

Vidhya Sridhar

Professor Kahn

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### **The Notation of Bharatanatyam using Labanotation**

Summary: Essentially a solo dance, the sculptural poses of Bharatanatyam have the chiseled sophistication of the great temple carvings of Tamil Nadu in South India. A dedicatory dance, Bharatanatyam was considered a divine art which celebrated, beyond the rapture of the body, the purification of the spirit. A fully developed notation system of this dance form has not been attempted in the past.

This article discusses the possibility of notating Bharatanatyam using Labanotation. The difficulty of notating a dance form which uses varying footwork, hand gestures and facial expressions will be exposed. Various examples in these categories will be taken for close examination and notated.

The discussion of Labanotation/Western dance and Bharatanatyam by other authors will be explored to see the differences. The end result in terms of the use of notation in Bharatanatyam, in teaching methods, the performance of dance, the choreography of group and solo productions, etc. will be questioned.

Essentially a solo dance, the sculptural poses of Bharatanatyam have the chiseled sophistication of the great temple carvings of Tamil Nadu in South India. A dedicatory dance, Bharatanatyam was considered a divine art which celebrated, beyond the rapture of the body, the purification of the spirit. In its present form, Bharatanatyam developed in South India about two hundred years ago, its thematic and musical content being given to it by the musicians of the Tanjore courts of the 18th-19th centuries. The key posture of the body, with its erect torso, bent knees and out-turned feet gives the dance form a symmetry and geometric grace, enhanced by eloquent and expressive use of the eyes and face. Labanotation is the term used in the United States to refer to the system of Movement notation invented by Rudolph von Laban. In Europe, and some other parts of the world, Laban's system is called Kinetography Laban. The system was first published in 1927.

Is Labanotation suitable for notating Bharatanatyam? What can be revealed by such an attempt? Can it be used as a teaching aid? The notation of the various nuances in facial expression seems impossible at first glance. But the '*nrtta*' (technical) aspects of the dance form give more hope to one who might undertake this endeavor. Each step, gesture and movement of body has to be taken separately and notated. Given the nature of Labanotation which allows any movement to be notated, this would not be too difficult although time consuming. These then have to be put together as one would build blocks.

### ***Rasa & Indian Dance.....***

"Laban looked upon movement as a two way language process through which the human body could communicate by giving and receiving messages." (Newlove 11). The Indian theory of '*rasa*' (sentiment) works on this principle. The performer communicates with the spectator and receives messages from the spectator and the resulting sentiment is *rasa*. Indian performance is deeply dependent upon *rasa* for its sustenance. When the mind thinks what the heart feels, and the body communicates what the mind thinks, that is '*bhava*' (psychological states) are communicated, *rasa* is the result. This is true to all Indian performance be it drama, dance, music, sculpture etc. all of which are united by the aesthetic theory of *rasa*.. *Rasa* has two aspects, the evoked state and the sentiments. For the Indian artist, regardless of the field he worked in artistic creation is the supreme means of realizing the Universal Being. Therefore the added element of spirituality gives Indian art its uniqueness.

Through a beautiful and complete language of movement, Indian dance provides the most concrete manifestation of the inner state. Indian dance has two aspects: the *nrtta* (pure or technical dance) and *nrtya* (mime, gesticulation). The *nrtta* portion depends on the music and rhythm and the *nrtya* portion on the theme of the narrative or literary composition which is sung. Bharatanatyam, which "is perhaps the oldest among the contemporary classical dance forms of India" (Vatsyayan, Indian Classical Dance

15), makes full use of these two aspects. The technique of movement which this dance form follows can be traced back to the fifth Century AD. from sculptural evidence. But the present format which this dance form follows is credited to four brothers known as the Tanjore Brothers, who lived during the 19th Century. The repertoire as it is danced today was conceived by them.

***Labanotation.....***

"Labanotation is the term used in the United States to refer to the system of Movement notation invented by Rudolph Van Laban. The system was first published in 1927". "Labanotation is a system for recording movement of all kinds and is useful, therefore, not only in dance but also in sports, scientific research, and many other areas". "Before action can be written down, it must be understood and this means analysis, breaking down what is contained in the movement". (Hackney, Manno, Topaz, 1). Labanotation has essentially been used to notate Western dance so far. The system essentially consists of a staff with three lines, the center line dividing the body through the center. The right and left support columns are on either side of the center line and right and left leg gestures are on the inside columns of the outer lines. The body column is just outside the outer line on either side and right and left arm gesture columns on the outer sides of the body column. The head is given the column next to the right arm gesture column only on one side.

L	B	L	L	R	R	B	R	H
	O					O		E
A	D	L	S	S	L	D	A	A
r	Y	e	u	u	e	Y	r	D
m		g	p	p	g		m	
G		G	p	p	G		G	
e		e	o	o	e		e	
s		s	r	r	s		s	
t		t	t	t	t		t	
u		u			u		u	
r		r			r		r	
e		e			e		e	

The system works on four aspects:

- Part moving which is shown by placement of symbol on the staff
- Direction shown by shape of symbol      Eg. L Side:              R Forward Diagonal:
- Timing shown by length of symbol      Eg. 1/4 beat: 4 sqs.              1/8 beat: 2 sqs.
  
- Level shown by shading of symbol      Eg. High:              Low:              Middle:

This is the basic structure on which the system is based but it gives scope for expansion as the staff can be extended on either side. It is a comprehensive system covering every minute detail from head to toe that one might come across when notating. From my short study of Labanotation, I have come to understand that one is likely to come across very few if any aspects of movement that are not covered by Labanotation.

Notation of Indian dance has been attempted only with stick figures and the latest addition is a more systematic notation using stick figures in the dance forms of Kerala. Notation should not be used as a form of shorthand but as a means to understand the dance more in detail and specifically the style that is represented. Notation of an Indian dance form using symbols as in Labanotation has not been attempted so far, or if attempted, has not been published. From my study of Labanotation, I have concluded that it is possible to notate at least some aspects of Bharatanatyam using this system. It would be a laborious effort that might take years to perfect because of the various intricate hand gestures (28 single-hand and 24 double-hand) and facial expressions involved but if a dictionary can be established for the gestures, an abbreviated form can be used to shorten the process. Such a dictionary will have to contain a glossary explaining in detail what each mark means. A shortened version of each hand gesture will have to be established to immediately identify the hand gesture. The student of

Indian dance is familiar with these hand gestures and their names and once these abbreviated versions are accepted, they will not be difficult to read.

### ***Western & Indian Dance.....***

Western dance places emphasis on space, its coverage, the relationship between the dancer and the space around her etc. Western dance strives to eliminate space by covering as much of it as possible, whether it is floor-space or space in the air. "The Western dancer is reaching out into space in order to arrest a moment of perfect movement: he strives for spacelessness at a point of time" (Vatsyayan, Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts 27). Indian dance with its sculptural quality is more preoccupied with time where the dancer is constantly trying to achieve the perfect pose that will convey a sense of timelessness. That is why, with the exception of a couple, Indian dance forms do not consist of large leaps and jumps. Some of the aspects of Labanotation will not be used in notating Bharatanatyam, for such movements do not exist. For example, the *releve* in Western dance which is standing on the tips of the toes or the balls of the feet, is never used in Indian dance. Such aspects will have to be omitted and a separate set of usages unique to Bharatanatyam will have to be set up. The difference in the emphasis given by Western dance and Indian dance makes this a difficult task and the end result may not fully capture the essence of the dance. But that can be derived only from viewing a live performance as any Indian dancer or lover of Indian dance knows and this is probably true of Western dance too.

### ***Building Blocks.....***

One steps into such an endeavor with the knowledge that it will take years to formulate a comprehensive study of such material. However, the beginning reveals that it is possible. Bharatanatyam has as its foundation the '*araimandi*' or '*ardhamandala*' position in which

the dancer turns both feet out and sits or lowers the level half way down. *Arai* means half and *mandi* is the sitting position. The dancer stays in this position during most of the time while dancing. Various rhythmic patterns are woven by the feet while staying in one place or moving about. The hands form different gestures that enhance the beauty of the movement. In *nrtta* (technical dance), the body forms various geometric patterns in relation to space and the angular, chiseled movements are evident, especially in poses which freeze the ancient nature of this art form. Footwork is based on various mathematical patterns to which the dancer dances accompanied by the *mridangam* (South Indian drum). In *nrtta*, the hand gestures do not convey any meaning. They beautify and enhance the movement that is being performed, making it more enjoyable. In performing *abhinaya*, the narration of a story or conversational pieces based on love etc., the hands are used along with the face to convey the meaning that the dancer wants to enact. Subtle movements of the neck and head add to the strength of this language. The eyes play an extremely important role in speaking volumes and when the dancer is good, it is as if the rest of the face and the hands are just inevitable additions. I have seen some excellent dancers even avoid the usage of the hands in some pieces, as in such pieces, they become more of an encumbrance. The breath plays a very important part in both *nrtta* and *abhinaya*. "The breath/energy release is a release into a configuration of facial muscles in which is encoded the message, "pleasure/erotic" or "fury". It is the correct control of the breath/energy that makes these otherwise mechanical facial configurations live with presence. (Zarrilli 142). The Indian dancer and musician are taught to breathe from the *nabhi* (navel region), giving life to the movement or expression.

In trying to notate using Labanotation, I have taken the dance unit by unit, and once these are notated they can be put together as sequences and eventually as pieces. The Bharatanatyam dancer maintains throughout her dance, the stance called *araimandi*, literally meaning half sitting position, which is like the second position in ballet, except deeper, for the dancer has to go down half way in level. All the categories of steps with

the exception of one, make use of the araimandi. When the dancer begins her training, she first learns what are called *adavus* (steps) or units of dance. Starting out with simple patterns, these get more and more complicated rhythmically and physically. The use of legs and feet are accounted for in great detail and one can take examples of certain Spanish folk dances such as Flamenco when referring to the accented footwork. I have tried to see if these adavus can be notated one by one. For example, let us take the first two: *Thattadavu* and *Nattadavu*. In Thattadavu, the dancer sits in araimandi position and stamps her feet alternating between the right and left. Starting with one on each foot, she builds up to five, and each is done in three speeds. This is how the first step in Thattadavu would be notated using Labanotation:

The hands are just held at the waist and are not performing any action. There are totally twelve categories of steps and as I said before, each gets more complicated than the previous one. As a dancer who has had several years of training, I ceased to think about my movements a long time ago and just enjoy performing them. But in this process, I am re-discovering each fundamental unit by analyzing it in great detail, for even the tiniest of

movements cannot be omitted in notating. I had to always keep the thought in the back of my mind that anyone who reads these must be able to perform them as I have envisioned, especially when it comes to whole pieces set to music. In order to do this the fundamentals have to be completely taken apart and notated.

Hand gestures in Bharatanatyam are the most complicated to notate, especially because there are no equivalents that have been used in Western dance. There are some common supports and leg gestures to both styles of dancing making the work less tedious as there are previous examples to learn from. The same is the case with arm gestures which are notated according to their relationship with space and with the body. When it comes to hand gestures, each finger has to be analyzed to see which joint is being bent, which fingers are in contact and at what point. There are 28 single hand gestures (with 3 different kinds for one of them) and 24 double hand gestures codified by *Abhinayadarpana*, a treatise on Indian dance. Among the single hand gestures, 13 of them do not consist of any finger contact and 17 of them maintain finger contact. I have shown examples of notation of some of the single hand gestures (*assamyuta hastaha*):

Notated as

*Pathaka* (flag)

(no contact)

*Tripathaka* (3 parts of a flag)

(no contact)

*Kartarimukaha* (Scissors)

(with contact)

*Mushtischa* (fist)

(with contact)

When we get into the more complicated ones consisting of each finger spread out in a different direction and some in contact, several such drawings will have to be used.

These hand gestures can be used in technical as well as mimetic parts of Bharatanatyam. When used in technical dance, the relationship of the hand to the body and space, i.e. where it is held, the flexion of the hand etc. have to be shown. When used in conveying meaning, the hand gestures take on different meanings according to the situation in which they are used. Apart from the relationship to the body and space, this brings up the new dimension of the meaning that is being conveyed which can be expressed only through words. The body (chest, torso), the head, face, eyes etc. are also to be studied in relation to the body and to space. Again their usage in technical dance is easier to interpret than their usage in mimetic dance.

### ***Results.....***

It is clear from my analysis that Labanotation is a comprehensive system of notation which can be used to notate Bharatanatyam although it may be a laborious task. Labanotation covers all the aspects of technical dance but the expressive portions of dance are not fully accounted for. We can find movements of every part of the face such as eyes, eyebrows, mouth etc. But the expression itself cannot be written through notation. Indian dance is very heavily dependent on the expressions of the face which is what gives it its unique nature and adds a sublime quality. Labanotation is therefore not very suitable to notate expressions of the face in Indian dance. We now have to analyze the purpose that such work will serve. Today, Bharatanatyam is taught all over the world and has been accepted universally as a popular form of Indian dance. Schools in India as well as abroad use various methods of training to impart this art form in a way very different from that of our ancestors. Some have incorporated certain western methods along with traditional ones to their benefit. But essentially, teaching of this art form remains as it was, that is handed down from teacher to student, the relationship between the two being a sacred one. Some teachers are performers themselves while others are not. But the Bharatanatyam performance is undergoing a major upheaval in the nature of

its repertoire. Group dances are becoming more the norm where solo once held reign. This is mainly due to the fact that scores of dancers debut every year, most of whom are not efficient as solo dancers but maybe good as group dancers. This is not to say that excellent solo dancers do not exist. But those who can hold sway over an audience for two hours all by themselves are few and far between. Schools are producing more and more group productions due to its demand by the audience also, since they get to see several dancers in one show. Also, the repertoire available for group productions varies from mythological themes to modern social issues giving more scope for the choreographer. The intricate patterns that can be put together with a group of good dancers is an excellent prospect to a good choreographer. In such occasions, notation of dance may come to be useful. When the essential choreography of a production is complete, it can be notated for the dancers to learn. Although during a production, choreography is an ongoing process which does not end until the dancers are on stage. But the end product can be notated which may be used by future dancers who may be filling in for certain others in various roles. This would save time in having to teach these new dancers everything from scratch. Uniformity among dancers is also established especially in intricate group pieces as notation is very specific and detailed in describing movements. Notation also serves the purpose of studying a certain style or the work of a certain artist or school by future students of dance. Video does not do justice several times in studying the style since only one aspect of the dance may be enhanced at any given time. But it can be used along with notation for deeper analysis.

Solo dance can be notated for the purpose of studying the style of a particular artist. His/her style may change over the years and this can be analyzed by interested students of dance. Again, videos do not do justice due to the same reasons mentioned above but can be used along with notation. Care should be taken to see that the work of a solo dancer is not copied by other students by studying notation although pointers in style may be derived. Although one may watch and learn, solo dancers are born and not made.

Notation can also be used as a teaching aid since it allows the dancer to gain a keen sense of the way their body moves and whether it is in line technically. By reading the notation and comparing with other students, the dancer can realize the correctness or otherwise of her postures or steps. At the basic level, it can be very helpful to interact with other students, for example, by checking each other while reading the notation to make sure that no technical mistakes are made. A three degree bend should be as such and a quarter turn out of the feet should be exactly that. At this stage, the personality of the student does not figure in her performance. It would only intrude. But once the technique is established, the dancer must concentrate more on bringing out the inner self through these movements. "The actor has to probe beyond this outer shell and search for an inner attitude, whether conscious or unconscious, which is directly linked to the movements observed". (Newlove 12). Beyond this, the dancer has to concentrate on what her body and mind are trying to express, and how her body is working compared to another's. If everybody danced in the same way, art would not have grown to this extent. During the short time that I have worked with Labanotation, I have come to understand in a small way, how my body moves as compared to other dancers. Dancers are the only ones who cannot experience how their body moves as it is in progress as outsiders. "Once we know WHERE we are going in space, we must observe and analyze HOW we are going and WHAT KIND OF MOVEMENT ENERGY we use". (Newlove 13). Detailed study can help a student realize their body movements and become more in touch with their own performance than they would otherwise be. The student can also use notation while studying other performances to learn what is right or wrong. In other words, it makes the dancer think more and be more in touch with themselves.

Among the aspects of Bharatanatyam, nrnta or technical dance is more suitable for notation as it involves bodily movements which can be defined within certain limits. But abhinaya or facial expression used to convey stories is best left alone because each person expresses in an entirely different way. The teacher may convey the meaning to be

expressed and its purpose in any particular circumstance, but the advanced student may interpret it in any number of ways depending upon their personality and several other factors. Just like human emotions cannot be notated, abhinaya which is based on human emotions can also not be notated. It is better off studied by watching a good performer at work than through notation. It may be used to study the work of dancers who are not alive or who no longer perform but in this case, a close up video might do more justice, in my opinion.

Bharatanatyam has gained worldwide recognition due to the work of several pioneering artists starting with Balasaraswati one of the most well known to the western audience. Work in fields such as Labanotation could place it more extensively on the world map by causing more understanding by those who are not familiar with this art form. "Most Westerners, in their initial encounter with Asian masters of in-body disciplines are so overwhelmed by the sheer virtuosity of technique, the fluidity of practice, and the powerful presence of the performer that both "what" that virtuosity is and "how" the performer achieves that state is left unexplored." (Zarrilli, 131). Although dancers of any culture communicate very well, understanding of each others art is arrived at only with very deep study. But through Labanotation, a common link may be established allowing more cross cultural bonds to develop and a deeper understanding of the art without the awe. This helps in better appreciation of the art form. This may further help in the production of cross cultural works with ease.

When watching many of the Bharatanatyam performances in India, one is aware of a dwindling of quality due to the proliferation of bad teachers. The number of bad dancers are increasing at an alarming rate when compared to the number of good ones who can be counted with the fingertips. The teaching methods are mainly to blame as some teachers are enamored by quick money and fame at the expense of quality. The senior and good teachers need to take responsibility to establish a training center where

training methods are imparted, thus making at least a small dent. Systems such as notation could be taught to enhance understanding.

***Caution.....***

One must however keep in mind that notation is not the ultimate answer to everything. It may help improve technique, but good technique alone does not make an artist. The dancer will evoke rasa only when emotionally involved in the performance. Care should be taken to understand that Labanotation is not a way of learning to dance. It is a way to analyze and understand movement thus contributing to better body alignment. But it would certainly make a stronger dancer with more awareness.

The traditional nature of this art form also brings up the question of acceptance of such work. Over the years, *nattuvanars* or traditional conductors and teachers of dance have been imparting training in this dance form. Today, only a few who belong to this tradition remain. Most of the teachers today are performers themselves who are educated and widely traveled, thus being exposed to much more than their predecessors. They are willing to explore new ideas and incorporate new elements into their choreography. Although many of the *nattuvanars* introduced pioneering changes in their choreography, they were not very learned in terms of theory or exposure to world cultures. But today's artists are different. I have recently seen two or three productions by well known Indian artists that were very thought provoking and left a deep impression in my mind. This is not to say that tradition does not have its values, for the work of these artists were also rooted in traditional art. The ideas were what were different making it a refreshing change for the audience who has witnessed one too many traditional performances. Conferences and lecture-demonstrations on dance are becoming more and more informative in a worldly sense and contribute greatly to the knowledge of an interested student. A subject such as notation will, in my opinion, be welcomed and discussed

earnestly. It will open doors to other scholars who have done research in such a field but have so far remained unknown. The uses and results of such work will be questioned and

suggestions given, contributing more to the work. But it may take several years for it to become part of teaching methods or recording of performances; to be accepted as another useful method of recording the work of our artists. The years to come will have to show the outcome.

It would be interesting to find out what *Nataraja*, the Lord of Dance would think about notation of his dance and his all encompassing pose:

Note: Only the immediate right and left arms have been notated.

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