

# The Origin and Development of *Sadir* and *Koodiattam* – A Critical Study

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**Abstract:** Indian dance and drama had evolved around 2000 years ago. *Natyasastra*, a treatise deals with the dramaturgy and dance was written by *Bharata Muni* approximately near 200B.C. which proves the existence of dance and drama during those eras. The existence of both the art forms *Koodiattam* and *Sadir* can be traced during that time, although the names and the forms were little different from today. This topic mainly focussed on the critical study of *Koodiattam* and *Sadir* in terms of origin and development. *Koodiattam* is a Sanskrit drama traced around 200 B.C. in present Kerala .But the exact period of evolution of this particular drama is still unknown. *Sadir* forms the modified form of *Dasiattam* which has evolved 2000 years ago. The massive development of *Dasiattam* or present *Bharatnatyam* took place in 17<sup>th</sup> century where the new name *Sadir* came into existence. The continuous development and modification of these two art forms happened throughout in these years. The different factors affected these two forms. Sometimes both of these got enormous support and contributions from royal patrons especially between 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the same time these have witnessed declination due to various issues. The various personalities also renovated and revived these art forms mainly during last century and held responsible in popularizing and propagating these art forms in every aspects. About evolution and growth, many similarities and dissimilarities can be found between *Koodiattam* and *Sadir* in this regards. This paper covers the entire origin and development of *Koodiattam* and *Sadir* and how these art forms travelled from 200 B.C. to present day.

**Keywords:** Origin, Development, *Sadir*, *Koodiattam*, Dance, Sanskrit Drama, Chakyars, Devadasis.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Introducing this topic on origin and development of *Sadir* and *Koodiattam*, it is very important to define the source of these two art forms from history. Comparing these two forms will give two different origins, anecdotes, cultures, communities, techniques, costumes, make-up and presentation. But talking about the similarities, both have a religious background with full-fledged devotion and have been patronage by the royal kingdoms in every aspects. They both extract their roots from *Natyasastra*.

The traces of these forms can be tracked back in *Silappadikaram*<sup>1</sup> (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.) and *Manimegalai*<sup>1</sup> (6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) during Sangam period of Tamil literature. Although the forms were not the same as it was earlier. Both of these underwent turmoil of various cultures and styles. The continuous modification gave birth to new form as we see today. This process

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<sup>1</sup> Silappadikaram and Manimekalai were the two of the five great epics of Tamil literature composed in the Sangam age around first few centuries of Christ Era.

of renovation and reformation will carry on in future too. Divinity was the main foundation which combined with the ethos of that particular era. The phenomenon of devotion spouted in form of dance and drama and both of these art forms were subsequently evolved. Classical dance in India has developed as a dance drama to depict mythological stories through gestures. It also represents the culture and ethos of a particular region or a group of people.

Dravidian are the mainly inhabitants of south India and their cultural development can be witnessed from 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. During 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., *Chola*, *Chera* and *Pandya* used to rule over South India those were known for rich culture in the field of literature, architecture, dance and music. Hinduism was in peak during this era and can be justified by magnificent temples and sculptures. The Dravidian culture of South India strongly supports the temple dancing during early centuries. Both *Sadir* and *Koodiattam* originated as a result of South Indian temple culture.

## 2. HISTORICAL ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF SADIR

*Bharatanatyam*, what is popular today, had sprouted out from *Sadir Natyam* or simply *Sadir*. The term *Sadir* evolved from the *Maratha* rulers of South India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, who called this particular dance as *Sadir Nautch*. This signifies to the presentation of the dance in the courts which was prevalent to *Devadasis*.

*Bharatanatyam* is the most ancient classical dance art of India and antiquity can be traced back nearly 2000 years ago. *Bharatanatyam* which was practiced as *Dasiattam* in early decades and later as *Sadir Nautch* form during 17<sup>th</sup> century extracts its features from *Natyastra* by *Bharata muni*. But most of the gestures language and movements were taken from *Abhinaya Darpana* by *Nandikeshwara*. Mainly early period of south India dealt with temple culture where notable temples were constructed and temple dancing was practiced and this tradition was patronized by various kings and preserved by the *Devadasis*. The poses of *Bharatanatyam* dance postures called *chari*<sup>2</sup> and *karana*<sup>2</sup> on *Gopuram-s* of the Chidambaram temple indicates existence of the dance during 10<sup>th</sup> century. But going further to medieval period, the court dancing became popular and this can be demonstrated during *Tanjore Maratha* and *Vijayanagar* Empire. As a result of this cult, *Sadir* dance was evolved. Although the origin lies back in the history, but the remarkable change and transformation of this dance form can be perceived here only.

### **Devadasis and Dasiattam:**

To start with the history of *Sadir*, one has to have an idea about *Devadasi-s* and their dance called '*Dasiattam*'. The word *Devadasi* or *Devaradiyar* implies "servant of God" who used to marry a particular God of that temple and were not allowed to marry any mortal. They generally were proficient in music, dance and different types of arts. Dancing here was considered to be sacred and pious which was popular as *Dasiattam*. The mention of *Devadasi* system can be found in Kashmir treatise '*Rajatarangini*' written by *Kalhan* where there is a description of *Devadasis* in the court of the Kashmiri king *Lalitaditya* in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

With the rise and flourish of the south Indian kingdoms from 6<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D., many temples were constructed and as a result this cult also embellished. The *Devadasi* tradition and *Dasiattam* of south India were grown and nurtured under the consort of royal patronages from various royal dynasties like during the rules of the *Pallavas* and *Pandyas* (550-850A.D.), the *Cholas* (850-1279A.D.) and *Vijayanagar* Empire (1336-1565A.D.) where *Devadasis* were given respect and they used to hold a high social status in the society. *Devadasis* used to showcase their classical dancing in the temple festival where they adorned themselves with stunning jewellerys, flower chaplets and costumes. The same kind of costumes, jewellerys and gestural language were used now also. The king used to be remunerated with jewellerys and land.

These *Devadasi* were free to choose their mates and their children were legally recognised. Generally girl offspring decided on to be a *Devadasi* only and male child as *Nattuvans* i.e., dance master who usually are proficient in music and musical compositions. *Nattuvans* are non-Brahmin person who used to train *Devadasis* and *Rajadasis*. So, the tradition of classical dancing flew in this manner. Other than temples, the dance was practiced exclusively in royal court also and they

<sup>2</sup> Charis and Karanas are the postures of dance in which one leg movements are called Charis and two legs movements are known to be karanas.

were known as *Rajadasi*. They also used to perform in festive and communal functions like marriages etc. Later in 16<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> century, this tradition became very popular.

*Swarnamala Ganesh* in his lecture 'Evolution of *Bharatnatyam*' said that *Devadasis* were associated with *Sadir*, a traditional form of solo dance performed in temples and royal courts and to select audiences in private places which is believed to be the precursor of *Bharatnatyam*.

#### **Emergence of court culture:**

The court dancing was prevalent in previous era too but a new format and system of dance recital was evolved during 17<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> century. An important milestone in this evolution was the development of the current format or *margam* of the *Bharatanatyam* recital. This happened in the late 18th century, by four brothers known as the Tanjavur quartet. The quartet Chinnayya Pillai, Ponniah Pillai, Sivanandam Pillai and Vadivelu Pillai of the Tanjore Court, during the rule of Maratha King Saraboji II (1798–1832), made a rich contribution to music and the dance recital giving it a new shape and structure in various aspects. It was known to be *Sadir* during that time which transformed and took a new name *Bharatnatyam* in today's date. It is said that during his reigning the concept '*ekaharya nritya*' in *Bharatanatyam* got popularised where a single performer carries away several roles to depict a theme or story. The Muslim influence also can be found. To quote an example of changes in situation, few shows were conducted in today's date which presents '*Salamu Sabdam*', reconstructed by *Serfoji-II*. The sources can be found in Saraswati Mahal library. The *margam* or the repertoire of present *Bharatnatyam* dance mainly more or less maintains the same quiddity as described here.

Today, in present world lower middle class, upper middle class and even elite class women learn and perform this art. But in the same time, this dance was understood as dance of *Devadasis* and their profession was not appreciated during 18<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> century which was matter of shame to the society. During British invasion, the southern kingdoms gradually started declining. As a result, royal kingdoms became weak and it was difficult for them to maintain temples, temple dancers and even court dancer to pursue their traditional dance. Due to lack of patronage, *Dasiattam* later known as *Sadir* started degenerating. The male community of *Sadir* however, got more patronage and became proficient in this art and made it a non-hereditary dance form. Even after early post-colonial decades they restricted the term *Sadir* which demolished in 1950s and calling it as a new name '*Bharatnatyam*'. To remove the stigma attached to it, this move was necessary. Though those women practiced as a part of their working routine and preserved the art form from long centuries but to associate present generation with this dance form, the taboo should be removed. At the same time it was possible to bring this form into public forum without the help of famous social activists and reformers.

#### **Reformation with a new name:**

*E. Krishna Iyer*, played significant role in prevailing the cultural purview in the 1920s and 30s. By that time, the *Devadasis* were treated as temple property and were misused. According to him, these *Devadasis* had made a notable contribution to art. So, he raised his voice against this act and published many strong writings about it. It was very important for him to reform, protect and reconstruct this dying art form. He associated himself with a theatrical group named as *Suguna Vilasa sabha* and started learning *Sadir*. Through his learning, he got to know the essence of this art form and to rescue this form from stigma attached with it, he founded the Madras music Academy and later teamed up with *Rukmini Devi Arundale*.

Around this period about 1930s, the anti *Natch* movements were carried out by Dr Muthu lakshmi Reddy to abolish the *Devadasi* system legally. Dr. *Muthulakshmi Reddy* recognized that *Krishna Iyer* was responsible for *Sadir* to become 'an art of every household'. He removed the shameful covering attached to *Sadir* and popularized this art form that could be learned and practiced. He adored and rechristened *Sadir* dance as *Bharatanatyam* in 1932.

It is said that *Rukmini Devi* after witnessing the *Sadir* performance of one of the disciple of *Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai* in 1935, got moved by the performance and decided to learn this art. She gave her very first public performance at Theosophical Society on an occasion. Finally, she with the help of her husband founded *Kalakshetra*, an academy of music and dance in 1936. The complete purpose of establishing this institute was to save and identify the valuable dance traditions of our country without flamboyance and commercialism. She thought this artistic tradition was precious which was inappropriately placed into the wrong hands of *Devadasis*. Her intent was to resuscitate the content of the dance only

through her modern institution *Kalashetra*. This prediction is only due to socio-economical background of *Devadasis* and her oddity in dance steps which make *Sadir* sensuous and vulgar.

#### **Present day scenario of Bharatnatyam:**

In 20<sup>th</sup> century, the scenario is completely changed. *Bharatnatyam* is considered as a noble dance profession or hobby of women leaving behind the taboo of economic employment. However, *Bharatnatyam* mainly consists of mythological stories and ancient lore. The *margam* created in 18<sup>th</sup> century still followed in *Bharatnatyam* dance recital commencing from invocation dance *Alarippu*, followed by *Jathiswaram*, *Varnam*, *Padam-s* and *Thillana*. The peripheral changes can be observed in dance pattern and style as compared to pattern existed one and a half century back due different dance tutors. The complete turnover in costume of *Bharatnatyam* can be seen which is presently worn like a dhoti since last five decades. Previously dancers used to drape the saree over a satin *pajama*. The change in themes was also very distinct. Many modern and social themes were enacted as ballets. Now our society appreciates the amalgamation of modern outlook into tradition form. So, it is duty of a dancer to restore the root form along with the diversity in subjects.

### **3. HISTORICAL ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF KOODIATTAM**

*Koodiattam* (*Kutiattam*), meaning ‘composite dancing’ of *Chakyars* caste who used to cast male characters and the *Nangiars* women belongs to *Nambiyar* caste used to play the female roles which signifies Sanskrit drama presented in the traditional style in *Koothambalam*<sup>33</sup> of Kerala temple and is the only surviving art form of the ancient Sanskrit theatre. It has traced back nearly a thousand years ago in Kerala, but its origin and evolution is still not clear. It is believed that *Koodiattam* is an amalgamation of the classical Sanskrit theatre of ancient India and the regional theatre of Kerala. The *Chakyars* claim their ancestries from *Mahabharata* as story teller *Sutas*. The gestural language forms the main feature of *Koodiattam* which was mainly derived from *Hastalakshanadeepika*<sup>44</sup>. The rich tradition of Sanskrit literature reveals the most sublime and brightest aspects of Indian culture. They have imbibed various under currents of thought and aspects of our civilization.

According to Dr. Heike Moser, in ‘Bowled over by *Koodiyattam*’, ‘*Chakyar koothu* have migrated from Tamil Nadu to Kerala and might have mingled with the local tradition and the amalgam gave in a new form called *Koodiyattam*.’ It is said that regional touch of a folk character as a comedian was integrated from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Kulasekhara Varma. It is said that Bharata had derived the concept of theatre by choosing and producing elements from the various regional theatre forms of the country. It is more likely that in South India *Koodiattam* existed as a Sanskrit drama even before the formation of *Natyasastra*. As mentioned earlier about *Silappatikaram* which was one of the five great ancient Tamil epics written by Prince Ilango Adigal in Tamil Sangam period in 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. where the character *Madhavi* being a royal court dancer used to practice and perform this art particular dance form.

#### **The seed-bed of Koodiattam:**

The home of *Koodiattam* is Kerala which is better known as Malaya or Malabar. The original natives of Kerala were mainly Dravidians. Gradually Aryans from north started penetrating into this Dravidian culture which gave birth to a unique chapter of Hindu culture. The *chakiyar Koothu* had their origin in Kerala as a result of Aryan influences. In 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C, the Brahmin cult came into existence and Kerala Brahmins are knowns as *Namboothiri-s*.

In *Namboothiri* society, when a woman is alleged with a crime of infidelity, she used to put under adjournment till her guilt is proved. If it is proved, she is out casted and the judgement is carried away by the recognised member of *Namboothiris*. During this period of trial if any male child is born, he becomes *Chakiyar* and female child becomes *Nangiyyar*. This was the way how *Chakyars* were originated and considered next to the Brahmins and their main caste-Dharma is *Natya* or drama. That is why they were also called ‘*Ottillengil Kuthu*’ which means deprived of learning Vedas for not being a Brahmin but right to learn a *natya* or drama. *Chakyars* traditions were the result of blend between the culture of Dravidian and sophistication of Aryan and they had thorough knowledge of laws, religion and artistic qualities.

<sup>3</sup> A stage with wooden structure made in the temple premises and is one of the important features of Kerala style temple.

<sup>4</sup> *Hastalakshanadeepika* is a treatise which deals with the mudras or hand gestures which are used by *Koodiattam*, *Kathakali* and *Mohiniattam*.

The *Chakyar* community used to practice the tradition of drama before the Christian era which can be clearly referred in *Silappadikaram*.

#### **Reformation of Koodiattam by Royal families:**

*Kulashekhara Varman Cheraman Perumal*, an ancient king of *Chera* Dynasty known to be the designer of *Koodiyattam* of current form. He wrote a book '*Aattaprakaram*' which defines various features for *Koodiyattam* performance. He introduced a special feature in this form by adding Malayalam language for a comedian character *Vidushaka* and also structured the presentation of the play to create a new history. Before this, it was considered to be pure Sanskritised dance drama with purely religious in nature. Not only this, he also composed and staged two plays *Subhadra Dhanamjaya* and *Tapati Samvarana* in association with his Brahmin friend *Tolan*.

#### **Koodiattam in modern time:**

As *Koodiattam* is the only surviving form of Sanskrit drama which still presented in a traditional bowl in *Koothabalams* of Hindu temple which was previously restricted to only Hindu spectators. Though it expanded its horizon in different directions still it maintains its authenticity and the tradition of performing in temple of *Koodal Manikyam* at Irinjalakkuda and the temple of *Vadakkumnatha* at Thrissur where every year it is still performed. *Koodiyattam* is also declared as one among the 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' by UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization). This is one of the oldest arts which should be sheltered and conserved. This is a matter of respect which hardly any art form has got till date.

Till 19<sup>th</sup> century, many royal patrons directly or indirectly contributed *Koodiattam* to maintain its form. But it faced a serious declination after the fall of feudal system. This art form is only inherited by the *chakyar* community and the pedagogy process continued within their own caste only.

In 1955, Padma Shri Guru Mani Madhava Chakyar took initiative to perform *Koodiattam* outside the temple premises to the common people by going against the community. Thus he becomes the first person to perform *Chakyar Koothu* for All India Radio and *Doordarshan*. He is one of the greatest *Chakyar Koothu* and a *Koodiyattam* performer in present world. His proficiency in Sanskrit literature and classical art form was observed from childhood itself. *Natyakalpadruma* is a treatise on *Koodiattam* written by Mani Madhava Chakyar which deals with theatrical study of Sanskrit art in eight chapters. It covers almost every aspects of traditional classical temple art. His contribution in this work is noteworthy.

After getting the recognition from UNESCO, many institutes and schools cultivated and hands down this art form to the upcoming generation. The Margi Theatre group of Thiruvananthapuram and *Nepathya* institute work on *Koodiattam*'s growth and revival. Few other renowned schools train and propagate *Koodiattam* in every prospect. The late *Ammanur Madhava Chakyar* and *Painkulam Raman Chakyar* played a vital role in uplifting this art form in 20th century. *Ammanur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam* and *Natana Kairali* in Irinjalakuda in Thrissur district are the centres which provide scope of research and performance from last two decades and they also conduct various workshops and performance not only in India but also outside the country. Poet *Vallathol Narayana Menon* with the help of *Mukunda Raja* founded *Kerala Kalamandalam* in 1930. *Kerala Kalamandalam* is a society which provides homage and training for *Koodiattam*, *Kathakali* and *Mohiniattam* and also recognised as deemed University by Government of India in 2010.

During a certain period of time *Koodiattam* was about to extinct. This might have happened as this was restricted to a particular community and the next generations have not taken keen interest in learning the ancestral art form as one has to undergo a hardship training to bring agility and perfection. As a result they started involving in some other profession rather continuing the history. *Koodiyattam* can be restored only by spreading awareness about the greatness of this art form and bringing ample opportunities for training, research and performance.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Both *Sadir* and *Koodiattam* evolved around 200 B.C. and the evidence can be traced from various scriptures like *Silappadikaram* etc. Although the form of these art forms are not the same what it was during that time. Both underwent various changes and reformations. Many similarities can be drawn between these two art forms regarding origin and development. First they both borrowed their elements from *Natyasastra* and followed the aspects of *abhinaya* as described there. Secondly, they both evolved as a result of spiritual involvement towards God and used to perform in the temple

premises only. As it is already described that *Bharatnatyam* previously known as *Dasiattam* was exclusively done by the *Devadasis* and *Koodiattam* was performed by only by *Chakyars* and *Nangiyars*. So, the third most common feature was that both of these art forms were performed exclusively by a community whose *Dharma* or work is to entertain the God and the audience. Next, they both got patronage by various royal dynasties where these royalties not only contributed in building several temples but also directly involved them either by learning the art forms or by structuring various compositions for these art forms. These both suffered a declination during last two centuries due to various factors and again transformed and revived by few activists and performers who reformed and brought these art forms into the world of modern era.

About origin and development many dissimilar factors are also there between *Sadir* and *Koodiattam*. *Chakyars* and *Nangiyars* belong to a special caste where they have to adopt the art of *Koodiattam* as a part of hereditary culture. But *Devadasis* in *Dasiattam* adopt their profession by their own will and it was not mandatory for one to inherit the same work of his or her parents. Although previously both drawn their features from *Natyasatra* but later *Bharatnatyam* has taken most of the aspects from *Abhinaya Darpana* of *Nandikeshwara* and *Koodiattam* followed *Hastalakshanadeepika* for further transformation. The prominent growth of *Sadir* had taken place during 17<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of King *Serfoji-II* whereas *Koodiattam* had seen its reformation in 9<sup>th</sup> century during King *Kulashekhar Varma*. Although both the art forms have witnessed the declination but the factors were different from each other. *Sadir* started degenerating during 19<sup>th</sup> century because of the stigma of *Devadasi* attached with it and have to face vulgarity and indecency in their art form, whereas in *Koodiattam*, the main reason was not external but internal factors affected the art form. Primarily, *Koodiattam* was performed in temple premises where only Brahmins were allowed to see the performance and other caste people are not allowed. So, the popularity restricted to a particular community only and as it was a hereditary art form, the next generation did not take interest in learning and have involved them in other profession. The last different feature in both the art forms is *Sadir* got sheltered in royal court where they used to showcase their talent in front of commoners during any festival but in case of *Koodiattam*, it was restricted to temples only. Many more similarities and dissimilarities can be seen between these two art forms regarding style of performance, features, costumes, musical instrument used and the *abhinaya*-s but this topic was mainly focussed on the origin and development of *Sadir* and *Koodiattam*.

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