

RITUAL DANCE AS A FORM OF WORSHIP – A CASE OF BHARATA NĀṬYAM

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The article focuses on the nature of the Bharata Nāṭyam style of classical Indian dance as a form of worship, analyzing its relation with the environment of a Hindu temple. Linear parallels are drawn between the traditional repertoire of the Bharata Nāṭyam recital and the process of going to the temple. The ontological relation between the dance and the temple as well as the link between the internal space of the dance and that of the temple are also analyzed.

Although ritual dance has ceased to be the intrinsic part of the religious practice in India, and the institution of the temple dancers has declined in rather unfortunate circumstances, temple dances of South India survived to become the classical art of the secular stage. The classical dances of today, known under different names such as Bharata Nāṭyam, Kuchipūḍi, Odissi, Kathakali, Mohini Aṭṭam, etc., often go beyond traditional repertoires to explore secular themes and values. Rediscovery of their purely aesthetic beauty, universal appeal granted them rehabilitation with the public and dissociated them from the past.

However, classical dances continue to be associated with Hinduism. Rukmini Devi, the pioneer of the revival of the Bharata Nāṭyam dance and one of the greatest dancers of this style, has worked hard to re-activate the spiritual religious character of the temple dance. Not only the classical dances draw inspiration and stories from the Hindu spiritual tradition, but they also continue to use the same body language full of Hindu cosmic symbols that are able to carry very universal meanings. Greatest exponents of Indian classical dance again call themselves either devadāsī (servants of God) or *yogī*, followers of this specific type of yoga. Rukmini Devi said about Bharata Nāṭyam: “It is so obviously a temple art that I can understand why great artists called themselves devadasis”¹.

In today’s India, temple can provide a beautiful backdrop for a recital of the classical dance during some festivals of dance. And yet for many modern spectators of the Indian classical dance, especially on the Western stage, but also in India, the link between this dance and the Hindu temple is either non-existent or at best something of the past. It is argued by some that this inextricable association of Indian art with Hinduism is a misconception.

¹ Sunil Kothari, *Bharata Nāṭyam*, Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2000, 24.

Considering Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy responsible for this misconception, as he expressed the position that art was the expression of religion, N. Pattabhi Raman states that ‘<...>it is not, despite its one-time association with the Hindu temple. Bharatanatyam is a dance of India, not a Hindu dance, even though its performance corpus has historically been focused on persona and narratives enveloped by Hindu faith. As in yoga, its technique is value-neutral’².

Of course, the issue of this relation between Indian art and religion goes far beyond the scope of this article. But it is my opinion that although dissociated from the Hindu temple, today’s classical dance of India can be interpreted and understood, both in its practical aspect and its research, only through the study of its sources and roots, of which temple environment and the Hindu concept of the universe is primary.

The objective of this article is to argue about the intrinsic association of the two prominent phenomena of India – Hindu temple and ritual dance, the latter being treated as a specific way of worship. I would like to focus not on the ‘one-time’ historical association of the temple and the dance (which lasted for at least 1500 years) but rather on finding an internal link between the two, tracing parallels between the interpretation of temple space and the space of the ritual dance. The question is whether this dance has become ritual only because of historic parallels. The internal link, if any, would then underscore that it is not the historic association of the dance with the temple but rather its very nature that makes it a way of worship.

Acknowledging the historical link between the two phenomena is not a contentious issue here. It is well known that historically the two phenomena, the temple and ritual dance, developed side by side. The sacred texts mention and even recommend consecration of dancers to the temples. A lot was written to emphasize the patronage of the greatest dynasties of medieval South India – Pallavas, Chōḷas, Pāṇḍyas, Nāyakas and others – to the temples and temple dancers. The climax of the evolution of Hindu temple architecture also witnesses the flourishing of the temple dance, beautiful *nāṭya-maṇḍapas* (dance-halls) were constructed for dance performances in the bigger temples in the Middle Ages. And of course the fact is that the whole inventory of dance movements can be found depicted marvellously on the walls of the temples. Similarly, the decline of temples coincided with the decline of ritual dancing and degradation of the status of temple dancers. It was after this sunset of the glory of great Hindu temples that Bharata Nāṭyam became associated with vulgarity and got the “stigma of eroticism”, as Sunil Kothari has put it³, to become a lewd entertainment. The questions arise whether the association between the two is conditioned only by these historical reasons and what remains of the ritual dance after the disruption of this link of the past.

I have chosen to focus my research on the Bharata Nāṭyam style which can be taken as a case *par excellence* of temple dances of India. The name of Bharata Nāṭyam is a modern creation of the thirties of the 20th century. It can denote the range of temple dance forms from

² N. Pattabhi Raman, *What is Bharatanāṭyam?*, [cited 01/07/03]. Available from: <<http://www.narthaki.com/info/articles/article35.html>>.

³ Kothari, *Bharata Nāṭyam*, 34.

Tamilnadu, but it mostly refers to the Sadir / Sadir Kacheri style of solo presentation of the temple dancers *devadāsī*, which later became known as Sadir Nautch. It is widely argued by the dancers and connoisseurs of this style that what is now called Bharata Nāṭyam historically comprised some other forms of the religious dance in India: Rukmini Devi says that dance dramas of the Tanjavur district, the Kuchipuḍi system of dancing, solo presentations of Sadir Kacheri can all be categorized as Bharata Nāṭyam. She concludes: „Bharata Nāṭyam is a comprehensive word. Even the other forms of dancing, like Kathakali and Maṇipuri, are obviously the variations of Bharata Nāṭyam, though they have changed in character in accordance with the environment and the atmosphere of their surroundings“⁴. It is obvious that the most glorious times of both Hindu temple architecture and ritual dance as well as of their happy combination are in the past, so it is not exactly the modern Bharata Nāṭyam stage dance, but rather its earlier forms that are the subject of this article. But there exists a near agreement on that it is the Bharata Nāṭyam style that is the oldest and has remained closest to the tradition of *Nāṭya Śāstra*⁵, Bharata’s treatise on drama and dance. Therefore while arguing about the need to preserve the authenticity of this style, the ritual religious nature of Bharata Nāṭyam is the issue of importance.

Linear space of the dance: the repertoire

For the accidental spectator, the presentation of Bharata Nāṭyam might seem a simple or even accidental sequence of dance items. However, the traditional repertoire of Bharata Nāṭyam follows a certain codified order. It is called *mārgam*, the Tamil word of Sanskritic origin, meaning “path”, “road”, “course”, but also “seeking”, “search”⁶. It indicates a linear action, the process of gradual advancement in space.

It was a famous quotation of the legendary exponent of Bharata Nāṭyam, T. S. Balasaraswati, that prompted me to approach the linear aspect of the dance repertoire. In her Presidential Address at the Annual Conference of Tamil Isai Sangam in Madras in 1975 the dancer said: “I think that the traditional order of the Bharata Nāṭyam – *alārīppu*, *jatiswaram*, *śabdham*, *varṇam*, *padam*, *thillāna* and *śloka* – is the correct sequence of this art, which is an artistic yoga revealing the spiritual through the corporeal.”⁷

Further she compared the linear character of the repertoire of Bharata Nāṭyam with a devotee’s visit to a temple, where a devotee passes through the main spaces of the Hindu temple: *gopuram*, *ardhamaṇḍapam*, *maṇḍapam*, *mahamaṇḍapam*, *garbha grham* (sanctum sanctorum):

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Manjula Lusti-Narasimhan, *Bharata Nāṭyam. La danse classique de l’Inde*, Éditions Adam Biro, 2002, 24.

⁶ *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, ed. M. Monier-Williams, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997, 812.

⁷ Katia Legeret, *Manuel traditionnel du Bharata Nāṭyam. Le danseur cosmographe*, Paris: Geuthner, 1999, 175.

„The *Bharata Nāṭyam* recital is structured like a great temple: we enter the outer tower (*gopuram*) of *alāriṭṭu*, cross the half way hall (*ardhamanḍapam*) of *jatiswaram*, then the great hall (*manḍapam*) of *śabdham* and enter the holy precinct of the deity in the *varṇam*. This is the place, the space, which gives the most expansive scope to revel in the rhythm and moods of music of the dance. The *varṇam* is the continuum which gives ever-expanding room to the dancer to delight in self-fulfillment by providing the fullest scope to creativity as well as to the tradition of art. The *padams* now follow: dancing to the *padams*, one experiences the containment, cool and quiet of entering the sanctum ... the expanse and brilliance of the outer corridors disappear ... and the rhythmic virtuositities of the *varṇam* yield to the soul-stirring music and *abhinaya* of the *padam*. Dancing to the *padam* is akin to the juncture when the cascading lights of worship are withdrawn and the drum beats die down to the simple and solemn chanting of sacred verses in the closeness of God. Then the *tillāna* breaks into movement like the final burning of incense accompanied by a measure of *din* and *bustle*. In conclusion the devotee takes to his heart the god he has so far glorified. The dancer completes the traditional order by dancing to the simple devotional verse”.⁸

This quotation is very often presented in the texts on Bharata Nāṭyam as an apt allegory to describe the linear aspect of the repertoire of this style. However, is it really a mere allegory? The parallels between the two linear spaces of dance and temple are quite striking. The two devotees – the temple visitor and the dancer – move in time and space in a similar manner, each one of them approaching the sanctum of the temple in a way conditioned by his way of worshipping the God. Therefore a deeper analysis of the linear aspects of the traditional repertoire of Bharata Nāṭyam and the visit to a temple can be very interesting.

The repertoire of Bharata Nāṭyam was codified in the early 19th century by the four famous musicians, dancers, poets of Tanjavur Court – Chinnaiya, Ponnaiya, Shivanandam and Vadivelu, known as the Tanjavur (Tanjore) Quartet. As Balasaraswati has enumerated the items in her quotation given earlier, a correct sequence of the recital is to start with an *alāriṭṭu* piece and to end with the *śloka*.

However, in reality there are often variations in the beginning and end of the recital. Quite often the dance is preceded by a *śloka* – a prayer which is not accompanied by the dance, or by a *todaya-mangalam*. The very first item of the dance presentation may often be *puṣpāñjali* – offering of flowers. It is directly in parallel with the temple goer bringing flowers for offering them to the Deity of the temple. Though omitted from the codified repertoire by Tanjavur Quartet, it should be a direct reminiscence of the times when this dance was performed in the temples, where the dancer paid her obeisance to the *Aṣṭadīkṣpālas*, the Guardians of the eight directions. When the dance stopped being performed exclusively in the temple precincts, its ritual meaning might have got lost, but the main thrust of it, which is offering of flowers, a symbol of pure mind ready for the communication with God, remains.

⁸ Kothari, *Bharata Nāṭyam*, 103.

As per Tanjavur Quartet, *alārīppu* is the first official invocatory item in which the dancer pays her obeisance to the Gods, the Guru and the audience. In Kannada “*alar*” means flower, and this dance item suggests the “blossoming forth of dance and dancer before the audience”⁹. It is the item of a pure dance having no narrative meaning, *nṛtta*, in which the dancer employs simple postures and movements to a simple tune and rhythm, and to the syllables used in teaching the dance movements. It resembles a warm-up exercise starting with eye movements, gradually involving head, neck, shoulders and all the limbs. The dancer prepares her body to leave the mundane and subjective domain and to start her movement towards the divine. *Alārīppu* may look misleadingly simple, but if well performed it creates the impression of a moving sculpture, something that normally greets a devotee entering through the great *gopurams* (outer towers) of a South Indian temple. As S. Kothari said, “one feels like one is looking at the mobile piece of architecture, a moving frieze”¹⁰. So the analogy that Balasaraswati makes between *alārīppu* and the *gopuram* is very apt indeed. In this dance the dancer sculpts both her body and mind in order to prepare them for meeting the God.

In the following item, *jatiswaram*, melody is introduced. In this item of pure dance more complicated rhythmic sequences – *jatis* are set to a particular raga. Lyrics is still absent, as raga only employs *swaras*, syllables of the musical scales. The aim of *jatiswaram* is not to create any special mood but rather to set the mind in the framework of general aesthetic pleasure by creating beautiful forms. However with the introduction of *raga*, a certain *bhāva* – the feeling that expresses the soul of a *raga* – is already being created. This resembles a devotee getting into a special mood on his way through the half-way hall (*ardhamāṇḍapam*) of the temple before addressing the Deity.

The following dance item of a recital, *śabdham*, is the one in which sections of poetry and the art of *abhinaya*, expressive dance, are introduced. *Śabda* means words, in this context words of praise for the deity (or a king) who is praised in this poetry for his/her deeds and qualities. By gestures and facial expressions, *abhinaya*, the dancer enacts the verses. But poetic passages are still separated by rhythmic pure dance compositions based on syllables, – something in parallel to a devotee passing through a great hall of the temple (*mandapam* / *mahamāṇḍapam*) which is marked by decorations consisting of both pure ornamental passages and narrative sculpture, the former delimiting the parts and sections of the latter and facilitating their combination into a story sequence. *Śabdham* usually ends with the words ‘*salaamure*’ or ‘*namostute*’ – a salutation. Thus a devotee salutes the Deity just before entering the sanctum.

Varṇam is the central item of the repertoire, the most difficult and responsible one. It requires excellent synchronization of the efforts of a dancer, a singer and a drummer as all three elements are sometimes employed simultaneously but differently. They must all blend into the melodic line of the dance. It is this unity of the three that are supposed to generate the

⁹ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

presence of a Deity before a devotee. Therefore *varṇam* can be compared to entering the sanctum sanctorum of the temple.

Varṇam also demands extreme concentration and devotion of a dancer. Frequent interchanges of sequences of pure dance and *abhinaya* demand that one line of the song be interpreted by means of *abhinaya* and another one by *nṛtta*. The climax is reached when the both aspects go together into a stream: the dancer does complex footwork as her hands tell the story of the poetry and her face depicts one of the nine emotional states – *rasas*. What is important in following the parallels with the linear outlay of a temple is that this is the climax stage in the efforts of the devotee approaching the deity when all his physical, spiritual and mental abilities are united in this process.

Abhinaya is fully explored in *padam*, the next dance item, a highly emotional piece performed to a love song exploring a love *rāga*, slow rhythm and tells the story of *nāyaka* – *nāyikā* (hero and heroine). Two aspects of love are prominent: separation (*vipralambha*) and union (*sambhoga*). The *nāyikā* suffers in the pain of separation and tries to reunite with the loved one, which in spiritual terms means the longing and search for the highest truth. What is normally told as a story of mundane feelings of a heroine missing her hero is interpreted in a religious sense of a devotee longing for God. The intensity of the feelings of lovers is compared to the religious mystery happening in the sanctum in the closeness of God, worshipping through love, *bhakti*.

The next major item, *tillāna*, is a pure dance item again. Being very dynamic and geometric, presenting a sequence of sculptural postures, it again gives the impression of mobile sculpture. It expresses the sheer joy of dancing which pleases Gods. Of especial interest is the use of the *periyā aḍavu*, a dance unit covering the space, reminding us of the *pradakṣiṇam* of the temple – the act of circambulation of the sanctum sanctorum after a glimpse of the Deity. It makes a resumé of the act of worship and the visit to the temple, uniting the microcosm of all the previous actions with the macrocosm of the sacred realm.

The recital often ends with either *ślokaṁ*, prayer, or *maṅgalam* – a benedictory verse, in which the dancer salutes the elements, the universe, the guru and the audience to pray everybody's benediction and well-being. The blessing of the Deity is the result sought by any ritual, any type of worship.

One can see that in every next dance item a new element is introduced to create a certain artistic-devotional tension. In *jatiswaram* a melody is added to the simple and beautiful movements and mnemonic syllables of *alāriṭṭu*. Then acting, *abhinaya*, is employed to approach the Deity personally in *śabdham*. In *varṇam* all the faculties of a dancer are fully employed, blended into a unity and submitted, sacrificed to the Deity. This augmenting tension is born of the approaching closeness of divinity, – something that is achieved by the devotee walking around the *prākāras*, the temple enclosures, concentric zones of approaching divinity before entering the sanctum sanctorum. Later, after the dialogue with the Deity, the tension calms down giving way to the bliss of reunion and benediction.

Apart from these main dance pieces, there are other items of repertoire performed in the recital, exploring emotionally lighter, even humoristic, or heavier moods. Of course this part of repertoire got a boost when ritual dance left the temple premises. But this social element must have been also present in the ritual part of Bharata Nāṭyam, just as a big South Indian temple had a social role to play with all different kinds of spaces included into the temple area (market, intermediary halls, minor shrines, etc). However, even if there is some flexibility of movement in this huge temple area, it is unthinkable for a devotee to change the visiting order drastically, just like the order of a dance recital is in principle preserved and a dancer would not start a full recital with a *varṇam* or finish with an *alāriṭṭu*.

It would still be an exaggeration to conclude that the linear correspondence of the two processes – dance recital and devotee's visit to a temple – is so literal. It is likely that there were many more variations in the repertoire before it was codified by the Tanjavur Quartet. But it is also quite likely that the Quartet codified the dance repertoire precisely in such a way that it resembles the worship process. By the 18th century the decline of great temples was very prominent and the dancers moved to the royal courts. So the connoisseurs of the dance might have felt the need to preserve the order based on the ritual precisely after the dance had left the temple, while in the temple environment there was no need for the dance to reproduce the ritual so scrupulously.

So the linear character of *mārgam* has quite clear parallels with the temple worship, both processes being two linear rituals of approaching the deity. Therefore the quotation of Balasaraswati seems to be more than an allegory or poetic analogy, as it stems from her deep perception of classical dance as a ritual, a form of worship.

Ontology of the dance and the temple

It is still quite easy to believe that the linear parallels between a dance performance and a temple worship are conditioned by the fact that both dancing and going to a temple developed side by side historically for the same purpose as the expression of *bhakti*. The order of repertoire could also be manipulated to suit the requirements of the day. Therefore in order to see a more substantial inner link between the two processes, or rather to discover the inner nature of the dance as the way of worship, one has to compare the ontological and cosmological space of the temple and of the dance.

Ritual dance and temple architecture are based on the same fundamental ideas of Hindu thought and practice. Even pure art also has a religious explanation. In Indian tradition, dance is a divine creation born for the sheer pleasure of Gods. In *Nāṭyā Śāstra*, Bharata says about the pure dance: "The dance is occasioned by no specific need, it has come into use as it

creates beauty” (NS, IV, 267–8¹¹). Functionally speaking, men dance to please the Gods. And one of the ways to earn the salvation from the cycle of rebirths is to submit art as a sacrifice for a Deity. But at the same time dance has a supreme ontological significance. As interpreted by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the dance represents five activities of Śiva (*pañcakṛitya*): creation, preservation, destruction, illusion, salvation.¹² After a very detailed study and interpretation of the statue of Śiva Naṭarājā, the supreme lord of the dance, Coomaraswamy summarizes its symbolism into a threefold synthesis: first, the dance of Śiva symbolizes the rhythmic movement of the Cosmos, second, release of souls from the snare of illusion, third, the place of the dance (originally, the temple of Chidambaram) is the centre of the universe, but also the innermost essence of the heart.¹³ Therefore the stage of the dance symbolizes the universe and presents the arena of everything happening in the Cosmos, from its creation to its destruction, while uncovering the ontological truth – the illusion of the universe and the unity of the ‘outside’ and the ‘inside’ (the universe and the heart). Through the language of symbols dance expresses the universe, unveils its illusion and becomes the medium for realizing this supreme truth of oneness.

Ontologically, the temple is the place of the Dance of Śiva, the arena of all his five-fold activities that constitute the cyclical creation and destruction of the universe. This is directly linked to the main function of a temple. Functionally, this place of worship is primarily the arena of the Vedic sacrifice, the concept on which Hindu worship is based. As the first activity of Śiva, creation of the universe, is attributed to god Brahma, who has created everything in the universe from the separated parts of his own body. The motive of this partition is repeated in the more philosophical version of the creation of the universe – the cosmic sacrifice of Puruṣa, a cosmic being of a human shape who sacrificed himself and gave beginning to the universe. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* testifies: “this ritual act accomplished now corresponds to what the gods did in the beginning” (7, 2, 1–4¹⁴).

The temple provides the religious individual with an adequately modeled space for the reproduction of this primordial sacrifice. Even the simplest temple is full of symbolism, which becomes more complicated as the temple rituals develop. The greatest Indian temples perform also significant social functions, therefore their architecture becomes very exuberant, both in terms of organizing space and in ornamentation. But its main thrust remains: it is the space for performing a Vedic sacrifice ritual and recreation of the universe, representation of the Supreme Being in the manifested forms to facilitate the mediation between the Supreme reality and the manifest world.

¹¹ Sanskrit source: Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Adhyayas 1–9, in *The digital library of Goettingen SUB*, Available from: <http://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/ebene_s1/fiindolo/gretil/1_sanskr/5_poetry/1_alam/bhn0109u.htm> (translation borrowed Kothari, *Bharata Nāṭyam*, 23).

¹² Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Śiva. Essays on Indian Art and Culture*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1985, 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁴ Legeret, *Manuel traditionnel du Bharata Nāṭyam*, 26.

As Stella Kramrisch says, “temple is the concrete shape (*mūrti*) of the Essence; as such it is the residence and vesture of God. (...) The temple is the monument of manifestation”¹⁵. Therefore the Hindu temple is the cosmogonic model of the Universe with all the deities and planets of the solar system – Navagrahas – present there not only symbolically, but also physically as represented by their *mūrti*, sculpted images. “The temple appears like a real observatory and astronomic laboratory. Its construction, which is based on precession of equinoxes, signifies not only that the body of the temple symbolizes the body of the Earth, but that it also creates a powerful magnetic centre, microcosm of the celestial dynamics. It enables a devotee not only to discover the laws and the rhythms of the sky intellectually, but also to feel them energetically and to make their own bodies more and more conscious of that”¹⁶. So the temple is a very powerful mediating space which, firstly, makes the Supreme reality manifest itself, secondly, makes the microcosm represent symbolically the order of the macrocosm.

Here one can observe very substantial parallels between the dance as an ontological act of Śiva and the temple as the place of permanent reproduction of the ontological sacrifice, as well as between a dancer reproducing the primordial dance of Śiva and a temple devotee who reproduces the primordial sacrifice of Puruṣa.

Inner space of the dance and the temple

An attempt to find a correlation between the plan, construction, functions, etc. of the temple and the internal geometry of Bharata Nāṭyam might also be useful in trying to discover the internal link of the two. This link is related to the ontological relation between the ritual dance and the temple.

The temple’s design represents the whole universe and is its model. The metaphysical plan of a temple is based on the image of the universe, hence it is called a *Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala*, the dwelling place of the Cosmic Man in his manifested aspect as expressed in a diagram.

Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala is always square and subdivided into smaller squares which are inhabited by the gods and planets, 12 Ādityas (manifestation of Sun) and the 32 Nakṣatras (lunar mansions), each of them presiding over his territory, depending of the current situation of the day. The Deity of the temple is in the central square of the plan. This metaphysical plan of the temple is “a stage on which is drawn, while it is being acted, the movement of sun and moon and that of their years in their unequal course, their meeting, reconciliation and the fresh beginning towards one more coincidence”¹⁷.

Thus, when a devotee enters the temple, he is symbolically traveling in the solar system¹⁸, visiting the images and representations of planets represented in the temple, which were

¹⁵ Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, vol. 1, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1996, 165.

¹⁶ Legeret, *Manuel traditionnel du Bharata Nāṭyam*, 44.

¹⁷ Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 1: 37.

¹⁸ Legeret, *Manuel traditionnel du Bharata Nāṭyam*, 14.

installed there according to their place in the *Vāstumāṇḍala*. If one imagines him moving symbolically through the diagram of the temple, one would see him crossing over the territories of different planets, paying his respects and taking their blessings to proceed towards the central deity, Brahma, the supreme God, or a temple deity.

Similarly, in the initial items of the repertoire (like in *puṣpāñjali*) the dancer invokes the planets, representing them through his body and paying to them his obeisances. *Nāṭya Śāstra* also envisages invocation to the planets before a dance recital (Chap. 1, 58–92 and 3, 1–15¹⁹).

The construction of the temple starts with the installation of the sacrificial altar which is square-shaped. But its square shape is arrived at by drawing circles from the poles fixed on the east–west line²⁰, or drawing a semicircle after the shadow of the pillar planted in the envisaged place²¹. In any case, in the beginning a circle is drawn. It symbolizes the movement of sun. Then it has to be transformed into a stable and permanent square shape by connecting the cardinal points formed out of the intersections of circles.

The temple's metaphysical plan is always square, a perfect and stable shape which is the fundamental form of Indian architecture²². Stella Kramrisch quotes *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* explaining that the square can be converted into a triangle, hexagon, octagon and circle of equal area and retain its symbolism (*Bṛhat Saṃhitā*, LII, 56, comm.²³). In fact, Baudhāyana *Śulva Sūtra* (I.22) says that to form a square one has to form four circles first²⁴. A square is so perfect and universal that it can become a circle and can be turned back into a square again. A circle is associated with the unbridled wild floating Earth, as opposed to the square earth which is fixed and subject to a law²⁵. Following the *Vāstumāṇḍala*, the complex of the temple is also square in shape.

If we follow the geometry of Bharata Nāṭyam, we find a similar tendency to transform an imperfect and unstable circle into a perfect square. Bharata Nāṭyam is especially remarkable for its straight lines and strict geometric postures, but the style also has the subtleness of graceful circular movements. Similarly to the geometric tendencies of the temple architecture, the movements of the dancer tend to pass from a circle to a square. As Katia Legeret says, "The circle drawn by the hand of the dancer would activate the cycles of rebirths and suffering. The square, the image of cosmic order would intensify the psychic and psychological stability"²⁶. Katia Legeret notes that both a dancer and a devotee make circular movements around themselves and a sacred object²⁷. However, a devotee would always turn

¹⁹ *The Nāṭyaśāstra*, ed. Adya Rangacharya, New Delhi: Mushiram Manoharlal, 1996, 18.

²⁰ Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 1: 22.

²¹ Legeret, *Manuel traditionnel du Bharata Nāṭyam*, 42.

²² Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 1: 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁶ Katia Legeret, *Les 108 pas du dieu Śiva. Dance sacrée de l'Inde*, Paris, New Delhi, 1997, 38.

²⁷ Legeret, *Manuel traditionnel du Bharata Nāṭyam*, 44.

around the sanctum in the clock-wise direction, so that his right (pure) side is turned to the centre of the temple. The square temple plan is firmly here to assure the stability and perfection around him. A dancer can turn in both directions as he is outside the limitations of cultural codes and has to achieve the symmetry, perfection, completeness by means of his own movement. Therefore the geometry of most Bharata Nāṭyam compositions is based on a square pattern or rather on right-left-forwards-backwards linear movements. This characteristic pattern reminds us of the once-floating Earth being stabilized and fixed by the cardinal points, as is the view of *Brāhmaṇas*²⁸. A dance hall or stage would also be a square space – having the same symbolic meaning of cosmic order.

It is indicated in different sūtras on architecture that the architect of a temple, *sthapati*, is guided by a Hindu priest, *sthāpaka*, who has to have the qualification of *Ācārya*. He is the architect-priest of a temple, responsible for drawing up its *Vāstumāṇḍala*, performing all the rituals of foundation, etc.²⁹ Similarly, a *nāṭyācārya*, a dance teacher, is also given the role of the architect of his own theatre or stage, its ground plan and its consecration (*Nāṭya Śāstra* II–III).³⁰

The temple's vertical architecture is sometimes compared to a human body. Some architectural details of a temple are given names of human body (*grīva*, neck). But it is more the horizontal diagram of the temple that represents the symbolism of the body of the Cosmic Man. The cube of the sacrificial altar embodies Puruṣa, its graphical diagram – *yantra* – contains man in the position of a sacrificial victim, his head directed to the east, and legs to the west³¹. His body is further divided into the smaller squares symbolizing the partition of the primordial body and the creation of the world, but also representing the dwelling places of different Gods and planets of the manifested world. Through the act of sacrifice a devotee recreates the initial act of creation and identifies with the body of Puruṣa, experiencing the joy of this unity in this dimly lit chamber of sanctum sanctorum which symbolizes the human heart.

Ritual dance of India in its turn is another way of confirming the primordial unity of every devotee with the cosmic sacrifice. Through the body of a dance the story of longing for the unity with God is once again retold, the creation of the universe is reproduced. Dance in its form of the cosmic dance both recreates the *Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala* in its spatial aspect and reproduces its story line. The dancer himself embodies god Śiva and his cosmic dance of creating and destroying the Universe. Thus the dancer becomes both the sacrificer and the sacrificed. The dance would often take place close to the altar³² to enhance this identification. The language of the gestures plays an important role in this reproduction of ritual; both the priest and the dancer have to be scrupulously precise in their vocal recital and the language of gestures employed during the ritual.

²⁸ Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 1: 29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁰ *The Nāṭyaśāstra*, ed. Adya Rangacharya, 7–21.

³¹ Legeret, *Manuel traditionnel du Bharata Nāṭyam*, 42.

³² *Ibid.*, 43.

Of all arts, temple architecture and ritual dance have the most intense relation with the Earth. The Earth supports both the temple and the dancer and provides them with her fertile essence for the ritual of sacrifice, assimilates the energies of the local spirits. The construction of the temple is preceded by rituals related to the Earth. The first step is to ask the Earth to be a firm and reliable support³³. Then the divinities living on this piece of Earth chosen for the temple are asked to leave: “Let spirits (*bhūta*), gods (*deva*) and demons (*rākṣasa*) depart and seek other habitations. From now this place belongs to the divinity whose temples will be built here” (*Brhat Saṃhitā*, LVIII.11, etc.³⁴). Later the Earth is purified and leveled. It is interesting to note that the practice of classical dance (not only concert, but every practice, lesson) begins with the salutation (*namaskāram*), part of which is also addressed to the Earth to ask her pardon for striking her with the feet.

As was mentioned earlier, sculpture plays a very important role in the temple architecture. Images of gods and planets are not mere decorations, but important directions for orientation, the legend of this symbolic map of the universe. In a dance performance the role of sculpture is played by the body of the dancer who displays the images of different gods and planets in their variety of manifestations. The body of a dancer has therefore to correspond to the same canons of sculpture. Katia Legeret emphasizes that from the very beginning the dancer of Bharata Nāṭyam has to renounce all subjectivity. During the years of strenuous training he has to bring his physical forms close to the image of the ideal, abstract body depicted in the sculptures of a temple. “His movements have to achieve the geometric perfection defined by the canons of sculpture; his body will express universal laws and will reconstruct analogous, like the temple architecture, universal Man–Puruṣa of the Vedas”³⁵. Dance expresses the same law of composition as sculpture, therefore the posture is more important than the movement, which are born out of moving from one posture to another³⁶. In older times the technique of *karaṇas*, – codified postures and movements of dance, some of them being extremely difficult, even acrobatic, was used in dance presentations much more than frequently at present, what can be seen from its description in the *Nāṭya Śāstra*. The *karaṇas* sculpted on the walls of the great Tamil temples of Tanjavur and Chidambaram also bear witness of that and serve as manuals for today’s dancers. As dance itself is divine, these auspicious *karaṇas*, all in all 108 (a sacred number which represents for Hindus the perfection of the cosmic order³⁷), were created by Śiva himself, and were called 108 steps of Śiva³⁸. Then the ideal body of a dancer has to resemble the divine stature of Śiva.

Āhāryābhinaya, costume, make-up, jewelry of the dance, is an important part of the dance presentation. The jewelry of Bharata Nāṭyam is called temple jewelry. It repeats the motives

³³ Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 1: 12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

³⁵ Legeret, *Les 108 pas du dieu Śiva*, 38.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

found in the sculptures of South Indian temples which are full of temple-related symbolism. Similarly to the way the concept of *Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala* reconciles the solar and lunar cycles, the head jewelry of Bharata Nāṭyam is marked by sun and moon diadems (*candra-sūrya*) reunited in the dance. *Rakodi*, head ornament worn on the back of the head, has the function of separating the good from the evil³⁹.

It is obvious that both a temple and a dance are also manifestations of artistic expression. But they both also represent celebration of social life. In a big South Indian temple with many *prākāras*, concentric enclosures, as important parts of the temple (for example, Srirangam temple has seven enclosures and Thiruvannamalai five) we find all the forms of mundane life, such as markets and shops in the first enclosure as one enters, schools, different shrines and purification areas further on, etc. A visit to such a temple would include visiting shops, minor shrines, taking delight in the beauty of exquisite columns, sculptures, vehicles, vessels and other objects of the temple household. It would also include taking a meal, meeting people, etc. The temple in its totality is a model of the town or rather of life, accommodating everything from the most mundane to the purest. Still the whole life turns around the primary ritual of sacrifice being performed in the central chamber of this huge household. Similarly a dance recital does not limit itself to the recreation of the primordial sacrifice or ontological dance of creation and destruction. It presents the whole range of manifestations of Divinity all around – stories of heroes, lovers, sufferings, all embellished by passages of pure dance for the pure aesthetic pleasure of God and man. It is also a social event gathering the people of different layers.

Summing up the last chapter, I would like to argue for essential commonalities between the spatial, functional and ornamental conception of a temple and that of a ritual dance. Both of them are conceived in a way which represents and expresses their ontological significance. The two are based on the geometric pattern of the representation of the Universe and assure the medium for the unity between the Macrocosm and the Microcosm.

Conclusions

In this short overview of certain parameters of Bharata Nāṭyam, one can see that the presentation of classical dance is by its inner nature rather close to the temple worship. In the linear space both the temple worshipper and the dancer pass through the same stages of devotion and use certain gestures of their own body with the aim of attaining the ultimate goal – union with the Supreme Being. But what is more important is that the two phenomena share the same ontological and functional ideas and structures. Both a temple visitor and a dancer reproduce this primordial cosmic sacrifice, the first through the body of the temple and certain gestures of the ritual and the other by means of his own body. Being essentially religious, they mutually complement each other as two ways of worship.

³⁹ Lusti-Narasimhan, *Bharatunāṭyam*, 14–116.

The Hindu thought also gives explanation even to the pure aesthetic side of the dance, viewing it as created for the pleasure of gods. This explains that yet another function of the dance is also religious, as a dance recital gives a devotee one more chance to achieve unity with God through the experience of *bhāva*, the aesthetic pleasure generated by the *rasa* of the dance.

This intrinsic link of the ritual dance and the temple indicates that Bharata Nāṭyam might have been conceived in such a way that even after its separation from the temple environment it could preserve the same roles as those of the temple: the ontological role of representing the model of the universe and the primordial sacrifice and the functional role of recreating the sacrifice and bringing salvation. The Hindu identity of this dance is therefore not in its application as a ritual, not in enacting the stories of Hindu mythology, definitely not in the external aspects of costume or worshipping the statue of Naṭarājā on the stage, but in the very inner space of the dance conceived as a form of worship even without explicitly saying so.

Bharata Nāṭyam of today succeeds in expressing secular themes and even newspaper stories on a variety of environmental, social problems, etc. Many talented dancers successfully move away from the traditional *nāyaka–nāyikā* subject, there are some who have staged dances on Christian, Buddhist themes without compromising on either religious or dance aspect. But even though Bharata Nāṭyam can be and is viewed separately from its Hindu environment, this can in no way negate its primary religious and spiritual value. On the contrary, understanding the spiritual structure of the dance enhances the vitality of today's dance and its adaptability while exploring its purely aesthetic and artistic values. The combination of spirituality and pure aesthetic beauty widens the horizon of its possibilities and helps to convey its universality. And surely, acknowledging this important internal Hindu component in Bharata Nāṭyam does not make it less Indian.

RITUALINIS ŠOKIS KAIP RELIGINIŲ APEIGŲ FORMA:

Bharata Nāṭyam atvejis

Diana Mickevičienė

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje analizuojamas vieno iš Pietų Indijos klasikinio šokio stilių – Bharata Nāṭyam, ritualinio šventyklos šokio sceninio varianto, vidinis santykis su religinėmis apeigomis ir šventykla. Gretinant klasikinio šokio repertuarą ir tikinčiojo veiksmų šventykloje linijinę eigą, matomos paralelės tarp šių dviejų procesų. Taip pat trumpai apžvelgiama šventyklos ir šokio ontologinė reikšmė bei gretinamos šių dviejų reiškinių vidinės erdvės – erdvinis planavimas, geometrija, ornamentika. Pastebimas glaudus vidinis šventyklos ir ritualinio šokio, kurie abu yra kuriami kaip išreikštosios visatos kosmologinis modelis ir atvaizdas, taip pat kaip individo ir dievybės bendravimo mediumas, ryšys. Daroma išvada, jog Bharata Nāṭyam šokis pagal savo vidinės erdvės struktūrą yra sukonstruotas hinduizmo mąstysenoje kaip religinių apeigų forma, todėl hinduistinė šokio tapatybė negali būti visiškai ignoruojama ir sekulariojoje scenoje.

Received 14 November 2004