



Chitra Nrithya -from the archives of temple ritual dance

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Abstract

From time immemorial, dance is an offering to the main deity of the temple especially in South India by the temple dancers as a ritual as mentioned in Agama Shastra. Each ritual has a significance and one such wonderful ritualistic dance is Chitra Nrityam performed during the chariot festival by the deva ganikas or devadasis of the temple.

Keywords

Devadasi, Deva Ganikas, Chitra Nritya, Temple ritual dance

Citrarnitya - is a dance composition which was performed in the temples of Andhra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu an amalgamation of drawing and dance which was performed during the chariot festival held on the Brahmotsavam before the chariot used to go on procession. The ground was cleaned and the colour powder was spread around and the temple dance artist or the devadasi, performed on the ground in a very unique way and it was an amazing sight to find a drawing on the ground drawn by the feet of the dancer, performing this Nritya and the drawing of the picture was resembling the vahana or the vehicle of the deity. These devadasis performed this item with lot of devotion, singing and praising the God in a particular Ragam and talam. It was believed that the chariot moving on the picture drawn by the dancer was a very good omen for the village and the people.

This composition has historic value and has been recorded in the manuscript titled ‘chitra nāṭya vidhamu’, at the Telugu section in Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Sarasvati Mahal Library – mss catalogue number D10697- B 11543 -966, 10741. In this, the procedure is mentioned, with step-by-step description, and a series of sub-compositions, like dvipada, śollu, jati, daru, swara patterns are mentioned.

This complex number also finds its mention in Tamil literature of, ‘sangam age’ and in particular in the treatise on dance named –Koothanool. The Lakṣaṇa and lakṣya text of Gangai Muthu Pillai Nattuvanar also Natanadi Vādyā Ranjanam, of the late 19th Century, gives details of citranritya as one of the popular compositions performed in the period.

In chitra nrityam three numbers are performed

- a. Simhanandini- in praise of goddess Durga and the dancers draws a lion while dancing with foot work at the end of this item, set to Simhanandana Tala
- b. Mayura kowthvam - in praise of lord Subramanya and the dancers draws a peacock while dancing with foot work at the end of the item this is set to Mallikamoda tala.
- c. Lakshmi Udbhavam- in praise of goddess Lakshmi and the dancers draws a lotus while dancing with foot work at the end of the item this is set to Lakshmitha tala

All the talas mentioned in the above items are from 108 tala system used in the ancient times and Simhanandana Tala is the longest tala in Carnatic music.



Picture 1 Simhanandini -The dancer drawing the lion while dancing

Temple dance

Dance was one of the most important offering to God as one of the shodasha Upachara or the 16 types of rituals performed by the temple dancers dedicated to the temple known as Deva Sani, Deva ganika or Devadasi. These temple dancers usually started their performance with dance rituals from early morning to night as per the Agama shastras. Each ritual has significance right from waking up Deity with Suprabhatam to pavalimpu Seva.



Picture 2 After the dancers have finished drawing a lion in Simhanandini, peacock in Mayura kowthvam dance items.

Devadasi / Deva Ganikas

Is a girl who is married in a ceremony to the deity of a temple after which she would perform all rituals, including dance and music in the honour of the deity as a sacred act for the divine. This system was prominent in south India.

Conclusion

As time passed by, this wonderful art called Chitra nritya lost its glory after the devadasi act was passed and the temples did not allow performances by the devadasis and slowly this art lost its significance and could not survive. With constant effort, intense commitment and creative abilities of Guru Shri C R Acharya, this wonderful art of Chitra nritya was revived and brought to the proscenium stage.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely indebted to my guide Dr K Kumar Professor of Dance, College of Fine Arts, and The University of Mysore, who has been my pillar of support throughout. I would like to express my gratitude to him for giving me this opportunity to be a research student and to learn from renowned scholars. I would like to express my gratitude to my gurus Smt. Voleti Rangamani, daughter and disciple of Guru Shri C.R Acharya for making this the most beautiful journey.

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