

# Bharata's Natya Sastra

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Like the 64 arts, the origin of Bharatanatya Sastra is in Sanskrit. Saint Bharata wrote this in 6000 *slokas*, in 36 chapters. It is widely believed that Saint Bharatha belonged to 300 B.C. He learnt the art of dance from Nandikeswara and wrote elaborately about song, drama and dance in his Bharatha Sastra.

Natya Sastra was created by Brahma, as the 'Fifth Veda' by compiling the quintessence of *geetham* (song), instrumental music (*vadhyam*), dance (*abhinaya*) and *rasa* (emotions) found in the four Vedas.

The first letters of the three words Bhava, Raga and Thalam in Sanskrit (Bha+Ra+Tha=

Bharatham), are linked together to form the name 'Bharatha', the art of theatre. This is revealed in a play *Sankalpa Suryodayam* written by Sri Vedantha Desika, who lived in 1300 A.D. Nandikeswara (300 A.D) wrote *Bharatarnavam* and *Abhinaya Darpana* in which he dealt elaborately about the art of *natya*.

Hari Prasadha Sastry, Manavalli Ramakrishna Kavi, Manmohan Ghosh, P. V. Kane and Dr. Geeth have mentioned Bharata's period at 400-300 B.C. Nyaya Devar Battalolludar, Acharya Kirthi who all lived from 600-1000 A.D. wrote the text for *Bharathasastra*. But, translators from other languages, in their respective languages



Navrasas demonstrated by  
a Bharatnatyam artiste

followed only *Abhinava Bharathi*, a work by a Kashmiri Saiva religious scholar Abhinava Gupta (800 A.D.). For the first time, Bharatanatya Sastra was published and released in 1894 A.D. in Kavya Mala Series through Sivaprasada Sastri. Sroe of France published and released upto 14 chapters in 1898. In 1926, the University of Baroda published a book on Bharatanatya Sastra penned by Manavalli Ramakrishna Kavi.

In Sangam literature there is no specific mention about works on dance/dramas. But subsequent authors have mentioned about works pertaining to Natya Sastra.

This is confirmed in *Silappadhikaram*, which states that Madhavi performed her dance, strictly as per the Natya Sastra (*Nataka Nannool*). There are authentic evidences for this in literatures like *Yapperungala Urai*, *Vazhichezitriyam*, *Poigaiyar Nool*, etc.

Researchers thus conclude that there were several ancient writings on Dance/Drama, but they all perished over time. We also find evidences in

Tholkappiya literature viz., *Nataka Vazhakilum*, *Ulagial Vazhakilum*, which confirm that several writings in Tamil pertaining to *Iyal*, *Isai* and *Natakam* (Dance, Music and Drama) existed even before Tholakappiar.

In *Silappadhikaram*, we find the greatness of dance. Ancient dancers were well versed in all the 64 arts. Dance exclusively meant for the kings were called *Vethial*. After the first dedication ceremony in the King's court, the dancers were conferred the titles *Thalaikoil*.

The special features and greatness of dance can be guessed from the paintings of 'Siddhanna Vasal' in Pudukottai district. The architectural and sculptural

beauties in the Vaikunta Perumal temple, Kanchipuram reveal the grandeur of this ancient art.

In the Telugu land, where the Vaidic religion existed during *yagas* and *yagnas*, gods like Devadasi, Dig Balakas, Navagrahas, Panch Bhutams were worshipped in different styles and forms of dance. Lord Shiva was known for worship through various forms of dance. These can be seen in the Natya Sastra.

In the Telugu land, where Buddhism prevailed, song and drama formed part of worship. Buddhist devotees dedicated girls from their families solely for performing dance before Gods and deities in temples. They were well

trained in song and dance and delighted the gods with their dances during festivals. These girls were engaged in dance profession until they were married. After marriage they gave up dancing and retired to lead a family life.

Sometimes people were subjected to sufferings and great hardships due to estrangement between celestial couples. To pacify and propitiate the gods and goddesses and to get rid of the sufferings and troubles, damsels used to dance in the nude form (*Naknann Nruthyam*) before the deities.

By doing so, the gods and goddesses were pacified and



pleased to return to normalcy and end the sufferings and hardships of the people. This was the belief in those days.

We can see the various postures and forms of dance in the carvings, sculptures in the Buddhist stupas in Amaravathi and the greatness and beauty of sculptural works in the Nagarjuna Konda mountain caves.

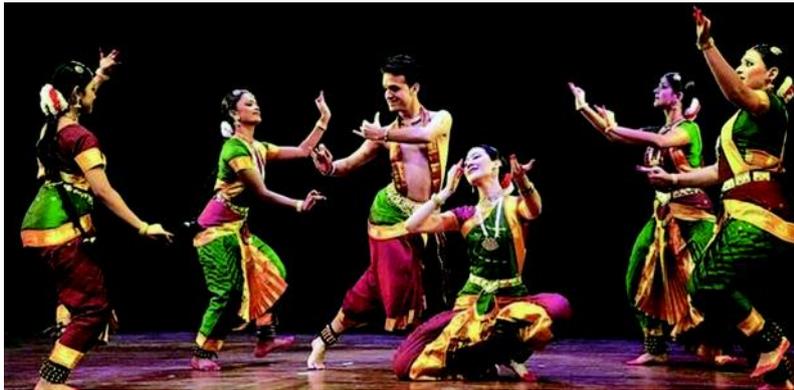
In 1300 A.D. during the Kakatheeya regime, dance art flourished greatly in the Telengana region. Joyf, the Commander-in-Chief of the Kakatheeya King Ganapathy Devar, was a great hero, a man of great talent and proficiency in art and dance.

In his 60th year (1253-54), he wrote the famous Natya Sastra known as *Niruthya Rathnavali*, in which he dealt with Bharathanatyam and all other

traditional forms of dance that were in vogue in his country. There are several similarities between the formal Sastra Natyas and the traditional street folk dances.

Researchers consider dramatist Bhasa as a pioneer in drama literature in Sanskrit. He dates back to poet Kalidasa. His dramatical works bear a testimony to the fact that he is proficient in Natya Sastra. He belonged to 300 B.C. From this one can conclude that Bharathanatya Sastra had its origin in 200 B.C.

Kalidasa (100 A.D.) wrote the Sanskrit drama *Malavikagini Mithiram*, in which he portrays a dancer as the heroine. Here he narrates in detail, her various forms of dance which means that even prior to Kalidasa (100 A.D.) the Bharathanatya Sastra existed.



Poet Manavalli Ramakrishna collected palm leaf manuscripts pertaining to Bharathanatya Sastra. He conducted extensive research and brought out a publication through the Baroda University. Most palm leaves collected by him belong to South India. As a Reader in Tirupati Venkateswara Oriental Research Institute, he brought out a book named *Bharatha Kosam*. It is evident that Bharathanatyam was widely familiar in South India in those days.

The Natya Sastra was created by the trio, Sadhasivar, Brahma and Bharathar. Each contributed 30,000, 12,000 and 6,000 *slokas* respectively. It is not the beginning nor was it the original. It is a guide book. Gowri, Vasuki, Saraswathi, Narada, Agasthiya, Vyasa and the disciples of Bharatha contributed in the creation of Bharatha Sastra, says Sarada Dhanayar in his book, *Bhava Prakasika*.

Vedic religion did not patronise Bharathanatya. Natya Sastras says that the art of dance is divine and was the creation of Brahma. Yet, *srutis*, *smrutis* and other Dharma Sastras ridicule dancers and heap insults on those partaking in dances as mere actors. The Artha

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Sastra even bars building houses in the centre of a town and other important places for actors and performers of dance and allied artists.

Singers, dancers and storytellers known as *Kusalavas*, were dubbed as people with bad character in some sastras.

According to *Vyakkiya Valgiya Smruthi* it is no offence to have sexual relationship with the wife of a person with acting as his profession. Another *smruthi* says a Brahmin should not dine with an actor. To cap it all, Saint Patanjali (200 B.C.) in his *Bhashyam*, defines a wife of an actor as a public property. Is it not a paradox to declare dance as a divine art and Natya Sastra as Natya Veda and at the same

breath, rule that nobody should practise it, and insult those who practise it as outcasts?

Thus Natya Sastra is full of contradictions! This is perhaps, attributed to the fact that it was created by those belonging to the Aryan way of life and that is why *sruthi* and *smruthi* which insist strict adherence to Vedic culture abhors dance and those engaged in it. There is no evidence to confirm that except Bharatha, none following Vedic culture learnt this art.

In Bharatanatya Sastra (concluding a portion of Chapter 36), Saint Bharatha is said to have told the other saints who learnt the art from him the following incident: Once, the 100 sons of Saint Bharatha after learning the Natya Veda started ridiculing and teasing other saints through dramas full of witty, derogatory and funny sequences known as *Prahasanas*. They enacted a play portraying improper and immoral sexual characters. Portraying saints in the most despicable manner provoked by the dastardly behaviour of Bharatha's sons, all saints joined together and cursed them in anger and indignation as follows: "Oh, Brahmins! You have insulted us and caused us humiliation and

disgrace through your words and deeds. You will lose mental faculties and talents. Though you are Brahmins you will lose all your dharma, charm, sanctity of the Gayatri mantra! You will become ignoble and no longer be called Brahmins. You and your dynasty shall be ignominious. Your sons and daughters will become actors and be treated as outcasts unfit to dine with others. You will fall from grace and be dependent on others even for your livelihood."

Consequent to this, Bharatha's 100 sons suffered serious decline. Later, Saint Bharatha consoled them saying that there is no escape from the Saints' curse and that could not be wished away. He told them further that the Natya Veda would never be destroyed and would flourish.

Saint Bharatha did not suggest a remedy or recourse to the curses of the Saints to his sons. It seems he himself admitted that the actors were characterless and condemned people. The high respect and esteem ascribed to the Natya Sastra at the beginning of the chapter was reversed in the end. Failure or the intransigence of the *vaidic* and other sastras to absorb the fine qualities of this great art resulted in the sharp decline of this Sastra. ●

