

# THE SACRED DANCE OF INDIA

*by*

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*To my Mother*

**Ammu Swaminadhan**

*with love*






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## The Sacred Dance of India

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The dance in India is an eloquent expression of an ancient civilization, whose timeless wisdom continues to evoke the passionate search of man for conscious identity with God. Not the dance alone. All the arts were dedicated towards the quest for philosophical insights through disciplined endeavour and the synthesis of the varied forms was a necessity. A long dialogue in the *Vishnu Dharmottara*, between the rishi Vraja, and the sage Markandeya, emphasises the continuity and flow of one art into another.

Bharata, the author of the treatise on the performing arts, the *Nāṭya Shāstra*, states: "There will be no wisdom, no learning, no art, nor craft, no device, nor action, that is not found within *nāṭya*."

"This art," he tells us, "is not merely for your pleasure, but exhibits *bhāva* (expression) for all the three worlds. I made this art as following the movement of the world, whether in work or play, profit, peace, laughter, battle or slaughter, yielding the fruit of righteousness to those who follow the moral law, a restraint for the unruly, a discipline for the followers of a rule, to create wisdom in the ignorant, learning in scholars, affording sport to kings, and endurance to the sorrow-stricken, replete with the diverse moods

informed with varying passions of the soul, linked to the deeds of all mankind, the best, the middling and the low, affording excellent counsel, pastime and all else ”

The rules of the art were a revelation, and to the artist, each creation carried with it the bliss of spiritual experience. In Hindu thought, every action became a stirring ritual and work was both prayer and an inspiration. Yet, at the same time, through analytical study, techniques and significant principles, disciplines were seriously evaluated and codified. All facets of art were catalogued, discussed and clearly enumerated. Nothing was left to chance, for the quest was for the absolute truth. The artist was the seeker after the highest wisdom. It was, therefore, in a state of exuberant joy, in the precincts of the temples, amidst the devotional fervour of worshippers, in an atmosphere of radiance, that Indian art was nurtured.

In the ruins of Mohen-jo-daro, a rare figure of a dancing girl was found. So strong is the continuity of traditional pattern, that this may well be a dancer of today. At Harappa, Shiva danced in a broken image. This is what Indians call *Samsāra*—the stream of life—flowing through countless lives, peeling away the false, rubbing out ugly angularities, slowly bringing to light, man's true relationship with God.

The Gods were always the Supreme Artists. To make them tangible to mankind, the sculptor took up his chisel, and the beauty he created can be seen in the myriad forms that adorn the walls of the temples.

Nataraja, God of the dance, is perhaps the grandest symbol, ever created, of the birth, the evolution, the death and re-birth of the human soul. He is the living being, who shedding his *māyā* or ignorance, is re-absorbed into the supreme harmony of the universe.

Shiva, as the cosmic dancer, represents both creation and destruction. The right hand holds the drum for, *nāda* or sound was the first element in the universe from which flowed all language, music and literature. The hand of the half-moon holds a tongue of flame, symbol of destruction, the burning away of all evil. The lower right hand held in a gesture of tender solicitude held in front of the body, is the hand of protection, the promise of salvation, while the other hand indicates the way to enlightenment as it points to the foot, lifted and released as the other foot stamps out *avidyā* (ignorance) shown as the dwarf *Muyalakan*.

The image of Nataraja depicts the eternal wisdom transmitted through the arts, a tradition that has not changed much in a thousand years.

Krishna, incarnation of the Creator, Maha Vishnu, is also a dancer and God of eternal melodies. Saraswati, Goddess of knowledge, plays the *veena*, Parvati, the mother-Goddess, consort of Shiva, was herself a *gūru* of dance. With this back-drop, dancers became devotees with the very first steps they took and the atmosphere of the Indian environment was one of reverence and exaltation. The music related the ancient stories drawn from sacred texts, and while musicians composed new songs, the spiritual content retained a marvellous continuity. The particular flavour or *rasa* of India's artistic heritage was worship through every symbol known to mankind. The dance was presented in the temple before the sacred inner shrine, where earthly movements became imitations of God-actions and the dancer was equal with God.

Tradition, environment and spiritual aspiration gave each style a particular form of its own. While *Bharata Nāṭyam* flourished in the temples of

Tamilnadu, *Kathakali* drew large audiences to festivals in Kerala. In Manipur, the folk form became *Manipuri* dancing and the Mughals gave their own ideology to the story-tellers of the North and the dance became *Kathak*.

Inherent in all the forms is the timeless story of existence, the struggle between the forces of good and evil, the Divine Being separated from Itself. The dance in India depicts the profound teachings of Hindu metaphysics, presented in the simplest of forms for the understanding of the intellectual and the unsophisticated.

The harmonious blending of art, religion and philosophy comprised the sacred tradition of the Indian culture, and gave man the sense of the totality of the universe.

Historically speaking, the South of India retained a remarkable continuity of its cultural heritage. Parimal Alagar, the famous scholar who wrote a commentary on the *Tirukkural*, tells us that the celebrated dynasties included the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas and there is evidence of the Pandya kingdom in the writings of Megasthenes of the 4th century B C.

From the 6th century onwards there was great activity and the architecture shows us the artistically powerful developments that took place. The Pallava king of Kanchipuram, Mahendravarman (600-30) who was called the 'Vichitrachitra', gave great encouragement to artists and artisans and introduced the rock temples in South India. The temples of Mahabalipuram are a magnificent work of that time. The Chola kings were also patrons of taste. The great Karikala's kingdom was described in the poem, "Pattinappalai Tondaman Ilandrayan", and it is said that the author was rewarded with a lakh and sixty thousand gold pieces. Karikala brought great glory to the South from the 3rd to the 13th centuries. During the 10th century the religious movement was at its height, and the Shaivite saints, the *Nayanars*, and the Vaishnava saints, the *Alvārs*, stirred the entire country with their deeply moving songs. The great temples of Southern India came into being during these years when singers and poets moved man into a profound relatedness with God.

In the countryside, there were bards, who, in groups, wandered through the land, singing and entertaining the people. They were called 'panar' and 'vraṭis'.

This was also the period of the Chalukyas of Vatapi (Badami) whose great ruler Pulakesin II (606-42) contributed fully to architecture for, influenced by the Pallava art, he erected temples at Badami, Pattakadal and other places. The Deccan was under the domination of the Chalukyas and the dynasty maintained its supremacy from A D 630 to 1200.

One of the most remarkable of Chola Kings was Rajaraja I (985-1014), and Rajendra, his son. South India was united under the Cholas and the Chalukyas, and poets, musicians and dancers flourished as never before. The Tanjore Brihadeesvara temple, with its exquisite sculpture of the dancing Shiva, was built during this time and languages, both Tamil and Sanskrit, were used in literary compositions. The temple of dance, Chidambaram, was built and enriched with each successive dynasty, and within and without the temple walls, the dancing figures are the finest examples of sculpture in Southern India. Here, the *Kanaras* of Bharata's *Nāṭya Shāstra*, are fully illustrated in stone.

South India was later, in the 14th century, dominated by the Vijaya-

nagar Empire (A D 1336-1650) and the arts were given great impetus. The Muslim invasion from the North was halted and the South retained the remarkable qualities of India's ancient civilization. The noblest of Vijayanagar's kings was Krishnadeva Raya (1509-29), a Sanskrit and Telugu scholar, who patronised the arts, rebuilt temples and was responsible for a glorious revival of art and architecture.

With the fall of Vijayanagar, the arrival of Europeans and the emergence of the Nayakas, a new period of history was unfolded.

The Nayakas of Madurai continued the traditional methods of enhancing the beauty of Dravidian temples which found their culmination in the high imposing *gopurams*, so characteristic of South Indian temples.

The Mahrattas, whose dynasty followed the Nayakas, continued the traditional patterns and set the stage for *Bharata Nāṭyam* as is known today.

The Raja Sarfoji (A D 1798-1833) introduced Marathi songs, keeping intact the Carnatic style of music. He built special halls for dance and music, as can be seen in Madurai and Tiruchirappalli.

Acyuta Nayaka (A D 1561-1614) gave the gift of Melattur village to the dancers of *Bhagavata Mela Natakam*, a dance-drama form of *Bharata Nāṭyam*. His descendants were also patrons of dance and music and his son, Raghunatha Nayaka, and grandson, Vijayaraghava Nayaka, fostered and developed the arts. The celebrated composer of songs, Kshetragna, flourished at this time and Venkatamukhi composed his famous treatise on music, *Chaturdandi Prakashika*.

The earliest reference to the *Bhagavata Mela Natakam* is found in A D 1502, in the Manchupalli Kalfiat, when a group of players went to the Vijayanagar ruler, Immadi Narasa Nayaka, and acted the drama before him with a realistic theme on the plight of the people under a tyrannical ruler.

The dance-dramas were written in Telugu, as the Vijayanagar Empire stretched over the whole of South India at that time. It is interesting to know that two yogis were responsible for developing the art in Kuchipudi and in Melattur. Siddhendra Yogi first created the dance-drama at a village called *Kuchelapuram*, which is today known as *Kuchipudi*.

His *guru*, Tirtha Narayana Swami, had settled in Tanjore and there he wrote a lyrical devotional play, the *Krishna Leela Tarangini*, which was danced by young men in the shrine of Varahur in the Tanjore District. Thus, the *Bhagavata Mela Natakam* became a devotional rite in Tamil Nadu and Andhra. Dance-drama was the most ancient form of *nāṭya*, combining the arts of dance, music, speech and drama, and the later Sanskrit theatre perhaps became a more sophisticated form of this ancient technique.

In Karnataka, the dance-drama form is called *Yakshagana*, which originally particularised a style of musical composition, but developed into a dance-drama with its stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and later, other plays were enacted from the *Bhagavatam* and *Shivapurana*.

All dances were sacred offerings to the Lord, and through the myriad forms, the relationship of the cultural patterns of the dance and its fundamental unity is apparent. Yet, each one had a separate identity. Man confronted with powers that he could not comprehend, sought refuge in myths in order to link himself with the universal unseen worlds. Through the dance, he attuned himself to the cosmos and found within his body a source of transcendental power that became the timeless truth.



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# Bharata Natyam

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Tamil literature of the Sangam age (500 B C to A D 500) tells us of the importance of dance. Though beginning as a ritual, the form developed into a sophisticated style, which is described in the celebrated epic, the *Seelapadikaram* (A D 171). The Dravidian South had already a fully developed style of its own, when Bharata's *Nāṭya Shāstra* was written. Later, the texts of the various traditions mingled and influenced each other.

*Bharata Nāṭyam*, as it is known today, strives to portray through rhythmic movement, facial expression and symbolic gestures, the spiritual awakening of the human soul and its longing for enlightenment. This dance form, which had several names, such as, *Chinna Melam*, *Kuttu* and *Sadir Nautch* was generally known in intellectual circles as *Bharatam*. Those who contributed to its renaissance, gave it the name *Bharata Nāṭyam*, in order to give the art once again its traditional dignity. The term 'Bharata' was derived from three essential aspects of the art: 'Bha' from *Bhāva* (expression), 'ra' from *Rāga* (musical mode), and 'ta' from *Tāla* (time measure).

The Gods, who are the supreme examples of human realisation, are adored, praised and supplicated in every song and the dancer is the instrument through which a prayer is made real and given outer expression. All achievement is but through the grace of the Gods, and it is they who are the



Aiming the arrow—Mrinalini Sarabhai Chathunni Panicker

primary *gūrus*. Shiva, the destroyer of the Hindu trinity, is the God of the Dance in His manifestation as Nataraja, Saraswati, Goddess of Learning, is the mother of music, Parvati is the first teacher of the graceful dance form called *Lāsya*, as opposed to the virile *Tāṇḍava* of Nataraja. Krishna is the

celestial flute-player and dancer (Natavara), as also the embodiment of the Erotic Sentiment. The Vedāntins always compared the experience of contemplation of a work of art as akin to the highest spiritual attainment.

Nowhere else has there been so clear a revelation of the inter-relation of philosophic thought and artistic concepts. Every image of religious significance is imbued with the spiritual duality of God and nature.



Krishna playing the flute—Mallika Sarabhai.

"Dancing was used", says the *Vishnu Dharmottara* (4th to 7th centuries), "to please the Gods in the temples and this art was of greater value than the joy experienced by those who meditated on Brahman, the Supreme One." And again, "Indeed the offering of a dance was more appreciated than flowers and other oblations."

*Bharata Nāṭyam*, as the dance form, has been handed down through the centuries by dance teachers called 'Nattuvanars' and ritualistic dancers, called 'Devadasis', in the temples of India. In the sacred atmosphere of the temple, the art developed and became a rite for realization through the enactment of movements dedicated to God. The 'Devadasis' were classified in categories of 'Rajadasis', who danced before the *Dhwajasthāmbham* (the sacred flag-staff of the temple); 'Alankaradasis', who performed for social events; 'Devadasis', who danced before the shrine in the temples; and the 'Swadasis', who performed the rituals for religious purposes, such as the *Kumbhābhishhekam*\*. There were also the handmaidens called 'Adukala Mahal', 'Nataka Mahal', 'Devar Kannigayar', whose sacred duties were fanning the image of God, lighting the 'Kumbha Arati' (sacred light), acting in fact as priestesses in the temple.

The dancer was first dedicated to the temple through a ceremony called

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\*NOTE : Consecrating an image by sprinkling water from a pot usually when installing the image.

'Bottukattal' Symbolically, she was married to God. A golden *Tāl* was given to her as the symbol of marriage. The study of *Bharata Nāṭyam* lasted seven years under the 'Nattuvanars', who were the *gūrus* and musicians of the dance. The great 'Nattuvanars' of Tanjore, Chinnaiyah, Ponnaiah, Shivanandam and Vadivelu, arranged in sequence, the *Bharata Nāṭyam* programme for a solo dancer. Ponnaiah and Shivanandam were *gūrus* in the Brihadeesvara temple of Tanjore and their patron was Raja Sarabhoji (A D 1711-28), who was deeply interested in dance.

Chinnaiyah taught at the court of Maharaja Krishna Rajendra Odayar of Mysore and Vadivelu was the musician at the court of Maharaja Swati Tirunal of Travancore, himself a distinguished musician and composer. There was great impetus given to the arts by royal families and Rajadeva (A D 985-1106) had four hundred dancing girls during his reign, who were part of the temple rituals and with them were Nattuvanars, musicians and *mridanga* players, all supported by the Raja.

The dancer in *Bharata Nāṭyam* begins her training by first learning the basic dance steps called 'adavus'.

Once the 'adavus' are mastered, usually over a period of one year, these are combined into 'jatis', 'theermanas', or 'aridis' (endings). A series of 'jatis' are recited and these syllables are called 'Sollukattus', very similar to the language of the drum. The pupil studies each step through the direction of the Nattuvanars (dance teachers) who beat out the rhythm on the wooden block with a 'thattu kazhi' (rhythm-stick). The 'jatis' are the dance units of *Bharata Nāṭyam*.

**Bharata Nāṭyam Pose—Mallika**



**Adavus** (basic steps of Bharata Nāṭyam)



**Sarikkal Adavu.**



**Katta Adavu**

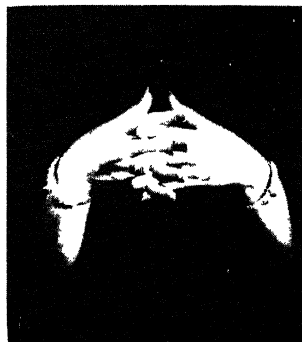




Hasta Mudra—Suchi



Swastika



Karkata

With the feet, the body has an important part to play and when the fundamental position of *Bharata Nāṭyam* is taken, the feet are turned out, the knees bent, the arms stretched, the hands lifted to the side, the dancer begins her initiation

The *Nṛita-hastas* are studied separately for the language of the hands is most important in all Indian dancing. Symbolism of the hands has been utilised in all religions of the world. In ancient sculpture, whether it be Eastern or Western, the *Anjali Hasta* (of prayer), and the *Abhaya-hasta* (of blessing), are used frequently. In India, hands formed a fundamental part of worship and became a magical code for religious rituals. In Buddhist and Jain sculptures, this mode of communication is also apparent. It was but natural that dancing in India, which began as worship, codified these gestures and elaborated upon them.



Tamrachuda

In *Bharata Nāṭyam*, there are two major classifications of the hand symbols or *hasta mudras*. The single hand (*Asamyuta*) movements are twenty-eight in number and the double hand (*Samyuta*) movements, twenty-four in number. Each symbol is used in various ways and has several meanings. The primary symbol, 'Patāka' or flag, according to Nandikeshwara's *Abhinaya Darpana*, is the first of all the *astas* and was formed when Brahma, the Great Creator, went to Parabrahma and greeted him, saying, 'Victory', thus holding up his hand like a flag. Each hand symbol has a special colour, a patron *gūru*, a caste and a deity.

It was only after seven years of training that the dancer gave her first performance which was called, as it is today, the 'Arangetram'. On this occasion, she was presented with a bamboo stick, which gave her the title 'Thalaikol'. There is a charming story about the origin of the 'Thalaikol'. The *Seelapadikaram* tells of the *apsara*, Urvashi, who, while dancing at the God Indra's court, saw Jayanta, the son of Indra, and enchanted by his beauty, stopped for a moment. This aroused the anger of Sage Agatsya, who was watching the performance. He cursed Urvashi, saying that she would be born as a dancing girl (*Devar Kannigai*) on earth and Jayanta in the Vindhya Mountains. However, when they both begged for forgiveness, the sage said that the curse would cease, when Urvashi had her 'Arangetram' and was presented with the 'Thalaikol', which was Jayanta.

Madhavi, the dancing heroine in the *Seelapadikaram*, is a descendant of Urvashi, the divine dancer, and her first performance is described in detail. The 'Thalaikol' was first bathed in the sacred waters and then taken in procession through the city in the temple car to the dance hall. Madhavi was presented after her 'Arangetram' with a 'green-leaf garland and one thousand and eight *Kalanjus* of gold', which was the customary present given to dancers who held the 'Thalaikol' and exhibited their talents for the first time.

Dancers used to study in a small room called the 'Silambakoodam' in the Nattuvanar's house. The floor was made of mud which is still the best surface for dancing. Children used to begin their regular training when they were about seven years old, though they had already been watching the classes for some time. In the beginning, a ceremony called 'thandiam pidital', literally meaning 'holding the stick' was performed. The young people were initiated into the first steps of dancing by holding the stick over a scattering of paddy. On this day, as on all festive occasions, presents were offered to the teacher.

The first item of the *Bharata Nātyam* programme is the *Alarippu* or invocation. It is a prayer to the Gods, to the *gurus* (learned teachers), the *vidvans* (scholars) and the audience. Only rhythmic syllables are uttered with the *mridangam* (drum) and the *jalra* (cymbals). It is almost like the introduction into the form or pattern of the dance. In *Alarippu*, the chanting of the syllables can be compared to the recitation in temple worship, which seems appropriate for this dance of prayer. In olden days, the *Alarippu* was preceded by a musical overture called 'Melaprapti' in which the dance teacher participated by rhythmic utterances with musical accompaniments and this ended with a thanks-giving (*mangalam*). As in *Kathakali*, the musicians stood behind the dancer, the Nattuvanar in the centre keeping time with the cymbals, the percussion player on his right, and on the extreme left, the 'Sruthikar' (drone). The flutist and the other musicians stood behind the Nattuvanar.

The *Abhinaya Darpana*, by Nandikeshwara, describes this in a verse: "In the centre stands the dancer (*patra*), and on the right, the musicians, keeping time (*taladhari*) and on either side, the percussionists.

**Bharata Natyam—Mallika**



**Petting the deer—Mallika**



(mridangakah) Between them stand the singers (gitakarah) In this order, should the group be arranged on the stage”

Shri Meenakshisundaram Pillai, the learned *gūru* of *Bharata Nāṭyam*, related the story of the birth of ‘jatis’ The Great One, Nataraja, when He danced the *Ananda Tāṇḍava*, the dance of Eternal Bliss, which is so beautifully depicted in the temple of Chidambaram, loosened a bell from His anklet and it rose high into the air and fell on the Lord’s shoulder and then down to the ground, making the sound ‘tha-thi-tham-num’ In that moment of eternity, time and rhythm were born in the form of a ‘jati’

After *Alarippu*, the ‘jati’ (now known as *jatiswaram*) was also recited but music in the form of *rāgas* was added later to render it more pleasing

Another interesting story tells of the birth of sound from the drum of Shiva The sacred OM resounded throughout the three worlds and the people shook with fear, so Shiva broke the drums into two and welded the outer ends together The sweet sound drew people close again Thus the first *mridangam* was created

The *jatiswaram* is created in any *rāga*, and all the manifold patterns of *tāla* are incorporated within a given framework Here the dancer executes varied rhythms to the same pattern of musical notes in the chosen *rāga* The *jatiswaram* has no *śahitya* (verbal) passages, but uses only the musical notes (*svaras*) in various *rāgas* It is divided into two sections—the *pallavi*, usually composed in *Vilamba Kal* (slow tempo), or in the *Madhyama Kal* (medium tempo) and the *Anupallavi*, ending in *Dhruva Kal* (fast tempo) The musicians sing the *svaras* choosing a particular *rāga* while the dancer executes them in various combinations of ‘adavus’ and the *mridangam* follows suit Beginning with a fast ‘jati’, the dance shows perfect harmony with the music and the various *gamakas* of the *rāga* The dancer expresses in feet movements the *akshara kalas* of the *tāla*, keeps intricate rhythm in between and with the main beat of the song

Bharata Natyam—Mallika



Serebendra Bhupala ‘Kuravanji’—Mallika as ‘Madanavalli’



After the *jatiswaram*, the *shabdham* is a song, whose words describe the glory of the God. The dancer, in *Bharata Nāṭyam*, is the devotee and praises God through her expression and movement. Expression or *abhinayam* is an important feature of *Bharata Nāṭyam* for the dancer imparts to her audience the theme and mood of her song. Not only should she be well-versed in the actual meaning of the words, but should comprehend the deep emotion and experience of its *shastric* (classical) and traditional content and background.

“Whither the hand goes, let the glance follow,  
Whither the glances lead, there should the mind follow  
Whither the mind goes, there the mood follows  
Whither the mood goes, there is real sentiment born,”

says the *Abhinaya Darpana*

In the next item, the *varnam*, the intricate technique of *Bharata Nāṭyam*, is vividly portrayed. Whereas in other techniques, there are many actors and dancers, in *Bharata Nāṭyam*, a solo dancer has to interpret by herself an entire story with no other aid but the movements of her body, the ever-changing expressiveness of her face and the gestures of her hands. She has to portray to her audience both the lyrical and dramatic quality of the emotional content of the story she tells. The *varnam* is literally the colour of *Bharata Nāṭyam*.

The term *bhāva* actually means ‘becoming’, for the dancer merges into the image of the character she has to play, for only then can she express the real meaning of the song she sings. She has to completely cast aside her superficial identity with her surroundings and surrender herself wholly to the song, whose interpretation cries out the longing of the soul for union with God. In the *varnam*, apart from ‘*sollukattus*’, the *jatis* are also created for the *svaras* (musical passages) of the *sahityam* (text of song). It is the greatest of all dance compositions, the superb culmination of the subtlety of this elevating art.

After the *varnam*, the tempo slows down, but the dancer has to evoke all her imagination and creativity in interpreting the various songs or *padams*. Here the inner emotions of the mind with its human approach to the Divine is presented with significant and creative movement. Every dancer searches for and interprets her own perception of situations and the audience is the ‘*rasika*’ (connoisseur), who experiences the intensity of her individual concept. The fortunate few can taste the *rasa* of the dance which is akin to yogic experience.

The ‘*tillana*’, which is a gay rhythmic dance, brings out the full beauty of an abstract dance creation. Many of the poses are those of the sculptures on temple walls and the rhythmic structure is intricate. All the dance ‘*Korvais*’ are shown and the endings become faster and faster in brilliant combinations.

The promise of the *Alarippu* is fulfilled in the ‘*tillana*’.

The recital ends with a *sloka*, in praise of the deity. A *Bharata Nāṭyam* recital leads the dancer and the audience into a realm of deep mysticism, when the devotee searches for the highest truth, in the dynamic movement that is dance.



## Kathakali and Other Forms

In Kerala, more than anywhere else, the historical evolution of the dance linked to drama from earliest primitive ritual to majestic symbolism, is clearly perceived. The land of the hills, *Malayalam* also known as 'Kerala', still remains amazingly inviolate in spite of many religious sects having sought refuge in this region. Amidst the lush beauty of dazzling green paddy fields, the mysterious landscape of dark forests, with sea and river waters lashing into the lands, the Malayalee lives close to nature, expecting and accepting the good and evil forces of life. Acts of propitiation, ceremonies to appease tribal Gods, and the spirits of ancestors he has forgotten or neglected, pujas to prevent illness and unhappiness, expressions of man's fear and superstition became through the centuries traditional forms of great artistic beauty.

On the plains dwelt the Nayadis and Pariahs, the Malayas and Vettuvārs, all aboriginals with their own attitudes and mysterious ceremonies. In the fields the Cheruman, the Kanakkan found harmonious articulation in song and dance.

One of the earliest dances to the Goddess Bhagawati (Kālī), was the *Pana* or *Kālī Nāṭakam*, relating the stories of Kālī. *Muttīyetu* is perhaps the most dramatic of the Kālī worship dances. A replica of the Goddess, in her most terrifying form, is first worshipped in front of the temple and then taken in procession. The drama begins with the episode of Narada relating to Shiva the havoc that is being caused by the Rakshasa, Daruka, on earth. A tremendous fight between Kālī and Daruka ensues, till Kālī triumphantly kills the demon and places his crown upon her own head. It is interesting to note that Daruka, as he is dying realises that Kālī is Shiva's daughter and is overjoyed to die at her hands, for he is a worshipper of Shiva himself.

In ancient days, the forest-dwellers carved figures out of wood, stone and metal, and worshipped them in order to drive out all evil from their lives. Powerful among the evil spirits was Kuttichathan, and he was greatly feared. The *Therayattam* danced to appease and propitiate the deities of the household and *kshudra devatas* (evil spirits) is another dance where the

**Kathakali**



**'Nala Damayanti'—Mrinalini Sarabhai**







**Kathakali make-up**

Goddess Bhagawati appears, adorned with a towering crown. The dancers in colourful costumes, their faces painted, wearing elaborate head-gear, soon become unconscious of their environment and shudder and shake in a trance. To the frenzied sound of the drums, they move in rhythm and grace, though many of them have had no previous training at all.

The Nayars who came later to Kerala, installed temples for the popular deities, Kālī and later Ayyappan and Vettekaran. Ayyappan is now identified as Sastha or Hariharaputra, the off-spring of Vishnu and Shiva, Vettekaran is Shiva. Himself in the guise of a Kirata or forest-dweller. The *Ayyappan Pattu*, is of special importance both theatrically and historically, and the story is interesting.

Ayyappan, who was born as the son of a Rajah of Pandalam, was, as a youth, so dear to his father that his step-mother became jealous of him. She employed a ruse to get rid of the boy, not knowing his divine origin and powers. The Rani feigned illness and the palace physician who was in her confidence, prescribed tiger's milk as the only remedy. They knew that Ayyappan, who was fearless and impetuous, would offer to obtain it. And so he did. Ayyappan returned from the deep forest, riding on a huge ferocious-looking tigress and followed by a whole litter of cubs. The citizens were amazed and his step-mother was repentant. Ayyappan, after revealing his divinity, disappeared, telling the people where and how he was to be worshipped. While on his way back from the forest, he met Vavar, a Muslim and there was a fight between them to the accompaniment of music. Strangely enough, Vavar and Ayyappan became friends, which may have signified the beginning of the Hindu-Muslim unity in Kerala.

Because of the vast and dense forests and the thick vegetation, Kerala abounds in snakes including the dreaded cobra. In the *Puranas* there is frequent mention of the divine serpents, Ananta, Vāsuki and others. Owing to their association with Vishnu and Shiva, snakes are generally respected. In Kerala, it is particularly so. Many of the houses of the well-to-do have a shrine called "Pambin-Kavu" dedicated to the snakes. It is believed that any neglect of the shrine leads to great calamities. As an offering, the dance known as *Pambu Tullal* is performed.



Scene from Bali Vijayam—Bali & Ravana.



Hanuman—Chathunni Panicker.



'Minuqu'—Women's costume and make-up.

On this occasion, the ceremony is conducted by a religious priest, called Kalathi Kanmath. A pandal decorated with green coconut palms is erected, beneath which the musicians draw in coloured chalk, two serpents intertwined in colourful patterns of black, white, yellow and green. Two banana leaves are placed near the serpent's tail and upon them are seated a young girl and an elderly matron of the family. The singing begins and slowly the women go into a trance, swaying and whirling, shaking the areca flowers held in their hands.

Circling around and around their bodies in a frenzy, they shuffle forward, wiping out the chalked patterns of the serpents with their loosened hair. A huge vessel filled with turmeric, lime and water, red in colour, is placed facing the North. The girls dip their heads into this in their trance, splashing the water all over themselves. They then dance to the rhythmic beats of the accompanying folk *veena* and drum, and pull down the decorations hanging from the pandal. Sometimes the people of the house ask if the puja is satisfactory and the girls who are now 'possessed' reply. If the puja is satisfactory, the girls leap up and run into a sacred shrine, which may be far away and place the flowers there. Only then, is the Snake God appeased. Sometimes, the puja has to be continued for a whole week. Many indeed are the trance dances where the 'possessed' persons utter strange cries and hit themselves with swords as they dance with frenzy.

It was the Nambudiris, who brought the Gods, Krishna, Shiva, Parvati and Rama to Kerala. But so powerful were the deities of the Nayars, and the Nayars themselves as a community, that the Gods intermingled and were absorbed into a vast panorama of Aryan, Dravidian and aboriginal worship, thus making Kerala a land athrob with myth and reality, where deities are revered and worshipped in the fullness of truth and evil; where man's destiny and the highest reaches of his soul are brought into immediate awareness through dance and drama.

#### *Chakkiyar Koothu:*

The first of the sophisticated, stylised and scholastic dance dramas of Kerala, was the performance of a particular community called 'Chakkiyars', who recited the ancient Puranic stories in the temples. These men were eminent scholars and in their discourses, while quoting from the Sanskrit texts, explained in Malayalam to the people, the meaning of the sacred *ślokas* in a particularly witty manner. While *Koothu* is a solo performance, the *Kudiyattam*, is a dance-drama closest today to the ancient traditions of the Sanskrit stage. Usually the plays chosen are those of Bhasa, but there are also the dramas of the Pallava King, Mahendra Vikrama and of Kulasekhara Varman. Though the *Aharya Abhinaya* is of the same pattern as the *Kathakali*, it is more simple in style, the most marked difference being that the actors of *Kudiyattam* speak, sing and dance as in the *Bhagavata Mela Natakam* of Andhra. One of the important characters of *Kudiyattam* is the Vidushaka, who recites in Prakrit and Sanskrit and then explains the story in Malayalam. Huge drums called 'mizhavus' are used as accompaniment along with cymbals (*Kuzhittala*) and verses are recited in varied *rāgas*, each *rāga* chosen for its sentiment. The *idakka* is also utilised along with the *Kombu* and *Kuzhal*. As in *Kathakali*, the conch is used as an instrument whenever necessary.

Usually only selected portions of the plays are performed. After the period of training the students give their primary recital. Selections from the *Balacharitam* are chosen for their first performance on the stage. An interesting fact in *Kudiyattam* is that women, not only sang but also took part in the plays. They were called 'Nangyars' and belonged to the Nambiar community. The Nangyars were experts in music, acting and singing. Many of the dance movements, as in the *Nāṭya Shāstra*, have special names, but the texts for the mudras are the same *Hastalakshana Deepika*, as is used in *Kathakali*.

After *Kudiyattam*, the intoxicating lyricism of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* swept Malabar. This devotional poem with its deepest roots in 'Śrīngara Bhakti' originated in Bengal and became a favourite piece in Kerala, a dance of Krishna, Radha and her Sakhi, known as 'Ashtapadiyattam'.

It was about A.D. 1660 that the Zamorin of Kozhikode, Manadevan Raja, wrote eight plays on the life of Krishna, to be performed in his own temples, usually at Guruvāyur.

The dancer's make-up is similar to *Kathakali*, though the *chutti* is smaller and used also by women characters. Beautiful and awe-inspiring masks are employed frequently. One of the loveliest items is the dance of Krishna with the Gopikas and here the transition of the folk dance into the classical form can be clearly visualised. Apparently, this dance is akin to the various *Kalis* of Kerala, the *Kolkali*, like the *Rās* of Gujarat, the *Kakkottikali*, danced by women during the *Onam* festival and the *Thiruvadira-kali*, the maiden's worship to *Manmatha*, God of Love.

### *Ottam Thullal*

Mention here should be made of *Ottam Thullal*, which is a popular solo dance form in Kerala, borrowing freely from *Kathakali* and using it for both, old and new ideas. A *Thullal* dancer, accompanied by two musicians, sings and dances to the audience. Beginning in the traditional way with *Kathakali* steps and gestures, he recites and acts out entire stories from ancient epics, usually written by the famous poet and satirist, Kunjan Nambiar, and often inserts topical subjects to enliven the recital.

There is, as we have seen, in Kerala an essential continuity of the dance pattern, beginning as ritualistic and slowly developing into an art form. Yet, throughout its quest for essential style, the dance remained a religious manifestation, opening up vistas in human thought and meaning. The entire search was, and is, for the discovery of the meaningful in human existence and the identification of man and God. Never has man in the Eastern world, especially in India, been completely alienated from the world of the *Puranas*. Knowledge can be perpetuated in many ways and as Polanyi says, "The shaping of knowledge is achieved by pouring ourselves into new forms of existence." The dance in India, from the earliest times, was a vehicle through which man, at first fearful of God, soon became the instrument of God, endowed with divine power, though still groping the way towards truth.

In Kerala the stage was set for a dance-drama of more sublime intensity, less primitive, and yet stimulating the mind and the senses.

There was a certain exclusiveness about *Krishnattam*, for there was only one company and that belonged to the Zamorin. The performances were



**Krishnattam Kali.**

held in the palaces of the Zamorin or in the Guruvāyur temple. And owing to the rivalry and quarrels which then existed amongst the Kerala rulers, the *Krishnattam* players seldom went outside the territory of the Zamorin. It was time for the art to become an image for every man to enjoy aesthetically and for the dance to go back to the people from whom it originally came—an art in a new perception, more beautiful, clothed in more stylised expressiveness. The Raja of Kottarakara wrote the story of Rama in a language that mingled Sanskrit and Malayalam and what was in the beginning called *Ramanattam*, became *Kathakali* as more and more stories were introduced.

Training for the young boys began in the 'Kalari' or gymnasium. Originally, 'Kalaris' were used for training boys to be soldiers. But even this military training took the form of dance. On festive days, young men as in ancient Greece, showed their prowess to admiring audiences. There were *Shanghakali*, *Shastrakali*, and even long narrative poems were enacted with a great deal of humorous episodes interspersed within the frame of the stories.

Human compulsiveness is to create myth out of reality, to make each event a fantasy, each episode a reflection of the tension between good and evil, and a reaffirmation that truth will always be victorious. *Kathakali* as an art is a forceful custodian of Hindu thought, a protection of basic values perhaps reduced to the simplest terms, but nevertheless powerful in approach and appeal. For the audience to have an immediate awareness of a situation, as the enlightened of old appealed to Brahma, the Supreme One, 'give us an entertainment that will be understood by all,' *Kathakali* is one of the most imaginative of the communicative arts. Take, for instance, the simplest episode of Sudhama, the Brahmin classmate and friend of Lord Krishna. Sudhama's wife, poor and miserable, begs her husband to go to his friend for help, not for her sake, but for the children. Sudhama goes unwillingly. What can he take to the Lord when he calls upon Him? His most precious possession is a handful of beaten rice, wrapped in an old rag.

His mind is filled with misgivings. He does not want to ask the Lord for material possessions. Yet he has no choice. Krishna receives him

with all the ceremony that would befit a king Sudhama is overwhelmed and forgets his request till Krishna asks him what present he has brought The Lord takes the gift with tenderness and exclaims at the tastefulness of the rice, and Sudhama rises to go, forgetful of his own need But when he returns, he sees no hut but a wonderous abode, his wife bedecked, his children transformed! But Sudhama's vision is not changed Indeed he has been further blessed by a vision of the Supreme One He is not happy with his new home and continues his search for the Lord, the eternal journey of the soul

Towards dusk as the sun is setting, the *Kathakali* drums announce the performance People gather from everywhere and sit on the ground in front of the pandal, the 'Ranga Bhoomi' Lit only by a huge brass lamp, its thick wicks burning furiously, the dance drama begins The 'Thira Sheela' is held up and the characters emerge from behind, some in dramatic and fearful tempo shaking the curtain with tremulous hands and some gently as though looking upon the world for the first time and smiling, half-sadly, half-mockingly, upon what they see

The characters are made up according to their personal characteristics There is *Paccha* (green), *Kathi* (knife), *Tadi* (beard), *Kari* (black) and *Minukku* (shining)

*Paccha* is for divine or sattvik personalities with a serene and calm temperament like Krishna and Arjuna The *Kathi* is used for Rajasik characters, who are kingly but not noble, as for example, Ravana, the King of Lanka The *Tadi* can be both good and evil For instance, the white *Tadi* is the make-up of Hanuman and the *Karuppa Tadi* is used for a forester or *Kirata*, as in the story of Nala, and *Kirata-Arjuna*, where Lord



**Krishnattam make-up.**

Shiva disguises Himself as a hunter The *Chokanna Tadi* is a terrifying make-up used for demons like *Dusshāsana*

The natural make-up or *Minukku* is for women and for lesser characters in the dance-drama. Some special characters like the half-lion-half-man Narasimha in the story of child Prahlada are masterpieces in themselves. Bhima when aroused, becomes Rudra-Bhima, when he destroys Dushshāsana, his enemy. For that episode, the make-up changes and becomes more animal-like, for he is like a hungry lion seeking his prey.

The various colours denote their essential qualities and predominant characteristics, so that they are easily understood by rural audiences. The enormous crowns exquisitely embedded with coloured stones, the billowing skirts, the reddened eyes, the stylised gestures and movements, all conjure up in the spectators' minds a world of fantasy. It is the actors and musicians who, with their art, have to create the atmosphere of a new dimension. There is no special stage-craft to help them, for even the few props are extremely crude. Yet nothing disturbs. The conviction is there, for these are dedicated dancers and players with more than ten years of discipline, hardship and learning behind them. It matters little to them if the audience participates with loud comments or if a man walks across the stage to pour more oil into the lamp, or a seat is missing from where it ought to be. Their world is the only reality, for from the moment of prayer before they don their 'Kiridams' in the thatched green room, they are no longer human. They have become the part they portray.

Here is the old tradition of the trance-dancers; here is the absolute demand of the subjugation of body into spirit; here is the realisation of the cosmic transformation of human into divine. Wholly possessed and exalted by the roles they play, these dancers re-enact religious episodes in a dimension that discloses to man his true identity and teaches him unknowingly the invincible realities of his tradition and heritage in a language that can easily be comprehended. The gestures of the hands, the movements of the body, the powerful rhythmic variations of the feet, the subtle expression of eye, eye-brow and mouth, make each word revealing, each symbol endowed with meaningful communication. In *Kathakali*, where the whole of the structure that is Kerala is portrayed, where art has still kept in touch with the profundity of human existence, where continuity of search and purpose is evident, where primitive myth has become artistic expression, the world of the Dravidian and Aryan unites in imperishable vision.

#### **Krishnattam Kali.**



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# Manipuri

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Originally, the dance of Manipur, was the dance of Shiva and Parvati. The God and Goddess, legends tell us, sought for a beautiful site to perform their 'ras' and found it in the green valley, that is Manipur. This dance came to be known as the 'Lai Haroba' and to this day is performed by a certain sect of people, the Meithies. There are many other dances amongst the Meithies, who are called the 'Maibas' and 'Maibeas' (priests and priestesses), all dedicated to Shiva and Parvati, and one of the most exquisite is 'Khamba Thoibi,' the love story of Khamba and Thoibi, related in the epic story 'Moirang Purba'. It tells of the poor boy, Khamba, who fell in love with the Moirang princess, called 'Thoibi'. She returned his love, but it was not destined that they were ever to be happy together. They married after much suffering, and one night, Khamba in order to test Thoibi's love for him, pierced his lance through the thin bamboo screen that lay between his bride's room and his. Thoibi took hold of it and flung it back, and it wounded Khamba fatally. Thoibi rushed to him too late and, snatching the lance, killed herself. The tragedy of the young lovers, Thoibi and Khamba, believed to be the incarnations of Shiva and Parvati, took place during the reign of Raja Loyamba, which was about A D 1074.

The 'Lai Haroba' or 'the festival of the Gods' is enacted in the form of a dance-drama, during the months of April and May. When the dance festivals in the temples are held, men and women dance together, while a chorus recite and sing the narrative to the accompaniment of horns (*singa*), *mridanga*, *nagara* and *dholak*, stringed instrument (*pena*), and *esaa*, and various cymbals of different sizes.

Another ancient dance, which gives insight into the martial nature of the people is 'Astra-Vidya' or war dances with sword and spear, danced during the Durga Puja Festival. This dance existed in Manipur from the earliest days, as is evident from an inscription dated A D 154, about a patron of the arts, Raja Khowoi Thampak. Records also tell us that in A D 707, a group of dancers and musicians from Burma, Assam and Manipur, went as a cultural delegation to China.

It was around A D 1714 that a wave of religious fervour swept Manipur, through the influence of a great Vaishnava saint, Goswami Santidas Adhikari. It was Raja Pamheiba who took up the new faith and it had a lasting impact upon the dance.

From this upheaval grew the 'Ras' dances that are seen today, the main forms being 'Maharas,' 'Kunjaras,' 'Vasantaras' and 'Nityaras', all depicting the life of Sri Krishna as so vividly described in the *Srimad Bhagavata*.

The lyrical quality, the supple and graceful elements of this form, and the deep devotional lyrics, make the *Manipuri* dance an expression of the inner longing of the devotee for union with God. It was no wonder that the rulers helped its progress and after Bhagya Chandra, came Gambhir Singh and later, Chandra Kirti Singh, each adding new items to the dance. In this century Rabindranath Tagore introduced this technique in Santiniketan and in many of his creative dance-dramas, the *Manipuri* tradition was used.

Even today, as in all the classical traditions, the *Manipuri* dancers dance in the ecstasy of the Love of God.





Nandita in Tagore's Dance Drama  
'Chitrangada'



Manipuri



Suryamukhi in Geeta Govinda

Another aspect of the *Manipuri* dance is the *Sankirtan*, which involves the drum and the cymbals. The *Kartal Cholom* is a beautiful dance, where each dancer strikes the cymbals and in accordance with the rhythmic *bols* or sounds of the drum, move in exciting rhythm, leaps with agile masculine movements, very different from the feminine, which is all towards ground and seemingly limited.

The *Pung Cholom* is the dance with the drum. Playing the *mridangam*, the dancer executes amazing and energetic movements in unique combination of dance and movement.

The dances of Manipur combine in an unusual way the *Tandava* and *Lasya* styles and it is perhaps the only dance form that is distinguished for its emphasis on *Angika Abhinaya*, the expression of the sentiments through the movements of the body.

From A D 1764 to 1789 the great ruler, Bhagya Chandra, gave not only encouragement and patronage to the dance, but wrote the standard treatise, *The Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilasa*, where he states that the dance is not merely for pleasure, but for the love of the Lord. Deeply devout, the king came under the influence of the Chaitanya devotees and Bengali became the language of Manipur. Bhagya Chandra himself had visions of Lord Krishna and through these mystic experiences, he created new techniques and codified the steps of the 'Ras'. The *Kumm* or costume was also his own contribution and in a deeply moving performance in 1769, his daughter, Lairoibi, danced as Radha in the specially constructed 'Ras Mandal' attached to the temple which became a feature of every Vaishnava temple.

The 'Ras' festivals begin with *Kirtanas* and recitations from Jayadeva's *Geeta Govinda* and devotional works like *Kalpataru* and *Govinda Leela Amrita*. The *Sutradhara* then introduces, as in Sanskrit drama, the main participants, and then the dances begin with *Bhang Pareng* and continue in a series of dances of invocation to the Blue God. The dance of Manipur has a lyrical delicacy which symbolises the devout longing of the human soul for God in every movement.

# Kathak

The *Kathakars* of Northern India, similar to the *Bhagavatars* of the South, were narrators of the epics. The poet, Valmiki, in the *Ramayana*, teaches his young students Lava and Kusa, to recite the story of Rama which they later enacted before their father in the Royal Palace. *Kathakars* used music, dance and recitation as they told their stories and this form is still prevalent in many parts of India.

When the Mughal rulers came to India, Vaishnavism was at its height of popularity and there were many communities of *Kathakars* who gave performances of episodes in the life of Krishna, who is called 'Natvara' and dances with his beloved Radha.

The musical compositions or *Kirtanas* inspired the dancers or *Nirtakars*, and the dance technique was the *Kathak*. Historical evidence tells us that the technique was well developed for, in the *Kirtanas*, there are references to the form and movements which closely follow the ancient Sanskrit texts on dance and music.

The main schools or *gharanas* of *Kathak* were the Lucknow (Janki Prasad Gharana), and the Jaipur, but now the Benaras and Rajasthan (Shyamal Das Gharana, as different from the Jaipur school), are also equally well-known.

The Lucknow school dates back to the early 19th century and is celebrated for its lyrical and poetical quality, laid down by Thakur Prasad, the court dancer of Wajid Ali Shah. His sons, Binda Din and Kalka Prasad, continued their scholar-father's great work and their compositions were numerous. The Nawab patronised their art and took a personal interest in the work, as he himself was a dancer, musician and a poet, and is believed to have introduced the exquisite *thumri*. Later on, the *dadra* and *ghazal* were incorporated. It was Wajid Ali Shah who inspired the celebrated poets to compose as, for instance, Thakur Prasad and Binda Din, etc.

## Kathak—Damayanti Joshi



In the temples of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, the dance-dramas woven around the life of Krishna, were an inspiring force.

Later, the sons of Kalka Prasad, Acchan Maharaj, Lachu Maharaj and Shāmbhu Maharaj, as they were affectionately named, continued the tradition and Acchan Maharaj's son, Birju Maharaj, has inherited this particular style with its emphasis on the art of expression, or *bhāva*. Their devotion to Krishna, who was the first dancer became the basis of the pattern of the dance. For instance, the *Kavita*:

Natwar nachat sangeeta geeta  
Vividha bhanti gati nayi nayi  
To para paga nu nupur baje  
Tho diga diga trem trem thai.

"Krishna dances to the accompaniment of music and song, in varied steps and new forms. As He dances, His anklets resound 'to the beat of the rhythmic syllables.' These syllables form the rhythmic patterns of the *Kathak* style."

Every episode in the life of Sri Krishna, in His aspect of *Sringara* as the Divine Lover of Radha and of the Gopikas, is enacted.

In the *Kaliya-Daman*, a series of *bols*, the sounds of which are compared to the sound of Krishna's dance when he vanquished the serpent *Kaliya* and danced upon his hood, form the *Tandava* aspect of this style.

Maharaj Binda Din tells us of the emotion of *Kathak* in a beautifully worded *pada*:

"Fanned by the balmy breeze of Brindavan  
Krishna dances with the Gopis showing  
the various gatis  
In His sport with the Gopis  
He reveals the 'gat' which changes with 'bhav'  
His feet maintain the rhythm in unison  
with expression  
He whirls in beautiful *chakkars* while  
His graceful bends are offset  
By scintillating footwork  
O Krishna, The Divine Dancer  
My only prayer is that I convey  
your image in dance  
Till I breathe my last.

(Trans. Maya Rao)

The Indian dance, deeply embedded in religious ritual, always had the sanction of the devotees of *bhakti*, who played an important role in inspiring and encouraging each art form.

In Jaipur, a worshipper of Shiva, named Bhanuji, learnt the dance of Shiva from a holy man. He taught the dance to his sons, Laluji and Kanhuji, and it was Kanhuji's grandson, Gindhaji, who settled at Jaipur and the *Jaipur Gharana* was born. By this time, the style had incorporated the gentle *Lasya* form of Brindavan, and Gindhaji combined in the *Kathak*, the *Tandava* of Shiva and the *Lasya* of Krishna. From this *Gharana*, many famous exponents have contributed and enlivened the great tradition.

The 'Nritta' or pure dance aspect of *Kathak*, dominates a performance and the rhythmic intricacies or 'bols' are exciting to watch as in the *toda*

and *tukada* and *param*. The *kavitas* and *parans* are a distinguishing feature, as their descriptive lyrics are composed in rhythm.

The *Kathak* dancer begins his performance with salutations to Ganesha, for it is stated in the *Sangeet Sara*, 'Commencing the dance, recite verses to Ganesha, and dance'. It is interesting to compare Northern Indian and Southern Indian verses to Ganapati.

The *Kathak* Dancer's prayer is

"Gan Gan Ganapati gaja mukha mangala gita  
Gita gita gida thun thum tat tat thei—  
Jaya jaga vandana vakra tunda da ni dha ta—  
Vighana haran, sukhakara, nadha gena dhage  
Dimi kita dhimi kita thudan—ga thudan—  
Ga dadhi gana thei thudan—ga thudan ga  
dadhi gana thei thudan—ga thudan—ga dadhi gana thei "  
and the dancer from the *Bhagavata Mela Natakam*, sings  
"Tandava nrityakari Gajanana  
Dhumikita dhumikita tala mridanga  
Brahma taladhari Gajanana  
Tejasakoti suraganadhari vande sivagauni Gajanana "

(In *Kuchipudi*, the artist reproduces on a cloth screen stretched across the floor, the image of Lord Ganesha, by dexterous footwork.)

The *Amad* is the pure dance to the sound of the rhythmic syllables and is followed by the *thata*, depicting the various poses, especially the basic poses of the *Kathak* dancer, with one hand held high, the other upon the waist, the eyes darting from side to side, with the eyebrows lifted alternately, and the graceful gliding movements of the neck.

Sound syllables and the drums play an important and decisive role in this art form. The *Paramelu* is a blending of sound and percussion, and the instruments in this piece are used with forceful effect. The *pakhawaj*, one of the drums of *Kathak*, is particularly used for the *paran* and the dancer and drummer mingle in a harmonious duet with vigour and rhythmic alternation. This is seen to advantage in the *parhant* and *tattikara*, which shows the dancer's grasp of rhythmic variations. A special feature is the *natvari* when the dancer, after very rapid movements, is able to make the anklets quiver musically, as delicately as the dancing leaves in a gentle breeze.

One of the most popular items, the *Kramalaya*, gives us the various rhythmic compositions, the intricate variations on known patterns and the mature artiste often creates new designs of percussion. When the poems *Kavita* are introduced, the lyrical aspect of *Kathak* is seen and the *Sangeeta* emphasises the musical recitation of the *bols*, a feature so prominent in *Kuchipudi*. '*Gat-bhāv*' is *bhāva* in its most eloquent form, expressed with musical accompaniment but without words. Small incidents are exquisitely described such as a *nayika* drawing her veil across her face, or flirting with Krishna, who teases her (*Horī Gat*).

In ancient drama, the actors sang, danced and spoke, and in the *parhant*, the dancer primarily recites the syllables of the rhythmic passages and then dances them.

Many facets of Hindustani music have been harmoniously blended with *Kathak*. Indeed it may be that they grew together, for most of the famous patrons and exponents were *pakhawaj* and *tabla* players.



Kumari Kum Kum Das in 'Darpana Bhangi' (Odissi)

## Odissi

The Cholas were a magnificent dynasty, whose contribution to the cultural history of India was unparalleled. From the 4th century B C, when Katyayana, the grammarian, mentions the Cholas, they are prominent till the 13th century. Mention is made of them by Kautilya in his *Artha Shastra*, by Ptolemy, and we find their name in the inscriptions of the Emperor Asoka.

In the 3rd century, the celebrated *Sangam Age*, they had their centres at Urayur and Kaveripumpattinam. From A D 846 till 1279, they held sway in Tanjore, their rule ending with the death of Rajendra III. There is evidence of *devadasis* being attached to the temples in the time of the Cholas, a system which continued through the ages. Judging from the various treatises, the dance was, already, a systematised and highly technical form and was called 'Natya' which involved drama, dance and music. The dancing girls attached to the Tanjore temple were four hundred in number and inscriptions from the temples tell us of their various activities. An inscription from Tiruvengaivasal temple mentions the gift of land to a dancer for her performance in the *Vaikasi Tiruvadirai* Festival. They were women of culture and proficient in various arts and many of the temples of India were proud of their *devadasis*, and their accomplishments.

In the Brahmeswar temple at Bhuvaneshwar, is an inscription dating back to the 8th century, which tells us of girls who performed ritual dances. These were called *maharis*.

The Jagannath temple was the focal point of all cultural activity and in the 12th century, Chodaganga Deva founded the Ganga dynasty, patronising the arts, a tradition that continued with later monarchs such as the

great Kapilendradeva of the 15th century, whose dancers were from Telangana and Orissa

That the Rani herself danced in the 16th century, is mentioned for she was known as 'gopi sakhi' and later, as in Manipur, the King Prataparudradeva encouraged the dancers to enact the love songs of Krishna, for he himself was a devotee of the saint Chaitanya. It was he who made the decision that only the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva should be recited in the temple of Jagannath.

While the *maharis* in the temple of Jagannath are dedicated to Krishna, there are *maharis* in Bhuvanewar who worship Shiva and Shakti, in the temples of Jhankad and Kakatpur.

In 1592, the Mughals came as conquerors and the dancers who until then served only the deities, were taken to dance in the courts. But the rites in the temples still continued and the *maharis* to this day dance twice in the sacred hall of the temple and also at the special festivals. Boys at this time were trained in the art and danced, dressed as girls. They were called 'gotipuras'.

The superb sculptures on the temple walls tell us of the quality of this style, which combines both *Tandava* and *Lasya* and follows closely the rules of the *Natya Shastra* of Bharata. In Bhuvanewar, at Konarak and in other temples dance poses have been immortalised in stone.

The *Odissi* dance begins with a song to the earth 'Bhumi Pranam' and then a devotional poem to Ganapati, the remover of all hindrances to the performing arts.

Then the dance to Shiva, 'the Batu Nritya', describes in song the worship to the God with ritualistic gestures and movements.

The 'Ishta Deva Bandana' expresses devotion to a particular God, and the 'Swara Pallavi Nritya' which follows, brings out all the rhythmic and musical qualities of this form.

*Abhinaya* is exquisitely portrayed in the Radha-Krishna theme usually from the lyrics of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*.

The last dance in a performance like the *tillana* of *Bharata Natyam* emphasises the pure dance or 'nritya' aspect called the 'tari jham' or 'natangi'.

The similarity of the Orissa dance form with *Kuchipudi* is striking. Historical evidence and inscriptions in Telugu tell us that the Kalinga emperors who were ardent Vaishnavites restored the Jagannath temple of Puri. The Kalinga king, Viranarasimha III, was responsible for building the Konarak temple of Orissa in 1262. At this time, dancers from Orissa were brought to Srikakulam and there was much intermingling of the cultures, especially during the regentship of Narahari Tirtha who was a devotee of Krishna.

An interesting dance depicting the *Tandava* style of the *Odissi* Form, is the *Sabda Svarapata*, danced only by men and dedicated to Shiva. Extremely vigorous and inspired, it has its roots in perhaps one of the most ancient of forms, when men first danced.

The dancer, who represents Shiva in all his aspects, becomes one with the dancing God, and often falls into a state of trance.

Throughout India, ancient forms are suddenly perceived through the veils of kaleidoscopic movements of new patterns added imperceptibly through the centuries. The dance remains a rite to please the Gods, and the Gods themselves still lead the way.

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# Bhagavata Mela Natakam of Andhra (*Kuchipudi*)

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## and Tamilnadu

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In 1678, an incident worthy of record by all artistes took place. The Nawab Abdul Hasan Tanhisha was visiting Masulipatam. With him was the Commander of the Forces, a man called Pingali Madanna. On the way, he encamped for the night at Kuchipudi, a village that lies a few miles away from the Krishna river in Andhra. That evening, the young boys of the village were dancing the story of Satyabhama in the dance-drama "Bhama Kalapam" in the temple. Hearing the devotional songs and deeply moved by the play, the Nawab donated the village to the artistes. Since then, families of *Bhagavata*s have lived in Kuchipudi, and the village has given its name to the art. What was the story of Satyabhama, that so touched the heart of a Moslem Nawab and how was it enacted?

Very little is known about the author of "Bhama Kalapam"—Siddhendra Yogi—but many are the legends about him and he is said to have lived between A D 1350 and 1450. He left for posterity one of the loveliest of Kuchipudi dance-dramas. The story is from the *Bhagavatam*, and is generally known as "Parijatapaharanam". The original story relates how Sri Krishna gave this beautiful flower to Rukmini. Narada conveys this to Satyabhama in order to arouse her jealousy, and so she compels the Lord to bring the whole tree to her from Indra's heaven. Thus this beautiful plant came down to earth, to be planted in Satyabhama's garden to appease her wrath.

The dance drama begins with the *Sutradhara*, the introducer of the play. He tells the audience that to enact the erotic story of Krishna, Satyabhama is entering the stage.

A curtain is held up by two people. Satyabhama from behind the curtain, throws a long plait (*pedda jada*) across it. The *jada* is decorated by small figures depicting the ten incarnations of Vishnu, twenty-seven stars and at the top of the *jada* there are ornate snakes and at the end, the *matsya avatara*, the fish form of Vishnu.

The *Sutradhara* enquires the meaning of this huge plait. Hidden behind the curtain, she replies: "This is presented by Sri Krishna, at our marriage as a symbol of his deeds. It has been blessed by His lotus-like hands, and has rested on His chest. I am Satyabhama, in search of my Lord Krishna."

Satyabhama then comes out from behind the curtain. The *Pravesadaru* or entrance with dance and song of each player according to the rule, is a peculiar and attractive feature. Satyabhama, the heroine, describes herself as she enters. Thus the play begins and lasts throughout the night.

Eight miles away from Kuchipudi, lies the village of Srikakulam. It was the seat of the Satavahana Empire and later, a centre of Buddhism. Andhra Vishnu-Vardhana (3rd century) was the ruler and built the temple of Vishnu where *devadasis* participated in the religious ceremonies. He gave the *devadasis* a village called 'Sanepadu' or the village of the dancing girls. Later, the Gajapati rulers of Warangal patronised the arts and one of the commanding chiefs, Jayappa, belonging to the kingdom of Kakati Ganapatideva, composed *Nritta Ratnavali*, a treatise on dance. At Warangal, the Ramappa temple was constructed under his guidance, with poses as described in his treatise. *Balipittas*, made of black stone slabs, were

a feature of the temple constructed especially for the ritual dance in front of the shrine Engraved on the sides and on the pillars were the dances as described in detail in the *Nritta Ratnavali*

When the Kakatiya Empire fell, the ruler of Kalinga or Orissa, Bhanu Deva I (A D 1263-1277) ruled Divi Taluka and Kuchipudi village was a part of this area, as were Srikakulam, Ghantashala, Muvva (the birth place of the composer Kshetragna), Avanigandha and Challapalli, through which flowed the Krishna river

After the death of Bhanu Deva, Narahari Teera, his minister, acted as regent for the young prince A disciple of Anand Teera, the great devotee of Sri Krishna, he brought the dancers from Orissa to teach the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva to the *devadasis* of Andhra The *Gita Govinda*, since then, has been cherished by the *Bhagavata*s of Kuchipudi and called 'Ash-tapadiattam' or 'Radha-Krishna Nrityam'

After that, many songs were composed on the eternal theme of Radha and Krishna and it was at Srikakulam that the celebrated poem *Sri Krishna Karnamrita* was written by the poet Leelasuka

The *Krishna Leela Tarangini* was a dance-drama in Sanskrit, written by Tirtha Narayanaswami (14th century) The story opens with Bhudevi (Mother Earth) praying to the Lord Vishnu for protection against evil The story is similar to the theme in the *Bhagavatam*, ending with the marriage of Krishna and Rukmini, and the death of the tyrant Kamsa

The seventh chapter in several *talas* is especially composed for dancers with musical *jatis*, a peculiarity of the *Kuchipudi* technique, depicting the *Rasa Kreedas*.

The name 'Taranga' or wave symbolises the dancer's various steps (waves) in the dance art (ocean) In the third canto of *Balagopala*, the dancer executes a typical dance, dancing upon a brass tray, with a pot of water on her head

There are twelve scenes, and each scene is introduced by the *Sutradhara* and the *Nati*, providing the links in the story

Krishna Deva Raya of Vijayanagar was perhaps one of the most attractive and outstanding personalities of Medieval India He is described as 'gallant and perfect in all things' Every morning the king exercised with 'great weights made of earthenware' and then wrestled with one of his wrestlers Then, till dawn, he went out riding and when dawn broke, he bathed and went to offer prayers in the temple, and then began his day's work His entire reign was a glorious age of the Vijayanagara Empire, when all Southern India was under the man of 'much gentleness and generosity of character, brave and statesmanlike' Of special interest to dancers is the interesting description of the dance school he had constructed The chronicle of Paes (about A D 1537) describes it thus

This hall is where the King sends his women to be taught to dance It is a long hall and not very wide, all of stone, sculpture on pillars, which are at a distance of quite an arm's length from the wall In each case, from pillar to pillar, is a crossbar, which is like a panel and from pillar to pillar are long panels, the designs of these panels show the positions at the end of dances, in such a way that on each panel, there is a dancer in the proper position at the end of the dance, this is to teach the women, so that if they forget the position in which they have to





Appearance of 'Narasimha in Prahlada Charitam' (Bhagwattmela, Melattur).

remain, they may look at one of the panels to know where the end of that dance is.

At the end of this house, on the left hand, is a painted recess, where the women cling on with their hands, in order to better stretch and loosen their bodies and legs; there they teach them to make the whole body supple in order to make their dancing more graceful. At the other end, on the right, is the place where the King places himself to watch them dancing.

Solo dancers have taken items from the Kuchipudi dance-dramas, called 'Shabdams' and present them on the stage as separate items of dance. The most popular are by Pandit Kasinath of Melatur. His 'Manduka Shabdam', 'Pralhada Pattabhishekam' and 'Rama Shabdam' are favourites. The 'Manduka Shabdam' is from the story 'Gajendra Moksham', where the frogs playing in a pond are described. The *bols* are spoken like the sound of jumping frogs. The main *rasa* in all Kuchipudi 'Shabdams' is 'Sringara.'

#### BHAGAVATA MELA NATAKAM IN TAMIL NADU

When the Empire of Vijayanagaram fell, it was the Nayaka Dynasty of Tanjore that patronised the *Bhagavatars*. Achyutappa Nayak (A.D. 1561-1641) gave land to 500 families at Merattur and Soolamangalam. Raghunatha Nayak (A.D. 1614-33) was a great scholar, patron and poet of Dravidian and Sanskrit literature. He invented a new type of *veena* called 'Raghunatha Mela' and was the author of the *Yakshagana Parijatupaharana*. In his court were great writers including two women, Ramabhadramba and Madhuravani.

Vijayaraghava Nayak (A.D. 1633-73) was the last of the Nayaka kings

and a devotee of Mannaru (Krishna), the deity at the temple of Mannargudi, near Tanjore. A patron and composer, like his father, Raghunatha Nayak, he wrote many *Yakshaganas*, *natakas* and *divipadakavyas* and translated many Sanskrit works into Telugu. In his palace, he had a special hall for dancing, where famous dancers like Chandralekha, Krishnajamma and Rangajamma performed.

He was a patron of the composer Kshetragaa, who dedicated some of his songs to him. This king, who was killed with his son in A.D. 1673 thus ending the Nayaka dynasty, was the patron of the famous astronomer Bhogula Venkatesa, and also of Pandit Venkatamukhi, who wrote one of the most important works of South Indian music, the *Chaturdam Prakashika*.

It was fortunate that the Maratha kings, who succeeded the Nayakas, continued the patronage and took deep interest in the arts. Shahji (1684-1710), the second Maratha ruler, was called 'Abhinava Bhoja' and wrote many dance-dramas of which 'Pallaki Seva Prabandham' is one of the finest.

In Raja Pratap Singh's time (1739-63) many of the *Bharata Natyam* items were composed and dedicated to him, as for example, the well-known *Husseni Suvarjati*. His son, Tulajaji, ruled for twenty-four years and composed poems in Sanskrit and Marathi. In Tulajaji's treatise 'Sangita Samayasara', he described the various basic 'adavus' that still exist in *Bharata Natyam*. It was at this time that the four Tanjore Brothers studied music from the great composer, Muthuswami Dikshitar. Thus the arts of *Bharata Natyam* and *Kuchipudi* slowly developed together, and separately, each laying stress on certain aspects of *Nritya* and *Nritta*, the expressive and the purely rhythmic.

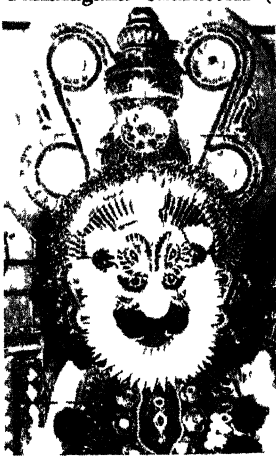
**Mallika Sarabhai as 'Radha' in Geeta Govinda**



# Yakshagana

In the South and North Kanara districts of the State of Karnataka, the dance-drama is known as *Yakshagana* or *Bayalata*. *Yakshagana* was primarily a form of ballad and the players were called 'Yakshas'. It was around the 16th century that musical plays were written by famous composers. The themes enacted were from the *Bhagavatam*, and the emphasis was on the child Krishna and His brother Balarama. The *Sutradhāra* introduces the young boys when the play commences. It was later the stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were included. Linked deeply with religious fervour, the great saint Madhavacharya influenced the theme of the stories. As in other dance-drama forms, the *Sutradhāra* or *Vidushaka*, introduces and keeps up a running commentary throughout the play, adding amusing and witty comments. The dramas, usually, have scenes of fights and the stories have an originality of their own. Interwoven through the main text are philosophical extracts and local colour.

## Yakshagana Characters (Karnataka)





Yakshagana Characters (Karnataka)

The costumes of *Yakshagana* are colourful and fantastic in their concept. As in *Kathakali*, costumes and make-up indicate the characteristics of each individual, hero or villain. Though the facial make-up is simple, the costumes are in meaningful colours. The kings wear crowns, and the other characters, turbans of a particular style, differing in size and colour with each actor.

Evil characters make up their faces in bizarre designs and are easily recognized by the shape and size of their head-dress, the colour of their clothes and the shape of their ornaments.

At sunset, the youthful students or *Kodangus* begin the dance. Then, after a prayer to Ganesa, the *Vidushaka* reverently carries the image of God to the stage, and there, with music and chanting, the God is worshipped. Then, enter the young boys—Krishna and Balarama—who dance and leave the stage to two women dancers.

As in *Kathakali* and *Kuchipudi*, characters enter behind a curtain and stand with their back to the audience. The main roles are those of the hero, the heroine, the demon and the *Vidushaka*.

All through the night the varied scenes are enacted and the sunrise brings the play to an end with the traditional *mangalam*. The *Yakshagana* style is musically of extreme interest as many of the rare ragas of South India (Carnatic music) and the rhythmic beats or *bidathige* accompanying each character as he enters the stage, known as *voddolage*, are recited musically, unlike *Bharata Nāṭyam*. This indicates the intricate relationship of dance and music in *Yakshagana*, which was originally a purely musical form, and the images of the dance were an expression of the varying emotions of the harmonious and discordant elements of the music.

# Chhau Dance

The "Chhauni Nritya," was a military dance, performed by the Oriyan fighters of Orissa or Singhbhum as it was called. Moving as in battle with spears and swords, accompanied by drums of war, the dance was popular in Mayurbhanj. Through the centuries, the war-like movements became systematised and *Asari Chhau* with its emphasis on the heroic quality of man was popular. Slowly, the stories from the epics inspired the people and in the early 19th century, the ruler, Shri Krishna Chandra Bhanj Dev, encouraged and patronised the art. Definite rules of training were laid down and the young students studied the basic movements of the body known as 'dharan', 'talka', and 'upalayas'. The dances are accompanied by the 'mahuri' and various drums, the *nagara*, *dhol*, and *mridanga*.

The dance of Nataraja, the *Savara* or hunter's dance, the magnificent 'Shiva-Parvati' (Hara-Parvati) and other dances are vigorous and performed entirely by men. The dance usually begins in slow tempo and mounts up into incredible speed and dexterity towards the end of the show.

## Chhau Dance —Purulia





**Chhau Dance — Purulia**



**Chhau Dance — Seraikella**

In Seraikella, which now lies in Bihar, the *Chhau* dancers wear masks and the princes themselves were leading dancers. Indeed it was essential for the man of the royal family to be trained in the *Chhau* technique. Because of the masks, the movements of the body are emphasised and the *angika abhinaya* is powerfully portrayed.

During the *Chaita Parva* festival, after many days of worship and ritual dedication to the God Shiva, the dancers in procession bear a sacred pot of water to the temple. It symbolises the Goddess Shakti and is called *Jatra-ghat*. From that moment, dancing and music continue in colourful pattern for four days of festivity. After the ceremony of the *Jatra-ghat* or sacred pot, which symbolises the union of Shiva and Shakti, the *Chhau* dancers begin their performances.

The first is the *Brindabani*, which involves the story of Hanuman, when he searched for Sita, in Ravana's kingdom and destroyed the garden of pleasure in Lanka.

The next evening, episodes from the life of Sri Krishna in Brindavan called the 'Garia Bhar' are enacted, and the following two nights similar ritual dances with significant ceremonies are performed.

Some of the loveliest dances are those of the moon-maiden, Chandra-bhaga, who is pursued relentlessly by the Sun-God, until she, in desperation, plunges into the sea. Legend tells that at the place of Chandrabhaga's tragic death, the Sun-God mourns forever and it is there that the superb temple of Konarak was built.

The dance technique, as in other forms, has basic movement called 'upalayas', which are a hundred and eight in number. The *gan bhedas* which are the *gatis* of the various images are rich and colourful. The *utplavanas* (jumps), the *bhramari* (circling movements) and the *padacharika* (foot-work) are especially exciting when they depict the animals, like the snarling tiger, the gentle deer and the hungry lion, each with its particular *tala* and rhythmic formation.

Interesting among the solo dances is the 'Mayura Nritya' imitating the peacock and adding to its beautiful movements the graceful stances of the dance. Haunting tunes accompanying the dance and the *shekhar* and *mahuri* evoke the deeply emotional quality of the dancer's moods. Under the masks, the dancer, through movements of the body, projects the theme in forceful imagery. The interpretation is both natural and subtle and modern themes have been added to the *Chhau* repertoire.

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## Folk Dance

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The unity and diversity of a country can be seen through its folk theatre and the *natya* in India with its exciting and harmonious blend of dance-drama and music, is a superb example. For instance, the theme of Siva and Parvati, the male and the female, *purusha* and *prakriti*, is depicted in almost every dance form. The human being, since the beginning of awareness, used dancing as a means of propitiating the gods, of mirroring the society in which men lived, and to depict sheer exuberance, sorrow and emotional relief. All dance was prayer.

The saint Tukaram sang: "Thou are identical with all means of worship. If I may give Thee ablution of water, Thou art Thyself. Thou art the scent of scents and the fragrance of flowers. If I am to sing a song, Thou art that song. If I sound the cymbals, Thou art those, for the whole world is filled by Thee."

In Gujarat, during the nine nights before Dassera, the '*Bhavar*' is enacted, before the temples of the Mother Goddess Amba. "When I enter the stage (paud)", says the *Bhavar* (actor), "the goddess of power possesses my face and the goddess of learning, my tongue."

It was a Brahmin who first created the *Bhavar*. Hailing from the *Audichya* community, his name was Asaita Thaker. When he settled in a village called Unzha, so pleased were the villagers that they promised to protect all *Bhavar* players.

Asaita created many compositions, humorous and satirical such as *Joothan Mian*, and instructive such as *Ram Dev*.

A long passage through the crowd which sits on all sides is cleared for the entrance of the players. The drums used are the *pakhawaj*, or *narghan* (tabla). The *bhungals*, which are long slender pipes, build up the

**Folk Dance (Rajasthan)**



**Dandia Ras (Rajasthan)**





### Stilt Dance of Gonds (M P)

excitement of each dramatic situation as do the lighted torches and spectacular processions of the actors

An interesting speciality of *Bhava* is the recitation of the rhythmic syllables by the actors and use of verse for some of the dialogues. As the two actors speak to each other, they dance and end their conversation with "tata-thai thai, tata-thai thai, tata-thai thai"—a dance full stop to a poetic conversation

*Jhanda Jhoolan* is another famous piece. Each play has its male actors, and the woman character, also played by a man is called *Kanchaho*. She is a dancer and singer, and wears a wide sweeping *ghagra*, a *choli* (*Kanchali*) and a veil (*odhni*) covers her face

Dancing with thick lighted wicks in her hand, she makes an impressive entrance. Saluting the Goddess Saraswati, bowing to her *guru*, waving her lights over her head and in different directions, she depicts the varied facial expressions and the foot-work of the *Bhava*. After her dance, she sings in a high-pitched voice, which is a peculiarity of this form.

Costumes and make-up are exaggerated and there is a curious intermingling of both Hindu and Muslim styles of dress. *Joothan Mian*, the boaster, is the only character who has a definite stylised make-up, with dots of red and black upon his cheeks, and a white stripe around his nose and eyebrows. Character-acting is a *Bhava* speciality and topical subjects are introduced constantly. The famous characters are *Joothan Mian*, *Jhanda Jhoolan*, *Chatki Matki*, *Adavo*, *Teja* and *Chhail Batai*.

Some interesting features are the Shiva-Parvati dance, depicting Ardhanarishwar, common to many folk forms, the lady in the palanquin (*madhi*) and *Vadi*, the magician.

The *Jatra* of Bengal, though not a dance form, uses dance and music in the telling of stories. Stories from the *Bhagavatam* predominate, after the great wave of the *bhakti* cult was introduced by Chaitanya in the 15th and 16th centuries. He danced and sang in worship of the Lord Sri Krishna and many of the literary works of later periods were based upon the incidents from the life of the Lord. It is related that Chaitanya presented the play *Rukmini Haran* and played the role of Rukmini, himself. Chaitanya also inspired the *Kirtan* dances of Bengal where devotees move freely to the beating of the drum and religious songs.





**Folk Dance (Tripura)**



**Folk Dance (Arunachal Pradesh)**

Similarly, in Maharashtra, the folk form, the '*Tamasha*' flourished especially during the reign of Bajirao II (1795-1818). The dancer of the *Tamasha* has a style of her own, saucy and eloquent. She is known as the 'Navchi' and is one of the most popular of entertainers.

Folk forms have a marvellous unity, conditioned as they are by certain elements. The religious festivals are celebrated by dance, as are the festivals of nature such as harvest dances, and the dances of the tribes describing the rhythm of their lives. In Kulu, the valley of the Gods, at Dassera time, Lord Raghunathji is worshipped and the dance called the *Natti* from the Sanskrit word *natya*, is performed, which is a colourful spectacle. Usually the group of dancers in striking costumes dance together in a circle to the music of pipes (*shehnai*) and drums (*dhol*, *negara*, *dholak*), trumpets (*karual*) and gongs (*bhana*). The *shehnai* has a peculiar tonal quality, and it is this player who is the leader of the orchestra. Songs tell us of the life of the people and there is always a round dance performed by the men with a fine display of technique, known as the 'Kharait'. The *Nattis* are a series of dances of thirteen variations performed by both men and women. It is interesting that the goddess of Kulu is the Rākshasi Hidamba, the Devi of Manali, and the festival cannot begin without the presence of this powerful deity. Kulu is a land filled with stories of the heroes of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramāyana*. The whole episode of *Kirita-Arjuna*, when the latter performed the penance, that was to lead him to a great battle against Shiva, and to his receiving the sacred bow, the Pasupata, took place near *Indrakila* in Kulu. At the great 'yagna' performed by Dasaratha, a Kulu priest officiated, and it is said that the last journey of the Pāndavas to the heavenly abode was through the valley of this ancient region.

Folk dances are usually a series of rhythmic group movements, the rhythm itself suggesting the movement, the tempo and the nature of each dance. Slowly out of what once must have been a disorderly pattern has grown what, today, we call dancing of the people, thus differentiating it from the technique and strict patterns of the classical schools where, through the centuries, people have formed a highly evolved composition of rhythmic

movement and harmony In classical dancing the music and dancing coincide with each other and the final choreography, though seemingly evolved with simplicity, is created out of separate fragments of ordered and highly-skilled technique

In very ancient cultures dancing was closely connected with ritual Rhythmic patterns seemed to be the simplest method for the earliest man to win the favour of the gods, for good weather, for his crops, for auspiciousness in birth, marriage and death, in hunting the wild beasts of the jungle, and in the defeat of his enemies

Traces of the earliest ritual dances can be found in the reliefs on the temple walls of ancient Egypt Historians and archaeologists tell us of the 'Dance of Lamentation', in which both men and women participated, the 'Dance of War', and the 'Dance of Fertility' To celebrate birth, dancers, disguised as the God Bes, danced around the figure of Ta-Urt, Goddess of Birth Usually when women danced, the musicians who accompanied them were also women Then there was the funeral dance, which can be found in certain parts of India even today, one for instance, being amongst the *Todas* of the Nilgiri Hills where men dance around the funeral hut, during the last rites, and the *Moharrum* dances of Mymensingh, where they move to the tune of sad dirges, waving red scarves

The *Savarās* of Orissa have an interesting legend when the daughter of God died, she expressed a wish that there should be dancing at her funeral So God Himself became a dancer imitating the dance of the Peacock and so the dance was created upon the earth



**Folk Dance (Arunachal Pradesh)**

The *rākhatala* dance of the *Lashkers* of the Lushai Hills is performed at the funeral of an outstanding personality

In India where the climatic conditions are so extremely varied, the folk-dances represent several centuries of social conditions, in all their diversity The characteristics and habits of the different people are reflected lastingly in their mode of dancing From the mild and gentle dancing of girls around a pole plaiting coloured threads in a fantastic dazzle of tints, to the wild and



Barlanga Dance (Bihar)



Naga Dance (Assam)

dramatic leaps of jungle tribes, a whole history of man is realised in plastic movement. Each new branch of form or melody suggests and recreates for us the constant process and evolution of the human body in all its heroism and struggle for supremacy in the disciplines of everyday life. In folk-dancing, man can spontaneously exhibit all the eloquence of his body, all the subdued fear that harasses him during his working hours, all the nobleness he desires to achieve, whether in simple agriculture or in the fierceness of war. That is why, perhaps, in most folk-dancing, there is an extraordinary element of confidence and joy, man consciously becoming a more stable and natural figure while he loses himself in the simple rhythmic outburst, that is characteristic of the folk-form.

The South, for instance, though the home of strict classicism, possesses a fascinating selection of folk-dances. The girls dance in groups the *Kolattam*, often beating rhythm with their hands or with small coloured sticks. In Tanjore there is the *Acchaponga* which is purely devotional. In Tiruchirappalli, the story of Shiva and Kamadeva is enacted for about 15 nights with a great deal of singing and dancing. Then there is the pot dance called the *Kodda Koota*, celebrating Sri Krishna's victory over Banasura.

Another variety of the *Kolattam* is very beautifully executed in the Telugu districts. Boys and girls, dressed as Krishna and Radha, take part, two of the best dancers taking their places in the centre. The song is a composition on *Dasāvatharam*, describing the ten avatars of Lord Vishnu. In Maharashtra also one of the most popular dance-dramas is the *Dasāvatar*, where *Sutradhāra* introduces the play which begins with an invocation to Ganesha and Saraswati. In this play the actors wear masks. In the district of Telangana during the Dassera celebrations, which last for nine days, women from all strata of society join in a group dance, singing and worshipping with flowers as they dance. This dance is called 'Bath-Kamma'.

Anyone who has travelled far into the jungles of the Bastar State in M P near Khamban will never forget the experience. In the cold season, during the *Dhanurmasam* festival, it is a strange and unworldly experience, to see in the depths of the jungle, by the light of the fire, a group of girls dancing the whole night, their arms clasped around each other.

The west coast in Malabar is one of the few places in India, where the

people enjoy both classical and folk-dancing and, because of this, the folk-dancing has a more mature and elaborate unity than the spontaneous movements of the same form in other parts of the country. The *Kaikottikal*, done by a group of women, in a circle, is especially interesting, as often, during festival days, women from different villages form teams and vie with each other both in the intricate steps and in the refrain, sung by one woman and taken up in chorus by the others. The movements are well formed and exquisite patterns are executed as the young women dance. Another dance popular with the women is the *Thiruvadarakali*.

The Nairs of Malabar were essentially a warrior race, and often danced with swords and shields, displaying the fine skill that, in the old days, was part of every young boy's training. Dancing made their feet nimble and the rhythm not only gave them dexterity in movement, but also contributed to the development of a keen mind and body, that must have prepared them well for real fighting. For dancing, even with abandon, slowly after tension is dissolved, builds up a discipline in its insistence on elaboration of simple lines, and constant repetitions, especially in group construction, till finally a unity with oneself and with others is unconsciously established. The *Velakali* is a typical example of a martial dance relating the fight between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

The *Bihu*, the popular dance of Assam, is done by men alone in a circular group (*Hichari*) and also by men and women to the accompaniment of drum, cymbal and pipe. The harvest or *Mangnai* dance reflects the work of the people, as they harvest the crop. So much of dance was linked to crops as thanksgiving in West Bengal in the *Karam* festival of Bengal where a song says —

'O brother, Goddess Lakshmi awakens,  
Goddess Bhagawati awakens  
The night of the new moon awakens  
The full moon awakens  
Oh our Mother, oh Goddess  
Oh brother, a blessing can bring  
ten cattle and five sons and  
unending wealth'

The Naga warriors of Assam, richly and rather fiercely clad, dance a vigorous warlike dance. The ornaments they wear, the long spears, the shields and their painted faces, give a realistic terror to their dances, and the incessant beating of the drum has a queer effect on the spectators.

In Gujarat, the *garba* dance is still extremely popular. Seen in its proper setting in the open, where the women worship Amba Mata, singing and swaying in their wide sweeping *ghagras* and brightly decorated *chols* and *odhnis*, it is a vigorous and swift dance. As they dance in a circle, the rich silver jewellery flashes in the sunlight, while the men, equally colourful in their frilled coats and turbans, watch enthusiastically. They sing—

"Now, open the doors of the temple O Ambika,  
*Navaratri* approaches,  
The stars in the sky, worship you  
The wind as your *shehnai* welcomes you  
All the people, anxiously await you "

Another form of the *garba* is the "Heench" where the women clap and snap their fingers, bending low as they move gracefully around. The *Rās*, a vigorous male dance, takes us back to the *Hallisaka* described in the *Bhāgavatam*. The men dressed in frilled shirts, tight white trousers and coloured waist-bands, start slowly, and then work up their steps into an exhilarating crescendo of vigour. The musicians squat in the centre and the cymbal player provides the rhythm with amazing dexterity.

Folk-dancing throughout the world has many similarities. The dummy horse dance of Tanjore has its counterpart in Poland. The *kuki* bamboo dance of Assam is similar to the *bamboo* dance of the Philippine Islands, and the *Hansengey* dance of the Nagas.

Devil dances and dances to exorcise evil spirits are common throughout all civilization. In Tamil Nadu the pot dance called *Karagam* where the mud pot is balanced on the head, is a dance familiar all over India. The accompaniment is spectacular and the orchestra or 'Nayandi Melam' consists of *nagaswaram*, *tavil*, pipes, drums and cymbals. In an agricultural society, the pot of water naturally was of significance, for it meant the sustenance of the earth.

The son of Shiva, Muruga, is worshipped extensively in the South, and the *Kāvadi* is an interesting ritual dance. The *Kāvadi* is a structure, made of wood, and decorated with peacock feathers and balanced with pots of milk, sandalwood and incense. The devotees dance with the *Kāvadi* upon their head, many with amazing dexterity. The musical accompaniment is varied and the tunes called 'Kāvadi-chindu' are litig and pleasant.

Using the *Ramāyana* as a theme, the Marathas of Karkal, in two large groups dance facing each other, dressed fully in white, except for their bright red turbans. Each individual sings, plays the drum and dances in a form of dialogue. Here too we find the *Ardhanarishwari* theme of *Purusha* and *Prakṛti*, danced to invoke the blessings of *Naga*, the great serpent, called 'Subba Raya'. As in Kerala, the drawing of the serpent is done in chalk in a specially selected place, and over it is placed a canopy, the *Naga mardala*. A priest represents the *Naga* and the meaningful songs denote the ceremonial content.

Naga Dance (Manipur)





**Dummy Horse** (Tamil Nadu)



**Kavadiattam** (Tamil Nadu)

The Nagas of Assam, elaborately clad, carry spears and baskets decked with the horns of bison. They dance, their brass ornaments shining, and their head-dresses glittering as they move. Chanting is their main accompaniment, invoking age-old customs of tribal rituals.

Every tribe has dance as their main recreation, and some of the most fascinating are those of the aboriginals. The Santhals, the Khonds, the Oraons, the Bondo-Porajas, the Hos, each have their own form, yet there is great similarity in the war-dances, and the dances of the women. Gentle or fierce in expression it is a gathering together of the community with linked arms in circular movements and stately steps, showing the dependence of one human being to another. The dances of the women especially evoke the timelessness of rhythmic designs. These tribal women have hardly changed from the ancient frescoes of Greece. On a Greek tomb of 400 B.C. the chain dance shows women holding each other by the hand, dressed in costumes similar to the Indian *odhni* and *gagās*. They might be the *garba* dancers of Gujarat or the Toda women of the hills. Was it not a Greek poet who wrote that it is only right that one dances in these ceremonies, for our ancestors demanded that each part of the body feel impregnated with devotional fervour?

It was not only the Gods who are worshipped through the dance. The *Madal Puja* of Bengal is an offering to the drum as representing the divine rhythm of the universe. The dance of the bliss of marriage in Mymensingh, is a masked dance called *Bura-Buri*, in which an old couple rejoice in the union and celebrate their harmonious life together. The very opposite is the *Moria* dance where a couple quarrel with each other, also hidden behind masks. The *Gambhira* of West Bengal, another mask-dance, depicts social events in humorous vein.

There are also dances of love as in the *Nongkrem*, the festival of the Khasts of Assam, where young women select their husbands. Beautifully dressed are the young women in colourful attire and silver head-dresses. In song and dance she discovers 'the husband of first love' that will bind her beloved to her for-ever.

Scarves, also, have through the ages been utilised for the dance and in Kashmir, there is a terracotta sculpture of a dancer holding a long scarf, dated around the 4th century

There are also animal dances where human beings hope to entice the animals and birds they hunt. The Juangs, the Gonds, the Beigas have beautiful dances of birds and in the classical dance the *Kathakali* dancers give remarkable representations of the swan, the peacock, the deer, the elephant and many other animals

There are also 'question and answer' dances, where opposite groups converse with each other in song and dance. The *Sangla* and the *Dangi* dance of Himachal Pradesh are of this variety and in the *Sangla*, the dancers sing with extraordinary harmony, in voices that echo through the hills. The dance may also be merely acrobatic like the *Raibenshe* dance of Bengal which is an ancient war-dance, where dancers also show their balance and skill, as in the *Sāvāra* dancers of Sarangarh. In the Punjab, the *Bhangra*, celebrating the harvest, is a vigorous expression of the energy of life. The *Thumar* too, executed first in simple rhythm, and then becoming faster and faster, uses sticks to harmonise with the beat of the drum.

Sometimes the dance is in the form of a game as in the *Hikat* dance of Kashmir, where children clap their hands and whirl around to the rhythm of the music in a movement known to young people everywhere. Dancers who clap their hands, dancers with sticks, with bells, with lamps, dancers on stilts with scarves, are prevalent throughout the country. The *Tera-tah* of Rajasthan, is performed by women, while seated on the ground. The cymbals or *manjira* are tied to various parts of the body and the dancer with the *manjira* in her hand plays the rhythm in thirteen variations.

In the incense-dances of Bengal, the dancers with pots of incense in their hands, keep rhythm, throwing more incense into the fire, causing a spurt of smoke and flames as they move, creating a weird atmosphere.

The richness of the Indian dance has remained in all its variety through the centuries. In the cities, as in the remote areas, the human being has sought solace in the abandonment of the body, evoking a power that will bless and enlighten. Whether it be in classical style or folk-form, the dancer has always been a supplicant who is transformed into a god-like being as he dances.

It is as though the simple rhythm of the body, as it moves, becomes one with the universal rhythm of the spheres. That this is possible is the sacred message of the Indian dance.



Raj Gond (Andhra)

## PHOTOGRAPHS

*Courtesy :*

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