

Exploring Desi Dances in Dance treatises of Medieval Period

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The history of Indian dance is very rich and is intertwined with the cultural, spiritual and social fabric of the country. The history spans thousands of years evolving through the various historical eras, taking different forms to a diverse array of genre

Dance treatises have played a pivotal role in tracing the history of Indian dance. They are codified repositories of knowledge that guide the practice, teaching and evolution of dance forms. These texts capture the social, religious and artistic milieu of their time, offering valuable insights into Indian society of that particular time period. These texts are the important primary sources for research and reconstruction of the dances of the bygone era.

The scope of this paper is to explore different types of dances mentioned in medieval Indian treatises. The period between 12th century AC. 16 century can be considered the medieval period in Indian dance history. This era saw significant changes and developments in Indian dance. The following are the notable developments in Indian dance during medieval era

1. In this type period the concept of Desi was introduced in the text. Though Matanga's Brahaddesi talks about Desi tradition in music, Someshwara's Manasollasa was the first text, which has information about the Desi vocabulary in dance. The Desi sthanas, charis, karanas mandalas were introduced
2. Dance was no longer just a part of dramatic production. It can be seen that evolution of dance as an independent art form
3. Desi dances gained popularity and Marga tradition became less prominent
4. Due to the Mughal rule, the Persian influence of Indian dance can also be prominently seen.

The Desi tradition

Natya Shastra is the oldest extant text for dance drama and music. Though Natyashastra does not mention

the term Desi, it explains the concept of Pravrtti which might be the root for the Desi tradition. Neither Abhinavabharati nor Vishnudharmottara Purana mentions about Desi tradition. The scenario changed in 11th and 12th century. The regional dances started becoming more popular. The scholars also began to include the Desi tradition with the older tradition in the manuals on dancing. Bharata's tradition was called Marga and regional forms as Desi. Desha means region, and Desi means regional. We find inscriptional source from early eleventh century from Kalyana Chalukya dynasty, which mentions Desi tradition. The important manuals of medieval period which helps to understand the Desi tradition, are:

1. Manasollasa of Someshwara (11th century)
- 2 Sangeeta Samayasara of Parshwadeva (13th century)
3. Sangeeta Ratnakara of Sarangadeva (13th century)
4. Nrta Ratnavali of Jaya Senapati(late 13th century)
5. Nrthyadhyaya of Ashokamalla (15th century)
6. Nartanda Nirnaya of Pundarika Vittala(16th century)

Some of the other texts are

Sangeethamakanda, Sangeet Damodara, Nrtyaratnakosha, Abhinaya Chandrika, Balaramabharata, etc

A detailed study of these texts gives the idea of the framework of Desi tradition. The Desi framework has the Desi sthanas, Desi Charis, Desi karanas. Also known as Utpluthi Karanas. Bramaris, Desi Lasyangas and Desi dances (these are fully choreographed pieces). Unlike Marga, tradition the Desi Karanas are independent from Desi Charis. The kinetics of this framework is very much different than Marga. But the fundamental elements of Anga, Upanga and Pratyanga remains the same.

The following up are the observations made regarding special features of Desi tradition

1. The number of Stahnas are more and there are Upavishta sthanas (seating posture) and Suptha Stanas (reclining postures) as additions from Marga tradition.
2. The number of Charis are also more
3. The Karanas are also called Utpluhti Karanas, which involves a lot of jumps and leaps implying Desi. Karanas are more acrobatic in nature.
4. Categories such as Desi Nrta hasta Desi Angaharas are not defined in any texts
5. Some of the Desi dances are described in detail example mukchali, from narthaknaya text following which reconstruction can be made.

Desi dances

Some of the important dances mentioned in the text of medieval period are :

Goundali, Perani, Dandarasaka, Rasaka, Mukhachali, Swaramanta, Chindu, Kollata, Jakkidi etc. These dance forms are explored in this study according to different texts here.

Goundali is a very graceful dance first mentioned in Sangeeta Ratnakara. Goondali, Gaundali, Goundila, Goundala are the different names found in various literary and inscriptional sources. Goundali dance was performed in two types of tradition or vidhi. They are Shuddha Paddati and Vichitra Paddathi. The Shuddha Paddathi followed the Marga tradition and the Vichitra paddathi followed the Desi tradition. Lot of detailing has been provided in the texts about the instruments and musical arrangements used for this dance. Trivali drum is played by the dancer herself while dancing. The choreographic details and techniques are not available in any of the texts. Saranga Deva mentions that Vachika (the songs) and the Aharya of this dance is that of Karnata Desa. Musical instruments like tanti Veena, Vamshi, Mardala was used as music accompaniment. A detailed Poorvaranga vidhi is mentioned for this dance. A desi Lasyanga 'Mana' is executed according to the textual sources.

Perani was also a very important dance which is described in medieval Indian texts like Sangita Samayasara, Sangita Ratnakara, Nrta Ratnavali etc. This is a dance performed by male dancers. According to Sangita Ratnakara the dancers's body is smeared with white powder such as ash, with the head shaved leaving a tuft of hair, having a number of shining anklet bells (Ghargara) tied to the shanks. This dance has five elements namely Gharghara, Visama, Bhavashraya, Kavicharaka and Gita. Gharghara is the special training in striking the foot with anklets and is of 6 variations. The sequence of these five elements to be performed has been mentioned in the texts. The desi Karana i.e the Utpluti Karanas are performed while executing Visama element.

The dances Rasaka, Natya Rasaka and Danda Rasaka are also mentioned in many texts. The description of these from the textual sources indicates that it is a group dance. 8 to 24 dancers can dance this dance depending on the patron's willingness to employ the dancers. Nartana Nirnaya describes Rasaka dance should execute Bandhas like Pindi, Srinkalika, Bhedya and Lata. Like wise various formations, entry and exit for the stage has been discussed. Natya rasaka is a dance which is danced by the dancers in the state of intoxication during spring singing lullabies and Kings history while doing padartha Abhinaya. Dandarasaka is also danced in pairs. The dancers hold sticks and tap them while dancing. The measurement of the stick differs in each text. Desi lasyangas, Charis, brahmaris are performed while dancing. Some times instead of sticks the dancers may also hold a fly whisk (chamara) in one hand and sword in other hand. There are many sculptural evidences for Danda Rasaka. From 10th century to later vijayanagara sculptures dandarasaka dance can be seen in temple relief.

A dance named Shiva Priya is mentioned in Nrta Ratnavali and also in Nrtya ratnakosha. According to these texts this dance is dear to Shiva. The dancers wear Rudraksha and sing the songs of the glory of Shiva. The dancers move in rhythmic lasyangas. At times they face each other in pairs and form circles, otherwise striking different poses. This dance is performed during festivals.

Another Saivaite dance mentioned in many medieval treatises is Cintu or Chindu Nrta. Texts like Nrta Ratnavali, Sangita Darpana, Sangita Chintamani etc. This was a dance of Dravidian region. Abhinaya is done for the couplets called Chintu. This dance is based on the desi lasyanga called Kiitu in graceful rhythm. This was a dance loved by the South Indians.

Bahurupi Nrta is one more dance which has been mentioned in multiple texts. This dance employs Loka dharmi. The characteristics of both male and female dancers are described in detail in Nrta ratnavali. The author Jayasena explicitly mentions that this dance includes all types of Abhinaya except the Satvika abhinaya. Abhinaya is presented by replicating the existence in the world. The biped, quadruped, legless creatures are mimed through this dance. Other than Nrta Ratnavali Sangita m Makaranda, Sangita Damodara, Sangita Narayana, and Sangita Kaumudi mentions Bahurupa or Bahurupi Nrta.

Kollata was a popular dance during medieval period. This is completely an acrobatic dance which involves the dancer walking, moving, swinging on the tight rope. Dancers forming a wheel structure and displaying various acrobatic techniques is the speciality of this dance. This is also performed on swords. Drums, trumpets and cymbals accompany this dance for music. Though the description of this dance is mentioned only in Nrta Ratnavali, while classifying types of dancers Sanita Ratnakara, Manasollasa, Sangita Chanra, Nrtyaratnakosha describe the dancer Kollatika who performs acrobatic dance, which then implies this dance was also known during that period.

Other dance forms mentioned in the Nrta Ratnavali text are :

1. Bhandika Nrta – a dance performed by clowns.
2. Kanduka Nrta – Dance performed by female dancers while playing with a ball.
3. Ghatiani Nrta – A dancer who dances while playing hudukka and is available for common man to perform for.
4. Chaarana Nrta : A dance form danced by the nomads of the Gujarath region.

The Desi dances dealt in Nartana Nirnaya stands out as the emphasis of texts had shifted from musical elements of dance-to-dance technicalities. Though there is a mention of Shudda paddati and desi padatti in dance, the main categorisation of dance is made as Bandha and Anibandha Dances. The Stahanas, Charis and Karanas which are described are not categorized separately as Desi and Marga. Thus, Nartana Nirnaya

stands out from other texts in describing the desi tradition. Bandha dances are the one which are bound by rules of gati and Anibandha are relatively free compositions and they do not have Abhinaya.

Eleven types of Bandha Nrntas are described among which Mukhachali is one of them. A detailed description of Mukhachali is given. Reconstruction is possible with this detailed choreography mentioned in the text. There are nineteen Anibandha Urupas mentioned and two Anibandha Nrntas are mentioned. These two Anibandha dances Rasa and Jakkidi are said to be popular in Desi tradition by the author. Nineteen Anibandha Urupas are desi dance sequences born in many regions and abiding in their respective quarters. The description of Rasa is similar to the Rasa dances explained in other texts. If the dancers dance with the sticks in hand then it is called danda rasa or else just the rasa without sticks. A new form of dance called “Jakkidi” is mentioned in the text. The songs for this dance is composed in the language Yavani(Persian). Pandarika Vittala says a female dancer holds the edge of her garment dances in three tempos. The description says the limbs are moved softly, splended with Bramaris. This dance is said to be loved by the persians.

Text which came after this can be placed under early modern period in Indian dance History. Those texts like Balarama Bharatha, Sangeeta Narayana etc have mentioned some desi dance forms which are still closer to present day classical dance forms and folk forms. For instance Bala Rama Bharata mention Mohini Natanam, Kolatadana, Kummitadana etc. which implies this was the period our present-day classical forms started taking shape during this period. Also most of the contents in those texts are either the extracts from Sangita Ratnakara, Nartana Nirnaya of Nrnta Ratnakara.

Drawing parallels

Studying Desi dance forms from medieval period helps to link these dance forms to the current day, classical or folk-dance forms. Some of the dances have striking similarities with today's practices, while some dance forms have evolved to be more sophisticated and independent dance forms from today's dance forms. Some of the dance forms have gone completely out of vogue. This section makes an attempt to identify the dance forms of Medieval India with those of current day dance forms either in the fullest form or the traces of Desi dances in them.

Gaundali is the first solo performance ever mentioned in Sangeeta Ratnakara. Though the earlier texts mentions a female dancer dancing solo as apart Lasyanga , Gaundali is a complete dance piece were a female dancer is accompanied by musicians. So, this could be the first step in the development of the solo dance tradition in classical dances of today, like Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Mohiniattam, etc. Also, there is a folk form in Maharashtra called Gondal in which the musical accompaniments described in the

Desi text are very much similar to this Gondal tradition, but a female dancer is not present in this form. This might be because of the changing social scenario during that time period.

The dance sequence called Garghara found in both Goundali and Perani are now very prominent part in Kathak performances. Kathak is characterized by the different types of footwork by make the sounding of anklet bells.

The Mukhachali of Nartana Nirnaya can be compared with the Pushpanjali of Bharatanatyam tradition. The Shabda Chali features have similarities with Shabda Nrtya of Odissi. The Swaramanta Nrta has many features common with the Swara pallavi of Odissi and Jathiswara of Bharatanatyam. Anibhanda of Nartana Nirnaya mentions a dance called Lavani, which is still a practiced folk form in Maharashtra.

Jakkidi dance, which is mentioned in Nartana Nirnaya resembles the Ghungat Gat in Kathak.

The Danda Rasa dance mentioned in Nartana Nirnaya describes the dance holding fly- whisk (Chamara) in one hand and sword in the other which is similar to the dance of North East India called Shad Suk Mynsien.

Also the Danda Rasala dance, danced holding sticks has been practiced in various parts of India with small regional variations. In Karnataka it is called Kolata, in Gujarath as Dandia, Kolkazhli in Kerala and Kolattam in Tamil Nadu.

The Bahurupa Nrta which is the dance supposed to imitate various animals and birds can be traced to the Mayilattam, Pambu natanam, Hulikunitha etc.

The Kollata dance which involves acrobatic movements, is still alive and known as Dombarata in Karnataka.

The Charchari dance features are very similar to Kaikottukazhi of Kerala and Kummi of Tamil nadu.

Charana a dance mentioned in Nrataratnavali can be traced to Garbha dance of Gujarath.

Thus the study of these Desi dances helps to trace the roots for both classical and folk dances of present day.

Conclusion

The reason Desi dances were studied from medieval Indian texts is no work on Desi is available from an earlier period. When a close observation is made the concept of "Pravritti" mentioned by Bharata started to evolve as an independent tradition, which took a form of Desi. During Bharat's period dance was a part of the bigger entity called Natya or dramatic presentation, but in earlier medieval period dance started to evolve as an independent entity.

A parallel form to Marga, which was called Desi branched out and the gained popularity. In the earlier medieval period, more emphasis was given to musical accompaniment rather than the dance movement. But late medieval text like Nartana Nirnaya, Bharatarnava, Nrta Ratnavali gave exhaustive information

about dances, which can be practically reconstructed today. The study of the technical and structural features of Desi dances reveals the facts that

- a. not all Desi dance forms where folk dances or simple and light dances.
- b. The present day dance forms whether it is folk, ritualistic or classical forms, have their roots in Desi Dances of medieval period.
- c. Desi dances and Desi tradition bridges the gap between the Marga tradition and present day dance forms.
- d. Studying and reconstructing the lost, Desi dances will certainly make the existing dance vocabulary richer.

Thus, a serious study of Desi dances will open a new dimension for Indian dance.

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