

## The Concept of the Male Dancer

V. P. Dhananjayan

Indian Dance is very popular today. In popular parlance, it is the in-thing. There are different classical Indian Dances, the most famous of which are Bharata-natyam, Kathakali, Odissi, Kathak, Manipuri and Kuchipudi. These dances arouse great public enthusiasm and consequently such performances now draw knowledgeable and highly sophisticated audiences, compared to those of past decades.

Amidst all this renaissance of interest in Dance, somehow a wrong notion has crept into the minds of our people that dancing is meant only for women. The historical and socio-cultural factors that led to this misconception are many. It is a fact that for many decades, dance has been a near monopoly of women, be it in the South or North. Nowadays the male dancer is a rare phenomenon and it happens that a section of the public looks down upon him. Men may become dance teachers; they may provide nattuvangam and musical accompaniment and do everything else needed to make it possible for women to dance, but if they themselves don ankle bells and start to dance, they are put down as effeminate upstarts in an exclusively female domain.

The traditional, meaning hereditary, dance teachers, usually refuse to teach men; and the less said about women teachers in this regard the better.

This is very surprising since the very concept of Dance is masculine in origin. Nataraja, meaning the King of Performers, the patron deity of dancers is male and according to Indian scripture, the originator of Dance.

Parallels from nature also, can be drawn showing that the male is more oriented towards the movements that appear dance-like to us. The dance of the peacock, the gait of the male swan, or the stance of a lion. The writer of *Natya Sastra* and all its great commentators have been men. So have been the foremost masters and composers of this medium of dance.

In folk and tribal dancing, the performers are generally men while women are mostly excluded from magical and ritual dancing. Thus the present social prejudice against the male dancer is entirely without basis. It is interesting to note that the *Natya Sastra*, the ancient Indian Science of Dramaturgy view dance as a male prerogative. The stylistic elements of its techniques are described under 'Thandavalakshana', the male overtones of which term are obvious. 'Lalitha Nrithyam', the soft and gentle type of dance is only a part of 'Kaisiki Vritt' one of the four dramatic presentation described in texts (the others, Arabhati, Satvahi and Bharathi).

It is believed that Parvathi, the consort of Nataraja Siva, introduced the 'Lasya' or the delicate-feminine mode into Dance. Yet as compared with her consort Nataraja, her dance finds as insignificant place in literature, overshadowed, as it were by the extreme and all-pervasive vigour of Nataraja's 'Tandava'. Apart from this divine couple there are quite a few personages from our mythology who are associated with the art of dancing in one way or the other and among these, invariably men outnumber women. Krishna, the frolicsome stealer of hearts is a dancer. Arjuna

was conscripted by Indira to judge the better amongst the celestial dancers, Rambha and Urvashi. And while in exile Arjuna taught dance as Brihannala to Uttara, Kamadeva, Ganesha, Anjaneya and even Ravana were all supposed to be masters of music and dance. Bharata and his hundred illustrious sons who propagated this art form throughout the country can also be cited as evidence from the itihisas.

According to the more substantial evidence from literature, men have been predominantly associated with dance from ancient times. Bharata, the author of *Natyasastra*, Nadikeswara the author of *Abhinayadarpana*, Dhananjaya who wrote *Dasarupaka*, and many other writers and commentators, including Dattila and Kobala alluded to by Nandikeswara in the introduction of his oft referred treatise, were men. So was Jaya Senapathi, of *Nrittaratnavali* and Ilango Adigal, the author of *Silappadikaram* (Tamil literary work) which devotes a chapter exclusively to an erudite discussion of music and dance as it existed then.

The heritage of Indian Dance embraces several forms which can be broadly classified as classical, folk and tribal. Apart from the major classical styles, there are at least a dozen other forms so highly developed that they deserve to be ranked along with the principal styles mentioned earlier. An interesting feature of these diverse styles is that, most of them were originally intended for men alone. It is only recently that women have been taking part in them.

Looking back again to the scriptures, Dance originally existed as dance dramas.

Kathakali, Bhagavathamela, Kuchipudi, Krishnanattam etc. were all presentations of drama through the medium of dance.

With this vast back-ground supporting the existence and virtually the pre-eminence of the male dancer, it is highly regrettable that so many misconceptions continue today. There are some people who hold that dancing should be delicate and graceful, even if a man is the performer. Some teachers go to the extent of coercing their male students to imitate their female counterparts in the departments of dress, ornamentation and presentation.

The cumulative effect of these misconceptions of the public and the mis-direction of the teachers is such that very few men are taking to dance, fewer still making the grade to become professionals. This apart, there is immense social and parental pressure on boys to become doctors and engineers so that a lucrative career is assured. With all this psychological stigma, social approbation and economic sanctions, it is not surprising that dance is fast becoming more oriented towards the fair sex. On the other hand, this is something akin to damning with faint praise, if a boy is delicately featured and minces to match, he is considered a fit candidate for dance lessons.

Unless these trends are reversed by educating public opinion the dignity and prestige of this magnificent art form will be lessened, probably for ever, by excluding the male elements from it. Let us hope it will not come to pass.

— x —