



HISTORICAL AND MUSICAL DIMENSIONS OF MOHINIYATTAM

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ABSTRACT

Kerala is the birthplace of Mohiniyattam, one of the eight Indian classical dance styles. This dance style, which has been known for its characteristic "lasya" mood, has gone through many phases, including royal patronage, decline, marginalization, and revival, which has led to its recognition as a classical dance form in India today. This paper attempts an integrated and interdisciplinary approach to the dance form by exploring the mythological roots and historical developments of Mohiniyattam. In addition, the paper attempts to analyze the revival process through the Kerala Kalamandalam and the codification of the Kalamandalam style. Moreover, the paper attempts to analyze Abhinaya Sangeeta, with special reference to the symbiotic relationship between music and the art of expression. This study includes the musical development of Mohiniyattam from the ancient temple traditions of Kerala and its association with Carnatic music. The rare Mohiniyattam pieces based on the indigenous Kerala ragas, rarely performed today, have received particular attention. An overview of Mohiniyattam with reference to the larger context of cultural memory, performance, and intangible heritage helps us understand the relevance of the dance form and its role as a living archive of Kerala's artistic heritage.

Keywords: Mohiniyattam, Kalamandalam, Abhinaya Sangeeta, Kerala Ragas, Indian Classical Dance, Intangible Cultural Heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

Mohiniyattam, a classical dance form from the state of Kerala, is celebrated for its lyrical beauty, gentle lasya movements, and subtle emotive content, and it belongs to the list of eight classical dances of the state. As a dance form, Mohiniyattam is deeply rooted in the mythological tale of the enchanting feminine incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. The dance form emphasizes the aesthetic of suggestion over the dramatic, as a manifestation of the divine feminine. It is to be noted that the aesthetic of the dance form, unlike the theatrical Kathakali, focuses on the elements of fluidity, continuity, and feminine beauty, which are deeply embedded in the geographical and cultural context of the state of Kerala.

The history of the evolution of the Mohiniyattam dance form is deeply associated with the patronage of the rulers of the kingdom of Travancore and the kingdom of Cochin during the 18th and 19th centuries. The colonial reforms and associated social-stigmas contributed to decline of Mohiniyattam. It was the establishment of the Kerala Kalamandalam in the 20th century that played a crucial role in the revival of the dance form.

Abhinaya Sangeeta, an inseparable fusion of music and expression that is crucial to the aesthetics of the Mohiniyattam dance form, is deeply associated with the blend of indigenous ragas from the state of Kerala and Carnatic music.



1. Its origin from mythical origins, literary influences, and socio-cultural context.
2. Its revival and institutionalization, especially with Kerala Kalamandalam, including pedagogy and prominent exponents.
3. Its technical, repertoire, and aesthetic characteristics, with special emphasis on the musical aspect of the Kalamandalam style.

The paper is based on performance studies and intangible heritage and aims to emphasize the importance of the dance form as an important aspect of intangible cultural heritage.

2. ORIGINS AND HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF MOHINIYATTAM

Mohiniyattam occupies a unique position in the wide spectrum of Indian classical dance traditions, marked by its limited dance vocabulary, lyrical flow, and emphasis on femininity. While grounded in the Lasya model of dance as described in the *Natya Shastra*, the treatise of Bharata Muni, translated by Ghosh (1951), it emphasizes emotional expression over dramatic impact. While more dramatic dance forms like Kathakali depend on dramatic impact, the aesthetics of Mohiniyattam lie in suggestion, softness, and inner expression, which is very close to the cultural and geographical environment of Kerala.

The very name "Mohiniyattam" is derived from "Mohini," the enchanting female form of Lord Vishnu, and "Aattam," meaning "dance" in Malayalam. The mythological story of the churning of the sea, "Samudra Manthan," describes Mohini as an embodiment of illusion, beauty, and order in the universe (Dutt, 1896/1997). The mythological qualities of illusion, beauty, and order are not just metaphorical but have penetrated very deeply into the philosophy of choreography of the dance, as described by Vatsyayan (1996), with its emphasis on circular motion, soft undulations, and twisting of the torso, which evoke an "enchantment" aspect.

Mohiniyattam does not have the advantage of continuous written records of its history. Instead, it is pieced together with references to literary works, temple practices, and treatises of the regions. The 16th-century legal treatise "Vyavaharamala" is one of the earliest written records of the dance, which mentions payments to performers of Mohiniyattam, thereby indicating its professional standing in the cultural scenario of Kerala (Menon, 1995). "Kunchan Nambiar's Gosha Yatra" and the dramatic treatise "Balarama Bharatam" show that the dance form was widely practiced and recognized in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The heyday of the historical development of Mohiniyattam was in the 18th and early 19th centuries in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, with royal patronage. Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma was a prominent patron for Mohiniyattam. He was a good composer and a learned man, and under his guidance, the dance form not only survived but also improved with the addition of more musical pieces, which are an integral part of the dance.

However, Mohiniyattam declined significantly after that period. The colonial movement and Victorian ideals of decency, along with the negative connotations surrounding female performers, ensured that Mohiniyattam became a metaphor for social degeneration, which marked a very difficult phase for the dance form. The dance form was finally banned in Travancore in the early 20th century, relegating it to the fringes of Kerala's cultural scene (Kothari, 2001). The break in history serves to illustrate the role of socio-political forces in the development of performance traditions.



3. REVIVAL AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION THROUGH KERALA KALAMANDALAM

The 20th century witnessed the revival of Mohiniattam, a major milestone in the cultural revival of India, along with this era witnessed the rebirth of the traditional heritage with a nationalist perspective. Mahakavi Vallathol Narayana Menon is a notable figure in the revival of Mohiniattam. He did not just want to protect art and culture; he wanted Mohiniattam to be a bold statement of cultural self-assertion, despite colonial rule. In 1930, Vallathol instituted Kerala Kalamandalam as a space for the preservation and transmission of Kerala's traditional performing arts, particularly the traditional dance-drama form known as Kathakali and Mohiniyattam (Paniker, 1993).

Vallathol's intervention in the history of Mohiniyattam was both ideological and practical, and it entailed the attempt to disassociate Mohiniyattam from moral censure and place it within a classical tradition informed by text, pedagogy, and aesthetics. Despite the fierce opposition he faced from traditionalist sections of society, Vallathol continued his efforts to track down Mohiniyattam practitioners and reinstate its legitimacy (Menon, 2007).

The appointment of Pazhayannur Kalyani Amma as Mohiniyattam's first teacher at Kerala Kalamandalam in 1932 marked a major milestone in the history of Mohiniyattam. Nattuvanar Korattikkara Appuradathu Krishnapanikkar and percussionist Madhava Warier finally institutionalized Mohiniyattam training (Kothari, 2001). The early days saw disruptions and a narrow intake, which was vital for what was to come.

The 1950s marked a new phase in the history of Mohiniyattam with Thottasseri Chinnammu Amma, a renowned teacher and exponent, taking over. Her teaching and her accomplishments would give shape to contemporary Mohiniyattam dance. Her students, namely, Kalamandalam Kalyanikutty Amma, Sathyabhama, and Himavathi, played a major role in popularizing Mohiniyattam and making it a national and international phenomenon, taking it beyond

4. TECHNIQUE, REPERTOIRE, AND AESTHETIC FEATURES OF THE KALAMANDALAM STYLE

The Kalamandalam Mohiniyattam school cannot be considered a simple progression from the previous. It's a considered blend, which incorporates elements of Kathakali and Bharatanatyam that the creators wished to add to the dance. It's a seamless flow, continuous movement, and inner feeling. Where Bharatanatyam might offer sharp edges, Kathakali might offer dramatic entrances, and Kalamandalam Mohiniyattam prefers gentle movement, light footwork, and effortless changes of direction (Kalyanikutty Amma, 1999).

Abhinaya, or the expression of emotion, is a significant component of Mohiniyattam dance, in which the expression of emotion is a gradual process of micro-movements of the eyes, eyebrows, and torso. The body of the dancer becomes a medium of narrative mediation, as opposed to dramatic expression, thus closely aligning itself to the philosophy of embodied knowledge and performative memory. The repertoire for Mohiniyattam is based upon the traditional form and structure of the Natya Shastra, combining Nritya and Nritta in its practice (Bharata Muni, trans. Ghosh, 1951). Dance pieces such as Cholkettu, Jatiswaram, Varnam, Padam, and Tillana allow for a progressive development of rhythm, melody, and emotion (Vatsyayan, 1974).

The costume and look of the Mohiniyattam dancer are in line with the philosophy of the dance, as the dancer wears a kasavu sari of off-white or cream color with a golden border, few pieces of jewelry, and a jasmine garland tucked in the bun of hair near the head, all of which reflect the temple traditions of Kerala and signify purity and restraint (Kothari, 2001).



5. MUSICAL HERITAGE OF MOHINIYATTAM: FROM TEMPLE TRADITIONS TO CARNATIC INFLUENCE

Music is at the core of Mohiniyattam, embedded in its very foundation. At the time of its creation, Mohiniyattam was influenced by the temple music of Kerala, a sonic environment characterized by devotion, simplicity, and a specific musical structure (Nair, 2012). These musical styles were associated with the ritualistic context, which focused on the meditative rather than the dramatic.

Kerala's geographical location at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean facilitated the constant interface with the South Indian music systems. It was after the medieval period that the impact of Carnatic music was felt on the musical style of Mohiniyattam (Subramanian, 2006). Gradually, the musical style of Mohiniyattam incorporated the elements of Carnatic music, which introduced the concept of the expanded ragas, tala systems, etc.

The role of music in the context of the performance of Mohiniyattam includes the concept of ragas, which establish the context of the emotions. It also includes the concept of talas, which establish the rhythmic context (Vatsyayan, 1996). The lyrics, which are composed in the Manipravalam style, a mix of Sanskrit and Malayalam, help to establish the context of the narration (Kothari, 2001).

The musical heritage of Mohiniyattam can be seen in the revival of rare compositions associated with Kerala's ancient ragas, including Samanda Malahari, Puraneer, and Nalanda (Nair, 2012). The compositions developed before the standardization of Carnatic music that offers an insight into the musical heritage of Kerala before the development of Carnatic music.

6. ABHINAYA SANGEETA: MUSIC AS EXPRESSIVE AND NARRATIVE AGENCY IN MOHINIYATTAM

Abhinaya Sangeeta is the essential content of Mohiniyattam, which signifies the indivisible unity of music (sangeeta) and expression (abhinaya). Unlike other dance forms, music is not relegated to the status of an accompaniment in Mohiniyattam. Instead, it is an essential narrative tool which determines the emotional content, the nuances of interpretation, and the narrative dance.

In the context of the traditional dance form, the selection of the raga has a direct impact on the emotional content of the dance. The emotional essence of the dance is reflected through the movement of the eyes, the expression on the face, and the fluid movement of the body as a whole. The dancer reflects each raga's unique emotional content—devotional, passionate, serene, or melancholic—through the nuances of movement (Vatsyayan, 1996). The talas provide the rhythm and shape of the path of movement of the body, thus taking the performance towards precision and precision.

The poetic essence of Abhinaya Sangeeta is the heart of this dance form. The traditional dances are mostly inclined towards devotional or mythological themes, thus providing the dancer a platform to convey complex emotions through delicate movements. The magic lies in the combination of the lyrics, music, and dance of the narrative dance. The dance form is not only classical but has also shown its flexibility by incorporating modern music into the dance without compromising its aesthetic content. This has ensured the relevance of the dance form in the contemporary context (Kothari, 2001).

In Abhinaya Sangeeta, dance transcends the physical movement of the body as it becomes a living tale of emotions, culture, and history. The contemporary dance form is the instrument for the interpretation of the meaning of the music by the dancer herself.



7. CONCLUSION

The history of Mohiniyattam, from mythological symbolism to royal patronage, decline, and revival, points to the interrelationship of performance, society, and cultural memory in a state of constant evolution. The role of the institution of Kerala Kalamandalam in restoring artistic legitimacy, pedagogical tradition, and aesthetic integrity to the dance form has been significant in securing a place for Mohiniyattam in the tradition of classical dance.

No less important is Abhinaya Sangeeta, which enhances Mohiniyattam to a sophisticated narrative dance form through the interrelationship of music and dance. The revival of the ancient ragas of Kerala adds another layer of depth to the historical background of Mohiniyattam, underscoring the dance form's potential for development while remaining connected with the present. Today, Mohiniyattam is a living expression of Kerala's intangible heritage, seeking to strike a balance between tradition and modernity in a manner that is relevant to the present.

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