TAMIL LITERATURE

Evolution, Cultural Transformation, and Social Status of Dance in Tamil Literature: A Comparative Study across the Sangam, Epic, and Bhakti Eras

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Abstract

This research evaluates the historical evolution and social perception of dance as reflected across the major eras of Tamil literature—the Sangam, Epic, and Bhakti periods. During the Sangam age, dance served primarily as a secular medium for expressing human emotions (such as joy, sorrow, and victory) and honoring victorious kings through wandering artists like *paanan*, *virali*, and *kooththa*r. In the subsequent epic period, including the Minor Epics (*Ainchiru Kaappiam*), fine arts experienced social decline and stigmatization. However, literature from this period reveals crucial technical details about dance performance, architectural measurements of dance arenas (*aadarangku*), and the preservation of artistic nuances. With the advent of the Bhakti era under Pallava rule, dance underwent a paradigm shift: secular human emotions were reoriented toward religious devotion, elevating dance into a sacred medium of worship in temples. This paper analyzes how literary texts capture the changing status, technical rules, and philosophical reinterpretation of dance in Tamil society.

Keywords: Sangam literature; Bhakti movement; Tamil epics; Ainchiru Kaappiam; Silappadikaaram; Varichaandhi; Kanigai; Soolaamani; Devadasi tradition; cultural history of dance

1 Evaluation of dance with reference to the three eras of Sangam, ethics and epics

It's necessary that an assessment is done in comparison of the three eras of sangam, ethics and epics at this juncture, since the next period in the tamizh literature is the bhakti age.

Dance switches on to a different platform as far as the bhakti age is concerned. In sangam age, the individual human emotions such as joy, sorrow, compassion and victory were expressed. In the later bhakti age, each of these emotions was connected with divinity and took shade of bhakti.

Karthikesu Sivathambi in his book 'Madhamum Kavidaiyum' says, 'the practice of looking at literature from the point of view of literature and literary works, was lost in the bhakti literature period' Akin to this view, arts were also connected with the thought of bhakti in tamizh literature.

Among the arts, specifically music and dance, were seen as a medium of worship. But in the sangam age, we find mention of the paanan, virali, koothar etc who sang and danced the glory of victorious kings. Puranaanooru and Paththuppaatu also portray kooththa*r*-s and virali-s who went from town to town, sung in praise of kings to procure wealth as gifts from them. Such virali-s and kooththa*r*-s while going from town to town performed the nuances that they knew and also learnt new types that prevailed in those different places. Thus they updated themselves with dancing in praise of the moon, maayo'n and four sects of people and then only the 11 major dances.

One can assume that all arts have to finally reach the people and that is why Madhavi has sung in praise of the four sects of people. This applies not only to dance, but also to all arts for that matter.

A deep study of Ve'ttuva vari, Aiychiyar kuravai and Kundrakkuravai - the desi or poduviyal dances - bring about certain understandings. That is, both Vari and Varichaandi spring from the land based emotions; but, those connected with human emotions were called as vari and those connected with divinity and attached with a prayer mode were called as vari-chaandhi.

Vari brings about feelings like expectations and disappointments as their subject. This can be understood from Kaanal vari. In Kaanal vari, tossed by the above feelings come songs rendered by Kovalan and Madhavi. But Ve'ttuva vari, Aiychiyar kuravai and Kundrak kuravai bring a prayer mode towards the deities attached to the respective landscape, thus becomes varichaandhi. Here, the people of the land pray to their deity to remove their troubles and bestow happiness.

While kaanal vari expresses human emotions through two characters, the other three are designed as a group rendition. The act of the group prayer and dance must have been taken up to redeem the social status of dance.

In Silappadikaaram, all details relating to dance are found connected with the particular sect of dancers called as 'kanigai-s'. We can also observe that, even if a kanigai wants to get out of the clan and lead a normal life, enough encouragement was not available in the society. Madhavi, born in the clan takes to dancing and continues doing it even after her association with Kovalan. But when Kovalan leaves her, she totally renounces dance and also directs her daughter to do the same. This act shows that the dancers must have thought of measures to redeem their social status in the society.

Saatanar describes that Chitrapati, mother of Madhavi say that the villagers scorn her for making Manimeghalai to take up ascetic life. Also the character Udhayakumaran believes that he could abduct Manimeghalai since she was born as a kanigai.

By trying to give a better status to the character Manimeghalai, we can understand the thought process of lifting the social status of dance and dancers through this literature.

Seevaka Chintaamani portrays the royal character Seevakan to have danced and composed drama and acted. We also find that there were schools teaching dance in the royal palace and dance halls for conduct of dance shows. This allows inferring that the social status lost by dance at the end of Sangam period, slowly tried to reverse in the period of Chintaamani. Amidst these also happened the destruction of arts during the kalabras rule. The kalabras were people who hailed from different language and culture.

Following the kalabras came the Pallava kings, in whose reign religion was revived and so the sentiment of 'bhakti'. The bhakti cult from the south also spread to the north, thereby binding the regions with the chord of 'bhakti'. This religious fervor reflected in the arts. The Krishna cult from the north became a common subject in the south. Tandava of Shiva and lasya of Goddesses earned fascination. Changes crept in the subject matter and not in the method of dance.

Vari songs of Silambu showing landscape emotions became songs in praise of Gods. Here too, we observe that Krishna cult from the north was accepted here, while Muruga cult of the south did not find acceptance in the north. Whatever be the reasons, one cannot deny that the art of bharatam of the south was recognized as a medium of communication in the north.

In this period of time, the texts prevailing in the tamizh land pertaining to arts were translated to Sanskrit. Due to this process of translation, development dawned on the Sanskrit language, while the primary tamizh works were slowly shaded and hided.

Dance at this point of time, regained its social status, and was held close to divinity. Yet, without due acknowledgement and preservation, the tamizh texts sunk into oblivion. AN mentions some texts that were lost during his time; it's a pity that none of them have been got by us today.

Dance that regained its social status was taken into the precincts of temples thus giving it high esteem.

Thus dance that was part of life in the Sangam age and had a treasure of grammar texts went to disdain in the epic period. During the Bhakti literature era, it was associated with divinity and so the 'dancing lord' found place. Just as the sentiment of devotion, religion and philosophy grew, also grew the art of dance.

The Saiva and Vaishnava saints went from place to place singing the glory of the lord and those songs were danced by the 'devadasis' in the temples. Human love transformed to Divine love and became the subject matter in the dance of temples. Tamizh grammar texts waned to void and the translated Sanskrit grammar texts were used for tamizh dance.

God who was not associated with dance before in the sangam and epic age, became an icon of dance. Dance which was a pastime, entertainment and media of communication of ideas, transformed into a divine form and used as a tool for bhakti. Dance rose to heights during the bhakti age and Lord Siva himself is said to have danced to conduct the whole universe.

2 Five minor epics

Succeeding the Five major epics came the minor ones, made with a purpose of taking forward the philosophy of Buddhists and Jainists. Since they were of the same number and were smaller in their volume they took the name of 'Ainchiru kaappiam' (five minor epics)

They are: Neelakesi, Sulaamani, Udhayana kumara kaaviyam, Yasodhara kaaviyam and Naagakumaara Kaviyam. Of these, the last one is not available in full to us. Details of dance are not much found, since these religions don't accept fine arts in high esteem.

To satisfy the requirement of epic grammar, are found description of city and town, where, a few details of dance find place.

> "aadalodu paadal avaithaam aarudhal indrik
>
> Ke'dil pugazh aaravaighal kandum isai ke'ttum"
>
> (Neelakesi, 17)

Meaning: Dance and music were performed in the royal court enjoyed by the kings.

Soolaamani: References to dance are found in many places in this literature.

> "Nataka magalir aadu naataka arangku nanpon
>
> maadagam thelirppa veyndha mandapa thalam"
>
> (Su: 856)

Meaning: The dance arena where the dancers perform was decorated with gold.

> "anghu adharkku aiyndhu kol alavil aadarangku
>
> *ingu vandhu iruththana"*
>
> (Su: 1778)

Meaning: The dance arena was a square measuring 5 kols on each side.

Thus we understand:

- Dance halls with golden roof were there
- The hall measurement was of 5 ko'ls

While Silappadikaaram and Panchamarabu mention 8 measures length for a dance hall, Sulamani mentions 5. Probably, the size of the halls were different in the period of Sulamani.

Details of dance available:

> "ananghu annaar aadal muzhavamum"
>
> (Su: 15)

Meaning: Dancer danced like an angel adhering to the rhythm.

> *"aadalaal arambai oppar*
>
> *aariyavaraith thanthaan"*
>
> (Su: 676)

Meaning: King dedicated more than 1000 dancers.

> *"Mani muzhaa chilambak konda*
>
> *mandapa arangkin angan*
>
> *pini muzhaap peyarththa paani*
>
> *payitruthal elayam konda*
>
> *kani muzhaa marungkural paada"*
>
> (Su: 674)

Meaning: With the song, musical and percussion instruments were played in a style meant for dance to which dance was performed in a theatre.

From the above verses we understand:

- Dancers stuck carefully to rhythm and music
- Such dancers were more than 1000 in number

Further, we find,

> *"naatiyam unarvaar"*
>
> (Su: 78)

Meaning: Dancers who knew dance.

> "oodagam kasindhu osindhu nindru sendru
>
> *vanthulaai*

> naatakangkal nangu adarkku nangaimaar
>
> *navitrinaar"*
>
> (Su: 485)

Meaning: Dancers moved like gentle breeze.

> *"Tho'daga melladi*
>
> *naatakar aayira naariyar tham"*
>
> (Su: 663)

Meaning: Learned dancers who wore anklet in their feet.

Thus stating:

- Dance and drama had strong going in the period of this literature
- There were thousands of dancers
- People very well understood, appreciated and enjoyed dance.

In Udhayanakumaar kaaviyam we find,

> "ko'dhai uththariyang konda ko'laththan
>
> kaadhil kuzhaiyinan kaalil sadangkaiyan
>
> oodhum kuzhalinan ulariya udukkaiyan
>
> po'dhach sirasil poruneerk kalasan"
>
> (Ud: 76)

Meaning: Wore flower garland, upper garment, earrings, sounding anklets; had flute in hand and his dress was dull colored. On the head he balanced a pot with water.

> Kodiyani moodhoork ko'la nall veedhi
>
> nadvann tho'ndri naatakam aadip
>
> padi misaik karanam paangkil thaandi"
>
> (Ud: 77)

Meaning: In the middle of the beautiful street decorated with garlands, was situated the theatre. On that stage, the dancer performed karanam-s and its sequences.

> "paaduthan magalir ellaam paattu ozhindu
>
> *aratri o'da*
>
> Aadunan maadhar thaamum aadal vittu
>
> *ulandhu sella"*
>
> (Ud: 79)

Meaning: The musicians who sing the dancers who dance, all ran away.

thus stating:

- Both male and female dance experts were there
- Mention of the ornaments worn by male dancers

Further, we find,

> *"palanari paraindhthunnavum*
>
> *parindha peykanam aadavum*
>
> *murindha mundangkal aadavum"*
>
> (Ud: 181)

Meaning: Foxes howled, ghosts danced together with headless bodies.

Which describes dance of the ghosts.

> "muttil ko'la vattanai muyandru paththi
>
> *yittudan*
>
> nattanai natanamum nayandu inidhu aadavum"
>
> (Ud: 238)

Meaning: Dance was flawless and confident using hand gestures without and with meaning.

The above brings information that female dancers used hand gestures in dance.

In Yasodhara Kaaviyam we find,

> "anj chollaal avar paadalodu aadalaal
>
> *vinjayaar ulagathinai vellume"*
>
> (YK: 4)

Meaning: Pleasant words, music and dance made the place feel like heaven.

> "olgiya maghalir aadum naatakam
>
> *nayandhu kandum"*
>
> (YK: 87)

Meaning: People watched with interest, the dance done by beautiful women.

> *"Paadagam Iyangkum sengkezhp*
>
> *seeradi paavai paimbon*
>
> *sudakamani men tholir*
>
> thozhuthanar thulangkath tho'ndri
>
> naataka maghalir aadu natakam nayandhu"
>
> (YK: 222)

[154 Dancers wore the ornament 'paadakam' on their reddened feet and the shoulder ornament. When they appeared on stage, people bowed]

Whereby we understand that the female dancers were good looking & maintained slim figure.

3 Conclusion

The historical trajectory of dance in Tamil literature demonstrates a profound transformation from a secular, courtly, and folk tradition into a sanctified, temple-centric spiritual devotion.

In the **Sangam Period**, dance was intrinsically tied to everyday human life, social celebration, and royal patronage. Wandering bards and dancers served as cultural ambassadors, learning local nuances across different regions and preserving the dynamic nature of the art form. The primary focus remained on human emotional expression (*rasa*) and heroic praise.

The Epic Period marked a turbulent phase for the social standing of dance. As seen in Silappadikaaram and Manimeghalai, professional dancers (kanigai-s) struggled against societal prejudice and a lack of social mobility. Despite this social disdain, literature from this period—including the Ainchiru Kaappiam (Five Minor Epics)—provides invaluable codification of dance grammar, stage measurements (5-kol and 8-kol stages), costume aesthetics, hand gestures, and musical synchronization. The epics also capture the transitionary classification of performance styles, distinguishing human-centric emotional songs (Vari) from ritualistic, prayer-based group dances (Varichaandhi). With the advent of the Bhakti Era and the revival under Pallava rule, dance achieved its highest institutional and spiritual elevation. The sacred devotional movement re-contextualized the art: human love was sublimated into divine longing, and the physical stage moved from street corners and courts into the sacred precincts of temples. Lord Shiva became venerated as the ultimate 'Dancing Lord' (Nataraja), and the practice of dance was adopted by devadasis as a sacred duty of divine service. In conclusion, despite the loss of early Tamil grammatical treatises during period transitions and foreign invasions (such as the Kalabhra rule), the essential spirit and technique of Tamil dance survived. It adapted to changing religious paradigms, absorbed cross-regional cultural interactions (such as the Krishna cult), and successfully transitioned from an entertainment medium into a tool for divine liberation. The literary record thus serves as both a testament to the resilience of Tamil dance and a primary source for understanding its architectural, technical, and sociological evolution.

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