

“Old Moorings and New Pastures” - Dance Scenario in Post-Independent India : An Overview

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Independent India turns 60! Artistically speaking, it is too short a time for any intellectual preoccupation to develop and consolidate. But, in the case of Indian art forms, such a consolidation had taken place centuries ago. They have had a long tradition, well-developed and long-chiselled. However, if we look back, there was lull for sometime and mis-directed exuberance ruled longer. For quite sometime values were at a low ebb. Art was at the mercy of the most inartistic men. The traditions of by-gone days seemed vanished. Temples which nourished arts to reflect the value systems of the ancient lore lost their vivacity and meaning. The temple priests were no more than chattel in the courtyards of the rich landlords. The temple dancers had to dance to the tunes of these petty-minded local lords. The Vedic lore and the Natyavedic lore fell on evil days. This was the gloomy picture of arts at the turn of the 20th century. Until 19th Century or to be more precise, until the Colonial Raj swept over India social moorings were not very disturbed, though shaky, at least in South India. But early British rule pampered the weak to suppress the strong and the zamindars became ruthless (though some were very benevolent, their numbers were negligible!). Religion, which was a binding force behind common people's belief systems, started losing its strength. Ritual, the only pointer towards community fulfillment had turned out to be a mechanical enactment. Education, which emphasized possession of a thorough and in-depth knowledge as the goal, had sidetracked and willingly accepted mere broad-based information, very often superficial, as the only key to success. The worst sufferers in this changing scenario were the performing arts, especially dance because of its close association with temples and with religion and ritual and is deeply dependent upon 'good taste' as a prerequisite to knowledgeable appreciation and eventual patronage.

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Temples were repositories of dance ever since they occupied a central place in rural India and it was prescribed that one of the ways of worshipping Gods was through dance. The female dancer, later called the *Devadasi*, adept in religious and artistic virtuosity, would dance in the temple precincts, before the altar of the God. In course of time, when ardent followers of a religious sect became rulers, they took upon themselves to propagate their religion, when dance and drama were used as vehicles for propagation. Festivals became long drawn-out ceremonies and male members alone could participate in all-night performances or freely move from one place to the other singing and dancing the 'leelas' of gods. The Natya Mela tradition came into vogue. Thus, ancient India seemed to have developed a dual-system of performance traditions – the Nattuva Mela and the Natya Mela – the woman dancer as a solo performer and a larger number consisting of male dancers as group performers. It can also be safely presumed that the solo dancer presented intricate interpretations of devotional lyrics, based more on *sattvika abhinaya*, while the Natya-mela presented dance-dramas pertaining to the "leelas" of the gods and the myths and legends that extolled their supremacy.

But the system, developed over long years, collapsed when the people who were designated to be the protectors of the land themselves became the destroyers. The 'Devadasis' – the temple dancers - had to come out of the temple precincts and dance before the king or the chieftain to please them and were ultimately forced to take to unethical ways for livelihood.

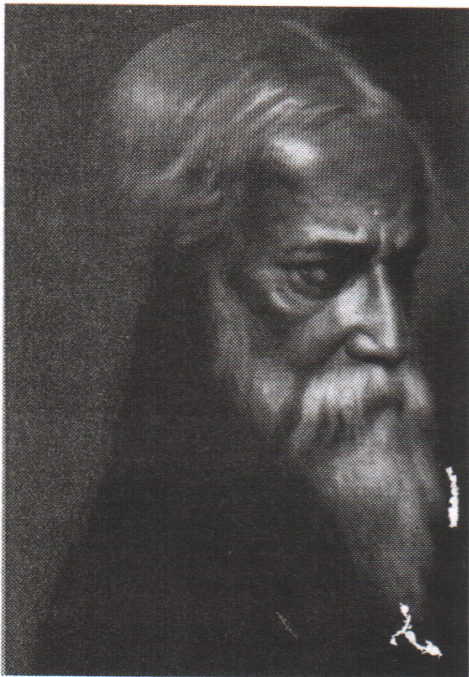
By the beginning of the 20thC., the cultural milieu in South India had felt the import of alien rule and suffered its contempt for the first time. The earlier foreign invasions which had taken dance out of the temples of North India and into the Moghul courts had left dance and allied arts in the South, where invaders scarcely penetrated, virtually untouched. But, our new pragmatism and reformist zeal with its 'Victorian' taboos, outstretched their arms of authority and, as a result traditional patronage of dance by courts and temples dwindled even in the South. The few remaining practitioners of dance survived in penury, and the dancers themselves came to be viewed as prostitutes. A vigorous movement was launched against all forms of dance. An English woman, Miss Tenant, came particularly from England to lead a crusade in Madras against temple dancers. She even gathered written pledges from upper-class Indians that they would have nothing whatsoever to do with this anti-social evil.

Eventually, the prejudice was countered by a few enlightened people. In 1917 Rabindranath Tagore introduced dance into the curriculum of his Santiniketan. In

1926 E. Krishna Iyer, having failed to secure audiences for the hereditary devadasi temple dances, undertook to study the same sadir dance and presented it before respectable groups, dressed as a traditional Devadasi dancer! In the same year, in 1926, Ruth St. Dennis and Ted Shawn toured India with their Denishawn Dancers, Miss Denis presenting 'Indian' dances. Anna Pavlova came to India in 1929, questioning Indians on the classical Indian dance traditions which everyone insisted had long since disappeared. Her subsequent works like "Radha-Krishna" and her work with Uday Shankar gave a measure of prestige to efforts to revive Indian dance.

What happened from 1860, when the first public opposition to Devadasis performing at a Patron's house during a wedding ceremony in the then Madras Presidency to the year 1947 to the passing of a Bill by the Madras Legislative Assembly prohibiting Devadasi dance in temples, initiated and passed at the behest of a good-intentioned Council Member, Dr. Muthulaxmi Reddy (though it was reported, that she was against the Devadasis dancing in the temples and was not against Dance as an art form!) clearly indicated that art practice, and not art, was at its lowest ebb.

The influence of Dr. (Mrs.) Reddy and her ilk worked in two diametrically opposite directions: Down South from Chennai to Kumbakonam her latter suggestion (in 1932) to develop Dance as an Art form was taken up seriously and non-hereditary dancers like Rukmini Devi took the cue up and practised it as a profession. She founded her school, 'Kalakshetra' in 1936. But in the northern parts of the Presidency – i.e. in Andhra districts - Devadasi dance was completely prohibited – their profession of dancing was unfortunately seen as a result of the personal favours extended to them for their 'services'! In down South, at the behest of visionaries like E. Krishna Iyer and aided by stalwarts like Rukmini Devi, the Sadir dance (Nautch Dance) has turned a new leaf when it was renamed as 'Bharatanatyam' endowed with grace and sobriety that characterised the personalities of the visionaries. On the other hand the rich Nattuva mela tradition of the Devadasis in Andhra slowly died a painful death as vehement social reformists did not sleep until Devadasis stopped practising Dance even at homes! In Tamil Nadu part of Madras presidency a new non-hereditary clan of dancers cropped up practising a modified version of Sadir. This seemed imminent and inevitable in the southern parts. However, there has been another strong dance tradition of Natya Mela in Andhra. When non-hereditary dancers came forward to learn dance they simply preferred the Natya Mela tradition of Kuchipudi – not as it was practised by the Yakshagana troupes, but a modified version to suit a



Rabindranath Tagore



Vallathol Narayana Menon



Kalicharan Patnaik

solo system, for the Yakshaganas incorporated several solo items (in the form of Tarangams, Padams, Asthapadis and Javalis). For dancers like Yamini Krishna Murthy and Indrani Rehman, a new inventory was created from among the traditional items! This was in the 1940's and early 50's. It was during this time a silent revolution was taking place in Indian performing arts.

If we look back, there was a Renaissance in 1880's that ushered in new ideas in political, social and economic spheres of Indian life. The Swadesi movement woke up several dormant souls to action. But not until 1930's was there a conscious attempt at defining the nature and function of the arts in future India.

Rabindranath Tagore, the visionary that he was, predicted in his 1928 Inaugural address to the Indian Fine Arts Society at Bangalore, presided over by Smt. Sarojini Naidu, that a new Resurgence in Arts was in the offing! This cultural renaissance addressed itself to the need of a new awakening in Indian Arts. The leaders of this Artistic Renaissance – Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Vallathol Narayana Menon, Shivaram Karanth, Kalicharan Patnaik, E. Krishna Iyer, Ayyanki Thandakrishna and Dr. Maheshwar Neog could be called the 'harbingers' of the New Artistic Renaissance. Their dreams were put into reality by the creative geniuses of stalwarts like Kunchu Kurup, Ramunni Menon, Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, Rukmini Devi, Pankaj Charan Das and Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and others who spared no efforts in giving their respective dance traditions a strong theoretical base and a sound performative technique.

The first group of savants lavished their time and attention on the examination and refinement

of the interpretation of the texts, brought to bear their knowledge of puranic source material and poetic allusions in enriching the art and its interpretation, whereas the second group of Gurus continually discussed and re-examined the past traditions and modified them to suit a changing contemporary sensibility. These two, complementary to each other, contributed largely to the revival of the respective dance traditions, of their respective regions.

The illustrious presence of innovative dancers like Udaya Shankar, Ram Gopal, Madam Menaka, Rukmini Devi, Indrani Rehman from the non-hereditary group added colour and strength to the artistic endeavours of the traditional Gurus. A few years later, India gained its Independence and the arts stood at the threshold of revival. There was all round expectation and a hopeful uncertainty of the future.

After sixty years of Indian independence, how do we assess the present status of the art of Dance and what future do we predict – are some of the questions that linger in the minds of all dance-loving people of the country. One thing that was favourable to the Arts at the time was the starting of several institutions like the Sangeet Natak Akademi and ICCR and the founding of Institutions by Government agencies and private practitioners like Almora School of Uday Shankar, Kalakshetra, Kerala Kala Mandalam, Udipi Centre of Yakshagana, Kuchipudi Kalakshetra, Bharatiya Kala Kendra, Kathak Centre, Jawahar Lal Nehru Centre of Manipuri Dance etc. From this position of consolidation, Dance art moved on into several spheres of activity, going through a confrontation of a



Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai



Rukmini Devi



Udaya Shankar

changing system of values, economic patterns and education – these pressures often threatening to have their impact on the quality of these arts. The methods of approach to the problem of inevitable change are many and whatever may be the vagaries of the quality of the emerging, transforming product, change it must.

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Having said this, we have to see in what directions this art is moving and the possible repercussions of the directions and evaluate, for ourselves, the strengths and weaknesses of the systems and supply proper timely reinforcements so that these dance traditions strengthen themselves and move successfully for another sixty years.

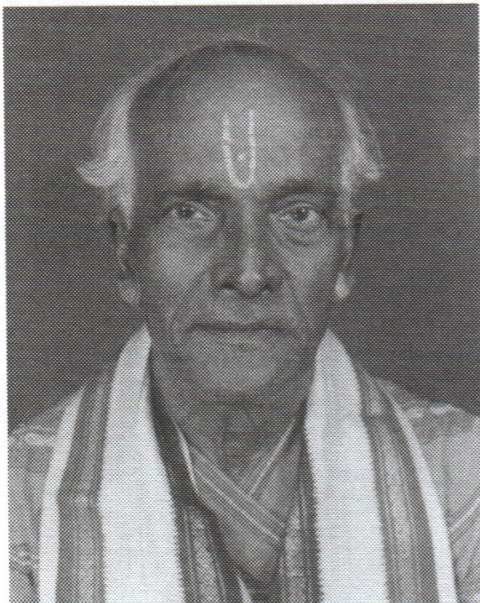


Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry

While assessing the transformation that could take place in traditional arts in a changing society, three important components need our scrutiny:

1. Performance Environment
2. Performance Modules
3. Performance Channels

“Performance Environment” denotes the conditions that we live and work in and the way they influence how we live or how effectively we can work i.e., the perceptive changes in the environments of performance – notably in providing the needs of a performance – the external manifestations that have a marked impact on the quality and nature of performances. These include the context of performance, the composition of the groups that are associated with a performance – the Gurus, the accompanying musicians and instrumentalists and the patrons.



Pankaj Charan Das

“Performance Modules” are the actual visual and auditory components of a performance such as “text” and “textual interpretation”, choreography, the actors, the new forms that are

more prominently operative in recent years including the changing trends in the repertoire and the structuring of a performance.

The third component – “Performance Channels” - are concerned with the strategies being developed in learning, teaching and the communication methodologies largely related to the transference of the ‘intent’ of the performance or the content therein to the audience and the methods of assessment and enjoyment. The role of Dance Institutions and Festivals, Research in Dance, Indian Dance in the Diaspora are some of the points that should get our immediate attention in this area. These three components, in a way, signify the Pre-Performance, Performance and Post-Performance areas of any art form, notably from the initial stages of learning conditionalities until the art reaches the connoisseurs.

My job here is to focus on the problems – not necessarily supplying answers – honestly because I do not have any answers.

I. PERFORMANCE ENVIRONMENT

1. Place of Performance:

Formerly performances invariably took place either in the temple (rituals) or outside the temple precincts, facing the God’s image (Utsava Vighram) as the performance was always in His honour.

But today, except on festive occasions when temple authorities choose to invite performing groups to perform near the temples, performances are held in auditoria. That is, the performances are shifted from open-air to indoors to large halls, from make-shift platforms to well-equipped stages. It took a long time for the artistes to adjust to the new environment. There were initial reservations, but soon artist-groups overcame these hurdles. Today artists are well-versed in using the techniques of sound and light and, with the help of trained technical personnel, use them to utmost advantage. The tours to big cities and tours abroad made most of them conscious of the importance of the dancing space and the technical inputs necessary to make a performance successful. However, the artists/groups from traditional habitats in rural areas, largely depended on the technical expertise provided to them by the sponsors. Such expertise, as we know, can work both ways: if the use of the gadgets assimilates with the artists’ creativity, the programme is a success; if not, it is chaos. These groups have not thought of engaging technical personnel to back their performances.

2. Composition of the Group:

In the past, a system used to have been evolved and practised in the composition of the performing groups which included the gurus/nattuvanars, singers, dancers and orchestral accompanists. In the case of the devadasi dancers, they all belonged

to a sect and their gurus were either their own mothers or scholars and teachers from certain (usually upper) castes. So was the case with the accompanying instrumentalists in the entire country. For example, certain groups from the Namboodiri, Ambalvasi and Nayar communities had been members of Kathakali groups. This gave a certain recognition and authority to the group as well as to the community and eventually established hereditary hegemony of these groups.

Things have changed totally from the past thirty or forty years. Teams today follow different parameters to choose their members – especially the singers, nattuvanars and drummers and other instrumentalists. Choice is often based more on expertise and availability. Whatever be the case, the choices have certainly crossed the hitherto–followed community/caste–based hereditary performers. This naturally gave credence to better professional expertise, which eventually led to individualism, and the ensuing problems of ego-centric clashes, while the hereditary group members had to eke their livelihood elsewhere. While new choices dislocated the age-old practices, mutual dependence and reliability of the old times are absent.

3. Urbanization:

The most dominant transformation in dance scenario related to the urbanization of the dance art. Earlier villages, where the gurus resided, were centres of learning. There were occasionally centres in urban areas as well – like the Lucknow and Varanasi gharanas of Kathak. But, by and large, centres of learning were the homes of the gurus. But dance has transformed itself to be an urban art – a change that resulted in several concurrent changes in all areas concerning dance.

Did it happen all of a sudden? Was it a result of the general urbanization activity in other spheres of life? Who was responsible for it? How did it occur? Besides the economic reasons which were strong enough to entice teacher migrations to cities, there were artistic reasons as well. They were not strictly artistic though, but facilitated artistic endeavours. With the advent of a new crop of non-hereditary disciples both the guru and the sishyas felt that cities or towns were more convenient centres of teaching, for reasons of easy availability of the teacher and the easier commuting time. City life would mean greater accessibility to seats of power and influence and that meant more profitable opportunities. Thus not only Madras, Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi attracted scores of dance teachers, but even smaller places like Thanjavur, Lucknow and Benares were selected. Meenakshisundaram Pillai migrated to Tanjore, 40 miles away from Pandanallur, his native village. Some others went to Mumbai and Delhi. There

was an exodus of Gurus from Kuchipudi to Madras, the then capital of combined Madras Presidency. People chose nearby towns as well – Lucknow, Benares, Bhubaneswar and so on. A large number of people including Achhan Maharaj, Shambhu Maharaj, Dandayudha Pani Pillai and others chose Delhi. The reasons were many and the results were far reaching. The first symptoms of such a place-shift could be seen in the economic depression in the post-war period when many artist groups could not make both ends meet through their performances. They started looking for other avenues of profitable employment. It was also a time when the ‘talkie’ was emerging as a great enterprise which could absorb diverse talents. For many gurus this was an attraction too tempting to deny. So, there was an exodus of gurus and artists to centres of power and profitability. When the teacher, by migrating to the town, has dislocated himself in his search for new pastures, it almost amounted to the teacher searching for students rather than the students devotedly going to the teacher wherever he was and learn the art seriously. Another, and a more far reaching change seemed inevitable : the teacher-student relationship, upheld as a pious one all these centuries had broken, replacing it with a convenient – more or less – commercial endearment.

4. Patronage:

This dislocation led to a change in another important area of dance performance - a perceptible change in patronage. With the loss of temple patronage and the gradual collapse of the princely order, dance lost its prime patrons. The Devadasi and Nattuvanar families, to maintain their self respect migrated to towns, either teaching students of non-traditional families or completely withdrew from the dance arena. The groups performing dance dramas, however, continued to depend on traditional patronage of temples, though they also received patronage from government organizations and other sponsors.

Urbanization led to more and more people (mostly girls) from rich and upper middle classes learning dance. In due course the parents also were pleased that their children achieved something worthwhile. This willingness to back their children’s interest in dance slowly prompted them to arrange for more programmes. Though the parents’ intentions were progeny-centred, it benefited the teachers as well for they found patrons in their own students or their parents. Rich students and their parents sponsored shows both in India and abroad. Another source of help came from the Government. Government aid became a major support and Ministry of Culture, Sangeet Natak Akademi and ICCR emerged as the best benefactors.

It is often said that any performance is made possible when five primary requisites are met – a place of performance, a performer, a guru, a patron and an audience. In the case of dance, a sixth requirement has emerged in recent years – a conductor of the programme, who might not be a Guru. He is the Nattuvanar.

The emerging composition of the two most important elements in performance – the Guru and the Nattuvanar on one side and the learner/performer on the other seems interesting. As in old times, the Guru need not be a Nattuvanar now, following a disciple through each performance. The dance field is slowly grooming a separate category of Nattuvangam performers who just conduct a programme. Realistically speaking, this possibly eliminates several embarrassments. The disciples cannot every time carry the Gurus (and their possible idiosyncrasies) with them. Secondly, a disciple, as in old times, is no more a disciple of only one Guru. In his or her anxiety to learn new and ‘catchy’ choreographies in a short time, she learns various and specialized items from various Gurus, sometimes of different styles. A more practical arrangement seems to have settled down by now according to which a separate specialized Nattuvangam accompanist conducts the programme, though the sentimental attachment a teacher feels when his student performs is no more relevant. Fortunately, the Guru-sishya relationship is quickly getting into new avenues of obligations. A disciple of a well-known and respected Guru usually thrives on her/his relations with the Guru in the beginnings of her/his career.

But, even the composition of discipleship is undergoing tremendous changes. When once the stigma on learning dance was removed and a new respectability attained, tens and hundreds of girls from respectable families thronged the thresholds of the now city-based Gurus. This female ‘invasion’ of the field could be seen in almost all solo styles of performances slowly finding its way into other dance styles which are hitherto bastions of male dancers. As an example, one could see Annie Marie Gaston’s data on the composition of discipleships, according to which the female-male ratio in Bharatanatyam is 121:9. The case is similar, if not worse, in the other styles of dance.

In the area of dance dramas an irony of sorts crept in. In Kathakali, new and devoted girls have come forward to learn the art, going through the rigorous practice. They are no more shunned and rejected as in old times. We hear that when Shanta Rao wanted to join Kala Mandalam, Vallathol thought it was wonderful, but Ramunni Menon spurned it! Kathakali still remains largely male-oriented. Both Kuchipudi and its Tamil Nadu variation of Bhagavata Mela are strong bastions of male actors, who don even the female roles, as well, in which

the female impersonation is a much-sought-after technique. But a new situation has arisen in many institutions presenting dance-dramas where even male roles are donned by women only! The 'rupanurupa' concept Bharata has moved to a full cycle from males donning female roles to females donning male roles!

PERFORMANCE MODULES

1. *Choice of Texts :*

Among the several performance modules that saw considerable transformation in the last sixty years, the most perceptive are the changes in the choice of texts. Several new literary pieces have emerged as successful choreographies. No text is considered prohibitive. All lyrics- old and new- have been experimented with. Pure devotional songs, set aside as music-centred ones and not translatable to visual medium thus far, are now favourites for dance choreography. Popular *vaggeyakaras* of ancient times have been popularized. What happens when simple devotional lyrics without enough symbolistic lore embedded in relational imagery has happened to many such songs choreographed : they remain mere encomiums to gods without necessary aesthetic and imaginative evocation. Lyrics that do not yield to *abhinaya* elaboration tend to provoke repetitions of *angika* elaboration.

Perhaps the composition of the audience is another factor that determines the choice of new and popular texts and also the choreographic methodology adopted by dancer-teachers. The new urban audiences have a different role to play in today's performance milieu; they no more share the beliefs that the texts and their presentations do. They have no community oriented goals in witnessing a performance; neither do they have strong allegiance with the content presented. For many of them this is a social event; if not a social obligation. To entertain and inspire such audiences, the choreographers have to adopt new methods or new strategies of visual and auditory aesthetics. One such strategy, easily available to them, and which is often 'mis'-used or 'over'-used is the insertion of 'jatis' whenever or wherever they feel fit. Another one is the 'parikrama' – the circular movement on the stage of groups and formulations of visually appealing compositions. All these are welcome as long as the content permits and propriety concedes.

2. *Repertoire:*

The emergence of a large number of items newly choreographed seems to have an impact on the building up of a viable repertoire in each dance style. Some of the old works seem to have been relegated to background. Items like *Javali* and *Padavarnam* which have an elongated *abhinaya* are now rarely seen. Instead,

new pieces mainly based on lyrics of earlier vaggeyakaras, are becoming popular. Concurrently, descriptive or dramatic lyrics get predominance over expressive ones.

This is understandable in an age of fast pace, for the abhinaya pieces need elaboration and both the variations in hasta mudras and mukhajabinaya are elaborated in them making their pace slow, but indepth presentation when emoting becomes intense. The other pieces are visually good; quick 'charis' make the momentum and the tempo fast. We tend to sacrifice deep emotional experience to pace, rhythm and visual compositions. Both are important and choreographers must find out how best they can fuse them.

Other important features that made a mark in the post-independence era are the presentation of a large number of dance-dramas, the emergence of modern creative dance and Indian dance in the global age – or, more specifically, dance in the diaspora.

3. *Dance-Dramas:*

Dance-Dramas originally belonged to the Natya Mela tradition and, more often than not, they were performed exclusively by men alone. We have evidences from temple sculptures to show that some of the dances were performed by women also. However, dance-dramas have emerged as major thrusts in choreographic works. Uday Shankar, perhaps was the initiator of this tradition, though in a different vein. Today, the dance scenario reveals vibrant choreographies from almost all major dancers and dance gurus. They are also growing under the willing patronage of the Sabhas and festival committees. Their popularity has become so prominent that today festivals showcase half solos and half dance dramas. If this trend continues, there might come a day when solo performances become sparer and sparer when compared to dance dramas.

However, there are concurrent traditions in some regions, which is a recent trend. The situation in Andhra is a case in point. It has a rich Natya Mela tradition, practised by the Kuchipudi maestros. With the advent of the solo system and its inevitable extentions into dance-drama, the Andhra traditions have become multiple-layered phenomena – the Yakshagana, the solo, the modern dance-drama – besides the age-old lasya (or abhinaya) tradition of the Devadasis which was once a vibrant one, but fell on evil days later and practised sporadically and called by several names, the most well-known one being 'Andhra Natyam'. Within the dramatic traditions, Andhra has on one side, the Yakshagana, performed by men alone and on the other extreme is dance drama, a modern variation, largely

performed by women actors. This paradox is bound to happen in the other dance styles also, since dance is predominantly becoming a “female-dominated” art.

A notable feature of this format is that several front-ranking gurus and choreographers all over the country have done some excellent and commendable work. Their work in the modern times is so vast and varied that it deserves a whole thesis on it.

Since experiments in both the traditional and modern dance dramas are in constant practice, we can find four different possibilities of combinations in their content and form:

1. Traditional – both in content and form
2. Traditional – in content but experimental in form
3. Modern in content but traditional in form
4. Modern both in content and form

Though it is very difficult to categorize all dance drama forms to fit into these divisions we can roughly presume that all age-old institutions practising the Natya Mela tradition like the Kerala Kala Mandalam, the Kalakshetra, the Bhagavat Mela and Kuchipudi Kalakshetra largely subscribe to this category, except for minor variations. The second category was largely practised by the early exponents of modern experimentation – Rukmini Devi, Maya Rao, Mrinalini Sarabhai, the Dhananjayans and others who, in their own different ways, worked out to bring in a modern sensibility into the traditional content, though many of them did exceedingly good work later in modern creative dance as well.

The traditional themes with modern choreography with accelerated movements in a fast tempo with jatis reflecting the occasion and the mood always go well with the contemporary audience and that was by itself an achievement of the second generation dancer- choreographers.

Even within the parameters of the second category – viz., “traditional in content and experimental in form” experiments reflecting trans-regional performative styles were done successfully. One such was the presentation of “Sri Krishna Parijatham” presented by four front-ranking choreographers – Vempati Chinna Satyam, Kelucharan Mahapatra, Birju Maharaj and Kalyanasundaram Pillai. The dance-drama has four major roles, Krishna, Satyabhama, Narada and Rukmini. Leading ladies of the four styles participated in this unique experiment. Samjukta Panigrahi as Rukmini, Saswati Sen as Satyabhama, Vani Hasan as Krishna and

Kamala as Narada. The performance, though memorable, could not have repeat shows as it involved difficult managerial problems. However, jugalbandis of two different styles have become popular and often seen these days in festivals.

The third category – modern in content, but traditional in form – has been a common feature since innovative choreographers used their creative imagination to interpret contemporary themes in the form and technique they have acquired over years. This was especially true of the early non-hereditary dancer-choreographers. One should really appreciate these choreographers for having ventured into areas which were until then prohibitive.

4. Modern Dance :

The fourth of these categories is with regard to modern dance. The single major creative endeavour in the field of contemporary dance is the Modern Dance – abstract, but containing several possible layers of meaning. Several adherents to modern dance originally mastered a particular kind of dance style and moved into abstract projection of symbolic ideas. It is an intellectual response to an emotional reaction to a reality outside or inside, which has a bearing on the quality of human life. Since they are intellectual preoccupations and are interpreted through kinetic language, it is often difficult to get at the meaning easily. Instead of trying to understand each move and gesture, audience get an overall impression of the theme presented. However, many of these choreographers are hard task masters. Uday Shankar is the first dancer who can be called the originator of creative dance in India. Ram Gopal, Sachin Shankar, Narendra Sharma, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Maya Rao and Kumudini Lakhia are among the earlier generation dancer-choreographers. Chandralekha and others followed. Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar and many other modern choreographers have made meaningful experiments in this genre.

3. PERFORMANCE CHANNELS

1. Role of Dance Institutions:

The institutionalization of arts is a great step in dance studies. There are two types of institutions – nay, three types. Eversince Uday Shankar started his Almora centre, such centres had become leaders of a particular kind. Kalakshetra, Kerala Kala Mandalam, Kuchipudi Kalakshetra, Kathak Kundra and Jawaharlal Nehru centre for Manipuri Dance have emerged as major institutions that impart performance-oriented training. In the third category we can count the University Departments which have combined theory and performance aspects of Dance

under a broad syllabus of Dance studies. While specialized institutions are the ones to be chosen as harbingers of traditional learning and technique, the latter are visualized as centres of either academic excellence or as centres of comparative dance studies which envisage to make students imbibe the strengths of different styles so that they can later experiment.

A queer outcome of the University-based dance education is the shocking gap it generated between traditional dance teachers and university teachers. The gap is so large that it sometimes leads to mutual recrimination and it percolates to the student community as well.

2. Festivals:

India is a celebratory nation. There are festivals and festivals all over and throughout the year. While festivals are desirable platforms for showcasing the best achievements in the field, there are lacuna that are to be addressed to.

Very slowly, festivals become show pieces. Large scale inaugurations, a great inaugural recital. This presumably is for the national press and the powers that back us up for the festival. In course of time they become stale and cliché-ridden. New blood, new dimensions of programming which generate genuine interest in the artists and the audience should be the motto of the organizers.

There is another urgent need we have to address ourselves to. We have plenty of festivals for the more well-known; we have sizeable performance opportunities for the child artist. But the youth are neither here nor there. Special attempts are to be thought of in the case of those youngsters who are seriously pursuing the profession to create our own hub of tomorrow's "greats". Each State Government/Department of Culture/State Akademi would do good if it selects two or three young dancers (selected by a group of unbiased Gurus) and provide them platforms at district centres. The Central Government's Department of Culture has a scholarship programme which doesn't give equal dividends to the amounts spent because of monitoring difficulties. Though well-designed festivals of the Sangeet Natak Akademi give proper focus to youthful talent, such festivals are becoming fewer over the years. Private 'Sabhas' tend to prefer the 'known names' to new talent.

All these agencies must garner their efforts together and work out a plan of action to hold every year at least four major young dancers' festivals in each one of our regions and showcase all those that are promising. The Zonal Centres, the Departments of Culture and the State Akademis must put into action such plans,

so that training facilities and performance opportunities go to the really deserving, thereby creating a worthy generation of new dancers.

3. Sponsoring Agencies:

With the advent of independence, the liberal Indian leaders initiated measures to enliven the art field, partly by starting institutions to monitor and help the practitioners, but mostly through festivals. A Ministry for Culture overviewed the planning and supervision of governmental help. Sangeet Nataka Akademi was started to be a nodal agency to put into practice government's policies. It, in turn, started teaching institutions such as the Kathak Kendra and the Manipur Institute. Though priorities keep changing whenever a new chairman takes over the SNA every five years, the help more or less continues. The work of the Akademi has become so vast, sometimes one feels it loses its focus. Primary questions regarding art development and art management still haunt our national institutions. When it did have a focus, the work done by the Akademi has been commendable. With increasing international relations, arts also have had their share to keep the cultural flag of the nation afloat in other countries. A special governmental agency was started to look into matters concerning arts transshipment – the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. These institutes, though occasionally accused of bias and partisanship (which accusation is very common in the field of arts!), have been leaders in providing the necessary impetus to showcase their creative excellence.

4. Dance and Diaspora:

Indian Dance has become a hot commodity in the international market. It is customary for Indian dance troupes to tour the world centres of culture. ICCR is established simply to facilitate such programmes. European associations of people of Indian origin organize their festivals and invite native Indian teams to perform. Uday Shankar was the pioneer. Ram Gopal added lustre to it. Eversince that time teams and important artistes found invitations from abroad unrejectable.

Diaspora involves people who settled in other countries. In this context several Indian dancers went abroad and settled down there, either for professional reasons or personal ones. Many of them started their own institutions. The advantage in such schools is two-fold. The aspiring young boys (!) and girls whose mothers want them to learn Bharatanatyam or Kathak to keep their "Indian memories" alive welcomed such scholars. The teachers also found it profitable to invite their own teachers for a workshop after which a tour of the country is usually envisaged. Thus a foreign student of Indian dance will have an opportunity to learn the art from a real "Master" and also participate in presentations he has choreographed.

However, such training programmes tend to become increasingly commercialized – two or three youngsters from each dance style travel abroad every year to “coach” students and to arrange for an “arangetram” in India. The usual paucity of good, well-trained youngsters, is multiplied by the good and young dancer-composers migrating to other countries – especially to the U.S.A.

Secondly, there is a danger that teaching is largely getting diluted. Even in India. The teacher is often expected to teach an item in a week so that after a 4 to 6 week orientation, she or he will have to participate in the tour. Thus the entire training process is being diluted and the results are deplorable. This problem is circumvented when a fully-trained group of a well-known guru travels abroad for giving programmes.

SOME OBSERVATIONS

One major problem in the performative context is the growing distance between the artiste and his materials. If the Guru chooses a traditional theme, the artiste, who grows up in an alien environment, cannot grasp the importance of the subject-matter. The Guru is not in a position to explain things, even if he knows, for lack of time due to time schedules. A correlated problem is the growing distance between the teaching and the taught. Where the teacher and the taught get together often, the resulting creative product turns out to be enduring. With the new system of “learning by items”, (I learn an item with one Guru and shift to another for another item) vitiates the system. Change the Guru, change the dance style. We want to possess all that we can. When Sonal Mansingh learnt Bharatanatyam and then wanted to learn Odissi, her Guru, Kelu Babu, asked her why another dance? He kept her waiting for six months, I understand.

Another problem is the teaching methodology. In a traditional Gurukula or institution, the syllabus is well set. But with many of the young Gurus, the problem of a lack of methodology hampers the correct learning process. There is no strict regulation that if you want to be a teacher you will have to undergo a course in methodology or at least a course in choreography. So a dancer, even before she completed her own training, starts a ‘school’ and teaches the tiny-tots around. This naturally dilutes both teaching standards as well as the fundamentals of dance techniques. This is the case with all urban-based dance styles, for there is a craze for learning and there are no qualified teachers; not even a methodology and syllabus! Elders in the field must take steps and provide corrective steps.

Lack of scope for spreading an awareness among the public, especially youngsters, about dance is a great impediment in the appreciation of dance. There are no appreciation courses offered. The universities and colleges and schools do not think in those lines. Even liberal schools which offer dance courses in extra time do not think in these lines. We want good dancers. Yes. But, more than that, we also want good spectators. Spic Macay does this to some extent, but in a vast country like India, several dedicated and senior artists are needed to apprise the young about the vocabulary of dance, about its basic grammar and style.

Dependable research work in dance is in a deplorable condition. There are very few who can write knowledgeably, with sympathetic understanding. In many areas, there are only reporters, not even reviewers. People who know the dance form and are also thorough with the language should come forward to share these responsibilities! "Dance Studies" is still an unbeaten track in Indian universities.

TO SUM UP

Things are changing quickly. Each tradition has been forced outside its haven to find support elsewhere in India and abroad. Inter-region migrations broaden the thresholds of dance styles. Vast numbers of traditional practitioners have drifted away into the trades and professions of modern times. Those who remain in dance stay on because they believe they have to. Amid a great deal of activity, the threat of extinction is ever-present. Almost all the early masters of dance are gone, the hereditary lines have been broken and the pupils whom the great Gurus have left behind – and are now important Gurus themselves – are a mere handful. The old channels through which the traditions flowed have crumbled and the art now requires a new breed of dedicated scholars and artistes.

Today's task requires that the innovator be thoroughly versed in the entire tradition, not in one aspect of it only, but in as much of its totality as possible. A spirit of enquiry is needed too! The youngsters must learn, must also learn to probe, to question – for in such questioning alone lay the further development of art as a living organism.

Let us all work together to make dance - that "Chakshusha Kratu" as Kalidasa spoke of it – a feast to the eyes and to the minds!! And uphold its glory as reflected in the best of times and in the best of practitioners!

(This is a modified version of Maheshwar Neogi Memorial Lecture delivered at Guwahati in September, 2007)