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The Glory of Indian Arts

Indian art was inspired by the intuition that the soul of man and that of Nature, is one with the Universal Soul. Ever since, the artist has been trying to reveal that unity through various media like stone and steel, colour and canvas, prose and poetry, bronze and brass, wood and wicker, and through dancing and singing.

For an Indian sculptor, a block of stone is not dead; it pulsates with life. He sees in it the potentialities of many personalities, gods and goddesses. He could carve any god out of it which will be worshipped by the millions.

So it is with every creative artist – a potter, a painter, a poet, a dancer, an architect, a carpenter, a weaver, or a jeweller. For each one of them, art is worship – rising above his puny self and diving deep into divinity. Artist Satish Gujral, for example, has tried many media. When he was working with wood, he told me, 'It breathes.' A real artist is a practical philosopher.

He does not say that God is everywhere. He sees Him in everything.

Similarly, an Indian musician when he/she sings, closes his eyes, and seems to be totally absorbed in the superconscious. Indian traditional arts have a wide dispersal. They include martial arts, training and tending of animals, culinary recipes, and even fun and frolic. In ancient India, every youth of a decent family was supposed to learn as many as sixty-four arts!

These are mentioned in many scriptures like the *Vishnu Purana*, and the *Bhagavata Purana*. Vallavacharya has recorded a short description of *Chatuhshashtri kala*, or the sixty-four arts, as given in the *Shaiva Tantra*. Based on another old treatise entitled *Vidya-Samgrahanibandha*, Sukhadeva has given details of the sixty-four arts. There are some variations in the lists. Vatsyayana has also mentioned them in *Kamasutra*. (See Appendix I)

Lalitavistara, a Buddhist text, says that Prince Siddhartha – later the Buddha – was an adept in many of these arts. A Jain scripture claims that Prince Mahavira – a contemporary of the Buddha and founder of Jainism – had mastered the technique of seventy-two types of arts.

In the epic of the *Mahabharata* when the Pandavas lost in the game of dice with Duryodhana, as a condition of the bet, they had to sojourn in forests for twelve years and spend the thirteenth year incognito. This one-year period they spent at the palace of King Virata and, as they were proficient in many arts, Bhima served as a cook, Nakul and Sahadeva looked after the cows and horses, Yuddhishtira became the counsellor of the King, and Arjuna disguised as a woman teacher Varhannala, trained Uttara, the daughter of the King, in music and dancing.

Some classical Sanskrit dramas of later period mention a large number of arts being practised by the heroes. It shows that such arts were very much in vogue. In *Kadambari*, the immortal prose romance, Banbhatta gives a list of twenty-four arts in which the hero Chandrapida was an expert. The list includes arts like *Gandharva-veda* (dance and music), *Chitrakarman* (painting), *Lakhyakarman* (engraving); *Shakunirutajnana* (interpretation of the sound of birds), *Dantavyapara* (ivory carving) and *Grahaganita* (astronomy). Among these, the most important are music, dance and painting which will be considered here.

Classical Music

The origin of Indian classical music is traced to the chanting of the Vedic hymns. Much before that, whenever the early man would have got a good kill – and later, a good crop – he must have burst into singing and dancing. There would have been two streams of simultaneous development – folk and classical, and the folk form must have preceded the latter. The classical stream will be dealt within the book.

The hymns of the *Samaveda* – one of the four *Vedas* – were chanted by the priest referred to as *udgatri* or the singer. In ritualistic singing, there are strict instructions on the modulation of syllables and words in higher or lower pitch.

On the letters of the verses therefore are indicated figures 1, 2, 3, 2, 3, 1, 2 to guide the singer about the length of the letter and tune of the melody. Some of the *ragas* and *raginis* of Indian music have emerged from the melodies of the *Samaveda*.

Chhandogyopanishad belongs to the *Samaveda* and opens with the words: *aum iti etad aksharam udgitham upasita*, that is, one should meditate upon the syllable Aum which is the *udgitha*, for one sings the *udgitha* beginning with Aum.

Indian music has seven main notes. These are *sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni* and lastly the upper *sa*. Of the Indian octave, *sa* and *pa* are permanent notes – *achal* – they do not undergo deviation. The other five have a *vikrit* or flat modification. The ascending order of the notes is called *aroha* and the descending order, *avaroha*.

In between the two notes, say *sa* and *re*, or *re* and *ga*, there are other minor sounds known as *shrutis* or microtones. It is difficult to reproduce these microtones on a keyboard instrument like harmonium, and are best played on string instruments like the *vina, sitar, sarangi* and *violin*.

In all, there are twenty-two *shrutis* – between *sa* and *re*, three; between *re* and *ga*, two; between *ga* and *ma*, four; between *ma* and *pa*, four; between *pa* and *dha*, three; between *dha* and *ni*, two; and between *ni* and upper *sa*, four *shrutis*. Only expert musicians and instrumentalists can render these fine *shrutis* and a trained ear can appreciate each.

With the combination and permutation of the twelve *svaras* – pure and flat – a large number of *ragas* and *raginis* have been composed. The *ragas* have a robust and grave approach, and the *raginis*, a delicate and tender flavour. Thakur Onkar Nath, wearing his long silken cloak, used to demonstrate the difference between the two with remarkable finesse.

Many methods are adopted in devising a new raga. Some of them have only five notes and are called pentatonic. The *svaras* or notes in *aroha*

and *avaroha* have a different order, and this leads to a vast variety. The *vadi*, that is the principal note, and *samvadi* – next-in-importance – notes differ from *raga* to *raga*. The combination of a few important notes, called *pakad*, is different in *ragas* and recurs every now and then. There is no end to musical ingenuity that has led to the composition of numerous *ragas* and *raginis* numbering about two hundred.

For some time past, some say beginning with the Gwalior *gharana* – or style of singing – there has been a trend to combine two *ragas* like *Basant-Bahar*, *Nat-Malhar* and so on, partaking the idiom of both the *ragas* which adds to their number. The *ragas* and *raginis* evoke a specific *rasa*, mood or flavour among the audience. The *rasa* may be erotic – *shringara*, or of compassion or tranquility – *shanta*. Accordingly, the time and even season of their singing is specified.

A musician generally begins the performance with an *alaap*, without the aid of a percussion instrument. It flows freely delineating the main features of the *raga* in hand. He starts in *bilambit* – slow tempo – and gradually attains *badhat* or speed, throwing light, as it were, on the various nooks and corners of the *raga* through the use of musical embellishment and nuances creating the desired mood. A good musician may sing an *alaap* for hours together presenting total personality of the *ragas*.

The *alaap* does not use the song-words and carries on with mnemonic phrases like *nom-tom*, *tarra-tana-na* and so on. What the *rasiks* relish is the mood of the piece presented with all the musical graces. After the *alaap*, the singer takes up the *sthai-antara* two-some in a specific *taala* played by the percussionist. Whenever he is executing a note-pattern, or a

boltaan, the accompanist and the musician both have to reach the *sama* simultaneously. A good *tabla* or *pakhawaj* player understands and maintains the pace with the singer – matching a *tukra* (piece) with a *tukra*, a *tihai* with a *tihai* and an elaborate *taan* with the percussion *bols* of equal length arriving at the *sama* and at the same time earning *wah wah* from the audience.

It would look like that the singer is tied hand-and-foot with many fetters – the basic structure of the *raga* (*shuddh* – pure, and *komal* – flat notes), the pattern of *aroha* and *avaroha*, *vadi* and *samvadi* *svras*, *taal* (time beat) *layakari* (rhythm), *bandish* (combination of specific notes), and so on. And therefore he enjoys very little freedom.

It is not so. In spite of these constraints, a good musician has infinite opportunities to exhibit his creativity and command over the *svaras*. In fact, the structure of the *raga*, and *taal* are no constraints but act as an invitation and inspiration to express his *tyyari*, the prolonged preparation to present the *raga* in its full glory.

Some Styles of Compositions

Perhaps the oldest form of Hindustani classical music is Dhruvpad or Dhrupad. As the name implies, in this orthodox form, the greatest emphasis is on the purity and steadiness of each note. It may meander through the usual four phases of *sthai*, *antara*, *sanchari* and *abhog* but in rendering each, the notes should have perfect intonation and modulation. The note-patterns are few and far between. The full-throated notes are grave, deep, and generally shorn of musical embellishments, almost austere and ascetic.

Some musicologists are of the view that this style was introduced by Raja Man Singh of Gwalior. The legendary Tansen was a great exponent of this style. The annual Tansen Music Festival at Gwalior these days, generally begins with the presentation of a Dhrupad. In Delhi, Rahimuddin Khan Dagar and his family specialise in Dhrupad singing.

Dhamar and *Hori* styles are quite popular in northern India. The song-words are composed to suit the significance of the festival at which they are presented. The rhythm and time-beats – *theka* – are the peculiarities of their style of singing.

Presently, the most popular style prevalent in the North is *Khayal*, chosen and chiselled by the well-known musician Sadarang. It allows enormous scope to the singer to display his creative imagination. It generally begins with *alaap* which is free from the fetters of *taal*. The performer gives extensive elaboration of the principal – *vadi* – note, highlighting it with the help of various combination of specific notes of the *raga* or *ragini*. Normally, beginning in slow- tempo he gradually gains speed, and executes a variety of note-patterns to bring out the personality of the piece.

'*Khayal*' literally means an 'imaginary idea'. After *alaap*, the musician takes up the *sthai* and *antara* of the composition to the accompaniment of a percussion instrument. In modern musical soirees, usually the *Khayal* singing dominates.

In the light classical style are included *thumri*, *tappa*, *kajri*, *chaiti* and *ghazal*. In the hands of master singers like Siddheshwari Devi and Begum Akhtar – both adepts in classical music – the *thumri* and *ghazal* rose to great heights. Such singers imparted them the dignity of classical style.

They interspersed their songs with note – patterns – *taans* – of appropriate *ragas* and *raginis* and regaled the audience with their control over the *svaras*. Rasoolan Bai and some others specialised in *Tappa* singing. There was a period when Siddheswari Devi, Rasoolan Bai and Badi Moti Bai were being hailed by music lovers as the Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh).

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow was a great patron of thumri and kathak dance, as generally the two go together. A number of popular thumris and khayals are attributed to him which he wrote under the name Akhtar Piya. He himself danced kathak wearing his unique self-designed *angarkha*. In Thumri and some other light classical pieces the text of the song is given due importance which the kathak dancer interprets through his *hao-bhao* and acting.

The Indian classical music commands such respect that several gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are shown with one musical instrument or the other. For example, *Saraswati*, the goddess of learning and arts, carries a *Vina*; Lord Shiva a *damru*; Lord Vishnu a conch, and Lord Krishna a flute.

In spite of pop and similar type of western music which has flooded India, the devotees of the classical form have not deviated from their traditional path. They know that classical music – Indian or western – is a jealous mistress and demands hours of regular practice. The abiding joy they derive out of it cannot be compared with the ephemeral titillation of quick beats.

Bharat Ratna Ustad Bismillah Khan, who placed little known *Shehnai* – a small reed instrument – on the high classical pedestal, used to practise

upon this reed for at least six hours a day even when he had crossed his 80th year! Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan on Sitar, the late Sharan Rani Mathur and Ustad Amjad Ali Khan on Sarod, N. Rajam and Subramaniam on violin, the late Alla Rakha and Chatur Lal on *Tabla*, gained expertise only after long hours of hard practice.

Similarly, Thakur Onkar Nath, Ustad Fyyaz Ali Khan, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and many others made a name in vocal recital in India and abroad after regularly practising their art with untiring zeal.

No wonder Indian classical music has many admirers of the foreign origin. One French friend, now mostly forgotten is Alain Danielou. He was a restless soul, trying to master whatever he took up. He was well versed in western music; in India he chose *vina* as his instrument and became a consummate player in six years; he was in love with Rabindra Sangeet and translated some songs of Tagore and set them to western music. He picked up Hindi, Bengali and Sanskrit and was quite familiar with Hindustani classical *ragas*. He translated some Sanskrit treatises on music such as *Sangeet Darpan*, *Narad Samhita* and *Raga Sagara*.

Very few know that Danielou initially orchestrated the Indian National Song – *Vande Mataram* – and the National Anthem – *Jana Gana Mana*. He moved to Benaras and regarded Indian classical music “an art, profound, difficult, refined and subtle that satisfied me completely.”*

Menuhin is another admirer of Indian classical music and learnt sitar. Ravi Shankar and Danielou were friends. Of the four Shankar brothers,

*For details, please read the article, 'A Forgotten Friend' by Swati Dasgupta in *India International Centre Quarterly*, 1982

the two highly talented are – the eldest, Uday Shankar in dance and Ravi Shankar in sitar. They are among those who have a long list of their students many of whom, in turn, have set up their own dance and music institutes.

Inspired by the Indian saint Purohit Swami, Nobel Laureate W. B. Yeats, and his friends invited the well-known musician Pandit Jasraj and his party, offered them all facilities in the seclusion of the Spanish island of *Majorca*, to chisel his composition on the *Mandukya Upanishad*, particularly to give a musical interpretation of *Aum*, the seed sound of creation. It is the shortest Upanishad of only twelve mantras beginning with *Aum iti etad Aksharam idam sarvam*, that is, the word *Aum* is the imperishable; all this is its manifestation The music of the entire Upanishad is available in an album of three audio-cassettes.

Classical music, Indian or Western, is a pathway to the Absolute. The great composers of the West treated music as a form of meditation. In front of an old German opera, an inscribed legend reads: Bach gave us God's word, Mozart God's laughter, and Beethoven gave us God's fire, and God gave us music so that we can pray without words."

Dancing

Music is the most abstract of all arts. It is on sound that the artist soars to the highest realms of bliss. The next in importance is dancing when bodily gestures are added to the sound of music, in which there is a story or theme presented by the singer. The story is interpreted by the dancer through body movements and gestures, and the *taal* is executed through

footwork. The dancer wears about 200 small brass bells, or *ghungroos*, on each ankle – something unique in India and not seen anywhere else.

Like many significant activities in India, dancing is also traceable to the *Vedas*. Initially, the dialogue or story portion of dancing was provided by the *Rigveda*, the music part by the *Samaveda*, *abhinaya* or acting by the *Yajurveda*, and the *rasa* or flavour portion by the *Atharvaveda*. All these were coalesced into one, in the *Natyaveda*, considered the fifth *veda*.

Bharat Muni, the author of the *Natya Shastra* is said to have learnt the *Natya Vidya* from Lord Brahma himself. His sons acting as *natas* or actors, the heavenly *nymphs* forming the *natis* or actresses, the sage Narada and Gandharvas taking the charge of composing music and *taal*, formed a semi-celestial group to practice *Natya Vidya*.

It is no less than a wonder that on a small stage, a dancer tries to recreate extensive scenes of a *Rasleela* in Vrindavana, or a Ravana abducting Sita, or even the battle of the *Mahabharata*. It is due to the dexterity of the dancer, aided by the magic of music and percussion instruments.

In ancient India various types of stages were in vogue – square, rectangular and quadrilateral in shape. Some specimen of these stages can be seen in over 2000-year-old caves at the hillocks of Ramgarh in the Sargia district of Maharashtra. Usually the square-shaped stages, 12 feet on each side, with attached green rooms, were common.

The *rasas* or emotions the dances and dramas are supposed to create are nine in number. These are *Shringana* (love), *Hasya* (mirth), *Karuna* (compassion), *Raudra* (ferocious), *Vira* (bravery), *Bhayanaka* (fearful), *Bibhatsa* (horrid) *Adbhuta* (strange) and *Shanta* (peaceful, tranquil). An

expert dancer is in a position to portray all these sentiments with telling sincerity.

Indian Classical Dances

There are four main Indian classical dances. These are: Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Kathak, and Manipuri, the last being the simplest of all, the rest rising in complexity in reverse. A better plan may be to begin with the simplest.

Manipuri

In India, when the sun is strong and his rays vivifying, when the flowers are in full bloom and the air is titillating, when the clouds are cast and the earth is expectant, the human heart begins to dance with joy. Manipuri dance is the most spontaneous expression of that joy.

Manipur, literally the city of jewels, is a small Indian state on the eastern border. It is noted for its scenic beauty and simple gay folks. Song and dance form a part of their life. To them *Kartala*, the clapping of hands, and the music of *manjiras* or small hollo cymbals, are like incantations to drive away the evil.

This dance dates back to the fifteenth century if not earlier. Its technique is derived from the *Natya Shastra* of Bharat Muni and Nandikeshwara. There are a few fundamental hand actions which are repeated in all movements. Gyration of waist forms a prominent feature

with occasional gentle hops by one foot or both. It is generally danced by women but when danced in group, men also join.

The themes of the dances are the various moods of nature, particularly *vasanta*, the spring; or the episodes of Lord Krishna, mostly *Raaslila*. "It is a moonlit night near the bank of river Yamuna. Krishna stands under a *Kadamba* tree and plays upon his celestial flute. The innocent lasses of Vraj stand around, lost. He arranges them in a ring and begins the dance. He dances so fast that each damsel finds him by her side and the soft jingling of ankle-bells adds to the mystery." The ideal of every Manipuri dancer is to re-create the *Maha-rasa* of Lord Krishna through her dance.

The gesture code of Manipuri comprises highly specialised movements of limbs – the bending of head with arms on the side ways shows 'acceptance'. The hands waving in a circle and the body moving in rounds shows "I am lost in Thee." When face tilts upwards, the dancer prays, 'I am at Thy will.' Now the dancer completes an oblong circle, pauses and prostrates. That means: "I bow my Lord, take me at Thy feet."

The Manipuri dance is very graceful. The limbs of the body move forward, backward, sideways and finally in a circular form. Arms swing in a fan-wise direction. The strokes are sharp, rhythm is delicate. The dancer is not concerned with facial expressions. At times, it comes close to the Western ballet.

Manipuri owes much of its popularity to the revivalist efforts of Rabindranath Tagore. He weaved this technique into his dramas like *The Kingdom of Cards* and *Nateer Puja*. Guru Nabakumar Sinha was invited by the poet to Shantiniketan to help in streamlining these dance-dramas.

Easy to learn and perform, Manipuri dance does not give jerks and jolts, flows smoothly and tenderly, and falls lightly on your consciousness, like the gentle dew.

Kathak

Kathak is mainly a solo dance. The person who dances is also called 'Kathak'. Barring the opening invocation – *vandana* – all items of the recital have to conform to a rhythm. The basic *bols* of the rhythm are: *ta, theyi, theyi, tat; aa, theyi, theyi, tat*. Many other syllables, drawn from various drums, bedeck the rhythmic arabesque created by the dancer. The rhythm is cyclic; it not merely rises from, but reflows to the first beat – *sama* – completing a round. The drummer keeps marking the cycle as long as the dancing lasts.

The other key accompanist is an instrumentalist whose role is the continuous playing of a musical line – *lehra*. Both are required to retain the tempo chosen with absolute poise. The third accompanist is a singer to lend musical text to the dancer which he interprets through gestures and rhythmic movements.

The dance is very popular in the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and, to some extent, in West Bengal. The name of kathak is found in ancient treatises like *Maha Puran*, the *Mahabharata* and *Natya Shastra*. The *Sangeet Ratnakara* of the thirteenth century gives an elaborate description of the dance. The word is derived from '*Katha*', a story. As it is said: *Kathnam Karoti Kathakah*, that is, one who tells a story is 'Kathak'.

The dance always begins with *vandana* – prayer to God, sometimes called *Salami*. The *bols* with which the dance begins is called *Aamad*. The various movements of hands in different directions convey specific meanings. The dance has two main parts: *torah* comprising footwork, and *gat*, the rendering of the musical text through gestures.

The *torahs* are made up of dance *bols* producing the rhythm for the dancer's feet. The dancer, 'translates' these beats through his or her brass bells called *ghungroos*. Sometimes these beats become very fast and sometimes they slow down to a subdued speed.

A 'Kathak' develops his dance based on any basic beat rising from 4 to 32 or even more beats. The audience know the number of beats and when the dancer, the drummer and the instrumentalist all reach the climax of *sama* simultaneously, they break into applause.

In perfect unison with steps, the hands, wrists, eyes and eyebrows of the dancer register quick and sharp movements. He is able to convey the contents of the story with the help of his gestures or *mudras*. In kathak dance there are hardly two dozen *mudras*.

Depending on the beats, the dancer at times undertakes terrific whirling and spinning to execute lengthy *tukras* in a short period. The themes of most dances are the romantic episodes of Radha and Krishna, their fun and frolics in the moonlit garden of Vrindaban, near Mathura. It is a sweet world of courtship, indifference, separation and self-surrender. There is love without passion, indifference without sincerity, and union without desire.

In the hands of Nawabs and Sultans, the high standards of dignity in love were seldom maintained. Lucknow is the main centre of this dance along with Jaipur and Benaras. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow himself used to practise Kathak and was a well-known exponent.

Jagannath Prasad, better known as Achhan Maharaj – and his family members right up to Birju Maharaj – are adept in this dance form. There are many more well-known kathak dancers from other places like Rukmani Devi Arundale, Damyanti Joshi and Padam Shri Shovana Narayan.

The traditional costume of kathak consists of tight leggings, or *ghagra*, a *kurta* or a jacket and an embroidered *Topi* (cap). Dancers are free to make changes in costumes provided the dance form remains the same.

Kathak dance is noted for its fleeting footwork, swift body gyrations, simple gestures and postures, and lyrical romantic appeal. Though essentially a '*lasya*' type of dance, it has plenty of vigorous movement of forceful steps.

Kathakali

Kathakali, literally story-play, is a vigorous dance-drama of Malabar, South India. It pictures entire episodes through an elaborate use of *mudras* or hand gestures. A performance begins in the late evening and generally lasts for the whole night.

Mudras and a specific make-up including the dress, are the main features of this dance. A *mudra* in kathakali is more than the mere movement of fingers, it is the expression of the entire personality.

A dancer has to undergo training for at least twenty years to appear on the stage. The make-up may take a few hours during which the dancer tries to imbibe the qualities of the character he has to portray. When he 'wakes up' from the make-up, he displays the spirit of a Rama or a Ravana.

All Indian classical dances do make use of *mudras* but in Kathakali, these are the mainstay and can express even abstract ideas. The *Hast Lakshan Deepika*, or the 'Glossary of the Hand-language,' records twenty-four root-*mudras*, conveying 382 ideas, classified into 278 *Sanyukta* (using both hands) and 104 *asanyukta* (single-hand) *mudras*. Some later innovators experimented with *mishrit* or mixed *mudras* where each hand shows a different *mudra* simultaneously.

A recent book on kathakali lists as many as 509 *mudras*! When ideas keep on growing, these have to be expressed through fresh *mudras*. Thus the language of hands has to keep pace with new developments like aeroplanes, satellites, computers and now Chandrayan and nuclear weapons, and new *mudras* have to be devised and evolved.

Mask-like make-up of the characters is another important feature of kathakali. It usually consists of *chutti*, a kind of rice paste which is glued on to the face from ear to ear and may take several hours. Different characters have distinctive make-up and colour.

The green colour, or *paccha* is for the gods, kings and heroes. For *Kathi* the face is coloured red and green representing kings with material ambition and worldly pride. *Thadi* or a beard stands for lower characters like messengers. Sages and women come under the category of *minniku* and have only ordinary make-up. Demons or Kari characters are painted

black. When these characters with grotesque make up and strange costumes appear on the stage, they seem to belong to a different world and create the appropriate mysterious environment.

Kathakali costumes are a class apart. There is hardly anything elsewhere to compare with the towering gold and silver crowns, huge crinoline-like billowing skirts and multi-coloured jackets.

In a famous Cochin mural, Lord Rama in a typical kathakali pose, is shown wearing a tight dhoti (long cloth tied at the waist) and bare torso. That might have been the practice in the beginning as pointed out by Miss Kay Ambrose in her book on Indian dancing. But her speculation that "the 24-white layers of skirts were probably affected in accordance with the attire of the contemporary European ladies along with the cumbersome long-sleeved jackets," seems to be far-fetched.

The present-day kathakali was evolved during the sixteenth century from the 2000-year-old prevalent dance form. The themes chosen are legends of heroism and romance from the vast treasure-trough of Hindu mythology and epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* where characters assume super-human dimensions. The songs are written in a mixture of Malayalam and Sanskrit and weave entrancing imagery. The stage is just a raised platform under the canopy of the blue sky.

To herald the performance, the drummers display their skill while the singers offer an invocation. A brilliantly coloured cloth is held near the brass lamp by two attendants as high as their arms can stretch. Terrific drumming announces that the audience are going to witness what is called as *Tirannoku* or a curtain look, when a dreadful personality is about to

emerge. The jumping and thumping and a rumbling growl grows. The people get glimpses of the top of ornate crowns, and occasionally two hands with silver nails.

Amidst ear-splitting noises of drums, gongs and conches the violently agitated curtain is thrown aside and, may be, a Ravana appears and the dance-drama begins. A kathakali performance has to be seen to be believed and no one should miss it.

Bharatnatyam

Kathakali dance appears to be rather rustic – mask-like make-up, artificial long nails, loose costumes, howling and growling accompanied with ferocious drum-beating at ‘curtain-look’, preceding the performance. Bharatnatyam is elite, refined, restrained and graceful.

Not entirely as graceful as the Manipuri, where lovely little ladies sway and sway like ripples of a ripe corn. Bharatnatyam has its virile moments as well. A Bharatnatyam dancer not only plays a serene Saraswati or Lakshmi goddess, but also the ten-armed Durga killing the demon Mahisasur.

Traditionally, Lord Shiva is said to be the originator of the *Tandava* dance calling for very vigorous rhythmic movements. His wife Parvati or Gauri is credited to have initiated the *Lasya* form, delicate and effeminate, to be danced by women. But when goddess Durga can become angry and kill a demon, a mere mortal is well within her rights to enact the same scene through her dance.

There are two main divisions of dance – *Karana* and *Angahara*. To place hands and feet while dancing in different postures is known as *Nritya Karana*, or just *karana*. Bharat Muni in his *Natya Shastra* mentions one hundred and eight *karanas*. In the two Gopurams of the Nataraj Temple at Chidambaram many of these *Karanas* in relief form a part of their architectural design. The ceiling of a famous temple at Madurai also exhibits all the 108 *karanas* in beautiful paintings.

The postures of other parts of the body are called *Angahara*. According to the character, style and expression, *Natya Shastra* mentions thirty-two types of *angaharas*. As the *kathakali* is danced mainly by men, *bharatnatyam* is the preserve of women. Both the dances belong to the South and have maintained their pristine beauty.

The costume of a *bharatnatyam* dancer comprises a long bright silk sari and a matching *choli*. The sari is worn in tight legging form, with pleats in front. These pleats open up fan-like whenever the dancer bends her knees.

The dancer is bedecked like a bride with flowers woven in the *Veni* (pigtails), bejewelled round gold 'sun' and 'moon' in the hair, a *Baina* between the parting of the hair in the middle, earrings, gold bangles, a heavy necklace and a golden girdle round the waist. Thrown in are the ornaments round the neck and arms called *Guluband* and *Bajuband*.

Parts of the Dance

The dance begins with invocation to God and offering of flowers to the unseen omnipresent Lord of the Universe with appropriate movements of

the neck, eyes and eyebrows. The entry of the dancer on the stage is elegant with measured steps and folded hands. She offers her greetings to the audience, the Guru and prayers to God. It is called *Allaripu*.

With *Jethisvarnam* starts the dance proper to the accompaniment of music and *taal* on *mridangam*. The dancer moves round the stage executing various dance sequences in accordance with the percussion beats. The dance assumes more elaboration in *Shabdam* and is followed by *Varnam* which is the main portion of the performance. Here, to the accompaniment of Karnataka music providing song-text, various episodes are described with the help of the *mudras* or hand gestures. *Mudras* may be called the language of the fingers and hands depicted by one or both hands conveying the ideas being mentioned in the song.

Most of the *mudras* are the same as in Kathakali barring some modifications here and there. The ingenuity and originality of the dancer lies in explaining a single line or idea, say *mayya mein nahin makhan khayu* (says little Krishna, "O mother! I have not eaten the butter") – in a variety of ways.

There is no dearth of themes a dancer could pick up from a vast repertoire of Indian mythology, epics and modern history. Although the dance is quite popular in northern India, the songs continue to be only in Tamil. If some dancers pick up songs in Hindi or Brajbhasha, and set them to music, it shall make the dance more meaningful and enjoyable in this part of the country.

In the next part, *Padam*, the dancer is fully prepared to execute more elaborate *boltaans* and try themes of love-lorn ladies, called *Nayak-Nayika*

Bheda in Kathak. There are several types of situations in love and the dancer delineates numerous nuances in the game of love.

In *Tillana* the dancer exhibits her dexterity of footwork and control of rhythm and beat. It is a pure *nritya* portion based on the harmony of *laya* and *taal*. The dance concludes with *shloka* in the praise of the Almighty. On the whole, a beautiful dance, generally danced by a single woman, rarely in a group.

Indian Art

The Indian artist has been no less creative than the musicians and the dancers. Whereas the singer and the dancer have the *Natya Shastra* and many other ancient treatises to guide, the artist mostly has his own philosophy and aesthetic sense to carry him along.

The earliest available specimen of Indian art are to be found in the small bronze dancing girl of the Indus Valley Civilization along with steatite seals, terracotta and a few other pieces of 3000 BC vintage. The 'dancing girl' is slim, elegant wearing bangles earrings and necklace. It shows that dancing was practised at that early period also and was so popular that some artist was inspired to cast an image of a dancer in bronze.

For the rest, we have to fall back upon stone, which pulsates with life and preserves our heritage. Many pillars set up by Ashoka the Great inscribing in Brahmi/Pali language the message of peace, non-violence and human brotherhood, are adorned with huge capitals on which are mounted the figures of animals. All these belong to the third century BC.

The capitals of Rampurva pillars, for example, have a bull and a seated lion, the Sankisa pillar an elephant. The Sarnath pillar has a group of four adjacently standing lions looking in each direction mounted on the ornate capital of an inverted lotus with images of four animals interspersed with *chakras* round the abacus. It has the honour of having been chosen as the crest of the Government of India, printed on all official stationery.

After the colour photography came into vogue, some western artists like Manet, Monet and Cezanne found that formal, true-to-life portraits and landscapes had lost significance. Thus started the Impressionist and post Impressionist movements. The Indian artist seldom made a portrait from life. He relied more on his inner vision to bring out the essence of the person. It came very close to the Impressionist style of the West.

All the animals carved on the capitals of Ashokan pillars are not true-to-life but stylised in a formal idiom, conveying the impression of each. According to Indian artist, as propounded by Indian saints and sages, beauty is not objective but subjective. As Havell explains: "The true aim of the (Indian) artist is not to extract beauty from nature but reveal Life within life, the Noumenon within phenomenon, the Reality within unreality, and the Soul within matter. When that is revealed, beauty reveals itself."

When Zeuxis was commissioned to paint the figure of Helen for the people of Croton, he sought as living models five most beautiful virgins of the city. On the other hand, says Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy, "the Indian artist would have demanded an opportunity for meditation and mental concentration in order that he might visualise the idea of Helen in his



(Capital of inscribed) Ashoka Pillar at Sarnath, 3rd century B.C.
being used as Government seal.

inner consciousness, aiming rather at discovery than creation, desiring rather to draw back the veil from the face of the super woman than to combine visible perfection by a process of intellectual selection."

See the numerous statues of the Buddha. Each reflects the spirit of the Age in which it was cast, and seeks to convey his basic message of peace and non-violence. Compare them with the 'Buddhas' of the Gandhara School. These are certainly more charming, almost amorous, but lack the soul of the Buddha. The Indian artists kept on trying to bring out the basic spirit of the Buddha. It was only during the Gupta period that the artist succeeded in the Buddha of Sarnath, seated in lotus pose with half-closed eyes, seeing his eternal dream of a violence-free peaceful world.

Similarly, see the paintings of women in the Ajanta caves done between second century BC and sixth century AD. They do not represent particular women but the essence of womanhood – grace, tenderness and beauty. For the Indian artist, the figure is not important; it is only a means, the end is to portray the emotion, the *rasa*, that figure stands for. The Buddha of Sarnath is a perfect example of peace – *Shanta rasa*. The more you look at him, more you are bathed in an aura of tranquility.

Indian art therefore does not always answer to the general definition of beauty. There are examples galore of that 'beauty' depicting love, even eroticism – the *Shringara rasa*. See the flying apsaras at the gate of the Sanchi Stupa (1st century BC) or the copulating couples at Chandela Kings Khajuraho temples (1000 AD), or the erotic friezes at the Konark Temple (13th century AD) at Bhubanesvara. There are many specimen of *Vatsalya*



Ajanta Murals



Ajanta Murals



Buddha of Sarnath – Gupta Period

(maternal love) as the charming 'Mother and Child' painting in Cave XII at Ajanta. In valour (bravery), there are not many pieces to match the *Mahisurmardini* sculpture at Mahabalipuram, or *Bhairavi* at the Dasavatar Cave, Ellora (both of 7th century AD). Some uninitiated western art critics have called such specimen as 'grotesque.'

The Times, London, of 28 February 1910 carried the following declaration about Indian art signed by thirteen well-known British artists and critics:

"We the undersigned artists, critics and students of art... find in the best art of India a lofty and adequate expression of the religious emotion of the people and of their deepest thoughts on the subject of the divine. We recognize in the Buddha type of sacred figure one of the great artistic aspirations of the world. We hold that the existence of a distinct, a patent, and a living tradition of art is a possession of priceless value to the Indian people, and one which they, and all who admire and respect their achievements in this field, ought to guard with the utmost reverence and love..."

The declaration concludes:

"We trust that while not disdaining to accept whatever can be wholesomely assimilated from foreign sources, it will jealously preserve the individual character which is an outgrowth of the history and the physical conditions of the country, as well as of those ancient and profound religious conceptions which are the glory of India and of all the Eastern world."

Courtesy, Vincent A. Smith

- A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon, p. 3

The works of modern Indian artists like Prof. K.S. Kulkarni, Satish Gujral, Swaminathan, Tyebji, Kanwal Krishna, Ratna Mathur Fabri, Ghulam Rasul Santosh, Bhabesh Sanyal, and many others, show that Indian artists are steeped in their ancient traditions and, at the same time, have kept their windows open to admit fresh air from all directions in pursuing their profession with deep conviction and distinction.