

## WESTERN INFLUENCES ON OUR DANCE

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Performing arts in India have always encapsulated both in structure and in content the philosophical aspirations of the Indian mind. Indian dance appear as a subtle synthesis of philosophy, sculpture, music and literature. It gathers all the three strands and sets them in motion before the eye. To speak about Bharatanatyam, our oldest and most popular classical dance style, is to enter into a philosophical discourse on ethics, aesthetics and social reality all at once. The illusion of the art is reinforced by the religious themes of dance and drama stories which are often extracts from the legends and the vedic scriptures. The ideal spectator (sahridaya) was one, who absorbed in the religious stories evoked in the conventionalised mode of representation experienced "rasa" or aesthetic delight. Endowed with superior artistic and intellectual capabilities, the spectator would harmonise differences into unities by the power of his own mind. Bharatanatyam would therefore be, what Dwight McDonald might call the 'high culture'— occasionally popular and very elitist. This "high culture" is slowly being converted into "mass culture" by integrating the masses into a debased form of high culture. It brings about an "average consumption pattern"- a process of regression of the aesthetically pure forms to facilitate an easy mass acceptability. This phenomenon naturally effects a change in "form" and perhaps "content" of Bharatanatyam.

Art cannot be independent of the society it exists in. Bharatanatyam is infact a socio-aesthetique phenomenon, embedded in Hinduism that stretches beyond dance proper. As such, it interprets the entire life in terms of mythical poesis. In the Hindu Society of the bygone days, the dancer belonged to the

community of the Devadasis. The Devadasis or "Servants of God" had specific functions in the temples. The traditional classical dance known as "*Sadir*" in Tamilnadu and "*Karnatakam*" in Telugu and Karnataka districts was practised by the Devadasis. They sang and danced stories of gods before the temple deities to propitiate and entertain them. As this form of dance was exclusive to the Devadasis, the knowledge and practice of this art form was prohibited to the castes and communities.

If the 'women' of this community became 'devadasis', the men were 'nattuvanars'. They provided the needed accompaniment for the dance. More importantly, they composed and choreographed marvellous pieces of dance. Their professional lives were wholly engaged in, if not "dedicated" to the pursuit of this specific art. The 'patrons' of dance and music - the special consumers maintained and used them. The problems of day-to-day living did not affect them. They lived at and for the pleasure of the patrons. A typical feudal arrangement but helped the highly talented people to specialise-caste in this case was characteristically specialisation.

The end of the 19th century saw the impingement of the British culture on that of India. The Indian Hindu renaissance had begun to absorb unconsciously two western attitudes-

- a) a conscious pride in one's own artistic heritage - a secular pride which could convert the religious into the aesthetically excellent.
- b) a quasi-victorian attempt to suit art to the needs of 'morally' acceptable social norms, and make art a part of mainstream society.

These attitudes affected and changed the relationship between respectable 'modern' educated society and the performing arts/artistes.

Again, this influence was a two-way process. While Britain sought to teach India its culture, there was a minority in Britain who were wrongly impressed by the richness, depth and durability of Indian culture. The early Indologists were found among the early Indophilis. Indeed, it was fashionable to be proud of and to be concerned with one's own culture and arts. The western educated Indian connoisseurs of dance and music were faced with the problem of making these art-forms acceptable to the respectable society. To establish the beauty of the art in the public mind, it had to be brought out of the temple precincts and it had to be learnt and practised by others also. It is said that the great Anna Pavlova told Rukmini Arundale to learn Sadir.

But in order to make 'sadir' acceptable to respectable upper castes, it was necessary to give it a sanskrit slant. The whole art form 'sadir'-nourished and enriched by a traditional Devadasi class became "Bharatanatyam", an art form derived from sanskrit lore and hence, worthy of respect and acceptance by the respectable upper classes. The anti-nautch movement was started in the last decades of the last century. It's principal aims were the boycotting of nautch and abolition of the Devadasi system itself.

By about this time, something called the Hindu Dance was in vogue in the West. In 1906, Ruth St. Denis (1877-1968) began performing highly imaginative and spectacular Oriental dances. She had successful tours of Europe with a dance called "Radha"- or the "Five Senses". It was an adaptation or imitation of what was then called "Hindu Dance". She explained - "I made a dance with a Buddhist theme, danced by a Hindu goddess in a Jain decor". Her oriental dances had widespread influence on modern dance.

It became fashionable for every well-known dance school to include "Hindu" or "Oriental" or "East Indian" dance in what it taught its students. The dance teachers involved had hardly any authentic notion of the dances of India, but this did not deter them. In 1930, a book called "Oriental and Character Dances", by Helen Frost was published in New York. Besides descriptions of dance, it contained notated piano music composed for the dance by Lily Stricland and accompanying photographs. It also included some references to oriental dances such as - "Krishna and Radha", "Nautch Temple Dancers", Komari and Ceylonese" (a comparable Indian dance is the gypsy dance included in a Bharatanatyam based dance-drama.)

Helen Frost observed "it has been said that there is no dancing worth to be found in India. That idea I know to be wrong. But discovery does take time-for one may see nothing for months and then suddenly be in the right place at the right time.

Uday Shanker further aroused and strengthened this curiosity and desire of the Americans about Hindu dancing. But the Americans were not to seek authenticity. It would have been difficult to hold for authenticity in any case, since the West had not yet been exposed to the authentic dance tradition of India. Uday Shanker, Menaka and Ramgopal revelled in the glory of attention being paid by the West to their own synthesised dance.

The '30's and the '40's saw the early pioneers from the non-traditional classes taking to dancing in India. The traditional Devadasis were banned by the "Sarda Bill". The menfolk, the nattuvanars set up as Bharatanatyam teachers-teaching students from the new non-traditional classes. Now girls from respectable families are given Bharatanatyam training at the instance of their parents. It has become a cultured hobby or snob accomplishment.

The language of dance has become English. In fact English has become '*lingua Bharatanatica*' if one may say so. Many peripherals of the dance has changed. The dance has now to be performed on stages in halls, theatres. It started, I believe, more as intra-personal communication with god in the closed '*garba-grihas*' of the temples-later became inter-personal when small groups of interested '*Rasikas*' watched the performance in the precincts of the temple. Today, as I have said before, this pure aesthetique is becoming a popular aesthetique with more or less all the connotations of mass culture. The changing communication patterns are heavily drawing upon this art form and transforming it into a mass palatable quantity. It is projected on cinema, on the television, video, cassettes etc. The production values of the performance like lighting, stage design, decoration, make-up, costumes etc. have become very complex.

Even professionalism of presentation techniques is on the rise. But with all this, the essential part of the dance *per se* remains Indian. Even if the western preoccupation with or fascination for Indian rhythm has made the rhythmic patterns in the dance more sophisticated, the material which goes into the intricacy is Indian.

The concept of the dance "ballet" has been borrowed from the West, although dance dramas called "*nriya-rupakas*" were being performed here. Here again, the role of the choreographer becomes vital. Our solo-dances are pre-choreographed, so there was no need for a choreographer. "Ballet", contemporary dance or whatever it may be called has re-resulted in syncretism, i. e. combining and getting together of different styles. In all this confused state of classical, neo-classical, contemporary, modern etc. what will emerge is still to be seen.

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