



ANUSHKA
JALAN

— THE —

THE
MIME

OF EXPRESSIONS





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Chapter 1



Classical Dance



“Indian classical dance is sustained by a profound philosophy. Form seeks to merge with the formless, motion seeks to become a part of the motionless, and the dancing individual seeks to become one with the eternal dance of the cosmos.”

- Nita Ambani

India is known for its rich cultural legacy. Performing arts like classical dances form a very integral part of Indian culture. These are traditional dances that reveal the emotions through dance, drama and poetry. One must perform these with grace, dignity and meticulous movement along with elegant formal gestures, steps and poses. They express ideas, emotions or narrate a story. They have developed as classical arts, a media between the external world and internal teaching.

The Indian classical dances have always been based on the stories from the mythologies like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavata* and *Puranas*. Worshipping was the primary aim. The roots can be traced from the Sanskrit text and *Natyashastra*.

Natyashastra is a Sanskrit Hindu text on performing arts. In the matter of dance, Bharata Muni’s Natyashastra is one of the earliest texts. Its main theme deals with drama, but dance is also widely featured. The

first compilation of Natyashastra is dated between 200 BCE and 200 CE. The mythological stories revolving around Natyashastra are very interesting.

Bharata, in his *Natyashastra*, refers to the celestial beings *Deva Kalaa* as the initiators of the origin of dance. He has specified that the art of dance was born from Shiva Nataraja, Goddess Parvati and Goddess Saraswati. Lord Shiva, known as ‘Nataraja – King of All Dances’, is said to perform the cosmic dance that delicately balances life and death and all that is happening in the universe in harmonious cycles.

Classical dance or *Shastriya Nritya* is all about technicalities and strict rules. Acharya Nandikeshwara’s *Abhinay Darpan*, a book that talks about Indian classical dance and culture in detail, and Sharangdev’s *Sangeet Ratnakar*, along with *Natya Shastra* form the technicalities of all classical dance forms, which include their *Rasa*, *Bhava*, body movements, etc. Classical dance also uses a suggestive language of hand gestures, called *hastas*, which can express words, ideas, symbols and sentiments.

History of Classical Dance

Dance in India has a very rich tradition. Classical dance as a performing art is an important part of the Indian culture dating back to ancient times. Most classical dance forms have originated from temples. It was done in order to impress gods and goddesses. Extensive evidence has been provided on dance with the help of excavations, inscriptions, chronicles, genealogies of kings and artists, literary, sculpture and painting of different periods. This is further supported by myths and legends that dance had a significant place in the religious and social life of the Indian people.

Panchamaveda, the fifth Veda or Natyaveda, came into being when a group of gods and goddesses pleaded with Lord Brahma to create a simple Veda for the common man in Kaliyuga. To form this Veda, words were taken from Rig Veda, Abhinaya or gestures (the communicating element of the body) from Yajurveda, geet (music) and chant from Samaveda, and Rasa (the important sentiment and emotional element) from Atharva Veda.

Lord Brahma handed this Veda to Sage Bharata for him to spread it on the earth. Bharat Muni, in turn, taught his hundred disciples and presented a dance drama titled “*Tripura Dabana*” in front of Lord Shiva. On seeing the presentation, Lord Shiva was very pleased and suggested to Bharata Muni to learn Tandava Nritya from

Tandu and the gracefulness in dancing or Lashya from Parvati started teaching his disciples. It was then that *Natyashastra* was written by him and became the common root or sourcebook for all classical dance forms of India, music and art of drama. There is also a legend that states that Brahma wrote the *Natya Veda*, which has over thirty-six thousand verses.

Another legend tells us that Goddess Parvathi taught this art of dancing to Usha, the daughter of Demon Banasura. Later, Usha, in turn, passed this knowledge down to the Gopikas of Dwaraka, Lord Krishna's birthplace. The art of heavenly dance has been passed on through many human channels by gods and the goddesses, as they have been dancers themselves.

The earliest historical illustration of Nataraja preaching Natyagama in its pure form originates in the Chalukyan sanctuaries of Badami and Aihole in the mid-6th century A.D. temple dancing was traditionalised, and the dancing girls were patronised by the kings. Now these classes of dancers were known as *Devdasis* (servants of God) enjoyed respect, status and prosperity in this era and were encouraged in their art *Dasi attam*. They are respectfully mentioned in many inscriptions of temples built in the medieval age.

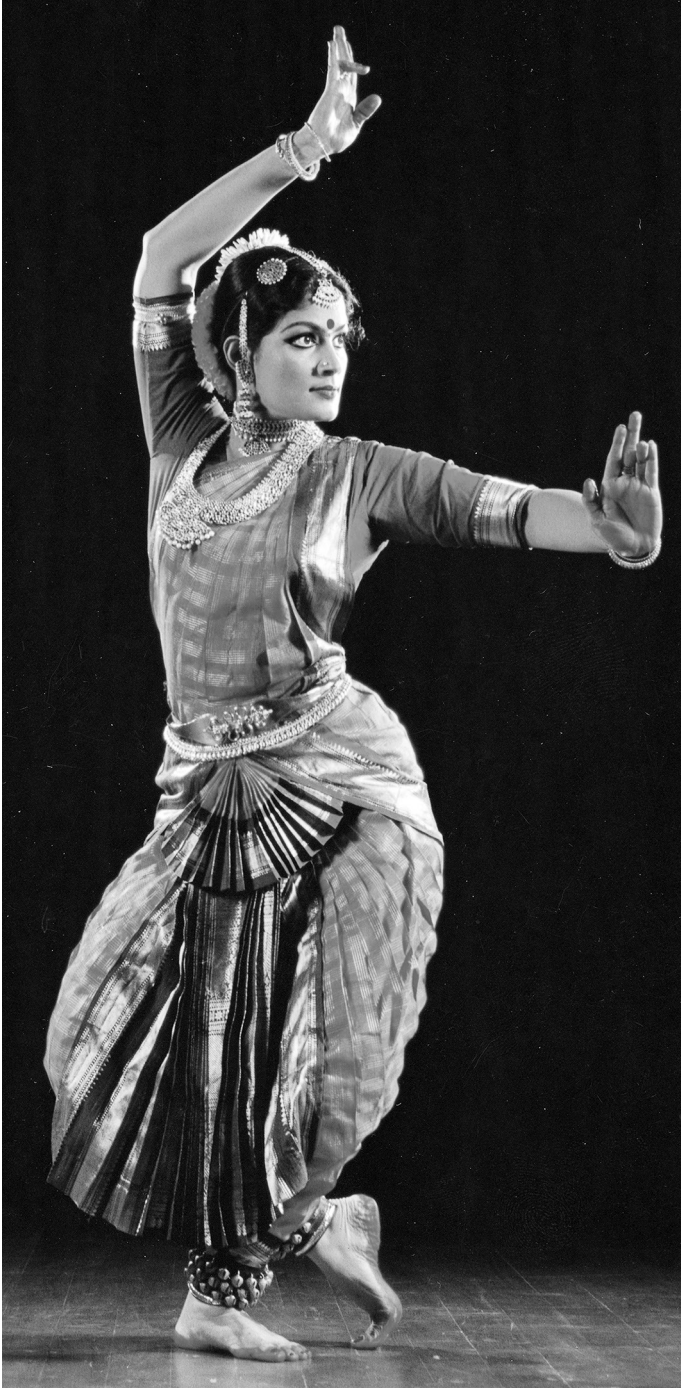
The temples of Khajuraho, Bhubaneswar and Puri reverberated with the lyrics of Poet Jayadeva. Gradually, due to factors like social, historical and economic restrictions and circumstances, tantric practices and free sex enjoyed by the *siddhas*, *jangamas*, *charanas*, patrons and priests, these dancers in the temples became public women and were associated with prostitutes, therefore, extinguishing the very life of the tradition.

To uplift the status of women, give them freedom in education and to protect them from social evils, the British government abolished the devadasi system in India.

Over the centuries, Indian classical dance has evolved and undergone many changes in different parts of the country. Its own distinct style taking on the culture of the particular region, each acquiring its own flavour. Most of the contemporary dancers use the formal classical Indian dance technique to stage ballets representing many themes like nationalism, the unity of religions, the animal rights activism, evils of the current education system and many more. Today, there is also a whole new body of modern experimental dance.

Types of Classical Dances

Indian classical dance, or Shastriya Nritya, is used for various performance arts deep-rooted in religious Hindu musical theatre styles, about which one can find out in the Sanskrit text called *Natyashastra*.



✦ *Bharatanatyam* Geeta Chandran

The heritage of Indian classical dance embraces several styles and the most popular are:

- Bharatanatyam
- Kathak
- Odissi
- Kuchipudi
- Kathakali
- Mohiniattam
- Manipuri
- Sattriya

Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam is considered as the oldest classical dance form of India and is considered as the mother of many other Indian classical dance forms. It originated in the Hindu temples of Tamil Nadu and gradually spread in South India. The meaning of Bharatanatyam is Bha (Bhava which means emotions), Ra (Raga meaning musical notes), Ta (*Taal* meaning the rhythm), Natyam (the Sanskrit word for Natyam). According to some scholars, this dance is primarily evolved based on the basic rules of Indian Natyashastra, and hence, its name is Bharatanatyam. Traditionally, it was a solo dance performed only by women. For many centuries, it was performed only by few families in the district of Tanjore.

The main supporters of this dance form were the Devadasis or temple dancers who used to perform this dance during worship or on festive occasions. It was also encouraged by the Rajas and princess. This dance includes a singer, music and, most importantly, a guru who directs and conducts the performance. It has inspired many art forms including paintings and sculptures from 6th to 9th century CE temple sculptures.

Bharatanatyam classical dance is purely based on Bhakti, Tanjore being the prime centre for Bharatanatyam. Tanjore is also known as the city of temples and birthplace of many gurus of Bharatanatyam. While performing Bharatanatyam, there are about sixty-four different movements or Adhau of hands, legs and body. The presentation of Bharatanatyam is comprised of Alaripu, Jatiswaram, Sabdam, Varnam, Padam, Shloka and Tillana.



✦ Kathak Birju Maharaj

Kathak

The graceful dance Kathak of North India is also known as ‘**Natwari Nrutya**’. **Kathak also means narration of stories.** It is believed to be originated from the travelling poets of North India known as Kathakars or storytellers. These Kathakars communicated stories of Lord Krishna’s childhood days. In earlier days, the narrator used to tell the stories in the temple followed by devotional songs and dance. Subsequently, the dancers started narrating the stories with the help of songs, through foot movements, hand gestures, facial expressions and eye movement, and it was named Kathak dance.

Kathak is one of the most appealing dance forms of India. It has been mentioned in Natya Shastra and Mahabharata. Different postures of this dance are seen in the engraved sculptures found in Mohenjodaro and Harappa. For the historical study of Kathak dance, evidence is available in paintings of Kishengarh, late 18th century also. The themes and melodies of this dance form revolve around stories of Ramayan, Mahabharata and Krishna. Apart from this, Kathak integrates presentations on many subjects also. A solo dance form but group compositions on themes with perfect synchronisation steals the heart and makes the overall performance look amazing.

Kathak is world famous for its outstanding footwork and padhant (*bols, toda* and *tukdas*). *Tatkar* or footwork is a very special feature of the Kathak dance style. The dancer stamps out the *tala* with the feet to the accompaniment of the instrument which is either tabla or the pakhawaj. It creates a connection between the dancer and the audience. The body movements are very straight compared to the other dance forms of India.



✦ *Odissi Madhavi Mudgal*

Odissi


Originated in the Hindu temples of the eastern coastal state of Odisha in India, Odissi or Orissis is one of the outstanding classical dance forms of India. It is one of the most ancient Indian classical dance forms which till date hold a strong position among other Indian dances. Its conceptual bases trace back to 'Natya Shastra', (as Audramagdhi) the ancient Sanskrit Hindu text on the performing arts.

The age-old tradition of Odissi is established from the Odisha Hindu temples and various sites of archaeological importance that are associated with Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, the sculptures of which decorate the dance postures of this art form. It is a form of the illustrative anecdote of mythical and religious stories, devotional poems and spiritual ideas performed by the dancer with excellent body movements, expressions, striking gestures and sign languages. The performance includes prayer, *Nrita*, *Nritya*, *Natya* and *moksha*. Odissi includes themes from Vaishnavism, and others are linked with Hindu gods and goddesses like Shiva, Surya and Shakti.



Kuchipudi - Raja Radha Reddy

Copyright photo by Avinash Pasricha

 *Kuchipudi Raja and Radha Reddy*

Kuchipudi

Kuchipudi is a well-known dance form that originated in Andhra Pradesh around 3rd century BCE. This classical dance is named after a village called Kuchelapuram, sixty-five kilometres from Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh. In the early medieval era, people were devotees of Lord Shiva; hence, the devotion towards Lord Shiva is seen in the performance of this dance. It became popular due to the support of the Brahmins who practised it. This dance form is a long established dance-drama style and is known for its remarkable and quick footwork, dramatic portrayal, expressive eye movements and spirited narrative. It is a blend of *tandava* and *lasya* elements. A distinguishing feature of this dance is the performance on a brass plate and moving the plate to the soundtrack of Carnatic music. Apart from being a dancer and actor, Kuchipudi dancers need to be skilled in Sanskrit and Telugu languages, music and manuscripts of the performance.

It takes at least seven to ten years to master this art form. Kuchipudi is a dance drama of *nritya*, *nritya*, *natya*. The *Nritya* consists of *Theermanams* and *Jatis*, the *Nritya* of *Sabdams*, and the *Natya* of acting with mudras (hand gestures). Kuchipudi has strong ties with dance-drama tradition, with its roots in the ancient Hindu Sanskrit text of *Natya Shastra*. It merges the elements of speech, mime and pure dance.



☞ *Kathakali* Sadanam Balakrishnam

Kathakali

Kathakali is a dazzling classical dance form of Kerala. Movements in Kathakali are influenced by **ancient martial arts and athletic tradition**. It is chiefly a **dance drama**. Kathakali was traditionally a male-dominated dance, but now, females are also a part of it. This dance form is also famous for its huge, extravagant costumes, amazing makeup style, face masks and ornaments representing the gods or demons in accordance with the character depicted by the performer.

Kathakali is contemporary to Bharatnatyam; it is somewhat different from other classical dance forms. Kathakali dance form is developed in the courts and theatres of the Hindu domain. In Kathakali, dancing and acting skills are the basic requirements because, in this dance, the dancer does not speak but expresses through facial expressions and mudras of the hand. Music is a very essential part of this Kathakali dance. It is purely Karnataki and very similar to South Indian classical music, and it is performed by two singers and Chenda accompanists to keep the rhythm. Kathakali has also gone through a lot of transition over time, as compared to the modern-day performances, which are short as per the time limit of the programme; the traditional performances were very long, from dusk to dawn. Kathakali resembles other dance forms like that of 'Noh' and 'Kabuki' of Japan.

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