

Ashish Mohan Khokar  
INDIAN DANCE TODAY.  
AN HISTORICAL OVER-VIEW

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Indian classical dance traditions have been borne out of a sense of propitiation of the divinity. A certain spiritual content has always been its mainstay. It has also been essentially the art of a soloist, except in dance-theatre forms. Over two thousand unbroken years, it has grown to become the longest continuous dance culture, affording an interesting insight into man and his relationship to stage in general and dance art, in particular.

Its classical nature comes through by a set of code of grammar, content and concept. Thus, if in one form, the knees are to be bent while performing and a half-sitting position maintained all through, then it cannot be altered. The position of hands, the use of eyes, neck, torso and feet, all go towards making dance units, which become strings of movements, through which individual characteristics and a grammar is set which makes each form distinct and thus, with age and tradition, classical. The content is mostly mythological. These forms evolved over centuries, and it is believed, these were created to please gods and their representatives on earth. The myth goes that the gods were bored and asked the wisest amongst them – Brahma, the creator – to create some form of entertainment that

would involve and engage all. Brahma enlisted the help of sages, of whom Bharata, was given the specific task of writing a new Veda, (the holy treatises of which four existed already – *Rig*, *Saam*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*) the fifth Veda called the *Natyashastra*, and through this work, the details of modern dramaturgy in India were born.

When the gods saw their own stories enacted on the celestial stage, they were pleased and blessed the enterprise! They then requested Brahma that the same be taken to planet earth where, by listening to such tales, human beings would benefit by what is moral and what is righteous. Earthlings would live pious lives and these stories enacted through dance, drama and music will help reinstate myths and traditions. Thus, the art of dance and drama were born to enlighten, entertain and educate human beings.

Over centuries, these dance and drama traditions have crystallised to seven main classical dance forms of India – Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi from south on east coast in a state now called Tamil Nadu; Kathakali from Kerala on southern west coast; Mohiniyattam also from the same region; Kathak from north and central India and Orissi from east and Manipuri from extreme north-east. In last decade, additions like Sattriya from Assam in north-east have been added out of bureaucratic and political considerations. That way, national poet Rabindranath Tagore's concoction of different forms too, now seeks recognition, as a form called Rabindranatyam. Regional aspirations, fuelled by ready-to-please bureaucrats, and politicians wanting to become popular, sometimes means some new forms will be added once in a while and boundaries between classical, folk, popular and ritual forms will get further blurred. Historians and dance buffs treat this as aberrations and accept it as anomalies of times we live in!

Each of the principal seven styles (Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, Manipuri, Kuchipudi and Orissi) has set grammar and language and are practiced and taught traditionally from Master to disciple. A minimum of ten years of training is critical to gaining some basic level of proficiency. While Kathakali and Manipuri were group art, all others were art of the soloist. Each form was taught in a personalised manner and the tradition of *guru-shishya* (master-to-disciple) was paramount. Gurus, as Master-teachers were called, were not found sitting in institutions waiting for students to come (and pay). They were mostly benevolent father-figures, who took a very few, truly talented wards under their wings, to groom and prepare. This process was not bound by time, money

or years, but could take a lifetime. Until the guru gave permission, a student could not perform or take to stage. Both the guru and the student had time for and commitment to, art.

Under a long colonial rule from 16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century ADE, most of these forms suffered from lack of patronage under the colonial rule, especially of the Britishers, whose Victorians ways and prudish nature did not permit an open celebration of the body and spirit and who also looked down on traditional, local cultures and did all to discourage it. Lord Macaulay, a certain British Viceroy, further killed traditional arts by delinking culture from education in schools. Thus, traditional disciplines like yoga, reading of Sanskrit scriptures and classical music and dance were given a go by. Local patronage by Indian chieftains and royalty assured some survival and continuity, in certain pockets, else most of these traditions would have been lost. In that, the role of local temples as cradle of culture, cannot be under-estimated and local nobility supported these temples thus indirectly these dances got supported.

The work of few pioneering gurus and visitors from abroad also helped these forms get established. The arrival of non-European artistes to India, at the turn of the twentieth century also proved to be a catalyst. Among these, mention can be made of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, pioneering American dancer; Anna Pavlova and Victor Dandre, Russian star performers; La Meri and Ragini Devi, enterprising American dancers; Louise Lightfoot, Australian talent and many others. They saw the dismal condition of Indian dances, submerged under a long alien rule of 400 years and felt sad for these century-old traditions. Dutch writers like Beryl de Zoete and French and Italian travellers like Alain Daniélou and Tavernier wrote their observations that helped too. The foreign dancers took samples of these forms, and helped create a flavour of these dances through their own interpretations, thus giving Indian dances a world-wide audiences and assured survival. These were in form of short items or «Hindu dances» with popular imagery. They also «discovered» new partners and thus created stars of the form. Thus, Anna Pavlova «discovered» and partnered Uday Shankar, who was to become «father of modern Indian dance» later; La Meri «discovered and partnered» Ram Gopal, who was to become the king of classical forms; and Ragini Devi discovered and partnered Gopinath, who was to take Kathakali abroad. Ditto Louise Lightfoot and Ananda Shivaram.

These foreigners helped reinstate Indian dance art and such activ-

ties got augmented by the slow and steady growth of a nationalist fervour in pre-Independence era, when Indians got inspired to fight foreign rule under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi (later joined by Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad and many more). In that period several regional and new institutions were created for revival, teaching and promotion of our dance forms, chief being Kerala Kalamandalam in 1930s in Kerala to teach Kerala arts of Kathakali and Mohiniyattam; Kalakshetra in Madras in 1940s to teach Bharatanatyam and Tagore's own Santiniketan in 1930s to teach Manipuri, Kathakali and all available forms. Once India became independent in 1947, lots of forms got a shot in the arm, as it were, and overnight, under the overall nationalist fervour and spirit of revival, many institutions were created that helped teach and train new adherents. In Delhi, an enlightened industrialist family created the Bharatiya Kala Kendra, which also housed the Kathak Kendra. Natya Ballet Centre, Delhi Ballet Centre and a host of institutions came up all over the country, too many to recount here.

The first generation of star dancers India produced are Uday Shankar, whose discovery by Anna Pavlova, sparked a creative partnership in London and Paris. Soon, Shankar returned to India to set up his own dance company and engage many, including musicians like Allaudin Khan Sahib, Timir Baran and Vishnudas Shirali to create everlasting works. His younger brother Ravi Shankar, distinguished himself later as a world-class sitarist. In classical dance, Ram Gopal of Bangalore, put three classical dance forms – Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Kathakali – on world map. These two can be called pioneers, for they believed in India dance and helped reach out as early as in 1930s to 1940s. They went to gurus in their villages and sought to learn from them.

Slowly traditional teachers called gurus left their villages and settled in big cities and started teaching traditional dances and thus many more aspirants started learning dance art properly. In Madras alone, in the 1940s, the fountainheads of Bharatanatyam dance could be found in the forties though the sixties. Guru Muthukumaran Pillai, Guru Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, Chockalingam Pillai, Ellappa Pillai, Guru Gopinath, even Uday Shankar (making a full-length feature film, *Kalpana*) all were in Madras in that period. In north, thanks to creation of Bharatiya Kala Kendra, lot of Kathak gurus could come and teach like Shambhu Maharaj, Sundarprasad, Birju Maharaj. In Bombay, Lacchu Maharaj, Mohanrao Kalyanpurkar, Madame Menaka, Sitara Devi, Damayanti Joshi could further the art

form of Kathak. In Calcutta, in absence of any classical form (Orissi had not yet been established) many went to learn from Uday Shankar and other Manipuri gurus settled there like Amobi Singh. Lahore, then still part of India had Zohra and Kameshwar Segal and Pyarelal. All of the 1950s and 60s saw a glorious revival of these forms and traditions and by the 1970s India was truly dancing!

The revival of classical dance forms meant a more prominent visibility to both the art and the artistes. Dancers became almost as important as film stars in the sixties and seventies and were society names. The cult of prima donnas like Shanta Rao, Indrani Rahman, Yamini Krishnamurthy was established. Real dancers also became film stars like Vyjayanthimala and Hema Malini, who went from Madras to Bombay to seek bigger name and fortunes. Indian dance had arrived centre-stage. By then Orissi as a dance form was also established and thus joined the pantheon of classical forms. Four legendary gurus – Pankaj Charan Das, Kelucharan Mohapatra, Mayadhar Raut and Deba Prasad Das – all helped create its repertoire. Their students, Ritha Devi, Minati Mishra, Indrani Rahman, Kumkum Das, Sanjukta Panigrahi, Sonal Mansingh and Aloka Panikar and Kiran Segal arrived as worthy names on national stage.

Gurus of various forms were training new talents and all through the seventies we see most dance forms being revived and performed grandly. No state function was complete without a classical dance performance by a top name.

To become a soloist of merit and repute, it takes minimum of twenty years in Indian classical forms. This is because a minimum of ten years are required for learning and another ten for arriving, professionally. Thus, a dancer starts to train at an early age, at seven or nine, and by twenty is ready for debut. The next decade goes in gaining experience and professional acclaim. If lucky, after that, other things being equal, can one be successful and become a known name and then the real struggle of maintaining that success starts! All in all, a rather arduous profession with no assured gains!

In the 1980s, a slow trend started where those who were not doing or flourishing in solo classical styles wanted to break away and make a new artistic statement. Their exposure abroad and world travels also helped them see what was going on in Germany (Kurt Joos, Pina Bausch); USA (Ted Shawn-Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor); France and England did not

provide much fodder then as in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, ballet still ruled roost with ballerinas like Italian Emma Pittéra, Russian Anna Pavlova and Diaghilev, settled in London.

These path-breakers from India who wanted to go beyond the classical tradition, having failed to establish themselves as soloist of repute, were Bharatanatyam dancer Chandrakha and Kathak dancer Kumudini Lakhia. Both had learnt traditional styles like Bharatanatyam and Kathak and had tried their hand (and feet) for decades to become a soloist, without much success. Before this cut-off point in 1984, there were true «ballet» (dance-drama in Indian context) masters like Uday Shankar, Sachin Shankar, Narendra Sharma, Shanti Bardhan, Prabhat Ganguli and they basically created dance-dramas based on Indian themes. They did not debunk tradition or say classical dance was of little merit. Chandrakha wished to position herself anew and made pompous statements that classical dance had no future. She must have meant she had no future in it!

The best years for soloists, in Indian context, is 25-50 years of age. Unlike in western ballet traditions, where body is central to dance, in Indian classical forms, the soul, the spirit is the key. Body or shape and size of it, is almost secondary though it helps to have a finely tuned body for dance. We have had cases of ageing, heavily set dancers (Balasaraswati), bald men dancing (Kelucharan Mohapatra) but they were all respected as great gurus and legendary dancers.

In 1984, a German maverick bureaucrat called George Lechner, posted at the Max Muller Bhavan in India and married to a local dancer Sonal Mansingh (who had left Bharatanatyam for Orissi), decided to initiate and host a platform, for all those, who felt Indian classical dance was a dead-end and needed new winds to blow. He hosted the first East West Encounter in Bombay and invited all those dancers who needed a new platform. The new breakaway lot of Chandrakha and Kumudini Lakhia wanted to make an artistic statement that was Indian in nature but not entirely classical in body or form. The simplest route was to take the form they had been taught and use features or elements from it. So, both created group works and thus the energy of soloist was magnified. Both succeeded somewhat because in mid-eighties the clime was right for experimentation. India had arrived internationally and new statement in art was welcome after all reviving of tradition had been sort of attended to. Both also had limited success, because their students did not have same strong foundation in any classical form, thus the style could be cloned but not grow beyond a point. While Chandrakha

success was short-lived and in her end years she was lampooned when her promoters wanted to put her on par with the Pina Bausch-of-India label, Kumudini was smarter to create a corpus of students who can continue her work, though, owing to her personality and temperament few wish to stay and work with her. Her prime student Daksha Sheth, the best creative choreographer of India today has branched off on her own and now stays in Kerala and creates her artistic work, far from the maddening crowd. Maulik Shah and Ipsita stay in Ahmedabad, the same city where Kumudini is based but have branched off to do their own thing. Aditi Mangaldas too has left Ahmedabad and loves and works in Delhi. Lechner tried to duplicate the Encounter in 2001 again in Bombay but by this time the movement of avant-garde dance was truly dead and even cosmopolitan audiences of Bombay walked out of Chandrakha's last work *Sarira*, which was soft-porn in appeal. Indian audiences said no thank you.

She died last year, leaving no student or inheritor.

In the nineties, the art of the solo dancer was slowly getting replaced with group art. This happened because of several reasons: real gurus or master-teachers who taught for love of art and not just money were declining. Real students, who loved art more than their won glory, were fewer! Patronage systems have not kept with growing volume of dancers and the state fortunately has no evident cultural policy, because India is the size of Europe, with bigger population and diversity which no one policy can contain. Group dancers also gave a sense of variety and opportunity for more to dance. It also covered up the individual lack of mastery over one idiom, as the strong, classical foundation was missing. All in all, a dilution of tradition took place.

Corporate India has also not done much to support the arts because there is no incentive or tax benefits to such support. Unlike in USA, where public support by companies can be written-off under tax systems, in India that is missing for several, quasi «socialistic» reasons. Politicians have no real interest in the arts anyway. The Gandhi family had some vision and interest and from Nehru to Indira there was some talent appointed in the field of arts and culture. In the last cabinet appointments, in May 2009, the culture minister was the last one to be appointed, after even the coal and fertilizer minister!

The best known dance talents today in what can be truly called «modern or contemporary Indian dance» are very few: Daksha Sheth

based in Kerala uses Kathak, Kalari and Chhau and is first-rate. She takes 5-8 years to create a production and is not in the market for name or glory. She is a true genius and a great artist. The gap after her is immense because most others are copying and cloning each other or are left-overs of Chandrakala and Kumudini structure. A few who have done sustained work are Astad Deboo, Aditi Mangaldas of Delhi, Attakkalari and Stem groups of Bangalore. Classical dance continues to rule roost because modern dance lacks clear language or direction and audiences mix, fusion for confusion!

Fusion dance is a shortcut to several demanding dance realities: few have time and talent to learn for long. There are no real gurus (masters) left. Teachers have become gurus and there is a vast difference between the two: one is in the market-place, other is about passion and pursuing an art form. Urban realities have also contributed to contexts of time and space, both being at a premium. Thus, learning and performing fusion dance is easy. Fusion in the Indian context today does not merely mean a sensible mix of two or more forms or styles. It means. A hand of Bharatanatyam, a foot of Kathak, make-up of Kathakali and pace of Manipuri. Martial forms like Chhau and Kalari have gained currency because they look dramatic and fulsome. Thus, fusion is not a defined merging, a defined form. Each does his or her own and none have staying power of more than ten minutes or more.

In fusion, minimum training or none can help one create some esoteric item that can be called anything. Wind, Air, Water, Karma, Reaching out, Looking Within... any fancy and vague title will do; the more esoteric and vague, the better! This type is easy to do, as the creator, generally takes the liberty of simply «borrowing or stealing» any existing music of any composer. Bach rubs shoulders with Keith Jarrett and L. Subramaniam with Pavarotti! Some vague body movements, some stretches and some international-looking, shining leotard costumes are all one needs to arrive on stage and also on Page 3 (society pages). Increasingly, films too support and offer these new «bastardised» forms because it is new. In the name of innovation, anything goes and while many new groups and talents spring up often, few last beyond two seasons. Thus, fusion is not taken seriously as dance culture and some artists like Bharat Sharma, Anita Ratnam, Madhuri Upadhyaya, «Samudra», are all doing dance-theatre and palming it off as fusion. When they can't do serious classical style, the shortcut is fusion. Hence, they help create confusion!

After ten years of this new genre, fusion, many in the audiences, wish to return to pure, traditional forms and their beauty. Thus, it is always a delight to see an Alarmel Valli, who ranks supreme as Bharatanatyam talent of today followed by host of wannabes. None have the staying power, the brilliance of the form and the beauty of art like her. Leela Samson, Malavika Sarukkai, Satyanarayan Raju and Urmila Satyanarayan show seriousness of purpose. In Orissi, there is a big gap between generation last (Sanjukta Panigrahi, Aloka Panikar and Kiran Segal) and generation next and by default, it is filled by Madhavi Mudgal, whose aesthetics are high but dance appeal, rather cold. Good lights and costumes can enhance, but not entirely make up for beauty and depth of classical dances. Sharmila Biswas of Calcutta is slowly emerging as someone with a difference in Orissi. The Protima Bedi students of Nrityagram in Bangalore have mastered the art of presentation and are successful abroad with dramatic lights and poses. At home, this novel institution Protima created, on the lines of a traditional *gurukul* (art hermitage) is in shambles with no students or teachers and a handful of girls trying to remain relevant. In Kathak, soloist of merit are hard to name as most do group work now but Malati Rawat is one exception. Rajendra Gangani, Maulik Shah, remain somewhat senior while youngsters Tushar Bhatt and Sweekruth are beginning to make a mark. In Kuchipudi, Vyjayanthi Kashi and Anand Shankar Jayant are in good form today and in Mohiniyattam, Deepti Bhalla Omchery and Neena Prasad try to be true to the form.

The popular dances on TV reflect young India and its aspirations and suddenly many more seem to be dancing! In last 20 years, India has become a young, modern, technologically progressive nation. Today, it has world's largest young populace, nearly 60% of its one billion population is under 25 years of age! Imagine, 600 million people under 25! It is a big resource and challenge.

In 2010, what do we see of Indian dance? The plate is full and over-flowing! There are thousands of classically-trained dancers who seem to be at it and perform even when there is no obvious support systems. Most performances are not ticketed and relatives and friends make up the audience. The press is generous because it has too space to fill when cricket and football are not being played! Critical appraisal having gone out of newspapers, only Page 3 society columns are left. Quality has been taken over by quantity.

Classical dance being always marginalised in most societies, Indi-

an dances are no exception. Audiences are limited, though committed. Big cities (and that means minimum of ten million people!) are busy teaching, projecting and propagating dance forms and while many parents desire their children learn some art form, especially in south India, the insular and civilised part of India, the lack of professional avenues make it difficult to pursue as a career. It is customary that most children learn some dance form, especially girls, till they are 20 and then decide if it is to be a profession. Pushy parents seeking social esteem and better marriage prospects, also encourage their daughters to learn, so if nothing else, it helps them in deportment, social graces and confidence levels! Once married, family life and responsibilities take over! 90% of those who learn for 5-10 years between ages 10-20, never take to stage, professionally. Dance is a calling, not a career.

The 10% who do, are assured of hard struggle, lots of persistence pursuit of that mistress of art called fame and if lucky, one percent do achieve it. Then, for them, the sky is the limit.