakshmi Dipika, studied by the Maratha rulers of Tanjore says that dance was organised by the king in the Sabha for the stability of the Kingdom and prosperity of the people.

साम्राज्यलक्ष्म्याः स्थैर्यार्थं सर्वसौभाग्य सिद्धये ।

पश्येत् लास्यकलां रम्यां नटीभिः अभिसूचिताम् ॥

Finally I would like to add what we call Bharata Natya is a combination of both Tamil and Sanskrit traditions. Many of the Nattuvanars of yester years made use of two principal Sanskrit texts - the Abhinaya-darpana of Nandikesvara and the Sangitaratnakara of Sarngadeva. Both were translated into Tamil about 250 years ago which were used by the Nattuvanars. Both are available in prints, the later under the title - 'Mahabharata Cudamanni'.

श्रीसिमाशीर्षः चक्षुः पद करणाद्यंगहार स्वरूपां  
 भूचारी मण्डलस्थान्यभिनयविलसत् कौण्डली पेरणीकाम् ।  
 नृत्ताध्यायस्यवृत्तिं प्रचुरलयलसत् देशिनी नृत्ययोग्याम्  
 कुर्वे शैवालयाधोश्वरपदविभवो लोकनाथो मुनोन्द्रः ॥

This introductory invocation is found at the beginning of the Nrittadhyaya of an unpublished text, written by one Lokanathamuni. The text says it was appropriate for 'Desi Nritta' meaning the regional style of dance. Over 70% of the text is in Tamil, and the rest is in sanskrit; for example the Tamil portion reads.

தலைபுஷ்பபுடம். முன் சொன்ன சதுரஸ்ர நிலைமிலே நின்று இடது புறத்திலே  
 ஸ்தன்யத்திலே புஷ்பபுடையாக பிடித்து பரதத்தை தலசஞ்சாரமாக பண்ணி இடது  
 புறம் சற்றே வளைத்து சாரியை பண்ண அது தலைபுஷ்பபுடமாம்.

This is a text used by a Nattuvanars of Bharata Natya tradition of Tamil Nadu, about 300 years ago, and refers to the Desi Nritta — the regional styles. Some of the present day traditions are derived from this school.

The use of these two works translated and used till recent times, show how both Sanskrit and regional styles coexisted side by side for over 2000 years, from Pre-Bharata days to this time, mutually enriching each other and that Sanskritisation has not affected the flourishing of regional styles.

