

The Changing Contours of Women and Dance in India (A Historical Twilight on Tradition and Transition)

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Abstract. A sweeping look at the magnificence of the Indian women through the forms, characteristics, challenges and changes occurred and are still occurring in traditional dance, forms the theoretical and pictorial substance of this study. At one level, it is a historical compendium of classical dance, an exploration of its' moods and majesty, an ode to its sublime aesthetics and at another level, it is a stunning scholarly portrayal of a pluralistic society teeming with feminine cultural vitality.

Keywords: Women, Bharathanatyam,, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniattam, Odissi.

1. Introduction

According to Natyashastra or the treatise of Classical Dance "The Body should catch up to the tune, the hands must explain the meaning, the eyes must speak the emotion, and the feet must beat the time-measure" [1]. Bharatha's Natyashastra which is popularly styled as Panchama Veda [2] speaks about 108 dance postures which constitute the basic structure of any classical dance and women whose mind as well as physic that is best suitable for this dance divine, naturally inclined towards dance from the inception of this universe. Women of India succeeded in developing an individual style which is a blend of the typical features of many Paramparas with the distinct stamp of their individuality.

Basically, there are two types of dancing – Theatrical Dancing and then Social Dancing. While theatrical dancing is performed for entertainment of spectators, in social dancing the participants dance for their own pleasure rather than for entertainment of the audience [3]. Indian women are a spectacle to both the forms of dancing. Though theatrical dancing was prevalent, women of ancient India preferred and took more delight in involving themselves in social dancing. In India dance is a way of worshipping God. The dance is treated like an offering to God and the movements are like prayers to please the Lord. This typical tradition evolved into the custom of Devadasi (Devadasi means God's Servant) system in India. The Indian women too spontaneously and wholeheartedly dedicated themselves to the temples to serve the divinity through their dances. The status of dancers was placed on a high pedestal since even the common women were entitled with equal status along with the men. At times, the Indian women were even stemmed as "Yatra naryastu pujiyante, ramante tatra devta [4].

True to this dictum women were revered as the goddess MahaLakshmi (Goddess of Wealth and Fortune). Unity and Diversity which is the basis of our Indian culture, has its roots in the classical dance forms too. The essence of classicism remained as a foundation, but the superstructures of various styles emerged in various parts of the country. If alphabetically listed, these include 1) Bharathanatyam, 2) Kathak, 3) Kuchipudi, 4) Manipuri, 5) Mohiniyattam, and 6) Odissi.

Kuchipudi dance does not find a place in this ancient traditional dance map of India, because one could come across to its reference for the first time in the historical records during the regime of the Ibrahim Quli Qutb Shah of the Qutubshahi dynasty (Golconda) [5]. Though, the dance suffered degeneration in the hands

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of the devadasis, who were forced to serve the men and were converted into prostitutes during the mediaeval period, the passing of the Prohibition of Traffic in Minor Girls Act 1922 popularly known as the Devadasi Prohibition Act [6] generated a congenial atmosphere to take classical dance as a profession.

2. Bharatanatyam

Bharata Natyam or Sadir is one of the oldest dance forms of India. It was nurtured in the temples and courts of southern India since ancient times. The art was handed down as a living tradition from generation to generation under the Devadasi system under which women were dedicated to temples to serve the deity as dancers and musicians forming part of the elaborate rituals. During the mediaeval period the Devadasis had fallen prey upon evil days due to lack of state patronage and changed social mores. The revival of Sadir took place by pioneer artist E.Krishna Iyer, who familiarized this dance form with the name Bharathanatyam. Rukmini Devi Arundale [7] brought the dance out of the temple precincts and onto the proscenium stage. Different schools and styles of dance use different nritta hand gestures and different terms for the same hand gestures.



Fig. 1: Dr. Prabhu Kumari Vanama in a nritta posture

The present day Bharatanatyam scenario consists of renowned artists like Rajalakshmi, Swathi Somnanath, Srinidhi Chidambaram, Srikala Bharath, Urmila Satyanarayanan and so on. Today, Bharatanatyam is being taken as a career and as well as a hobby. Many dance studios in the country offer courses to people of all age groups.

3. Kathak

Kathak is the acknowledged classical dance form of northern and central India comprising the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, northern regions of Gujarat and Maharashtra and some of the areas that are now in Pakistan [8]. Etymologically the word Kathaka is derived from the root Kath which means to sing in praise, to say or inform something or even to describe, order or express. The word Katha denotes conversation, speech, story, tale or table. It is generally believed that in the bygone days, the kathakas recited, narrated and sang stories in temples and while dancing so even enacted them or danced to them. Over the years this matured into an art form which came to be identified as Kathaka [9]. The advent of British Rule in India sent Kathak into sharp decline. The Victorian administrators publicly pronounced it a base and unlovely form of entertainment, despite often privately enjoying the pleasures of the tawaif. Indeed, by associating Kathak solely with the tawaifs and then associating the tawaifs with out-and-out prostitution, Kathak acquired an unwholesome image: the entirely British concept of nautch.



Fig. 2: Pandit Birju Maharaj and Saswati Sen in a Lecture cum Demonstration Concert

The 20th century witnessed a remarkable advancement in the Kathak dance form. Many female dancers took to this art and they even went a step forward by performing with their gurus (male teachers). A typical example for this is the soul stirring and world renowned performances of Pandit Birju Maharaj and his disciple Saswati Sen. Innumerable women dancers like Nandini Singh, Gitanjali Lal sprang up on the Kathak arena soon [10]. Ghunghru or ghunghroo are the small bells tied around her ankles. The Kathak bells are different from those of other Indian dance styles, as they are not affixed to a pad or strip of leather, but rather are individually woven along a thick string. The usual number of bells is 100 on each ankle. There is a more or less accepted upper ceiling of 150 bells on each ankle. Wellknown Kathak female dancers of the century include Sitara Devi, Shovana Narayan, Malabika Mitra, Kumudini Lahiya and Manisha Gulayni [11].

4. Kuchipudi

Kuchipudi is a complex admixture of techniques, repertoire, musical and metrical poems most of which have their roots in the Yakshagana, Veedhi Natakam forms. Also, Kuchipudi traces its heritage to the dance of the devadasis and the secular dances of the court dancers. This dance form derives its name from village Kuchipudi, situated near Masulipatnam in Krishna district in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The costumes of Kuchipudi though resembles Bharathanatyam has a unique style of tying the traditional saree knots. Beyond the stylistic differences of Kuchipudi and Bharathanatyam steps, there are certain types of dances that are unique to Kuchipudi. Specifically there is the Tarangam of Kuchipudi which is unique in that the dancer must dance upon a brass plate, placing the feet upon the raised edges. The dancer moves the plate with much balance as the individual is traditionally dancing on the plate while balancing a "kundi" (small vessel) containing water on their head.



Fig. 3: V. Prabhu Kumari performing Tarangam

At the end of the dance, typically, the dancer extinguishes the candles and washes his or her hands with the water from the vessel. Traditionally a male dance form, it was not uncommon to find histrionic performance of female characters of the story, being performed by men. The male bastion fell with the introduction of women performers in post-Independent era. The women dancers peppered Kuchipudi with enlightening and entertaining anecdotes which keep the spectator to be spell bound. Other popular compositions of the Kuchipudi dance include Sabdams composed on mythological themes like Sri Ramayana Sabdam, Sri Krishna Sabdam etc. At times these Sabdams are termed as Kavuttuvas or Kavitva (poetry) too [12]. Swapna sundari, Manju Bhargavi, Shobha nayudu, Meenakshi Chitharanjan, Indu Raman and a galaxy of illustrious artistes are adding luster to this dance form continuously till date.

5. Manipuri

Male and female roles in Manipuri are distinct. The well-known image that is conjured in the minds while speaking of Manipuri dance is the image of dancers in round box-like skirts, faces half shrouded in veil, dancing the Raas dances [13]. The dancers in Manipuri dance lay stress on expression through graceful movements of the body. Famous female temple dancers of the Manipuri dance are Ranjana, Radhasana [14], Sana Chandrabhas and so on.



Fig. 4: A Manipuri Female Dancer in traditional costumes

6. Mohiniyattam

Mohiniyattam is one of the classical dance forms of India which originated and developed in Kerala, the God's own country [15]. Indian classical dance can be broadly divided into two aspects – tandava or the masculine and lasya, the feminine. Mohiniyattam falls within the soft and graceful tradition of lasya. So divine is lasya, that Mohiniyattam could be attributed to the dance of the Devastris or celestial women. This dance form is famous for its beautiful swinging and swaying movements and intricate facial expressions. The role of Mohini is prominent in many of the theatre forms of Kerala including Kudiattam, Krishnattam and Katghakali, in the presentation of the Puranic legends. The dance traces its origin from Lord Vishnu who appears as Mohini to destroy the demon Bhasmasura [16]. Mohiniyattam stands for enchantment rather than seduction.



Fig. 5: Traditional Mohiniyattam Attire

The galaxy of Mohiniyattam dancers include Kalyani Kutti Amma, Nirmala Paniker, Bharathi Shivaji, Neena Prasad, Pallavi Krishnan, Pratima Gowri, Gopika Varma are quite prominent. Amongst these dancers, Nirmala Paniker acquired unique name for establishing Natanakaisiki - A Research and Performing Centre for the Female Dance and Theatre Traditions of Kerala.

7. Odissi

The dance form of Odissi is the product of a motivated effort by gurus, leading artists, scholars and concerned patrons. Although the tradition of dance in Orissa had fallen into grave disrepute during the British period, the authentic lineage of the classical legacy was preserved by certain distinguished artist families who had continued to practice the art. Among the first batch of girls to be trained in the dances of Orissa was Priyambada Mohanty whose accomplishments were of critical importance to the evolution of the Odissi dance form [17]. Sanjukta Panigrahi is the pioneer of Odissi dance. She started her training with Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra at a very young age. She rendered valuable service to Odissi by taking to all part of the world. Her name is synonymous with Odissi. Her performances reflected an intense inner vitality and poise, lending her dance a quality which sets her apart from her contemporaries. She received several honours, like the Padmashree and Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards [18]. Other dancers such as late Indrani Rehman, late Sanjukta Panigrahi, Priyambada Mohanty, Sonal Mansingh, Kumkum Das nee Mohanty, Sharon Lowen, Sujata Mohapatra, Aruna Mohanty, Sangeeta Dash, Surupa Sen, Daksha Mashruwala, spearheaded the movement that eventually brought Odissi into the limelight once again.



Fig. 6: Sensational Sanjukta Panigrahi

Historically speaking, the classical dances flourished under the support of two main categories of patron. The larger Hindu temples and the princely rulers of states both small and large. Over the last two centuries, the patronage of British residents and art collectors has become important. At this point of time, Rukmini Devi Arundale brought Bharathanatyam from the temple to the proscenium. Over the years, this country has witnessed the rise and decline of male soloists, and then in the last two decades, there has been a revival of tradition of sorts again in independent India, under a national art institute, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (1953) which started promoting classical dances. A peep into the ratio or the growing number of female dancers over the decades can be gleaned from below.

Years	Women with Men
Pre-Independent India	1:10
Independent India	1:3
21 st Century	10:1

Indian dance is now a widely recognized and respected art form all over the world. Many young and even middle aged women from Indian as well as non-Indian backgrounds are learning Indian dance with great interest and enthusiasm [19]. As such, the art form of dance has become an environment for women to discuss, debate and evaluate issues and their outcomes... to strengthen the link between knowledge and action [20]. In fact, the women of India enjoyed right from the ancient period the great continuum of a role in dance even with a tale of tears and tortures, trivial trials and tribunals during that she faced in the mediaeval period, undoubtedly grades her as a victor [21] in the present scenario.

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