

# Significance of Dance Songs in Tamil Films from 1940 to 1960

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**Abstract: Bharatanatyam, a temple-dance-form got revived with a steep change in the perspective of the common man in Tamil Nadu, which can be mainly attributed to the exuberance of artists and Nattuvanars who performed classical, semi-classical, and folk dance-forms in Tamil films which slowly removed the social stigma attached with that dance-form.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

For centuries Tamil Nadu remained the cradle of arts, since the Sangam epoch. Based on the rich culture, traditions, customs, and heritage, many structured art-forms blossomed from Tamil Nadu.

Dance, the refined form of human culture, is the expression of emotions. Classical dance and folkdance-forms got generated in Tamil Nadu by many stalwarts. Patronage of the then-ruling- kings, peaceful life and cordial, humanitarian-relationship among the citizens activated the latent talents in them and thus art forms emerged out of their hearts.

The growth of Iyal, Isai, Natakam viz. Prose, poetry, and drama was boundless. Bharathanatyam, was sterling one and many parallel folk dances in basic forms, known as Koothu were also found in Ainthinai era (Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Neithal and Palai).

Dance is an expression of the emotions of a person and that is how it originated. In due course it got refined into various forms. When Bharatanatyam had a structured form based on Bharatha muni's guidelines, folk dances were performed for generations in social community life of people. Devarattam, Kai-Silambattam, Bommalattam (Puppet show) Kolattam, Kaman Pandigai, Kolattam, Graham, and many more tribal dances are followed even today. When Iyal (Prose) and Natakam (Drama) gained momentum, there was a stagnation point for Bharatanatyam.

## II. BHARATANATYAM - ITS FALL AND RISE

The Sadir dance format was performed by Devadasis (Temple or Court Dancers) in a dignified manner. They were patronized by the ruling king or by the authorized dignitaries. But at a later date, it was ruined by few Devadasis. Due to lack of financing sources, they happened to yield to the wishes of the chieftains and other wealthy persons and lost their dignified status. This stigma made people to get away from dance and it slowly got deteriorated and nobody came forward to perform dance. Contrarily, other folk dances survived during temple festivals or domestic functions. How Bharatanatyam got revived to the present glory is very interesting.

Rukmini Devi Arundale portrays this situation in "Indian Dance" beautifully:

"The Sadir was performed by Devadasis on all auspicious occasions in temples, palaces, and the houses of the people in general. South India developed the tradition that no auspicious occasion was complete without music or Sadir. Though in later days, the Sadir, unfortunately, developed sensual characteristics, which almost brought about the extinction of the art. It must also be remembered that the Devadasis preserved both the technique and the spirit of the dance tradition. They were dedicated to the temples and this was no mere formalities but a real dedication, for when they danced during the temple festivals or rituals, they became the personification of pure devotion." [1]

"Originally in Sadir, too, the songs were religious though Narastuti or praise of kings and other patrons became common later. This also led to the descent of the art to a lower level." [2]

The first Tamil Talkie in 1931 Kalidas and the subsequent movies created a flutter in Tamil Nadu. The talking- singing characters and above all dancing characters lured them. Initially, women refused to act in films as the impact created by the Devadasis and their Sadir stigma still hovered over their mind. But in due course, women from decent families accepted roles in Tamil films and the audience gradually accepted the art of dancing. A refined form of Bharatanatyam and folk dances slowly erupted on the silver screen.

Films such as Thyaga Bhoomi and Meera were instrumental in changing cinematic vision and values. Kumari Kamala with her lighting speed movements made dance sequences in films adorable and popularized Bharathiyar's songs. [3] Vyjanthimala was another star, who allured the audience with her unique style of performing the Bharathanatyam. Sayee and Subbulakshmi popularly known as Pambara Sahodarigal or quick dancers had their stamp of uniqueness on the screen. Travancore sisters Lalitha, Padmini, and Ragini arriving from classical dance stages set the silver screen on blaze with their performance.

The performance of these artists, accompanied by classical music with neat picturization made the audience recognize the purity and divinity of dance. There was a period, when a decent family man could never think of giving dance education to his sister or daughter, nor speculate on educating them with such art. But the contribution of these artists, Bharathanatyam bloomed again with bright colors.

During the period between 1950 and 1960, many parents named their daughters Lalitha, Padmini, Ragini, Vyjayanthimala, Kamala, etc., and started engaging Dance masters (Nattuvanars) to teach their children Bharatanatyam. In those days one could find at least one Lalitha or one Kamala or one Padmini or one Vyjayanthi in any class-room. Bharatanatyam arangetram (first stage performance) for their child was a symbol of status and dignity for them.

### III. INFLUENCING DANCE SEQUENCES IN TAMIL FILMS

Bharatanatyam dance sequence in films lured even the layman, has to be mentioned here. Without any basic knowledge of this art, irrespective of the status, the viewer got attracted by the dance. Bharatanatyam sequences accompanied by good, pure Carnatic music, presented in a neat visual medium, made the layman view this with so much absorption. They ultimately created positive perspective impact on classical dances.

The role of Nattuvanars (Dance composers/ Dance directors) was much commendable. They rejuvenated this art and modernized it without disrupting the authenticity of the ancient art, with a pep presented on the screen, which could draw the attention of the audience.

Before 1960, Tamil Cinemas had a number of songs, i.e. 60 to 70 songs approximately. This concept was narrowed down gradually and a limited number of songs with an adequate number of dances was introduced. To reshape this design, Nattuvanars played significant role.

Table 1: Few songs to illustrate how classical dance was incorporated into films

Film	Year	Artist	Song
VanjikottaiValiban	1958	Vyjayanthimala and Padmini	<a href="#">KannumKannumKalanthu</a> <sup>[4]</sup>
Mannadhi Mannan	1960	Padmini	<a href="#">AadadhaManamum Undo</a> <sup>[5]</sup>
Raja Desingu	1960	Padmini	<a href="#">Paal KadalAlaimele</a> <sup>[6]</sup>
Parthiban Kanavu	1960	Kumari Kamala	<a href="#">Munnam Avan</a> <sup>[7]</sup>

### IV. INFLUENCING ARTISTS

Artists too played a significant role to transform Bharathanatyam into a refined performing art, mentioned below are a few:

#### A) KUMARI KAMALA:

Kamala entered filmdom as dancer Baby Kamala. She was a dancer, actor, and dance teacher. She performed in more than 100 films. Her agile, sterling performance lured almost all, which created a taste of learning Bharatanatyam. Her perfection in art and dedication earned a great name.

Table 2: Few few songs to illustrate the contribution of Kumari Kamala.

Film	Year	Artist	Song
Parthiban Kanavu	1960	Kumari Kamala	<a href="#">AndhiMayanguthadi</a> <sup>[8]</sup>
Parthiban Kanavu	1960	Kumari Kamala	<a href="#">VadiveyruThirisoolam</a> <sup>[9]</sup>

#### B) LALITHA, PADMINI, AND RAGINI

Popularly known as Travancore Sisters, hailing from Kerala swayed the film world with their impeccable dance presentation, drew the entire attention of all film-goers and entire residents of Tamil Nadu. Almost all Indians were charmed by their beauty, performance, dancing style and dedication.

Table 3: Few songs illustrate the contribution of the Travancore Sisters.

Film	Year	Artist	Song
Kannika	1947	Lalitha and Padmini	<a href="#">Shiva Thandavam</a> <sup>[10]</sup>
Kaveri	1955	Lalitha and Ragini	<a href="#">SingaraRegayil</a> <sup>[11]</sup>
Mallika	1957	Padmini	<a href="#">Neela Vanna Kannane</a> <sup>[12]</sup>
Maragatham	1959	Padmini	<a href="#">MaalaiMayangukindraNeram</a> <sup>[13]</sup>

#### C) VYJAYANTHIMALA

Another giant in the Bharatanatyam field was Vyjayanthimala. At the age of 13 years, she proved her caliber as an unmatched dancer, which took her to great heights, en route from Tamil Films to Hindi Stardom and she became a national star, with the forte of Bharatanatyam and other classical dances.

Table 4: Few songs to illustrate the contribution of Vyjayanthimala.

Film	Year	Artist	Song
Vazhkai	1949	Vyjayanthimala	<a href="#">BharathaSamudhaayam</a> <sup>[14]</sup>
VanjikottaiValiban	1958	Vyjayanthimala	<a href="#">Raja MagalRoja Malar</a> <sup>[15]</sup>

### V. FOLK DANCES

Irrespective of the artists, one common aspect governed them all. That was folk dance. This could attract all categories of viewers, due to its simple form with which the viewers were already familiar with. Folk dance could easily penetrate to the grass-root level and hence instantly became popular. Knowing things the filmmakers, invariably introduced at least one of this kind in their films. As the movements and music were very rudimentary, the viewers tried it by themselves, especially children, could copycat it.

Table 5: Few songs illustrate the contribution of folk dance.

Film	Year	Artist	Song
Mangalya Bhagyam	1958	Padmini and Ragini	<a href="#">Imaya Malaya</a> <sup>[16]</sup>
Amara Deepam	1956	Padmini and Others	<a href="#">NadodiKoottam</a> <sup>[17]</sup>

### VI. CONCLUSION

A few samples presented above elucidate the gradual transformation of the mindset of filmgoers during the period 1940 to 1960. In the early stage of 1940, there was not much scope for performing dance in the films and gradually that trend inclined to observe, enjoy and learn the art of dancing. During the later part of this specified period of 1940 to 1960, there was hardly any movie without a dance sequence, either classical or folk. Viewers revered songs and dance to that extent. Girls of that age were mad after them and throbbed to learn Bharatanatyam, which was now 'pure' with esteem. Bharatanatyam no more remained anathema. Contrarily it opened new vistas of pure art.

It inferred that their perspective on Sadir gradually shifted to a venerable dancing art. Many dance schools and many dance classes threw open their doors to aspiring learners, which paved the way to present-day dancers in multitude.

As times are changing, the dance form in Tamil Films has also transformed and made acceptable by the audience. The consoling fact is that even in recent Bharatanatyam- theme oriented movies this art is justified and presented in utmost pristine format.

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