

Evolution of Tamil Classical Dance (17th Century to 21st Century)

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Footnote to the Title:

This research examines the structural, historical, and socio-cultural evolution of Tamil classical dance from the Maratha period to contemporary practice.

Abstract

This study examines the evolution of Tamil classical dance from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first century, with particular emphasis on structural transformation, socio-cultural reform, and aesthetic continuity. The objective of the research is to trace the transition from early Tamil dance traditions and Sadir performance practice to the codified Bharatanatyam repertoire performed today. The study adopts a historical-analytical methodology based on literary sources, performance traditions, revivalist discourse, and structural analysis of the Margam format. Findings indicate that the Maratha period introduced significant narrative and structural refinements through the incorporation of Nirupanam elements, which were later systematized by the Tanjore Quartet. Twentieth-century social reform movements, including the abolition of the Devadasi system, further transformed the institutional and performative contexts of the art form. Contemporary Bharatanatyam demonstrates both continuity and adaptation, particularly in performance duration, pedagogical milestones, and interpretative expansions of Sanchari Bhava. The study concludes that Tamil classical dance represents a dynamic synthesis of tradition and modernity, sustaining classical integrity while responding to evolving social realities.

Keywords

Tamil Classical Dance; Bharatanatyam; Sadir; Maratha Period; Tanjore Quartet; Devadasi System; Margam; Sanchari Bhava; Dance Revival; Performance Tradition

Introduction

Tamil Nadu possesses an ancient and distinguished cultural heritage manifested through literature, ritual practice, artistic traditions, and social institutions. Among these, dance occupies a central position. Historically known by terms such as Koothu, Aadal, and Sadir, the tradition has undergone sustained transformation across centuries, culminating in the codified classical form known as Bharatanatyam. The

Bharatanatyam repertoire consists of structured items including Pushpanjali, Alarippu, Jatiswaram, Sabdam, Varnam, Padam, Javali, and Thillana, collectively forming the Margam. This study explores the historical progression of Tamil classical dance from the Maratha period to contemporary practice, examining structural codification, socio-legal reforms, and interpretative developments.

Dance Traditions Before the Maratha Period

Evidence from Sangam literature and later textual sources reveals a wide spectrum of early Tamil dance forms, including Kuravai, Thunangai, Veriyaadal, and various Koothu traditions. These forms functioned within ritual, communal, and courtly contexts. During the rule of Tamil monarchs, performance traditions such as Santhi Koothu, Saakkai Koothu, Aariya Koothu, and Thaandavam flourished under royal patronage. These traditions persisted through the Nayak period with gradual stylistic modifications.

The Maratha rule in Thanjavur introduced new narrative components derived from the Kathakalakshepam tradition, particularly the Nirupanam format consisting of eighteen items. These elements were incorporated into Sadir performances and contributed significantly to structural refinement.

Codification Under the Maratha Court and the Tanjore Quartet

The Tanjore Quartet systematized the extended Sadir repertoire into the structured Margam format. The sequence was reorganized into a coherent progression designed to produce aesthetic culmination through rhythmic, expressive, and devotional dimensions. This codification laid the foundation for modern Bharatanatyam and established a standardized performance model that endured well into the twentieth century.

Twentieth-Century Reform and Revival

The early twentieth century marked a transformative period. Legislative interventions in Mysore (1910) and Thiruvananthapuram (1930), followed by the abolition of the Devadasi system in Tamil Nadu in 1947, altered the institutional structure of temple dance traditions. Revivalists such as E. Krishna Iyer repositioned Sadir under the name Bharatanatyam, thereby restoring classical legitimacy. Rukmini Devi Arundale institutionalized the art through pedagogical reform and proscenium presentation.

Prominent artists, including Balasaraswati and others, contributed to the re-establishment of Bharatanatyam as a respected classical art. The dance transitioned from temple ritual to stage performance while retaining its aesthetic core.

Contemporary Adaptations and Interpretative Expansion

In the present socio-cultural context, Bharatanatyam continues to retain its structural foundation while adapting to changing modes of performance and reception. The traditional Margam remains the organizing framework of a recital; however, its presentation has gradually adjusted to suit contemporary performance environments. Modern stage settings, festival formats, academic platforms, and international tours often require time-bound presentations. Consequently, certain items are shortened or selectively rendered without entirely altering their internal grammar. These modifications indicate a practical response to shifting audience patterns rather than a departure from classical discipline.

The pedagogical system has likewise undergone transformation. The institutionalization of training through academies and universities has standardized certain aspects of repertoire and progression. Ceremonial milestones such as Salangai Pooja and Arangetram now function as formal stages in a dancer's development, marking technical preparedness and public debut. While this structured approach has expanded access to the art form beyond hereditary communities, it has also contributed to a degree of uniformity in performance choices and repertoire selection.

A notable area of development lies in the interpretative dimension of performance, particularly within the Varnam. Traditionally, the Sanchari Bhava passages elaborated a dominant emotional state grounded in devotional or romantic expression. In recent decades, dancers have approached these segments with broader psychological and social awareness. Themes are explored with greater contextual layering, and character portrayals reflect contemporary sensibilities. For example, depictions of motherhood or devotion may be presented with added emotional complexity, acknowledging lived experience rather than remaining within purely archetypal representation. Such interpretative expansion demonstrates the elasticity inherent within the classical framework.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the musical corpus performed in mainstream recitals remains comparatively limited. A small group of well-established Varnams and other Margam items continues to dominate the stage repertoire. Although the expressive scope within these compositions is vast, the number of newly introduced or frequently revived works has not increased proportionately. This has resulted in a situation where interpretative possibilities have expanded, yet the body of songs performed remains relatively concentrated.

Pallavi:

“Annayai Maravenadi Anudhinamum.”

Sanchari

In the present context, the mother does not confine herself solely to managing the household. Instead, she strives to maintain balance with the changing times by working in an office while simultaneously taking care of her family and demonstrating her competence in multiple domains. In order to represent this transformation, an appropriate Sanchari Bhava may be developed.

“With affection she sings ‘Aararo’ as a lullaby and shows countless playful gestures.”

Sanchari

In earlier times, a mother would place the child in a traditional cradle and sing a lullaby to induce sleep. In the contemporary situation, however, mothers often use mobile phones or television, playing rhymes or cartoons to entertain and lull the child to sleep. Various modern devices have become part of everyday life. Working women monitor their children through surveillance cameras connected to their mobile phones, enabling them to respond even while away from home.

This may be represented through the following scenes:

Scene 1

The mother brings her three-year-old child from school and enters the center of the stage. Seating the child beside her, she teaches the child to read and write. After some time, the child begins to cry out of hunger. At that moment, she receives a call from her office. Wearing a Bluetooth device, she continues the conversation while cooking and simultaneously prepares food for the child.

Scene 2

After feeding the child, she places the child in a modern cradle and switches on an electric rocking device to help the child sleep. At the same time, she continues her office work on a laptop while attentively observing the child.

In this manner, she manages multiple responsibilities—caring for her child, preparing food, attending to household duties, and fulfilling professional commitments. Such a mother should never be forgotten, no matter how high one rises in life. Through Sanchari, numerous innovations appropriate to the contemporary context can be portrayed. The Margam established during the Maratha period has undergone transformations in the manner in which it is presented today.

Previously, Sanchari Bhava emphasized primarily the emotion of Vatsalya (maternal affection). However, in the present context, it is possible to portray not only maternal love but also courage, resilience, and the multifaceted personality of a woman who performs multiple roles simultaneously. Through such an approach, the Sanchari can effectively reveal how a contemporary mother nurtures and raises her child.

The continued vitality of Bharatanatyam therefore depends not only on expressive reinterpretation but also on the enrichment of its compositional base. Efforts toward reviving lesser-known works, encouraging new compositions within classical parameters, and engaging in sustained research can contribute to a more balanced growth of the tradition. Through such measures, Bharatanatyam sustains its historical continuity while remaining responsive to the cultural realities of the present.

Conclusion

The evolution of Tamil classical dance reflects a sustained process of transformation shaped by political patronage, social reform, revivalist intervention, and contemporary reinterpretation. The Maratha period introduced structural refinements later codified by the Tanjore Quartet. Twentieth-century reform movements redefined institutional frameworks, while modern practice demonstrates adaptive flexibility. Bharatanatyam thus embodies a continuous dialogue between historical inheritance and contemporary expression, preserving classical discipline while engaging with evolving cultural contexts.

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