



CLASSICAL DANCE – ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

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Dance considered as rhythmic, graceful movements performed with gay abandon is by far the oldest form of art and may have been the master of the other forms of art like sculpture, drawing and painting. Dance has been a part of ceremonies, rituals and entertainment since the birth of earliest civilization. Although it is not possible to say when dance became a part of human culture, archaeology has delivered traces of dance from prehistorical times. Excavations have brought to light sculptures from Mohenjodaro and Harappa which are suggestive of dance poses. Curt Sachs, in *World History of Dance* writes, 'The dance is the mother of the arts; music and poetry exist in time, painting and architecture, in space. But the dance lives at once in time and space. The creator and the thing created, the artist and the work are still one and the same thing. Rhythmic patterns of movement, the plastic sense of space, the vivid representation of a world seen and imagined these things man creates in his own body in the dance before he uses substances and stone and word to give expression to his inner-experiences.'

What is dance to you? Is it just a hobby? Entertainment? Relaxation? An escape? Or everything? Dance isn't something that can be explained in words. It has to be danced. Dance is to connect with others, with self, with the universe and with everything. Dance matures with every performance. When you dance, this shows who you are. The passion for dancing makes one a great dancer.

In the ancient times, dance was sometimes used to show feelings for one of the opposite sex. Before the production of written languages, dance was one of the methods of passing stories from one generation to other. Before the power of speech, ancient man conveyed thoughts, wishes and emotions through actions just as modern day ballets. The first recorded dancing, is among the ancient civilizations of the middle-east and India and among the aboriginal people of America, Australia and Africa.

Why do you dance when music gets into your soul? It is because the impulse to dance is innate and natural and that is why when there is a music of a kind

which suited to dance, we may find ourselves without even being conscious of it. Swaying or tapping our feet to the rhythm of the music. Dance is for everybody. It can reveal everything mysterious that is hidden in music and it also has the additional merit of being human. It explores the communicative, physical, mental, emotional and artistic aspects of human expression and interaction. Dance also helps us to build confidence with our movements and help develop individuals as thinking artists. Our thought processes are involved while selecting the dance movements. It enhances our creativity. In Indian culture, dance and music have much importance to religious worship and spirituality. We can say that another form of worship is dancing. Dancing before the Lord is not totally about technique. It's about having the right attitude in your heart. It's also about telling a story. I.e. the music, the words and the dance must be in harmony. According to a popular belief, Brahma, the creator of the World, combined literature from the Rig Veda, songs from the Sama Veda, abhinaya (expression) from the Yajur Veda and rasa (aesthetic experience) from the Atharva Veda, to form Natya-what we call 'Dance' today. From the most ancient scriptures, one can see Lord Shiva, also known as Nataraja -the Lord of Dance, has his imprint on the concept of dance and music. Shiva as a God represents Creation, Preservation and destruction. These three processes are regarded as a cycle and are symbolized by a mythological dance. The most famous specimen of the Nataraja in the one form which is there in the great Shiva temple in Tanjore, the figure alone being nearly four feet high and of an incomparable grace, dignity and beauty. As for Shiva's character, as he is known and loved in India, he is hot-tempered, susceptible to female charm, adores jewellery, loves smashing things and celebrating with one of his wild dances Tandava. In a marvelously unified and dynamic composition expressing the rhythm and harmony of life, Nataraja is shown with four hands representing the cardinal directions. He is dancing with his left foot elegantly raised and the right foot on a prostrate figure-*Apasmara Purusha* the personification of illusion and ignorance over whom Shiva triumphs. The upper left hand holds a flame, the lower left hand points down to

the dwarf, who is shown holding a cobra. The upper right hand holds a 'dumroo' that stands for the male-female vital principle, the lower shows the gesture of assertion: "Be without fear. Snakes that stand for egotism are seen uncoiling from his arms, legs and hair which is braided and bejeweled. His matted locks are whirling as he dances within an arch of flames representing the endless cycle of birth and death. On his head is a skull, which symbolizes his conquest over death. Goddess Ganga, the epitome of the holy river Ganges, also sits on his hair. His third Eye is symbolic of his omniscience, insight and enlightenment. The whole idol rests on a lotus pedestal, the symbol of the creative force of universe. Thus, Tandava-the cosmic dance of Shiva, symbolizes the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, as well as the daily rhythm of birth and death. The Hindu scriptures narrate various occasions when Shiva have performed the Tandava. When Sati (first wife of Lord Shiva), gave up her life, Shiva is said to have performed the Rudra Tandava to express his grief and anger. The Bhagvada Purana talks of Lord Krishna dancing on the head of the serpent Kaliya.

Dance is a physical and visual form which has an immediate and massive impact on the spectators. Indian dances have played an influential role in many other realms of art including poetry, literature, music, sculpture, architecture and theatre. People engage in dancing and singing very frequently on a variety of occasions like religious festivals, social occasions, cultural programs and so on. Nurtured for centuries, dance in India has evolved in different parts of the country with its own flavour-such as the energetic Bhangra and Giddha of Punjab, while the rhythmic Garba and Dandiya belong to Gujarat. Then there is the entertaining Lavni of Maharashtra and the acrobatic Chhau and elegant Bihu of the Eastern states. Folk dances are numerous in number and style and vary according to the local tradition of the respective state, ethnic or geographic regions. Contemporary dances include refined and experimental fusions of classical, folk and western forms. There are also dances of rural and tribal areas which range from simple joyous celebrations of the seasons. Harvest to birth of a child. Some traditions hold dancing as fundamental to cosmology, suggesting a highly developed theoretical understanding of dancing as a human activity. Dance is used metaphorically as identified with life, with interrelationship, with abstract concepts and so on.

We know that India has a rich cultural heritage and its varied dance forms reflect its diverse cultural traditions. When it comes to classical dancing, the country has an amazing variety to present. Classical dances are highly developed, sophisticated and complete form of art. Our country is unique for we have many forms of them Kathak in the north, Manipuri in the north-east, Odissi in Orissa, Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh, Bharatanatyam in Tamil Nadu and Mohiniattam and Kathakali in Kerala. All the classical dances of India revolve around the nine 'Rasa' or emotions, namely happiness, anger, fear, courage, peace, kindness, agony, surprise and disgust. Most of them have religious significance and convey devotion and thanks towards the divinity. As the popularity of the classical dance forms in India increased, dance festivals came to be organized in a few temples, with the aim of bringing the religious dances and temples close to each other. Amongst the most notable examples in this context is the Khajuraho Dance Festival, which was held some 20 years ago, amidst the backdrop of erotic sculptures. The dance festivals of India provide a common platform to the artistes to display their talent.

Classical dances of India are always usually spiritual in content. The highly specialized art of giving the verbal, almost onomatopoeic accompaniment to dancers such as those of Bharat Narya, Kathak and Manipuri makes westerners ask: "Is it a song, or is the man telling the dancer what to do?"

Kathakali means a story-play and is an elaborate dance depicting the victory of truth over falsehood. Its striking feature is use of elaborate make-up and colourful costumes. The theme of Mohiniattam dance is love and devotion to god Vishnu or Krishna. The spectators can feel His invisible presence when the dancer presents it through circular movements, delicate footsteps and subtle expressions. In comparison to the costumes and make-ups of Kathakalis, Mohiniattam dancers maintain realistic make-up and adorn a simple costume. Both these dance forms belong to Kerala.

Bharatanatyam dance has been handed down through centuries by dance teachers and temple dancers called Devadasis. The dancer performs to a poem, creating a parallel kinetic poetry in movement, registering subtle expressions on the face and the entire body reacts to the emotions, evoking sentiments in the spectator for relish the rasa. The themes are from Indian mythology, the Epics and the Puranas.

Kuchipudi is from Andhra Pradesh in which the actors sing and dance and the style is a blend of folk and classical. The main purpose of this dance is to inculcate divine ecstasy which evokes immortal bliss and brings one close to the path of salvation. Odissi from Orissa is based on the popular devotion to Lord Krishna. The Odissi dancers use their head, bust and torso in soft flowing movements to express specific moods and emotions. It is a soft, lyrical classical dance which depicts the ambience of Orissa and the philosophy of its most popular deity, Lord Jagannath, Kathak, from North India is bound with classical Hindustani music. Traditionally the stories were of Radha and Krishna, but the Moghul invasion of North India had a serious impact on the dance which moved to Muslim courts and thus it became more entertaining and less religious.

The Manipuri dance form from Manipur was originally called joga/which means circular movement. It is said that when Krishna, Radha and the gopis danced the Ras Leela, Shiva made sure that no one should disturb the beauty of dancing. Goddess Parvati wished to see this dance and so to please her he chose the beautiful area of Manipur and re-enacted the Ras Leela. People who are serious practitioners of Indian classical dance and music consider their profession as a service to God.

When people connect with music through dancing it affects their body, their thoughts and their mind. The power of music and dance gives one wings to fly away from everyday life. Dance helps us to stay fit and young

forever. It improves our memory by making us recall steps, routines and dance patterns. It also helps us to overcome stress and depressions. It boosts our self-esteem. In most European countries, modern dancing, classical ballet and gymnastics are more or less compulsory for children and young people in schools at least upto higher secondary levels because they are considered to be essential parts of not only their cultural development, but also for building up their bodies and preserving their health. Even our classical dances like Bharatnatyam are exercises par excellence.

To dance is the most natural human activity known to us, bringing with it many advantages. It can be started at 5 years of age and still be enjoyed when you are 95. It helps to keep you youthful and up-to-date. In a world where people of different cultures come into exposure with one another, dance will continue to progress and reflect this diversity and fusion. Thus dance becomes a universal language that responds to the sounds of the beat without any discrimination.

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