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Antiquity of Dance from Vedic period

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Abstract

Introduction: The Vēdas make multiple references to dance and music throughout literature. It demonstrates the joy and prosperity of the Vedic community. The Vedic literature contains several references to dance and music of that era.

Purpose: To analyse how Nāṭya and the position of dancers were seen by the ancient people and to understand dance in the light of anthropology, as well as other social disciplines that deal with origin, historical growth, culture, social norms, and ideologies.

Scope and limitation: Vēdas have been influencing the value and purpose of life throughout the centuries and are valuable, as they supply the materials for the study of diverse subjects such as religion, philosophy, culture, and all fine arts including dance and music. However, this paper is limited to only dance.

Method: The analytical research methodology appears to be more suited for a paper of this nature. It attempts to critically analyse the information.

Findings: Many aspects of dance, music, instruments, and costumes of the Vedic era have been highlighted; therefore, an analytical study necessitated identifying the factors that complement the dance experiment in Vedic literature.

Conclusion: By this, we can understand that no art form would have evolved unless a community was satisfied with its fundamental requirements. Thus, it was a mature culture and a sophisticated civilization are visible to those who thoroughly study the Vēdas. The Vedic and Puranic genealogies indicate a greater antiquity of the Vēdic culture.

Key Words: Early Vedic age, later Vēdic period, Ṛgvēda and atharvanavēda, Dance in Vedic literature and people of Vedic period.

Early Vedic age:

A period of the classical civilization of dance can be traced from the pre-Vedic period. Dance in the Vēdic time was in a developed stage. It occupied a respectful position in the society as the Vēdic sages were well-attached and proficient in Gāndharva śāstra during the pre-Vēdic period.¹

In the pages of the Ṛgvēda, we get references to the art of dance here and there. The phrases like '*nṛtyamāno amṛtha*'² for dancing gods, '*jag³āma nṛtyatey*'⁴ means world of dancing gods, etc. prove that dance was familiar to the Vēdic sages. 'Sāyaṇācārya' explains '*nṛtava*' or '*nartanāya karmaṇi gātra vikṣepāya*'⁵ means moving the body in order to dance, and '*nṛtyanta*' means with dancing.⁶

¹ Article: History of Indian dance, pg.01, Nadsadhana, (institute of Indian music and research center)

² Rigveda,5-33-6

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⁴ Rigveda,10-18-3



In the 'Vēdic sūkta of Ushā', devatā Usha is compared with a lady dancer who comes moving her chest 'adhipesāmsi vapate nrturivapornute vaksha ustreva varjaham'⁷. And in the Prthivī-sūkta of the Atharvavēda, it is said that 'people sing and dance in that earth' 'yasyām gāyanti nṛtyanti bhūmyām martyāḥ'⁸. In the book 'The Chapters of Indian Music' by "Alak Rotary" states that singer (gāyaka), musician (vādaka), and dancer (nartaka), all the three types of artists were available at the time of Vēdas. The dancers took part openly in the concerts of music. All three types of artists got high esteem in the society.

The Vedic civilization enjoyed dancing and singing, especially in the festival samana i.e., a music festival. Women were allowed to take part in Sabhas and Samitis. There were women poets too (Apala, Lopamudra, Viswavara, and Ghosa). Women enjoyed a respectable position and child marriages were not allowed.

Religion and belief of the society are they worshipped natural forces like earth, fire, wind, rain, thunder, etc. by personifying them into deities. Indra (thunder) was the most important deity. Other deities were Prithvi (earth), Agni (fire), Varuṇa (rain) and Vāyu (wind). Female deities were Ushās and Aditi. There were no temples and no idol worshiping in the early Vedic era. All the mandalas of Ṛgvēda were composed based on the above deities, we get references on the art of dance here and there on the above Vedic gods.

Later Vedic period:

The class system was established fully in the society and the caste system became a legendary system, from parents to children. More classes came up to gain livelihood hereditarily. In 'Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa' some classes are mentioned as 'Ayogava, Māgadha, Sūta (dancer) and Sailūsa (gāyaka)' etc. In the "Puruṣa-sūkta" of Vājasaneyī samhitā of Yajurveda it is clearly mentioned that – 'On the occasion of sacrifices, the sūta should be employed in dance and śailūsa in songs 'nṛttāya sūtam gītāya śailūsam'⁹. Thus, it is seen that in Early Vēdic Age and later Vēdic Age dance had a pivotal role in society. From religious sacrifices to festivals, dance flourished all over.

But the dances performed at the time of sacrifices and the festivals like samana etc. were of folk variety. Classical dance was not familiar to all in the society at that time. But as time passed, in the later Vedic period when singing and dancing art became a profession for some classes of people, they needed to be trained up through the way of śāstras¹⁰. In this way, in the later Vedic period tradition of classical dances was composed by the Bharata community. Thus, Nāṭyaśāstra came into existence.

Origin of dance from Vēdas

It is believed that the main and original authors of 'Nāṭyaśāstra' were many with the surname Bharata or people of the Bharata community. All these Bharata's saw the creation of dance art in divine origin. Nāṭyaśāstra reflects the religious consciousness of the Vedic period in saying that Brahma created the fifth Nāṭya Vēda by adding Dance, music, emotions, rhythm, expressions, and rasas from the four Vēdas, in response to Indra's request.

Indian dance has been given the place of the Vēdas, and since the origin of dance is identified with the Vēdas, dance is considered as the Pañcavēda. Nāṭyaśāstra suggests that Brahma, the creator, chose the appropriate features from the four Vēdas and combined them to create. "Parts of speech, dialogue, prayer and poetry" are taken from the Ṛgvēda. "Gestural and expressive, creative performance" from the

⁵ Rigveda, 8-20-22

⁶ Rigveda 1.91.4

⁷ Abhinaya Darpana - A Study, By Sayanika Goswami 2016, ch -2, pg -29

⁸ Puruṣa-sūkta, xxx.6

⁹ Puruṣa-sūkta, xxx.6

¹⁰ <file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/NCERT-Notes-Vedic-Civilization.pdf>



Yajurveda, and “music from the melodious” form of the Sāmaveda, “emotions” from Atharvana veda finally formed Nāṭyasrṣṭi.

Although this idea can be said that “such a consciousness naturally exists or should exist only in the high society which has given Nāṭya the highest position in the social life”.

Dance in Vedic Literature

The proposal of dancing is first seen in the R̥gvēda, in the Vēdic description Indra, Maruta, Ashvins, Gāndharvas, Apsaras, and Bharatas appear as skilled dancers. The poetic vision of the Aryans who wrote the Vēdas equated Ushā Devi, the morning-rising goddess, to a dancer in terms of beauty.

While describing the morning sunlight in the R̥gvēda, there is a reference to “the veil of darkness that covers the earth is moving away and made the earth brighter like a dancer moving her clothes. And thus, Ushā is compared to a dancer. This is the first mention of a dancer in the art of dance from antiquity.¹¹

In Vēdic literature, the term 'Shilpaka' is applied to the art of creation and expression through the three mediums of instrumental music, singing, and dancing. While describing the dance of deities, it is indicated in the R̥gvēda as '*Nritya mano amritah*'. In the Atharvana Vēda, there is an exact usage of the word 'Nruth'. The use of the word 'dance' and 'gita' is frequently found in Vēdic literature. “*Nritya Sutam Geetaya Shailoosham*” has been used in Yajnas. The reference to ritual dancing is found in many parts of Vedic literature like Taittirēya Samhita, Tāṇḍya Brāhmaṇa, Aittirēya Araṇyaka, Budhāyana Śautā Sūtra, Āpastambha Śautā Sūtra, Kāvyaṇyana Śautā Sūtra.¹²

In the Vēdic period, dance was used as part of a ritual to please the deities. When Indian dance became a medium to convey the mysterious actions of the Supreme Lord in various ways, based on religious principles, in an understandable way to the masses, its significance increased. The idea of Gāndharvas and Apsaras who mastered the arts of music and dance became firm.

"The Vēdas include references to dancing gods. The Rig Vēda describes Indra as someone who also made people dance and delight themselves. Following are the verses related to dance from rigvēda (Rigvēda 1-130-7, 2-22-4, 8-24-9, 8-24-12, 8-92-2, 8-92-3)"

1.130.07: “भिनत्पुरो नवतिमिन्द्र पूरवे दिवोदासाय महि दाशुषे नृतो वज्रेण दाशुषे नृतो”

2.022.04: “तव त्यन्नर्यं नृतोऽप इन्द्र प्रथमं पूर्वं दिवि प्रवाच्यं कृतम् ।¹³

8.024.09: “इन्द्र यथा ह्यस्ति तेऽपरीतं नृतो शवः “

8.024.12: “नह्यङ्ग नृतो त्वदन्यं विन्दामि राधसे “

8.092.02: “पुरुहूतं पुरुष्टुतं गाथान्यं सनश्रुतम् “

8.092.03: “इन्द्र इन्नो महानां दाता वाजानां नृतुः “

Indra’s close associates the Mārutas and the Ashvins, are also dancers. As the leaders of a troupe of dancers, the Mārutas are extolled. Dancing and singing are also attributed to Ashvini’s, who dances in association with Sūrya. Dancing is one of the accomplishments of these gods.

(R̥gvēda 5-52-12, 8-20-22, 6-63-5)

5.052.12: “छन्दःस्तुभः कुभन्यव उत्समा कीरिणो नृतुः ।”

8.020.22: “मर्तश्चिद्रो नृतवो रुक्मवक्षस उप भ्रातृत्वमायति ।“

6.063.05: “प्र मायाभिर्मायिना भूतमत्र नरा नृतू जनिमन्यज्ञियानाम् ॥“

Dancing Nymphs (Apsaras)

The concept of nymphs is closely related to the dancing gods. They are consorts of the Gāndharvas (R̥gvēda 10-123-5, 7-33-9, 7-33-12, 7-10-95, 10-132-6)¹⁴ but do not belong to the category of

¹¹ Sahithya Mattu Nruthya by Choodamani Nandagopal Pg 5

¹² Ibid (10) pg-2

¹³ <https://advocatetanamoy.com/2019/07/08/rig-veda-second-mandala/>

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¹⁴ Research Article “Dance in Vedas” No.1766; Dated 1April 2015. Written by London Swaminathan



gods; they are the semi-divine people. Gāndharvas are praised as celestial singers. They are also associated with dance and music in later literature. By the time of Atharva Vēda, they became Indra's favorite dancers.

The apsaras (water nymphs) are more frequently found in the White Yajurveda than in the R̥gvēda. Urvāsi and Menaka are mentioned in Yajurveda (15-15-19), also Sahajanya, who represent portions of the sky, heaven, or earth. They are the consorts of the Gāndharvas.

10.123.05: “अप्सरा जारमुपसिष्मियाणा योषा बिभर्ति परमे व्योमन् ।”

10.132.06: “युवोर्हि मातादितिर्विचेतसा द्यौरन भूमिः पयसा पुपूतनि “

10.132.06: “अव प्रिया दिदिष्टन सूरौ निनिक्त रश्मिभिः ॥”

7.033.09: “यमेन ततं परिधिं वयन्तोऽप्सरस उप सेदुर्वसिष्ठाः ॥”

7.033.12: “यमेन ततं परिधिं वयिष्पन्नप्सरसः परि जज्ञे वसिष्ठः ॥”¹⁵

Description of the Āpsaras as dancing with the Gāndharvas are found in abundance in Atharvana Vēda (AV 4-37-1, 4-37-4, 4-37-5). Men and women sang and danced and they gathered in the assembly house (AV 7-12-2) ‘Sabha’, which was a meeting place for social entertainment including dance and music.

The hymn addressed to the Earth (AV. 12-1-1, 12-1-41) presents a picture of joyous life, where the mortals sing and dance. Dancing Gāndharvas and the Āpsaras help us visualize the picture of a society where dancing and music were regarded as an integral part of everyday life, whether in joy or in sorrow, as a profession, or as an important communal activity.

Indra, Rudra, Ūrvaśi, and the other apsaras are among the deities that are frequently mentioned in the Yajurveda His companions, the Ashvin's, the twin light gods, however, dance and represent the sustaining and took the initiative power of dawn the whip is compared to an expert female dancer.

People of Vedic age

People believed that dance was a powerful medium for purifying the soul and taking it out of darkness and evil thoughts, they elevated their state of themselves and the audience mind through consistency in practice and presentation of dance respectively

Initially, the people of the Vēdic era worked very hard and built a systematic and solid lifestyle. They lived in the land known as “Sapta Sindhu” (Land of the Seven Rivers). These seven rivers were: Sindhu, Vipāś, Vitastā, Paruṣṇi, Āsikni, Shutudri and Sarasvati. The tribal kingdoms are Bharatas, Matsyas, Yadus and Purus and their social assemblies were called Sabhas and Samitis.¹⁶

As the Vēdic Rishis give great importance to ritual worshipping and literary form of beauty, it is said that during the Yajna times like Mahavrata, Kumbhadasis danced around the homakuṇḍa called Marjaliya, carrying honey-filled pots on their heads. During Mahāvratayajña since they were offering in homa, sages wanted the rituals leading up to their Homa to be artistically beautiful at the same time 'Nartana' is the main sport for the kumbhadāsis and they were well worse in divine dance “Natya”. So, basis of the fact that after performing of homa, kumbhadāsis were assigned for serving such special task. perhaps in future these dancers might have been recognised as devadāsis.¹⁷

The Vēdic women had something like Garba or the Maypole dance. At least three women should be present for this ceremonial dance. Sometimes six or eight people can participate. There is a description in the Vēdas that they carry Kumbhās on their heads, tapping their right thighs with their right hands, holding Kumbhās in their left hands and chanting 'Ehaya Ehaya Ehaya, Idam Madhum Idam Madhu'¹³

¹⁵ <https://advocatetanmoy.com/2019/07/08/rig-veda-seventh-mandala/?hilite=rig+veda+seventh+mandala>

¹⁶ Nruthyaloka by Muralidhar Rao 1998

¹⁷ More about Bharatanatyam in the Vedas! Vlog article by swamynathan 2015



Every aspect of existence is viewed in that culture as the subject of divine drama. people of Vedic age were aware that each stage of existence is an experience, every movement of people or things is an emotion. Similarly, Vedic society accepted the play of such Kumbhadasis as a divine principle. People devotedly watched the exquisite dance being done by kumbhādāsīs very excitedly.

Conclusion

The Vēdas are regarded as the source of all Indian knowledge, including science, art, and other fields. The origin of entire Indian knowledge is believed to be from the Vēdas.

The Vēdas provide several, clear mention references to the dance from place to place. The expressions "Nṛityamāno Amrit," "Jagam Nṛityaye," nṛtava, etc. demonstrate that dance was well-known to the Vedic era.

The performance of these Vedic hymns on the occasion of Yagya, singing and dancing were performed alongside the chanting of these hymns.

They danced as a kind of prayer to the gods. This also refers to successful hunting. Repetition and tradition gave rise to rituals and established patterns. These sacred dances likely occurred in a circle, around a (holy) tree or sacrificial site like yagnas, Later, in a temple. Artist of all three types i.e., singer, dancer and instrument player were enjoyed a sophisticated life and contributed to the art during this Vedic era.

Thus, it is seen that in Early Vēdic Age and later Vēdic Age dance had a pivotal role in society. From religious sacrifices to festivals, dance flourished all over. The subject Dance brought from the ancient era and has been serving till to the present days is its greatest antiquity. Thus, the art of dance indicates a greater antiquity of the Vedic culture.

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