

CHAPTER 1

BHARATANATYAM : AN INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the land of music and dance, India, also known as Bharat (adopted in the Indian Constitution, 1950, in Part I after the preamble, “India that is Bharat”). The civilizational state “India that is Bharat” is explored in its entirety by J. Sai Deepak in his book by the same name.

Why bring that topic up, and what is the connection to music and dance?

For fine arts such as music and dance forms to be ideated, nurtured, flourished, and matured, they need a climate and a setting within a civilization state. That state needs the climate and nourishment for growth, and that correlation brings us to the lay of the land, so to speak, the civilizational connect.

At this stage, it is important for me to introduce you the Vedic texts which define Bharat, pre-dating present times by a few millennia. At the outset, I am setting the context of this book in the sacred land called Bharat, and you will appreciate its importance as you read the following paragraphs relating to music and dance.

Diana L Eck, in her book, *India: A Sacred Geography*, which is a very telling title for the book, refers to India as a sacred land of civilizational geography with deeply rooted connections to culture, tradition, and dharma. So, the sanctity of a geography is unique in any civilization. Focusing on this element of deep-rooted sanctity, no other country has as many pilgrimage centers as India. There is a reason for this, and it is timeless. It dates to the Vedic times. India was born a sanctity to geography, but what does that mean? How do we describe it and how do we define it?

Manu, in the Manusmriti, defines India as “Āryāvarta” [Sanskrit term Āryā (one who is noble and cultured) + “āvarta,” the land that lies between the Himalaya Mountains in the north, the Vindhya Mountain range in the south, from the Bay of Bengal in the east, and to the Arabian Sea in the west. This is known as “devabhoomi” (land of the Gods).



The phrase “Āryāvarta” can be found in:

- Part 1.1.2.10 of Baudhāyana Dharmasūtras (a group of Vedic Sanskrit texts which covers dharma, daily ritual, mathematics, and is one of the oldest Dharma-related texts of Hinduism) composed during 8th century BCE.
- The Vasistha Dharma Sutra - I.8-9 and 12-13, composed in the 5th century BCE, to the east of the Sarasvati River in the desert, to the west of the Kālakavana, to the north of the Pariyatra Mountains and the Vindhya Range, and to the south of the Himalayas.
- Manusmriti, also known as the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra or Laws of Manu, one of the many legal texts and the constitution among the many Dharmaśāstras of Hinduism. It was composed in the 3rd century BCE and was one of the first Sanskrit texts to be translated into English in 1776, by British philologist Sir William Jones.
- Patanjali’s Mahābhāṣya (mid-2nd century BCE) defines Āryāvarta like the Vasistha Dharmasutra. Reference can be found in Johannes Bronkhorst’s book *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*.

“Āryāvarta” bestowed nobility by its very being. So, this “civilizational DNA” became the pulse and impulse of India and shaped the essence of every aspect of Hindu culture.

The goal of the rulers of Bharat, referred to as Chakravarti, was to keep the identity of Bharat as a Rashtra (civilizational nation) and to follow the Dharma (cosmic order or law, including the natural and moral principles). The consciousness that animated the entire civilization was the Chakravarti, who would always uphold the peace and tranquility against any external aggression, while protecting the land and life – human and all animal forms (including cattle and horses). This peace and tranquility lasted at least 3 millennia until the advent of the first Arab invasion in the Sindh province, late in the 7th century.

Set in this era, Natya Shastra was created by Sage Bharata during the early 2nd century BCE. The location was Sharada Peetam, in the Kashmiri region of the Himalayas. Natya Shastra [Chapter 28.21] by Sage Bharata introduces the concept of swara and explains the unit of tonal measurement, or audible unit, as sruti beginning the musical scale. That forms the connection from music to dance.

HISTORY OF BHARATANATYAM

“Bharata” (that which came from India) and “natyam” means dance, so Bharatanatyam is a dance of India that originates from the south side of India in a state called Tamilnadu, specifically in a district called Tanjore, also known as Thanjavur. Bharatanatyam is an incredibly old form of dance that dates to the origin of natya sastra.

WHAT IS NATYA SASTRA?

This book can be regarded as a definitive treatise on theatre and a significant source in the field of dance. Written by the sage Bharata in the second century, it is believed that the dance form known as Bharatanatyam derived its name from him. While the concept of inventing a dance may seem unusual, it is said that Sage Bharata received the revelation of Bharatanatyam from Lord Brahma, the creator of



the world. Following these instructions, Sage Bharata documented the sacred book called Natya Shastra in Sanskrit.

The mention of Bharatanatyam in this ancient book from the second century suggests that the dance form is at least 2000 years old, and it is possible that it existed even before that time. It is one of the most widely performed dance style by both male and female dancers all over the world. There are a total of eight major classical dance forms in India, and Bharatanatyam is one of them. This dance is also known as the mother of many other classical dance forms. Bharatanatyam flourished in the temples, where the temple dancers were called devadasis (the one who serves God performing this specific dance form). The dancers had exclusive quarters inside the temple compounds, and it is said that the dance was then called “sadir aatam.” It is also considered the progenitor of many other classical dance forms and has served as a source of inspiration for various art forms, such as paintings and sculptures.

From the 6th to 9th century, temple sculptures, particularly those found in Lord Shiva’s temple in Kanchipuram, featured depictions of Bharatanatyam poses. Visitors to temples can view these intricately carved sculptures. Additionally, the eastern gopuram of the twelfth century Tillai Natraja temple in Chidambaram in Tamilnadu, highlights sculptures depicting 108 poses of Bharatanatyam, known as “karanas” in the Natya Shastra. Similarly, in Karnataka’s Badami cave temples from the 17th century, there is a notable five-foot-tall sculpture of Lord Shiva, portrayed as Nataraja.

During the 18th century, this would be termed as Bharatanatyam. During the British rule in 19th century India, Bharatanatyam and other classical dance forms were discouraged. In fact, Christian missionaries launched the anti-dance movement in 1892 to stop practicing dance overall and the British rule banned the custom of dancing in temples in 1910. Performing Bharatanatyam in Hindu temples ended sadly that time. The art form, which we currently have easy access to, was once a crime.

Indians in the south were worried about this, and the Indian community disapproved of such a ban, especially the Tamilians. Many classical art revivalists during those periods, like Krishna Iyer, an Indian lawyer and freedom fighter activist, questioned such discrimination against with the Bharatanatyam. For this, he was imprisoned and during his prison term, he convinced his fellow political prisoners to advocate for this age-old classical dance form. He then founded the Madras Music Academy, together with Rukmini devi Arundel, an Indian Theosophical Society dancer and choreographer. Iyer strived to save Bharatanatyam from dying. Despite the laws enforced by the colonial British government, many artists, like American dancer Esther Sherman, came from the west to learn Indian classical dance. (“Bharatanatyam Classical Dance - History, Clothing, Exponents”) She came to India in 1930, and not only learned the classical dance form, but also adopted the name, Ragini Devi. Devi became a part of the ancient dance arts revival movement. (“Bharatanatyam Classical Dance - History, Clothing, Exponents”) Her specific act brought excitement to the Indians. The then eminent Bharatanatyam dancers, like Rukmini devi Arundel from the Panda-Nalu-School of Bharatanatyam and Bala Saraswati from the Thanjavur style of Bharatanatyam, expanded the dance form out of the Hindu temples and showed it as the mainstream dance we currently practice.

The Tamil Hindu migrants revived this Hindu temple dancing custom in Tamil temples during the late 20th century. Today, this ancient classical dance form includes technical performances and the non-religious and fusion-based themes that were mentioned in the 2nd century BCE book Natya Shastra. Now, the dance is practiced all over the world, irrespective of race or religion. There is no shastra sculpting, knowledge, art, yoga, nor action that cannot be seen in Bharatanatyam.



