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PAPER 3

**DETAIL STUDY OF BHARATANATYAM,
DEVADASIS-NATTUVANAR, NRITYA AND
NRITTA, DIFFERENT BANI-S, PRESENT
STATUS, INSTITUTIONS, ARTISTS**



PAPER 3

MODULE 28

AHARYA OF BHARATANATYAM

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Module 28 Aharya Of Bharatanatyam

Aharya / **आहार्य** is an integral part of traditional Indian dances. In fact, *aharya* denotes and depicts a style specifically, and its accoutrements are very specific as are its aesthetics. Bharatanatyam as a form is very strict or rigid about its costume.

The traditional dance costume of devadasis was the tight bodice or *choli* and gold embroidered draped sari, a silk cloth of nine yards. Bright colors with wide borders of contrasting colors were favored. The sari was pleated in front, and the long end was draped over the left shoulder and wound around the waist, the embroidered end falling in front. The other end tied at the waist was folded and brought through to the back and tucked in at the waist. The traditional ornaments were of gold set with rubies and diamonds and decorated with pearls. The jeweled band that frames the face consisted of small gems and pearls strung on threads. The pendant worn on the forehead was attached to a string of pearls and gems covering the parting of the hair. On either side on top of the head were the sun and crescent moon ornaments. A golden disc on the crown of the head was encircled with white jasmine or mogra / **मोगरा** flowers and a cluster of flowers decorated the back of the head. The long plait of hair was covered with the gem studded *jadai naga* / **जडै**

नाग, the hooded serpent symbol of space and eternity. The cup shaped earrings were attached to ear ornaments. Nose jewels included the diamond droplet under the tip of the nose and the semicircular ornament attached to one nostril. A gold belt was worn around the waist. Bracelets and armlets decorated the arms. Neck ornaments were the pendant and mango garland inlaid with gems.¹

The ancient Tamils were great seafarers and had access to imported gems which they used lavishly. Tamil Nadu was well known for its stone-studded jewelry, especially those set with cabochon rubies. Rubies, uncut diamonds and emeralds were set with great precision and beauty in etched gold on a solid base. The bridal headdress or *thalai saamaan* / तल्ले सामन consists of ornaments that outline the forehead and hair parting and are flanked by the sun (symbolizing brightness and power) and the moon (peace and romance). The serpentine *jada nagam* adorns the whole plait beginning with a small jewel shaped like Adishesha / आदीशेष and ending with a *kunjalam* / कुंजलम or tassels. The *rakkodi* / राकुडी, a circular jewel carrying the design of a peacock tops it all. The *maanga malai* / माँगा माले (mango necklace), *kaasu maalai* / कासु माले (coin necklace), pendants shaped like swans, peacocks and parrots are typical south Indian items that adorn dancers today. The *vanki* / वांकी (armband), *odiyaanam* / उडीयाणम (waist band) nose stud and *jhumki* / झुमकी (swinging ear ornaments) are also derived from the heritage bank of Tamil Nadu.²

The Kaccham / कच्छम saree and blouse for the Bharatanatyam dancer probably dates back to the Nayak period. The devadasis in

the early decades of the century wore the Thuyya saree – silk tissue with *zari* and an extraordinary amount of jewellery. Rukmini Devi spearheaded a renaissance of our textile heritage in addition to dance. E. Krishna Iyer is also said to have played a role in the design of the Bharatanatyam costume.³

When the art of the devadasis emerged as Bharatanatyam, a new style of costume was created for the dance but most of the ornaments have remained more or less the same. Now silver has replaced gold and artificial stones for gems. Called temple jewelry, these are lighter to wear and still look beautiful. The revivalists designed a less cumbersome type with a stitched sari. The *araimandi* (bent knees) position being basic and specific, legs are covered and need flexibility, thus while originally a silk or velvet pyjama / पायजामा was used in 1930s, soon western influence and travels by leading exponents like Ram Gopal, made for more fashioned leg tunic, with flair and fan. In Bharatanatyam, while mistakenly the credit for creating the front fan goes to Rukmini Devi, photographic evidence shows Ram Gopal did these 10 years before she even came on stage!

In the mid-1900s elaborate accessories for men was common, making them look like gods. “I was never satisfied with the crudely-made jewels and ornaments that are used in the traditional dances of today in the four main schools. After a minute observation and detailed search of the bronzes, sculptures and paintings, in the temples scattered all over India, and the cave paintings of Ajanta and Sigiriya in Ceylon, I sought to capture the fine and brilliantly coloured robes, ornaments and jewellery depicted in these most authentic references that were, beyond doubt, far superior to what most of the actor dancers wear

in the four styles of the Indian dance today,” says Ram Gopal in his autobiography. He is seen wearing quite ornate jewellery and elaborate head gear in some photos, as are other dancers like Uday Shankar, U.S. Krishna Rao, and Bhaskar Roy Chowdury. It was an in-thing in the pre- and post-independence dance history. Krishna Rao used to wear a stitched pyjama costume with pleats in the front. Nala Najan also used to wear stitched pyjama costume with front pleats as well as a stitched shirt-like top with three quarter sleeves or full sleeves tucked into his dhoti costume.⁴

While the female dancers have a number of styles to choose from, like sari, skirt or pyjama type, the male dancer’s choice is limited. For male body there is no need to cover chest, so the costumes of men now are simple, usually a dhoti covering the lower body and no upper garment. The men also wear ankle bells or salangai to showcase rhythmic control and tala. They wear a necklace or two, waist belt and armlets, sometimes bracelets and even clip on earrings. Belt and armlets hold biceps and stomach muscles flat while dancing. Men also accentuate their eyes with *kohl*, since it serves an important purpose in the dance. *Alta* in palms and soles depict energy chakras. Nowadays, men generally do not use *alta* / **अलता** on their hands or feet though there are exceptions like dancer Justin McCarthy. Among present day dancers, Vineeth always wears a sleeveless tunic with his dhoti costume. Nowadays, since men are doing a lot of body building, some male dancers like Zakir Hussain and the tall Kiran Rajagopalan wear a *dupatta* falling on either side of the neck covering the body muscles and displaying only the middle of the chest. On heavily built male dancers, this also helps to hide their girth or chest hair!

The current male dance costume of wearing the *dhoti* / धोती / *veshti* / वेष्टी for practice and for performance was probably made popular by Kalakshetra male dancers. Not only was the unstitched draping comfortable for the dancer, it is quite easy to wear as well. Stitched versions of this *dhoti/veshti* costume are available. At the same time, other variations of male dance costumes abound with dance costume tailors.⁵

The uniqueness of Bharatanatyam is firmly imprinted by the elaborate costumes that the dancers wear. It is this look that gives the dance its final USP. Probably, ever since Bharatanatyam was conceptualized in the temple environs, costumes have been an integral feature of this classical dance. Ancient sculptures portray women bare above the waist, with a loosely draped dhoti-style garment tied below. Later, they began to tie a cloth above; when stitched clothes came to India that modified into a blouse. The sari was traditionally wrapped in the Maharashtrian style, passing between the legs, like a dhoti. In ageing photos of the devadasi dancers, one sees them wearing several layers of skirts, or being draped in saris in a different way.⁶

The costume most in vogue today - the stitched pleated costume - evolved sometime during the 1930s. This costume consists of “pyjama costume” where the dancer slips into a pair of loose trousers that are pleated at the thigh and knee to provide for flexibility. A knife-pleated fan, either to knee length or mid-calf, links the two legs of the pyjamas and unfurls with geometric precision as the dancer strikes the ubiquitous Bharatanatyam ‘*araimandi*’ posture. A variation on this basic style is the ‘cycle cut’ pyjama where the lower ends are not stitched together, but are clenched tightly by

the ankle bells. Or it could be a skirt costume which is a sari stitched like a skirt; or a sari costume which is cut and stitched to drape like (what else?) but a sari. Fans, pleats and borders are aesthetically maneuvered to give each dancer a unique look. In fact, the costume has evolved constantly and variations of each style are undertaken to provide for distinctiveness. Whatever the style, glamour of this classical dance from South India is indeed its dazzling costumes made from the famous Kanchipuram silk saris woven in the region, especially in Tamil Nadu. The costumes are crafted from these elaborately woven saris, and are stitched in several alluring styles.⁷

Since women dancers have modesty as mainstay, even the blouse is covered with a layered covering tied at the back. The tight tunic costume suited young female dancers and older ones could use sari, loosely tied to afford movement, as Balasaraswati used to wear in old age or Kalanidhi / कलानिधि Narayanan does while showing *abhinaya*. Half sari culture came in 60s when middle-aged dancers who were still in their prime could wear it and dance with comfort. Ornaments were specific: even the back of head had a decorative bird – the mythical *annapakshi* - and the sun and star on side of head to show Shiva's head adorned with the moon and the sun (*angikam bhuvanam yasya* / अङ्गिकम भुवनं यस्य...).

Costumes for dancers in films were loud and garish, with breasts being accentuated to showcase size. While it looked vulgar, many film stars succumbed to it to look appealing to the masses, which had no class. Box office ruled!

But today, like everything else in Bharatanatyam, costumes too are being modified to suit the changing visual aesthetics of the dance and to flatter the particular physical frame of the dancer, even while

keeping a sharp eye on how the clothed body will look in motion. Several renowned dancers have added punch to the evolving dance costume. Yamini Krishnamurthy abandoned the *melaku* / **मेलक्क** (dupatta) favoring a fan that added mystique to her blouse. With her tall frame and sharp movements, her costume improvisation worked like magic. But alas, when others tried to embrace that style, they ended up looking rather shabby.⁸

Padma Subrahmanyam was inspired by sculpture to design coiffures, costumes and jewellery to suit her *karanas*. Vyjayanthimala Bali dazzled with her uniquely draped sari that bestowed on her the unerring image of a dancing goddess on the stage. With a careful eye choosing best of Kanchi silk weaves, her costumes were as much discussed as her dance. Leela Samson worked extensively on evolving a sari style that flattered her dance persona and emphasized her unique style. Among the younger generation, Malavika Sarukkai and Priyadarsini Govind have both moved the costume dialogue. Malavika's quick changes of fans and Priyadarsini's innovative mixes of fabrics and patterns have yielded new visuals to their dance. Costume designers like Sandhya Raman and Lakshmi Srinath have researched on costumes for dance and are enabling several dancers to alter the visual aesthetics of how dance can be clothed.⁹

Costumes color and pattern palette has evolved too and changed, from sharp colours to Madras checks, the famous character of Kurathi wearing such in Kalakshetra or Padma Subrahmanyam productions. From bold strong colours to mute; from shocking pink

to soft rose, combinations are aplenty and southern textiles afford shine and gleam.

In contemporary dance of Bharatanatyam muted cotton and avant garde minimalism abound and this too looks neat. Kalakshetra students are so keen to show they learn dance, they walk all over Madras city (Chennai), on buses and on cycles, in practice costume as though the 100 plus acre campus of the grand old institution has no space for them to change from class dress and go out in town, normally! Veteran Bharatanatyam guru M.K. Saroja disliked this disregard to art so much she wrote letters to editors of *Sruti* magazine and *The Hindu* and also to the authorities of Kalakshetra. The Dhananjayans, alumni of Kalakshetra, seconded her stand.

Bharatanatyam costumes for women resemble Indian saris, but are specialized for the dance. Despite the resemblance to saris, they are not single pieces of cloth, but combinations of a number of specially stitched pieces. This customization makes them easier to wear, and easier to dance in than a sari. Most costumes involve pleated pieces at the waist that fan out attractively during various movements. The costumes are bright and colorful. They inherit from the sari tradition the use of contrasting border colors, and the borders of the various pieces of the costumes form patterns that decorate the dancer's form.¹⁰

In a detailed interview costume designer D.S. Aiyyelu gave to *Sruti* (40) he mentioned various types of pyjama costume. The pyjama costume is most popular and comes with an attached or separate *pallu*. He says the varieties of pyjama type costume are:

-The pyjama with a fan and a blouse tucked in.

- The pyjama with a big fan, a tucked-in blouse with attached *pallu* and a small fan.
- An old-type pyjama with a vertical border running down each leg and a big fan in the middle, a short blouse, a *pallu* tucked in and covered by a back piece worn over the hip.
- The pyjama with three fans and a separate *choli*. (The *choli* for children has a fan but no *pallu*)
- The pyjama with short and long fans, the second fan reaching down to the knees.¹¹

Talking of the second type of costume, the saree costume, he says there are two ways to do this.

One way is to cut and stitch it according to the required design. In the other method the six-yard saree is not cut-up, but is cleverly stitched at the waist and the *pallu*. On removing the stitches and a few hooks and string tapes, the saree can be restored to its original plain form.¹²

The third type he mentions is the saree-skirt costume with or without a vertical border running down the centre of the frilled fan in front, a 'back piece' around the hip, and with a separate blouse and *pallu*.¹³

Today Bharatanatyam costume still retains its Bharatanatyam flavour, so specific to its cultural moorings, though many youngsters don't use *alta* (on finger tips, tips of toes and a circle in the centre of the palms) as it smudges their dress. This decoration is meant to emphasize the movements of the hands and feet. They use marker pen thus making the marks permanent. In the 60s, a Bharatanatyam dancer changed her costumes almost half a dozen times to perform the different dances like Andal, Kurathi, snake dance etc, but now dancers make do with just one or two costumes per recital, partly

due to shorter duration of a performance. However minimum 3 to 4 costume changes has become the norm for *arangetrams*.

Bharatanatyam makeup has a few unique features. Heavy lines are drawn around the eyes, extending outwards past the eyes. Similarly, the eyebrows are darkened and extended outwards with liner. The purpose of this makeup is to accentuate the movements of the eyes and eyebrows, and make them more visible, because they are an important part of the dance, especially for expression.¹⁴

“Stage and photo make-up are a bit demanding. Lighting plays a major role. If the lighting is heavy, you can use heavy make-up and can use shades. But if the lighting is less, you can use only light make-up. For photos, the cameraman plays an important role. The angles and distances he chooses influence the nature of make-up. On the day of the performance, if the performance was in the evening, the artistes used to start preparing themselves from noon itself. In those days, lighting was confined to petromax lights only. So turmeric and castor oil was first applied to give a yellow tint to suit this type of lighting. After sometime, the oil and turmeric was removed. Then a mixture of zinc white, glycerin and sindhura was applied. Zinc white mixed with sindhura gave a good tone and glycerin gave a good shine. This make-up used to remain for hours. Now, basically the technique is the same. Based on the tone of the skin and the body heat, we decide on the make-up. When we put our hand on the head of the artist, we can feel the body temperature. Make-up tends to darken if the body heat of the artist is high, so we prefer light make-up for such people. The face will start looking shiny after sometime if the face is oily in nature. We consider these factors and do the make-up. To complete the make-up, costume and hair

dressing takes 1 to 1 ½ hours,” says veteran make-up artist Sethumadhavan.¹⁵

The dancer must remember to buy waterproof eye makeup and bindi as excessive perspiration would make them run down the face during the performance!

An essential item of the Bharatanatyam costume is the pair of ankle bells (*salangai* / सलान्गाई in Tamil, *gunghroo* / घुँघरू in Hindi). Ankle bells are an integral part of a dancer’s *aharya* for display of rhythm; hence its role in the performance is of immense importance. Dancers treat their *salangais* with utmost reverence. When students complete formal training in Bharatanatyam and are capable of doing a *margam*, *Salangai Puja* is done. Only after that can they formally start wearing the *salangais* and perform on stage. Without performing the *Salangai Puja*, no student can wear the *salangai*, so this custom is of significance. The *salangais* are blessed by the dancer’s guru who ties them to the dancer’s feet for the first time; they are sometimes placed in the sanctum of Shiva before wearing them, and they are never worn casually. *Salangais* are usually made of rows of brass bells (with an iron ball inside each bell to make the jingle noise) stitched on to a leather strap or cloth pad that is tied around the ankles. *Salangais* have 2 to 6 rows of bells and is used depending on the prowess of the dancer, like 2 rows for beginners, 4 rows of medium trained and 5 to 6 rows for well-trained dancers.

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