

Varnam - its place in the US dance scene

by Mythili Kumar

Common to both South Indian classical music and South Indian styles of dance, the **Varnam** finds a different emphasis in each art form. While it is traditionally the first piece performed in a Carnatic music concert (I recall my husband's sigh of appreciation when his favorite **Kanada Ata tala varnam** starts a concert), in a dance concert it can never be the first. While in a music concert it provides a wonderful warm-up for the vocal cords, in a dance concert one must be already warmed up to perform the varnam. In the structured learning of Carnatic music, it is a composition that figures early in the sequence where sarali varisai leads to alankaras and geetams, then several varnams before learning kritis and kirtanas. In dance, however, it is usually taught only when the student is ready to tackle the intricacies of expressing varied emotions, and has acquired rhythmic proficiency to handle the complexities of the **theermanams / jatis** that are seen in a varnam. The varnam traditionally performed in music concerts is usually a Tana varnam, with fewer lyrics and generally a faster tempo, while the varnam in dance concerts is usually a Pada varnam with more lyrics suitable for elaborating the abhinaya and sung in a more leisurely pace essential to bringing out the depth of emotions.

In Bharatanatyam, the varnam is announced as the 'piece-de resistance' of the traditional recital. As is oft repeated, it is the most elaborate piece that brings out the best in both nritta and abhinaya. A leading dancer's description of the varnam has remained in my mind for years. The word 'varna' meaning color can have many shades, varied sentiments, a variety of situations, it can paint vivid images, present a mosaic of colorful patterns, etc. etc. The legendary dancer **Balasarasvati** had said this about the varnam '...(we).. enter the holy precinct of the deity in the varnam. This is the place, the space which gives the dancer expansive scope to revel in the rhythm, moods and music of the dance. The varnam is the continuum which gives ever-expanding room to the dancer to delight in her self-fulfillment, by providing the fullest scope to her own creativity as well as to the tradition of the art.' No traditional solo recital is therefore complete without the varnam.

In the Bay Area and also in other US cities, in recent years there have been so many student arangetrams that the audience witnesses several varnams a year. Not everybody in the audience enjoys the complex varnam number. In fact, at times one can hear groans in the audience when the varnam is announced. "I slept through the second half of the varnam", confesses one teenager despite her keen interest in dance. "The varnam was so long, Auntie", says another commenting on one that was only half hour in length. I remember my dancer cousin, Padmalochani who used to perform one and a half-hour long varnams in the 1950s under the baton of the late **Guru Kittappa Pillai**, saying that dance connoisseurs wished then that it would be longer. There have been times when I had to quell a student's argument to do a shorter varnam since she felt that the audience from her specific community would not be able to sit through it.

However, the varnam rarely finds a place in many of the new productions both in India and here in the US where many different themes are being explored and presented. The trend began with the ekaartha (single thematic) presentations of leading dancer **Padma Subramanian** who successfully showcased her **Krishnaaya Thubhyam Namaha** and **Ramaaya Thubhyam Namaha** as a soloist and performed these themes without a varnam. Although the various rhythmic elements as well as mime and expression were abundantly present, the typical structure of the varnam and the alternating patterns of swara and sahitya did not find a place in these thematic performances.

It is interesting to analyze the reasons that make the varnam unpopular in many of these dance productions other than arangetrams. First, it is a long piece, with the division of the **Pallavi** and **Anupallavi** lines into two in the first half to intersperse jathis with the second half being performed with several swara passages with accompanying lyrics or sahitya; second there is no continuous thread of narrative in the varnam - each line can be a sentence describing unrelated aspects of the theme-be it a nayika in viraha (love-stricken) or the glory of a deity, third, the improvisation in abhinaya that a solo artist can attempt is lost when the varnam is performed as a group. In the varnam format, when the dancer describes or portrays the anguish of a grief-stricken heroine in the first line of the Pallavi, she/he has to switch moods instantaneously to project the joy of rhythm through the jathi that follows. My uncle who was a music connoisseur as well as a scholar of Sanskrit and Tamil literature would grumble at the break of emotion caused by these interspersed jathis, and found it incongruent with the sthaya bhava (prevailing mood) of the varnam. This format of presenting the varnam in Bharatanatyam has been the pattern for several decades and was set by the Tanjore quartet of musician-nattuvanars in the 19th century. Since the narrative is central in thematic shows, this format becomes an obstacle to the story line.

Several times we at Abhinaya have performed only the first half of a traditional varnam in order to shorten it and not overload the audiences with an intense exposition of rhythm and expression. In a dance competition held in New York in the mid-nineties, the entries had to be varnams performed for 10 minutes only. It was quite a task to edit a half hour long varnam, carefully deleting passages and keeping key ones to create a 10 minute segment that would still convey the required sthaya bhava of the heroine and project the dancer's excellence in both the rhythmic and expressional aspects of dance. Since all our entrants won the top prizes, it showed that ten minutes was more than enough to portray the dancer's caliber. Consequently, we have been encouraged to present 15 minute segments of varnams so that we can perform these more often in our repertory concerts as well.

When I opened up a discussion of varnams in a class comprised of both teenagers and adults, it was interesting to hear their answers to my question of whether they found a varnam boring or interesting. The varnam, was declared not boring.... 'if the stories are interesting', said one- meaning that episodes mimed in a varnam sustain audience interest; (the words of **Kalanidhi Mami** come to mind-that long stories should not be mimed in a varnam in the name of sanchari (elaboration of the line), only the suggestion

of the story or episode is appropriate) ‘if the raga is appealing-like **Charukesi**’, said another – echoing some music lovers’ choices for some ragas; (I can picture my husband Kumar making his way out of the auditorium if a **Varnam in Begada** is begun!) ‘if we understand all of it’- said another - meaning that the dancer had done a good demonstration prior to the varnam, crucial to the appreciation of a varnam not only in the US but also in India where audiences are not necessarily uniformly informed of the stories and gestural representation in Bharatanatyam; ‘if the dancer is good, energetic and projects the emotions well’, said another-reiterating the fact that nobody can do full justice to a varnam until a certain level of competence in the fundamentals has been reached, and one has absorbed the essence of the varnam by dint of practice. In fact, in a dance school in Canada, the student who is unable to reach this stage is only allowed to perform a Junior arangetram without the varnam, later after the necessary skills and maturity have been gained, the student performs her Senior arangetram with the full repertoire! The consensus in the class was that they would most definitely want to see varnams performed in concerts.

The words of a dance critic ring in my ear, echoed by my mother - ‘..a varnam must be performed a hundred times before one can do justice to it’. While acknowledging this, we are with trepidation presenting a new varnam today, having worked on it for an unusually short time and hope that the Lord of obstacles on whom it is based will pave the way for a mature presentation.

This article was written before performing a varnam on Ganesha with two other dancers on the tenth anniversary of Asha Ramesh’s music school.