

The Changing Scene

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Having been an ardent student and practitioner of dance for almost four decades as a performer, teacher, musician, conductor, choreographer and also as the head of a Faculty of Performing Arts, I wish to share some of my views with the readers. During a long period of time a change is bound to come in any field of human existence and at a certain period of time, the change is total leaving no spec of the original which substantiates the famous dictum "old order changeth yielding place to new." The arts are no exception to this be it the visual or the performing arts. The traditional painter or sculptor is today considered to be a copyist of order works of art with no creative expression. In the performing arts, particularly in India, the urge to change has been comparatively slow and practitioners of these arts are still very much tradition-bound or atleast call themselves so.

What is a tradition? Literally it would mean a continuance of certain norms which were instituted or established by someone of our own clan at some period earlier in the long history of human existence. In the field of art, a tradition which has a greater aesthetic appeal would continue for a longer period. During this period, however, it is bound to undergo gradual changes.

In the field of dance and Bharatnatyam in particular, we are in such a period of its history when the practice of this art form has reached its saturation point. I do not wish to repeat here its origin, history, renaissance, renaming etc. which have been elaborated by many a writer from time

to time. I am only putting down some of my observations as they seem very relevant to me for the future of this great art form at this juncture. I would stick more to the scene in Madras.

When I started learning dancing almost four decades ago, many an eyebrow was raised at my father's decision to let me pursue this art. Those were days when dance was just appearing on the urban stage and a few dancers were trying to establish themselves and tell the public of our great heritage. In the city of Madras one could count the number of auditoria where dance performances were held once in a bluemoon. The Rasika Ranjani Sabha Hall in Mylapore, the Gokhale Hall in George Town & the Museum Theatre were the few halls where music and dance performances could be held indoors for a fairly large audience. The Music Academy at its annual December festival gave an evening or two for a Bharatanatyam recital. The Kalakshetra had just started its art evenings at Adyar with its nearest audience coming from Mylapore. Lot of water has flown down the streams since then when we almost have a hall or two (permanent or temporary) in every locality, a new Sabha springing up every six months and a dancer in every house. This growth is tremendous in forty years for an art form which had lived in oblivion for more than a century.

Analysing the dance scene since the forties we find that some of the great masters of Bharatanatyam came down to Madras to teach privately or at institutions. They were hard task masters and would not accept any-

thing second rate. By then people had not realised the hard work that had to be put in to master the technique. Many who started learning found the style taxing and found easier ways to go on the stage and earn name and fame. This started the period of the "Oriental Dances" which was a poor copy of what Uday Shankar had pioneered to do to put India on the world dance map. The 'Oriental Dance' wave held sway for more than a decade and half. So much so even highly trained well known dancers had to include an item or two of such dances, in their recitals. They had to compromise at least to a "Kurathi Dance" being added to the programme. This fever gradually died out although it still cashes down in some mofussil areas of the south. During the 'Oriental Dance' wave there emerged many a teacher, who had not had a formal training of Bharatanatyam, who started imparting training to many young aspirants as by now the dance interest had grown. But very few amongst these could make a mark.

By the mid sixties however quite a few well trained dancers and more traditional teachers who came down to Madras started their classes and institutions and a real awareness for quality was realised. Institutions like Kalakshetra with their great ideals continued to stress the need of quality and aesthetic values in dance. As a result I found that by the early seventies, the general Standard of young dancers in the city had improved tremendously which still continues. The credit for this not only goes to those who teach but to the young people who wish to probe deeper into the subject than merely accept their teachers verbatim. They want to work hard in order to come up and get a name. They are also bold to approach any organiser and look for opportunities. It is here I wish to compliment the city Sabhas for the yeoman service of providing a platform to dancers. Almost every Sabha arranges one or two dance festivals in a year

giving an opportunity for hundreds of aspiring dancers. The Sabhas are often blamed for not paying the dancers adequately. But if one realises the number of audience witnessing dancerecitals one would not blame them. One is fortunate if the audience is hundred to two hundred strong. Even dramas which attracted large crowds have lost their clientele. Classical Music is the worst sufferer. Thanks to the TV and Video boom!

During the last decade there has been an urge to do something new, something different amongst the dancers. From the point of view of the growth of an art form creativity amongst its practitioners is a good sign. Experiments are welcome. But in the name of creativity very often all that remains is a hotchpotch jumbling of fragments of dance pieces already in vogue. The result is new wine in an old bottle. One of my esteemed colleagues in the field once jocularly remarked that we might soon find aduvus being done with one finger and one foot. The result is there is nothing new and the existing form is mutilated.

Then there is the greed for speed which is becoming responsible for loss of aesthetic values in dance. The subtle nuances in abhinaya have to be sacrificed, the sthaya bhava loses its significance and padams of Kshetragna and the like either have lost their place in a recital or are danced in jet speeds. As for Nrta, the less said the better. At the expense of the rhythmic virtuosity the clarity of movements is lost. When a dancer is young one is able to maintain a certain amount of clarity along with speed but this does not remain so with age. Very often a long sequence of nrta with very complicated jatis becomes lack-lustre due to lack of clarity although it sounds beautiful. That was probably the reason why our earlier traditional teachers believed in short beautiful nrta sequences. Is it not damaging to barter aesthetic beauty for mere technical virtuosity?

In recent years with the establishment of Kuchipudi and Odissi on a stronger footing along with Bharatanatyam there seems to be an easy amalgamation of the styles especially in the rendering of abhinaya. Very often I am told by dance loving friends that they really seem to see not much of a difference in the styles and I feel they are not totally wrong. With more and more of exposure to the different styles this amalgamation seems inevitable. Further, dancing tends to be moving closer to acting which could be adapted by any style in an identical manner. Is this a healthy trend for the growth of the individual styles?

Another threat to the growth of the dance form is the appearance on the dance field of teachers who have been accompanying musicians to dancers. No doubt constant nearness to the dance gives them a certain amount of understanding but for them to venture and teach a system in which they have no personal training is injurious to the art.

There is a lot of talk these days about the necessity to usher in a new era in the dance scene in India comparable to the modern dance wave in the west. The absolute lack of freedom in the western ballet technique was responsible for the emergence of a new style which would give a dancer total freedom. On the contrary India has had a long heritage and history of many styles which gave ample scope for improvisation within a flexible basic frame work and as such the variety is enormous. The necessity for a break-away style was not felt. The few innovations that have been tried are still to strengthen their roots, as most of them seem to be a recreation of existing styles. There is enough freedom in each style to be very creative and present the same piece differently every time it is danced. We are therefore at the threshold of a changing dance scene where pessimism and optimism regarding the future seem to weigh equally. ●

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