

Contemporary Dance Scene:

By Lakshmi Viswanathan

Bharatanatyam, the contemporary classical dance of our part of the country, has a brief history of about only five or six decades. What we hear about the state of dance before the turn of the century is a series of verbal pictures, with little or no accurate details about the technical form of the dance. Dance was then an offering in a temple, a ritual, a spiritual avocation, a sacred duty. Those who were involved in this ritual, practiced the art for a purpose, and within that framework, their art remained unblemished even with onslaught of foreign and other powers dominating the country. Within the temple, therefore, the art seems to have been, not a display of skill, but a humble offering, not an amusement, but a dedication, not a feat, but a prayer. Families who had dedicated their lives to nurture the arts of dance and music (the two could never be thought of separately) are the only link between present day dance, and what the art might have been when treatises and shastras were compiled, right from the time of the Vedas and Puranas onwards.

Outside the temple, recent history shows that dance existed in its classical form in the courts of royal and wealthy patrons, on the one hand, and in its popular form as folk art in every street corner of every little village. Under the patronage of the wealthy and the learned, performing artistes vied with each in giving of their best be it the delienation of a padam, or a complicated theermanam, a sophistication, a splendour which was, at once attractive and exclusive, pervaded the concept of dance in the royal courts. The respect shown to artistes and the reverence shown to art seem almost legendary when we read of it today.

With classical dance thus patronised either by temple or courts, the dance of the common man was naturally nearer his own home-accessible to him and above all easily understood by him. When people did not actually dance at harvest time; or to herald the monsoon, or at country fairs they sat in clusters watching folk dance-theatre, "therukoothu". Whereas the village folk, both men and women danced at weddings danced at the birth of a child, danced even at funerals, as an expression of their feeling of abandonment the participants. In entertainment such as "therukoothu" were small bands of professionals and semi-professionals with a certain amount of training to their credit. The stories they enacted were common folklore easily understood by if not already known to their audience, and to grip their audience, they painted their faces gaudied their head gear, indulged in gymnastic and acrobatics, and included their own brand of humour. This was not the dance of the devadasi doing the navasandhi nrityam to propitiate the gods. This was not the dance of the nayika exuding poetry, pleasing her patron, speaking to the gods with her gestures—an expression of inner communion with loftier powers. This therukoothu was just entertainment. Oh yes, indeed these classics—these dramas, also spoke of gods and goddesses. But differently—in an earthy unsophisticated way. In a way that the common man, squatting on the mud floor around, could discern and digest, in a way in which he could taste the rasa of this work of art.

With the classical dance banished from temple, and the folk dance eclipsed by cinema culture—today, we find practiced as a form of sophisticated entertainment in urban centres,

with dancers having to water down the art to reach the uninitiated and indifferent public, most of whom are bored with the lofty sentiments, one associates with traditional culture. In order to communicate easily with such an audience, the dancer tends to employ melodrama where a delicate suggestion of emotion would have spoken eloquently. To have an instant "appeal", flashy costumes are changed every few minutes. To gloss over the impatience of the viewers to see a tale unfold delicately in a leisurely pace, dancers pace around the stage, with the speed of lightning to create an illusion of vigour and perfection. In the process, we are losing the subtleties of an art which is supposed to raise both artiste and viewer to a higher place of aesthetic rapture.

We are now in an epoch which could be the beginnings of a renaissance of the art.

More and more people are learning dance, more schools and more teachers spring up everyday. But there are no clear guidelines as to what should be the ultimate in nurturing the true essence of a great and ancient art form. The eagerness of dancers themselves to know more about the shastras and technique of the dance shows a genuine quest for knowledge. But perhaps an intense pre-occupation with theories would only make us forget the intrinsic depth of an art form which has its base in spirituality, as a famous ballerina once aptly remarked 'I don't wish to say—"look how high I can leap.....look how fast I can pirouette.....I just dance". The soul should speak to the spectator's soul and an emotion deep enough to be remembered!

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