

## Classical Dance and the Society

During the period of the Quartet and for many decades afterwards, the dance was performed both in the temple and outside it in the courts of kings, princes and landed gentry. Apart from being offered as upachara or ritual, the dance was performed even in the temple and in temple-related processions as art, to attract believers to the presence of god. Outside the temple, it was indeed an art form, though sometimes it was presented as cheap entertainment.

The classical dance form that we see today has evolved quite a lot from the days it used to be danced in courts and temples. But to stand the test of time any dance should have substance and a solid base. The need to acquaint oneself with one's environment and society has inspired a number of established and upcoming artists to think seriously and work hard to act, react and respond to create an impact on the society. As far back as 1957, Ram Gopal, one of the early Indian classical dancers to set a precedent in experimentation, had realised the need to prune the traditional dances of all repetitive movement and light the stage adequately. Successful choreography happens if there is a thorough interrogation and proper understanding of the given structure. When the performance does not reach the targeted audience, the whole exercise becomes futile. The contemporary society cannot be taken for granted.

In the past several decades everything about the dance changed. From being a part of history, Bharatanatyam endeared itself to become the most popular Indian classical dance. From a lurking caste bound practice, it became a fantastic art form that snapped its caste and regional definitions to capture the entire nation's popular and critical imagination. From being a fragile ritualistic dance that had originated in the temples of South India, it became a vehicle for enlightening and entertaining performance. From a secluded and sacred art, it became public. From temple lintel to proscenium stage it became an object of celebration and of course some abuse.

The democratization of the dance has been one of the key features of this renaissance. Eagerly accepted by conservative society, it went on to break all geographical boundaries to gain pan-Indian acceptance. The dance has also crossed its gender connotations and male dancers today are equally celebrated as artists. All facets of the dance - its geometry, its narrative potential and its expressional capabilities - are being explored. Due emphasis is being laid on to improve body conditioning.

To much of the world, the ability of the dance to be a carrier of myths has been one element of its popularity. Its aesthetics and artistry filled glamour arouses popular imagination. To reach the common man of the society, the dance was newly structured with improvements in sound, light and stage technologies. The result was that every dancer could be a lovely angel! The aesthetics and the improvements in each of these fields impacted the dance. And the personalities and personal histories of the dancer-practitioners impacted the growth of the art form. Also, the intellectual component of the dance was finely honed, as empowered dancers enriched the dance itself. All this was automatically done to capture the attention of the society.

Great strides were made even in the teaching of the dance. From being a sacred art imparted from Guru to Shishya, classroom teaching became the norm and institutions, both state funded and private, sprung all over to teach the dance. The teacher-student relationship became less starchy and a more collegial and probably more informal, teaching methodology suited to contemporary learners was evolved.

Broader changes in the perceptions of the performance took place keeping in tact its grammar. Metropolitan life gave exposure to international cultural flavour including different styles and dance forms even within India, different choreography, themes, techniques of presentation, costumes and stagecraft. It added greater openness to one's thought process and choreographic presentations.

One can notice a tremendous change in the presentation of Bharatanatya especially during the past 20 years. It has become more professional. Focussing the tradition through modern techniques has only enhanced the tradition and help in its propagation. More youngsters, non-south Indians and people absolutely unconnected to the art are attending Bharatanatya recitals. Naturally, the dancers have started using more cross-cultural languages and themes, accept the contemporary ideas besides addressing various social issues. Exploration of one's potential, experience and expression with the underlying aspect of enjoyment throughout have marked the evolution of dance performances. The wonder of creativity and the joy of learning are indeed a miracle in itself.

Lately, dance is also the focus of criticism. It is damned as archaic and irrelevant to the modern times, especially by those who frown on its predominant nayika-nayaka theme. It is often misperceived as being bound with bhakti alone, while in fact sringara or love has been its dominant motif. But in the same breath it is to be accepted that it has not remained frozen. Many of its practitioners, through their fresh and polished interpretations, have either given a new sheen to the

traditional repertoire, that is, enhanced the value of the inherited treasure; or have added to the treasury by exploring new dimensions, prompted not only by fresh artistic perceptions of their own, but also by such factors as changes in the audience mix and changes in social environment. There are of course, the outstanding few who have done both.

The technique and vocabulary of the dance-form can be used to depict a variety of themes and artistic conceptions. Not surprisingly they have been used to convey not only themes and conceptions associated with the Hindu faith and way of life, but also Christian and Buddhist themes. Additionally, they have been utilised at least once to project perceptions of Islam. Ofcourse, choreographers and dancers have as well used them in recent times to present abstract ideas like nationalism, feminine power (Sakti) and the sanctity of the environment. Furthermore, the repertoire has been expanded to include compositions in languages like Hindi and its dialects, Marathi and Bengali with contemporary themes. Interesting topics like male chauvinism, eve teasing, dowry, evils of the current education system, the caste and reservation systems the caste and reservation systems, threat of nuclear weapons, AIDS, the population explosion, corruption in politics, bribery, religious fanaticism, secularism, fraudulent godmen, the greed for riches, the Chinese aggression, the Dandi March, literacy, agriculture, mechanisation, industrialisation, environmental degradation, universal brotherhood, abstract lines and forms, etc, are expounded in the medium of Bharatanatya.

Though it is a well-known fact that Bharatanatya is a state of mind, body and soul there has been a lack of real Gurus. The problem today is that even an inexperienced and unexposed dancer becomes a Guru. The subtleties of the dance form are missed. Such Gurus have no in depth knowledge and the shishyas have no time. And hence quantity seems to overtake quality.

The fall of kingdoms and courts led to decline in patronage and left the artists suddenly supportless. The late 19th and early 20th century saw the merchant community of Chettiars and Mudaliars support the arts. Founded in 1927, the Music Academy was the only sabha, which took up the fight for saving Sadirattam, thanks to enlightened members like E Krishna Iyer and others. However, it was not till the late 70s and early 80s that sabhas started dominating the dance scene.

The chieftain system had been abolished and people wanted to get exposed to Indian arts. Since dancing in temples was banned, gradually some groups of people in various parts of the city came together to form a sabha with an aim of preserving the tradition of Indian art forms. They have contributed well to the

growth of dance to some extent. The Sabha-culture popularised and democratised dance and music. The corporate sponsorship helped the sabhas sustain themselves. If this money can be used to set scholarships, welfare schemes, endowments and printing literature related to the arts the dance world would be that much richer. The presence of sabhas saves the dancer the trouble to look for her own sponsor. In contrast, while the less proficient but glamorised colleagues get crowned, talented youngsters are left out of the race. They are incapable of buying platforms from sabhas and even performance opportunities are less for them.

On some occasions this has led to negative results. The dance has suffered in terms of aesthetics and quality, because of proliferation of sabhas leading to an abundance of performances and mediocrity of execution.

While these sabhas continue to showcase Indian artistes, they also feature non-resident Indian (NRI) dancers, giving them an opportunity to perform in their own country by collecting donations from them. This has led to Indian artistes accusing the NRI community of bribing the sabhas.

The arrival of corporates on the cultural scene has been a boon to many artistes. Young dancers find that better emoluments for performances commissioned by corporates balances the loss in revenue from sabha performances. The role of corporates has come under fire from those who think that in the 40 minutes of package, they do not present but trivialise the dance before an ignorant and sometimes uninterested audience. However, the professionalism of corporates has helped evolve the dance scene. However, a better communication between dancers and the corporate world could benefit the dance.

Corporates have money and the platform; there is no harm in using them as long as their dance at such occasions does not influence their traditional repertoire.

There is yet another problem of finding an opportunity to perform and going through the cumbersome ritual of arranging everything. By the time the artiste gets to perform, she is too exhausted. The other side of the story is that you need to run after dancers because they are least bothered about providing information about themselves which is important if they need to have a programme or an invitation to perform. The well-meaning art impresarios need to take over the dance scene today.

There has to be a definite cultural policy on dance through which India can benefit as a global entity. At another level, art administrators need to come together to

build a larger network of performing arts that extends beyond the geographical boundaries.

Many artistes did yeoman service in popularizing the dance. Several dancers contributed to the growth of the dance form. Its scholarship, documentation and critical base were enlarged. It became subject of seminars, retreats and discussions.

Today the dance is at another crossroad. Serious dancers are attempting to break the structural routines that held so well for the past half century, to evolve new perspectives that reflect their individualised creativity. Whether they can stand the test of time and accepted by the society is to be seen.

The dance is not gender specific. It is open both for the male and the female; and it accommodates tandava as well as lasya without reference to gender. Though the greatest of all dancers is Siva-Nataraja, a purusha, historically, the dancers were almost all females, but during the last seven decades, many outstanding male dancers have emerged. It is notable, in this context, that the dance has essentially remained ekaharya, that is, a dancer in a single costume portraying indirectly or directly more characters than one, regardless of their gender. It has been a different case in the presentation of dance-dramas.

The sum and substance of the above analysis is that choreographies and performers who utilise the core characteristics of classical dance and yet add on extraneous elements like martial arts, or aspects typical of other Indian dance-forms, or Modern dance of the West are free to do so in the larger interest of the society, so long as they do not overstep the basic tenets of the classicism. Those who water down the technique in favour of mere movement that falls short of the larger aesthetic purpose of Indian dance tend to be rejected by the society.

The Dance is called the mother of arts. Any art can be termed as the most important expression of the aesthetic consciousness of an individual or a society. An artistic creation is the external manifestation of an inner urge, a tangible exposition of the intangible creative impulse. The aesthetic appreciation of an art and society's acceptability implies an effective presentation, an integrated end product of the two components - content and form.

I would conclude saying that the challenge of the dancer is always to catch the initial attention of the audience. Once that is achieved, they remain with you through the vicissitudes of your art and form.

(Courtesy - Gunagrahi)