

Contemporary Classical and Modern Indian Dance

Indian dance has a history of over 2000 years but has evolved considerably during that time. I will be speaking about its evolution during the 20th Century and its present state. In doing this, I will be recounting the recent history of Bharatanatyam which is one of the classical dance styles and of modern Indian dance. Names of practitioners of these dance forms will be used and their work briefly pointed out to explain certain aspects.

Indian dance was banned from the temples during the British rule and almost died a premature death. E. Krishna Iyer (a lawyer by profession, who danced in female attire) and Rukmini Devi (the famous dancer who established Kalakshetra, a dance institution) worked to revive our dance forms, especially Bharatanatyam since the independence of India in 1947. Post-independent India has taken great strides in spot-lighting many performing arts unknown to the general populace. Many regional art forms, till then restricted only to small areas, have been presented on the national network and popularized. The result is that we now have many additions to the performing arts, apart from the well-known ones like sadir (now called Bharatanatyam), Kathakali, Kathak and Manipuri. From being a disgrace due to the stigma attached to it, classical dance has become a status symbol. In carrying out this work, E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi tried to eliminate the erotic element which was deemed as indecent and to bring out the devotional aspect. They succeeded in reviving our dance forms but dancers like Balasaraswati and Kalanidhi Narayanan have since proved that the erotic is anything but indecent and in fact acts as one of the paths of devotion. The advent of nattuvanars who were only teachers and not performers played a significant role in producing a crop of excellent solo performers. The changes wrought by time are dictated by the changing circumstances. Today, classical dance is performed in theatres and rarely in temples, to audiences of varied nature. Electric lights have replaced oil lamps. The duration of performances has been curtailed so that the audiences can catch the last bus home. But none of this has changed the essential nature of the art being performed. The repertoire followed in Bharatanatyam today was essentially formed by the Tanjore Quartette, the four brothers who were musicians in the court of kings during the 19th century. This repertoire consists of the following pieces:

Alarippu: Literally meaning blossoming of a flower, this piece is the opening number in which there is a slow progression of movement from the head to toe thus warming up the entire body. Present day opening items include certain others of differing format.

Jatiswaram: This is a slightly more difficult piece of abstract dance in which rhythmic footwork and hand gestures are used to dance to musical notations.

Shabdham introduces expression in a simple manner.

Varnam is the most taxing piece in which there is a just combination of abstract and expressive dance. This is the true physical and mental test of the dancer.

Padams are entirely expressive pieces and offer physical respite after the difficult varnam but are mental challenges due to the depth of expression involved.

Tillana is a joyous celebration of dance which forms the grand finale to a recital. Due to its origin in the temples, the dance has taken on a distinctive religious quality and dancers tell the same legends and myths of Hinduism. It still flourishes as a solo dance inspite of the onslaught of group productions which have become the call of the day. The puranas, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavatam etc. are still the textbooks upon which composers base their compositions. Practitioners of the classical idiom find immense satisfaction and pleasure in portraying these themes due to their variety and due to the spiritual goal attached. Regional languages have been added to the repertoire of songs in a dance performance. There is an expansion of themes to include Christian and Buddhist subjects. Dr. Padma Subramaniam is a dancer whose scholarly research has contributed much to our dance forms. She believes that classical dance in India existed as one style known as the margi style and the regional influences created the various regional or desi styles. Other dancers such as the Dhananjayans and Alarmel Valli are performing great service while adhering strictly to the classical idiom. These dancers' bodies have become one with the dance and they do not know any other way. There is a large crop of extremely talented youngsters in the performance field today but opportunities are hard to come by due to the exploitation by organizations and other reasons. Still, the future of classical dance is secure in their hands.

But there are others who desire intensely to discover the meaning of movement and the world of perception. Ours being the century of the intellect, is a tremendous challenge to such an artist to portray the problems of society created by man. Many decades ago, the creative mind of Uday Shankar and the literary genius of Rabindranath Tagore set the foundation for modern dance as opposed to any of the classical Indian dance forms. Uday Shankar attempted to break away from the classical pattern and the distinction between nrta (abstract dance portions) and abhinaya (mimetic portions) were broken. Uday Shankar discovered like his contemporaries that there was the rich storehouse of the classical styles to be explored, and established the Almora Centre where several gurus of classical styles were invited to teach thus exposing the dancers to various styles by which they were influenced. This led to the temptation of adapting one of these styles to modern dance or using it as raw material for new creations. The break-up of the Centre and the establishment of various schools all over the country by artistes who had been members of the Centre may be called the second phase of the development of the modern dance in India. A majority of these artistes fell back on the known and tested traditional language of the classical styles and their creations slowly went back to depend upon given musical compositions as on known musical themes. Thus, most of the dance-dramas can be analyzed in terms of the incipient classical style which lies behind any modern dance creation. These artistes went back also to depend upon the gesture language, foot movement or rhythmic composition. Since the

training of these artistes in the classical vocabulary was limited, they looked towards other classical forms. The net result of the composition, more often than not was a stringing together of different types of movement drawn from the different classical styles. Very often, the frontal vertical movement of Kathak was followed by the triangular terse lines of a Bharatanatyam pattern, and the movement culminated with the vigorous finale of Kathakali. An individual character of movement was lost in the process. The only new thing they did was to have a story in which characters played a part, rather than have one person depict various roles as in the solo dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathak. The dance dramas which were created have all been based on one or the other of classical styles or on a number of classical styles. Not one of the artistes evolved a style of movement which was personal to the director of the company. Some of these have been very serious and successful attempts none the less. Mrinalini Sarabhai and her daughter Mallika Sarabhai have been using Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Kathakali in their performances to depict social themes which are relevant to today's world. Manjusri Chaki Sircar and her daughter Ranjabati Sircar have developed a new style of dance called 'navarntya' in which they use movements from Bharatanatyam, Chhau, and other classical dance styles as well as martial arts and yoga. These have been integrated to form a method of communication using the body. Chandrlekha is another choreographer who has used basic Bharatanatyam movements as expressions of the self. Eschewing facial expression, she has used the body as the main means of communication.

From the recent history of classical and modern dance, we can observe the following differences in technique between the two:

Modern Dance

1. It is movement of the human form for its own sake, primary and not dependent on the tala (metric cycle) or the poetic line.
2. Dance is created first and then the music is composed for the dance. Once the number is choreographed, music can be composed for it.
3. In the new formula, movement evolves 1st and it is not guided by any stylized pattern; any point of articulation of the body can be used.
4. Except for some singing in order to create an atmosphere, there is hardly any vocal accompaniment in these compositions. It is instrumental music which either heightens the effect of the dance or is subordinate to the movement

Classical Dance

1. It is movement that is set to a composition in a particular tala and/or with a particular poetic line.
2. This reverses the classical pattern where the musical composition is the basis and the dance is adapted to the musical composition.
3. Movement evolves as a coordinated pattern of the feet, torso, arms, hands. The movement is conceived in relation to the vertical median.
4. Since lyric and poetry are imperative to classical dance, it is wedded to song and works with it to communicate meaning.

of the dance.

5. The dancer is no longer in a position to interpret, or improvise according to the poetic line or the musical melody.

6. The dance is no longer based on the distinctive kinetic hypothesis; there is no basic pose which has to be repeated.

7. In modern dance, there is no self-imposed limitation of either the ardamandali (sitting position) of Bharatanatyam, or the chowka (bend) of Odissi, or the erect spinal treatment of Kathak, or the figure 8 of Manipuri. Movements are chosen for their expressive quality rather than for the abstract pattern which they can evolve on a given geometrical motif. Thus, dancers set move in any direction, have movements at all levels of

and these movements are not in chunks of time in a variety of rhythmical permutations and combinations as in classical dance forms. Instead, they are a continuous series of movements against counts or beats.

8. Finally, since there is no poetry to be sung, there used as a is no need to present variations on a given word or a given line of poetry through gestures, especially of the hands. The story is told through a series of movements in which the hastabhinaya plays a very subsidiary role. Indeed it would be more correct to say that the hands do not perform the same function here as they do in any of the classical styles.

5. Each word in the poetry being used can be interpreted in various ways. There is scope for improvisation due to the recurrence of musical melody.

6. In the classical pattern, sequential movements emerged from the basic pose and movement returned to the stillness of the basic sculptural pose. The perfect pose is a moment of arrested time in limited space.

7. All of these classical styles use these very limitations to claim a (half distinctive and recognizable quality unique to it. The abstract pattern formed by these movements of the body are well complemented by the deeply mobile and expressive quality of the face. Dancers move in directions to a large variety

intricate rhythmical patterns.

8. The whole body is not major means of communication. It aids the hands and the face in the communication process. The codified hand gestures are very important in classical dance.

There are thus fundamental differences in technique between the two styles. In conclusion, it must be pointed out that the movements used in modern dance are very often derived from classical dance. No art can survive without change as long as it satisfies basic aesthetic requirements. This is true of classical and modern dance in any context.

Glossary

Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Kathakali & Chhau:	regional classical dance forms
E. Krishna Iyer, Rukmini Devi:	pioneers in reviving classical dance
Balasaraswati and Kalanidhi Narayanan:	dancers of great repute
Kalakshetra:	dance institution established by Rukmini Devi
Tanjore Quartette:	4 brothers who formed today's Bharatanatyam repertoire.
Sadir:	old name for Bharatanatyam
Puranas, Mahabharata, & Bhagavatam:	epics and mythology on which classical compositions are based.
Dr. Padma Subramaniam:	dancer and scholar of Bharatanatyam
Margi & Desi:	national & regional styles of dancing
Dhananjayans and Alarmel Valli:	practitioners of classical dance
Nattuvanars:	teachers who did not perform
Uday Shankar, Rabindranath Tagore:	pioneers of modern dance
Nrta:	abstract dance portions
Abhinaya:	mimetic portions
Tala:	metric cycle
Mrinalini Sarabhai and Mallika Sarabhai:	mother and daughter who perform social themes relevant to today's society.
Manjusri Chaki Sircar & Ranjabati Sircar:	mother and daughter who have established a new system of movement called 'navanrtya'
Chandralekha:	Choreographer who uses Bharatanatyam movements in communication.
Ardhamandali:	half sitting position
Chowka:	Odissi bend
Hastabhinaya:	expression through hand gestures

Sources:

Indian Classical Dance	by Kapila Vatsyayan
A Dancer on Dance	by V.P. Dhananjayan
Proceedings of Tenth Natyakala Conference Dec. 1990	Compiled by Sudharani Raghupathy