

The Revival of Indian Dance Since Independence

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On August 15, 1997, India marks its 50th anniversary of national sovereignty and independence. It wears the rich mantle of a 5000 year old past, even as it has evolved into a modern nation. The world's largest democracy, India has entered the twentieth century through a consciousness and a culture that coexists alongside expressions of modernity. With its quixotic embrace of the past and present, Indian dance offers a fitting paradigm for understanding the quintessence of Indian culture.

From modern social scientists to ancient mystics, we have tried to explain the nature of dance. Dance Anthropologist Miriam P. Alan declared: "Dance is

culture and culture is dance." A Sufi poet said: "Culture is the fragrance that remains after the incense of life burns away," discerning immortality in this most ephemeral art.

The dance traditions of India not only are visual and aural effects performed across time and space, they also are complex symbolic systems that link Indian myth, ritual, philosophy, psychology and aesthetics. Understanding these traditions is challenging; like unravelling a dense tapestry to see the underlying threads. It can, however, be rewarding, opening a window to an elusive, complex and often paradoxical culture.

To this end, I present a brief ethno-history of Indian dance. Although folk dances and 'cinema-inspired' dances represent a substantial part of the dance culture, I will focus solely on Indian classical dance. This overview traces the

revival of dance through three phases: how it was rescued from the brink of extinction in the 1900s, how it entered a renaissance of Indian art after Indian independence, and how it began moving out of India and into immigrant Indian communities. The third phase continues with the establishment of trans-national communities in the United States, Canada, Europe, Africa and Australia. Indian dance has gone global and dancers, teachers, and audiences

bond with India's ancient heritage through the vibrancy of dance.

The Freedom Movement and Dance

The revival of dance in the 1900s was closely linked

to India's struggle to overthrow British rule. Through the non-violent, spiritual leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, freedom became a reality and democracy became the political choice. Indians increasingly turned from their medieval, feudal past towards a new national identity.

In the midst of this turmoil, the future of Indian dance was imperiled. In South and East India, the devadasi tradition (temple dance) had degenerated into de facto prostitution. Likewise, in North India, the tradition of Kathak dance had fallen into disrepute and was regarded as 'nautch', a dance form that used sexual innuendo in place of expressional or thematic subtlety. Indian dance no longer embodied the melding of sacred and sensual aspects of India; it now was merely profane.

The status of dance had sunk so low, that it inspired little confidence in a public seeking a

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national culture. The first woman legislator in formerly British India, Dr. Muthulaxmi Reddi, spearheaded an anti-nautch campaign in Madras. Her efforts were supported by the British government and members of the Indian elite.

Advocate E. Krishna Iyer, a proponent of dance, struggled against this social current, and not only spoke out about Indian dance, but performed it for urban audiences. The press coverage of his efforts captured the attention of local lawyers, writers, artists and devadasis. Despite all efforts, the legislative decision to

make devadasi dance illegal signalled the imminent demise of dance. Yet, during this period, dance secured a new lease on life through reformatory efforts by key social figures — respected members of the elite. Meanwhile intransigent views such as the rules governing caste and gender also were challenged. For example, the once exclusive guild of male Brahmins in the South Indian dance style of Kuchipudi was broken to admit women and non-Brahmin dancers. Similarly, the all-male membership of the North Indian style of Kathak, was increasingly infiltrated by women. A new urban Indian elite had begun to rediscover tradition on their own terms.

Instrumental in this revival which took place in the 1930s, were performers Uday Shanker, Rabindranath Tagore (in Bengal) Valathol Narayan Menon (in Kerala) and Sadhona Bose. Tagore set up the Institute of Shantiniketan, Valathol, the Kerala Kalamandalam and Shankar, the Almora. By 1936, Rukmini Arundale had founded the Kalakshetra School of Dance and Allied Arts. In 1938, Sadhona Bose established the Kathak School of Dance in the Khandale Hills of Maharashtra. Increasingly, middle-class educated women from respectable families ventured to these and other resources

to study dance. Dance had become largely gender and caste-inclusive.

The first four classical dance forms to be recognized during this revival were: Bharata Natyam from South India, Kathak from North India, Kathakali from Kerala, and Manipuri from the East Indian state of Manipur. The re-emerging

dance also began to diversify under the influence of regional cultural and linguistic identification, resulting in styles such as Mohini Attam from Kerala, Kuchipudi from Andhra Pradesh, Oddissi from

Orissa and Chau from Bihar and Bengal. With so many classical forms, each with stellar gurus, performers, and loyal urban audiences, critics and scholars, the dance world not only revived, but thrived.

Popularity brought with it intensified scholarly scrutiny that measured dance authenticity as it was found in the Natya Shastra (2nd Century A.D.), the Sanskrit magnum opus of dramaturgy. The term 'classical' was an appellation that now carried weighty expectations. From here on out, experimentation and change would be challenged in the same way tradition once had been.

In spite of the hardening of new standards of classicism, dancers and teachers continued to ask questions and seek to add to or redefine the aesthetic. There were, broadly, three kind of dance practitioners: orthodox classicists, radical new pathfinders, and neither classicist nor innovator. This third type belonged to a genre known for a while as 'oriental,' in which choreographers borrowed liberally from neo-classical and folk dances. There were new ways of presenting dance, new themes, new meanings, and new techniques even though dance was eradicated from temples. Yet, through all these

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transformations, the temple was kept in the dance. Dancers sought to bring the ambience of ancient palaces and temples to the urban stage.

The Outlook on Dance

Indian independence encouraged creative minds and pioneering spirits to recreate a national identity and revive an ancient vision from the threads of dance culture — devadasi tradition, oral tradition, sculpture, and literary work. All of these influences combined to lay the foundation for a renaissance of dance, in which the essential kinetic, philosophic, linguistic and musical qualities of Indian dance were established.

Underpinning the various regional classical styles are some common modalities: an emphasis on accepting gravity, the integral role of sung poetry, the use of a hand gesture code, and the use of delicate micro-movements. Each of these characteristics is intertwined to a larger philosophy. For example, the cyclic nature of Indian music and rhythm is a metaphor for the mystic concept of infinity or timelessness. Hasta mudras, (stylized gestures) express the text and subtext of the poetry involved in classical Indian music — and hence in classical dance. The gesture code explicated in the Natya Shastra, but since elaborated and enlarged, not only is amazingly intact continues to be a fecund resource for dancers willing to experiment. The nuance of micro-movements (e.g., neck, eye movements) and hand gestures combines to build a psychic and cosmic space that, ideally speaking, transcends physical limitations of stage and movement.

Views From the West

The West—Europe and the United States—tended to view Indian dance through a wide-angle lens; dazzled by the silk and gold cos-

tumes and the romantic and mystic themes. This fascination with the exotic appeal of Indian dance impacted on the development of classical ballet and modern dance.

Europe's fascination with South Indian devadasi resulted in several ballets or "bayaderes" (French for devadasi) that used Indian-inspired costumes and themes. Though attracted by the novel spirit of these themes, European choreographers were less affected by the Indian notion of micro-

movements in isolation. Fokine, a great Russian choreographer, choreographed the classic "Dying Swan" for Anna Pavlova in "La Bayadere." Pavlova, a prima donna ballerina, was strongly attracted to Indian dance and commissioned Uday Shankar (then an art student in London) to create ballets for her in the late 1920s and extending into the 1930s. This changed Uday Shankar's destiny irrevocably and he went on to become a pioneer in the dance history of India.

At about the same time, in the United States, rebel dancer and choreographer Ruth St. Dennis took to creating dances with bare feet instead of point shoes (a balletic convention). Ruth St. Dennis effectively used Indian themes to create sensuous dances such as the: 'The Incense', 'Radha', and 'The Cobras' that uncannily captured the spirit of India. With her partner Ted Shawn, she went on to become one of the foremost founders of American modern dance.

Today, Indian dance has entered a new phase in immigrant Indian communities the world over. Since 1965, Indian immigrants in the United States have — even as they assimilate within American society — recreated a semblance of socio-cultural familiarity in their new home. Contemporary Indian-Americans bring added intensity to this effort since dance is seen

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as a means of enculturating a younger generation that shares little of the nostalgia of their parents. Dance is first created by Indian society and then recreated by an Indian American community that interacts with and adjusts to a larger American society. This three-way process continues to be driven by the complex social and psychic needs of Indian immigrants.

The revival of dance after India's independence is a dramatic event that I have been a part of. As a young girl I had to battle familial and societal pressure to learn, and later, perform dance. Today, I teach this heritage to anyone who seeks it. Today, my daughter, a member of the next generation of dancers, joins my efforts to teach Kuchipudi to students in the United States.

I would like to see this transplanted art form take its own roots here in the United States as

an independent and vital sibling, not a step child, to Indian national dance. It would be heartening to see the emergence of contemporary poetry, with relevance to dancers and audiences and with intellectual and aesthetic rigor; without replicating what is current within India as a way to remain authentic. And although I am glad that dance is important to the community, I would like to see it transcend its identity-forming function to become, a primarily aesthetic pursuit. I dream of dance that is 'rasa' (aesthetic bliss); when the age-old philosophy of nourishing the soul as well the body is not merely an ideal but a reality. ▣

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Post-Colonial Indian Literature

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No map draws the whole story. The story is always hidden underneath the color, behind the etched boundary. Maps of the world that seek to depict an era of dominion are almost necessarily mute.

The questions will not recede. But surely, as we grow in our roles as readers and writers of Indian writing in English, they will evolve, moult, change.

The language we write in is no longer only the language of past colonizers. The English we use is, we hope, a different, more expansive space than the one our ancestors and colonizers knew. If a language is a route to a world, perhaps this is a sign: that we can indeed turn that route around, walk into our own experience through its doors.

Indian writers in English are doing an extraordinary thing: bringing diverse linguistic and cultural sensibilities to bear on the common space of English. Rendering it thereby pluralistic, vibrantly alive, inordinately visible. Fifty years after Independence, we are inside the fields of the language, and still playing. ▣

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