
STUDY OF THE LITERARY SOURCES AND PLOTS OF INDIAN TEMPLE DANCES

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Abstract

The stories underlying the temple dances are described in the scientific works devoted to different styles of dance, and are also used as examples in the literature on dance technique. The literature, covering the problems of Indian art including dance, contains mostly general description and stray instances. The aim of this study is the systematization of information and finding the common roots for the plots of various forms of temple dance. The article examines the literature underlying the plots of Indian temple dances, and investigates their common origin, considers artistic features and aesthetic techniques of plastic expression that are used in the reproduction of content and ideas of literary works to reflect the aesthetic experience of 'rasa'. Dance is considered as an important element of Indian traditional art. The article concludes that the art of dance in India has long been closely connected with other arts – from music to sculpture and architecture. However, special attention is given to the connection of dance with literature, because it is the temple dance that ruled the plot for literary works, and at the same time, as noted, was mostly narrative in nature. The sources of plots were primarily the puranas and the epics 'Mahabharata' and 'Ramayana', as well as the works of classical Indian literature as the 'Gita Govinda' by Jayadeva (12th century AD). The traditional category of rasa was used for the analysis of the plots, that allowed concluding that the main rasa of dance dramas, based on 'Mahabharata' and 'Ramayana', is 'faith-rasa' (heroic), and of solo presentations – 'sringara-rasa' (erotic) or 'bhakti-sringara' (the feeling of love to the deity).

Keywords: aesthetics, Indian, philosophy, yoga, shaivism

1. Introduction

Indian traditional art has won great popularity in the modern world; a lot of research and cinematic practices are devoted to it. None of its kinds is

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complete without dance, which has become an integral part of music, literature, painting, and sculpture.

Indian dances, both traditional and modern, have been popular also in Russia for many years. They are performed by amateur groups and professional dancers; the festivals are regularly held. The Russian audience is familiar not only with dances from Indian films, but also with folk and classical Indian dances of several styles – ‘Bharatanatyam’, ‘Odissi’, ‘Kuchipudi’, etc.

If we consider dance as a phenomenon of artistic culture, then it is necessary to understand that it has various manifestations and not all of them are connected with the deep foundations of national culture.

Aristotle said about the connection between dance and other cultural manifestations of one or another people: “dance imitates with its rhythmic movements foundations, passions, practices, and embodies the invisible thought” [1]. In this thesis, Aristotle states that dance is organically connected not only with culture, but also with a culturally conditioned human mentality, the characteristics of value consciousness, emotional response (‘passion’), of thought and action (‘customs’).

Dance is certainly an art form, and therefore may be motivated purely aesthetically or expressively, and this kind of manifestation of the human desire for artistic expression is diverse. Therefore, the known specialist in the theory of choreographic art E.A. Korolyova gave a broader interpretation of this phenomenon: “Dance is a kind of space-time art, artistic images of which are created by means of important aesthetically, rhythmically structured movements and positions” [2]. But at the same time, it is clear that the choreographic actions are not limited to such a motivation of artistic activity. The researcher in the field of paleochoreography V.V. Romm has rightly pointed out that “to determine dance only as an art form means to admit nearly half dance manifestations as not dance” [3]. Therefore, dance can be considered as an important component of the entire cultural life of the people. L.P. Morina, analysing the choreographic culture of the antiquity, highlighted the importance of dance for the areas that go beyond the purely artistic expressions of culture. The value of the dance, firstly, is that “a group of rhythmic movements leads to the emergence of the mystical sense of kinship, unity of people with each other”. Secondly, dance provides “the necessary energy for the experience of life events”. Thirdly: “dance as part of religious worship could provide an entry into a particular mental state other than ordinary, in which there are various kinds of mystical contact with the world of spiritual energies” [4]. In another work, L.P. Morina notes that dance “has played an important social role, had in itself semantic codes, ritually enshrined and passed down from generation to generation. Dance brought people together, developed a collective psychological system, and also served as a way of nonverbal communication.” [5]

These characteristics of dance testify to its indissoluble connection with a specific historical and cultural system. In this sense, the American scientist A. Lomax has pointed to the fact that dance in folk culture “is a sketch or model of vital communication” and “focuses in itself the most common motor-motional

patterns most frequently and most successfully used in life by most people in this cultural community” [6].

2. The origin of Indian temple dance

Since the early middle ages in India, there was a tradition of picturing in sculpture and painting of dancers, frozen in graceful poses. The plasticity of the body's curves, facial expressions and the details of costumes are carefully reproduced. The works of classical Indian literature of the authors like Kalidasa, Bhass, Jayadeva and many others contain the description of the method and the way of life of dancers, the details of their performances and dance technique. The dancers often acted as the main characters of these works. Due to popular Indian films, many people are familiar with the elements of temple dances, which include, besides the actual technique, also a narrative dance, which conveys the literary text with the help of a special plastic language of the body that is based on certain symbols. The elements of this language are gestures and facial expressions that show different feelings and emotions, the specificity of makeup and costume. Thus, we can say that dance is an integral part of literary text, but also the whole literary text is an integral part of the dance.

Indian temple dance had a ritual origin, religious basis. In ancient Indian epics, we find the interesting legend concerning the emergence of dances. According to the teachings of Hinduism, the goddess Bhavani, happy with the fact that she was born, gave praise to the Creator, jumping and dancing in space. During the choreographic exercises, three eggs came from her womb from which three deities hatched – Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva.

As a combined art form, it is a means of conveying ideas of the relevant religious-philosophical system. Ritual dance originated in ancient times. According to archaeological remains, it is aged more than 5,000 years. However, both temple art and dance were formed within a certain historical period, the main phase of which falls on the 4th-12th centuries BC. In the history of the evolution of India's religious and philosophical culture, this period is characterized as 'the time of puranas'. The main feature of this period is the formation of a 'new religion', so-called synthetic Hinduism, a rapid spread of this religion, and as a consequence, the displacement of such religions as Buddhism and Jainism.

The religion of Hinduism originated in the merger of Aryan and Dravidian beliefs or Vedic Brahmanism with the 'new' sects, such as Shaivism and Vaishnavism. For the transfer and dissemination of the basic postulates of this doctrine, certain methods were used, such as the presentation of esoteric and philosophical aspects of the doctrine in a popular form, the translation of Sanskrit texts into local languages and presenting them to the uneducated masses in the form of remittances, often with musical accompaniment, as well as in the form of dance-drama performances.

The last has been obviously the most effective, that is why dance drama based on philosophical and religious texts became widespread in almost all

regions of India. Literary works that found their staging in the form of dance or dance dramas included the Sanskrit drama, lyric poems and religious hymns, both in Sanskrit and in the languages of certain regions of India. The feature of all works of this kind is that they are based on the same primary sources: itihasa – heroic epics such as ‘Ramayana’ and ‘Mahabharata’; numerical puranas – a collection of cosmogonical legends.

The question about using dance and drama performances to promote religious instructions for the uneducated population of India is highlighted in many scientific works, devoted both to the history of the evolution of religious and philosophical thought and the history of development and theory of particular traditional temple dance styles. The first group includes the work by V. Raghavan [7], G.S. Majumdar [8], L.A. Varma [9], etc. Another group includes the works devoted to certain styles of temple dance and dance dramas, such as: M.L. Varadpande [10], P. Banerji [11], Sunil Kothari [12, 13], Shanta Sarabjit Singh [14], L. Venkataraman [15]; the works of Western authors: Key Ambrose [16], J. Kliger ‘Bharatanatyam in cultural perspective’ [17]; as well as numerous articles by Indian and Western authors.

3. The sources of Indian temple dance

Indian temple dance as an important part of traditional art is a complex set of emotional, intellectual and spiritual elements, and expresses certain ideas in an aesthetic manner. As has been said above, dance is regarded as a combined art that is interconnected with its forms: music, sculpture, architecture, and literature. The literary or narrative aspect is central to all forms of temple dance. The transmission of values and individual interpretation of the text are considered the most important. The presentation of the meaning of certain texts in the language of formal dance technique is termed as ‘Abhinaya’, which broadly means the transmission of ideas, feelings and emotions to the viewer using facial expressions, accompanied by gestures and body movements to achieve this goal.

According to the definition of the Indian philosopher Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Indian art represents the ‘perfect world’, i.e. the world, idealized in popular religious descriptions [18]. Under such popular texts, ‘Ramayana’ and ‘Mahabharata’ and legends – puranas are ambiguously meant. The emergence of these literary works served a certain purpose and was in the nature of a global social project. Given the fact that in ancient India, millions of people were uneducated, the religious teachers developed specific methods of knowledge transfer, which did not require the scholastic education. So, according to the legendary author of the Mahabharata, wise man Vyasa, this work was designed to convey the Vedic laws to most people [19]. The task of ‘Ramayana’ and ‘Mahabharata’ was the transmission of Vedic teaching in a concentrated form, where the emphasis was on moral rules and conscience, adherence to the laws of Dharma. The process of creating these works is the proof of the popularity of stories that lie at their basis.

Among scientists (R.S. Majumdar, A.K. Coomaraswamy, M. Khokar), the view dominates that these epics were created in a specific period, by a concrete author, and supplemented gradually during a whole era. The popular plot in the form of a heroic ballad ('Ramayana') or heroic epic ('Mahabharata') was taken as a basis of each of these works. According to the statement of R.S. Majumdar, over time these poems had been developed into multivolume brachminical works that were used with the aim of religious and moral propaganda [20]. So, 'Ramayana' is not just a story about the journey of prince Rama; it also includes the teaching of the legendary Hindu wisemen and conveys to the reader (listener or viewer) in the form of allegories the basic postulates of Vedic philosophy. 'Ramayana' develops the theme of the meaning of human existence and the concept of Dharma. The main idea of this work is a perfect execution of one's duty in worldly affairs, where Rama is an ideal husband and king, Sita is a perfect wife, Lakshmana is a perfect brother, etc. In 'Mahabharata', the leitmotif of the work is the reflections on life, its meaning, karma and final liberation – Moksha. In order to make these works more accessible to the common people, their Sanskrit texts have been translated into local languages.

In South India, due to the patronage of the ruling dynasties Pandya and Chola, these epics appeared in such languages as Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, and Kannada. Temples were the place where the sacred texts were retold, commented upon, and performed in dance dramas. Music-dance-drama performance had become the most effective tool for the presentation of ideas to the masses, as could convey not only the meaning of texts, but the feelings espoused in their sense. The high artistic level of the transfer of feelings and emotions was caused by the elaborated technique of the dance. The fact of the development of this technique itself over the centuries by Indian wise men stresses the understanding by the religious teachers of the huge influence of dance performances on the feelings of believers.

4. The reflection of aesthetic experience 'rasa' in the plots of Indian temple dances

The aesthetic experience of rasa is the most important term in the Indian theory of performing arts. There are 9 main rasas in the theory of dramatic arts. Among them there are: 'Sringara' (erotic), 'Vira' (heroism), 'Adbhuta' (surprise), 'Bhayanaka' (fear), 'Bibhatsa' (disgust), 'Hasya' (laughter), 'Karunya' (sympathy), 'Raudra' (anger), and 'Shanta' (peace). Each of the main rasas has its own subvarieties, as well as the reason of occurrence and consequence ('Vibhava' and 'Anubhava'). Rasa is relayed by the technique of 'Abhinaya', external expression. There are four kinds of the latter: 'Angika' (expression through body movements), 'Sattvika' (expression through facial expressions, gestures), 'Vachik' (with the help of text), 'Aharya' (the use of costume and makeup to transfer ideas and emotions).

According to the ancient texts on the theory of dance, such as 'Natya Shastra' and 'Abhinaya Darpana', the aesthetic experience is a kind of spiritual

activity, which transforms equally both the senses and the understanding, and is, in the end, the cause of ‘Ananda’ or supreme bliss. Drama and dance performances based on the plots from the sacred texts simultaneously performed several functions: ritual, educational, the transfer of knowledge, encoded in them esoteric aspects of the teaching, aimed at preserving them for future generations. Summing up the above-mentioned, we can cite the following statement of the American researcher Fred W. Clothey: “If without fire and sword Hinduism spread to the whole Far East, then it became possible due to ‘Ramayana’ and ‘Mahabharata’ that were passed through storytellers, sculptors, and dancers” [21]. What was said in relation to ‘Ramayana’ and ‘Mahabharata’ is also true for the cosmogonic legends – puranas. The puranas represent the theology of the two major religious trends: Shaivism and Vaishnavism. They are summarized in the form of popular stories of gods and contain versions of the history of the Universe from its creation to its final destruction.

The most common sources of plots for temple dances are ‘Bhagavata Purana’ in the Vaishnava tradition and ‘Shiva Purana’ as well as ‘Tamil Purana’, which includes the poems of the saints of Tamil Shaivism – nayanmar.

5. Regional variety of the plot types of temple dances

Scenes from the epics and the puranas formed the basis of poetic works in Sanskrit and regional languages. These adaptations and interpretations of primary sources served as the literary basis of dance and dance-drama compositions, which received the status of a regular temple ritual.

The plots of temple dances can be divided depending on the kind of dance presentation (dramatic or solo); religious and philosophical system (Shaivism, Vaishnavism); and the predominant emotions of ‘rasa’ in the tradition of a particular dance style (‘faith-rasa’ – heroism, the emotion that prevails in dramas; and ‘sringara-rasa’ – love, the emotion underlying the solo tradition).

The greatest variety of the types both of solo dances and dance drama is concentrated in South India. Originally, the tradition of temple dance in solo performance variant originated in Tamil Nadu as the cult of worship of the God Shiva in his cosmic dancer image of Nataraja (according to literary and archaeological evidences, from the 6th century BC, and possibly earlier). The tradition of dance drama was also well known and used for the transfer of the heroic epics – Ramayana and Mahabharata. With the popularization of dance as a temple ritual, dance dramas were also performed in temples. In Kerala, dance drama has a history of more than fifteen hundred years. In this region, there are more than 20 different types of traditional dance drama [22]. The most ancient of them is considered to be ‘Kudiattam’. The repertoire of ‘Kudiattam’ traditionally involves individual acts of all thirteen plays by the great Indian poet-playwright Bhasa (6th century CE). They are performed in original in Sanskrit with explanations in the local language of Malayalam. Six plays from 13 Bhasa’s plays are based on the plots from ‘Mahabharata’ and two – on the plots from ‘Ramayana’, and the rest transmit folk stories.

The vivid style of 'Kathakali' as a literary structure includes the poems of the founder of the tradition of this style Kottarakara rajah and his successors – Kottayam rajah, Unnayi Variyar rajah, Swathi Thirunal maharajah and Irayimman Thampi maharajah – in sanskritized Malayalam, the Dravidian language, common in the South-West of India. These poems are known under the name of 'Aattakatha' and are based on 'Ramayana', 'Mahabharata' and 'Bhagavata Purana'. A special role in these dance traditions is played by 'Aharya Abhinaya'. The actors use complex symbolic makeup, where each character is highlighted with a certain colour (for example, Rama – green, Hanuman – yellow, demonic creatures – red). The unusual appearance of the performers expresses the idea that the gods and demons, as beings of another world, cannot look like ordinary people. The fantastic appearance of the characters is emphasized by stylized and non-natural facial expressions and gestures. Also, for more expressiveness of images, the eyes of the dancers are not only distinguished with bright makeup, but also the whites of the eyes themselves are discoloured to red with the seeds of certain plants. Such exaggerated expression probably intends to emphasize 'rasa', which is dominant in a particular character.

The dance drama 'Kanyarkali' is performed in the village of Cochin (Kerala) during religious festivals dedicated to the goddess Bhagavati, a wife of Shiva. The plots of poetic texts in the local language are based on puranas and dedicated to the gods Shiva, Kali and Subrahmanyam.

In South Indian regions Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the vaiṣṇava tradition of dance drama was simultaneously developing, known since the 15th century under the names 'Bhagavatula' or 'Kuchipudi' ('Andra Pradesh'), 'Bhagavata Mela Natakam' and 'Kurvandji' (Tamil Nadu). The poetical works performed in these styles are based on the life stories of Krishna from 'Bhagavata Purana'. The founders of the tradition of 'Kuchipudi', Telugu Brahmins Tirthanarayana Yati and Siddhendra Yogi, are the authors of the major works of this style. Tirthanarayana Yati wrote the dance opera 'Krishna Lila Tarangini', which was based on the plot of the 'Bhagavata Purana'. This opera is considered the longest work in Sanskrit literature. His apprentice and follower Siddhendra Yogi created in the Telugu language the dance drama 'Bhama Kalapam', dedicated to Krishna and his wife Satyabhama, also based on the history of this purana. Traditionally, this style of dance was performed only by men who presented the female characters with complete external certainty. In 'Kuchipudi', expression is more naturalistic in comparison with dramas of Kerala. The emphasis is put on 'Angika' and 'Sattvika Abhinaya' (the expression of body movements – plastic expressiveness and facial expressions), as well as partially used 'Vachika Abhinaya' (as the characters sometimes pronounce dialogues).

The predecessor of 'Kuchipudi' is considered the style of 'Yakshagana'. This is a dance drama with elements of opera, common in South Indian regions Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. This dance has a long tradition. It is dedicated to Vishnu, and the basis for the plot of the plays written by local authors in the

languages of Telugu and Kannada is the texts of 'Mahabharata', 'Ramayana' and 'Bhagavata Purana'. The earliest texts of the plays 'Yakshagana' that have survived date back to the 16th century. There exists a hypothesis that initially this style originated as a ritual worship of God Murugan, which is associated with the son of Shiva, Kartikeya.

Tamil styles marked the beginning of the solo dance tradition of temple dance known in the middle ages under the names of 'Dasi Attam', 'Sadir', 'Chinna Melam', and 'Tamil Kuttu'. Their follower is the modern style 'Bharatanatyam'. These dances originated as a ritual action dedicated to Shiva in the image of Nataraja (king of dance). Temple dance was performed only by women who had the status of a divine spouse of Shiva. According to legends from the puranas, Shiva was considered to be the creator of dance. In the temples dedicated to Nataraja, the dance worships were the main part of the temple ritual. The idea of the cosmic dance of Nataraja and its esoteric meaning found their expression in the holy hymns of poets-mystics, nayanmars, the founders of Tamil Shaivism. Their works, taken together, constituted 'Tamil Purana', or 'Periya Puranam'. The sacred hymns of the Tamil poets, dedicated to Shiva, who danced, as well as popular local deity Murugan, who was identified with the Sanskrit Skanda, formed the repertoire of the temple dance of Tamil Nadu [22]. Because of the enormous popularity of dance temple perceptions in this region, this tradition had spread to the neighbouring states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, and also affected the emergence and development of the traditions of solo temple dance in Orissa. The main part of the repertoire of Tamil temple dances consisted of poetic works – padams. This romantic, sensual poetry was aimed at directing the feelings and emotions of the human to the divine. Medieval Tamil texts of padams disappeared from history. A new wave of Tamil dance poetry began in the 17th century. The most well-known authors of padams: Subaramayar, Muthu Thandavar, Marimutha Pillai, Papavinasu Mudaliyar, Ghanam Krishna Ayere, Gopalakrishna Bharati, Kavikunjara Bharati, and others derived the plots of their works from Tamil and Sanskrit puranas.

Since the 12th century AD, the tradition of solo temple dance of Orissa, which was called in the middle ages 'Odra Nritya' (the contemporary name of the style – 'Odisha'), has referred to the worship of Jagannath (Vishnu). These dances were performed in the temple dedicated to this deity, in Puri. The repertoire of 'Odisha' was based on the erotico-mystical poem by the famous author Jayadevi 'Gita Govinda' (12th century AD) dedicated to Krishna and depicting the philosophy of Chaitanya. Through the example of the relationship of Krishna and Radha, the author traces all the shades of feelings experienced by lovers. From an esoteric point of view, the lovesickness of Radha is interpreted symbolically as the suffering of the soul in its desire to be reunited with the deity. This poem gained immense popularity in the middle ages and entered the repertoire of other solo temple styles of the regions Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. In the tradition of dance drama of Kerala, the repertoire of the style 'Krishnattam' is constituted by the Sanskrit poem titled 'Krishnagatti', whose

author is the founder of this style Mahaveda (17th century). According to Dr. Mohan Khokhar, this play is nothing more than an imitation of ‘Gita Govinda’ [23]. The historical predecessor of Krishnattam is a different kind of dance drama, known under the title ‘Ashtapadiattam’ which is also an imitation of ‘Gita Govinda’.

Thus, it is clear that ‘sringara rasa’ (the feeling of love) prevails in solo temple dance traditions. The most developed is ‘Sattvika Abhinaya’ (facial expressions, accompanied by gestures). ‘Aharya Abhinaya’ is used to emphasize the status of the performer-’devadasi’ as the wife of the deity, and the expression of its divinity, in terms of the concept of yoga (the structure of the etheric body).

The examples from the repertoire of the above-mentioned styles are given to illustrate the process of adaptation and dissemination of the plots of Hindu religious texts and creation on their basis of local temple dance traditions. The plots of the ancient works have been the basis of temple dance for many centuries, confirming the words of the legendary philosopher Ramanuja that “...in India the past does not pass” [24]. According to Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “there, where is the implementation, the art lives and goes beyond the stories, and then it does not matter, whether the plots are new or old” [25]. Therefore, the originality and novelty have never been the criteria of success in Indian art.

6. Conclusions

Based on the foregoing, it can be stated that all types of Indian temple dances, despite the diversity of poetic texts that they use, are based on scenes from the epic works – ‘Ramayana’ and ‘Mahabharata’ - and the collections of cosmogonic legends, puranas, dedicated to the deities Shiva and Vishnu. The original purpose of dance (dramatic and solo) presentations was to promote the ideas of Hindu philosophy among the general population. To achieve it, the tool called in the technique of dance ‘Abhinaya’ was used, which was a means of expressing and conveying the feelings and emotions (‘rasa’) to the audience. The main ‘rasa’ or the dominant emotion of dance dramas, based on ‘Ramayana’ or ‘Mahabharata’, is ‘faith-rasa’ (heroism). In the solo presentation, such emotion is ‘sringara-rasa’ (erotica) or ‘bhakti-sringara’ (the expression of the feeling of love to the deity, like human love experiences).

The elaborated theory of ‘rasas’, the technique of ‘Abhinaya’ and the language of symbolism allowed expressing in dance performance not only the content, ideas and feelings, but also the metaphysical meaning of the text, hidden among the lines. Due to the high literary and aesthetic level of performance, temple dance has gained immense popularity throughout India and formed the centuries-old tradition of this art that has reached our days.

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