

23. Indian Classical Dance

Art in India is a sacred vocation; it was considered a method of approach to Reality through a process of intuiting Divine Mind in the expression of that Mind in the phenomena around us. Art and Religion were indivisible as it were. All the greatest works of Indian Art were inspired by religious fervour. Art without the ensouling devotion is something foreign to Indian Culture. To separate spiritual outlook from Art is to make it a dead shell without the ensouling life.

Dance is a composite art, enfolding in its range several other fine arts as well. Of course music goes with dance; dance has also in it the elements of sculpture, poetry and drama. In one sense it may be said to be a complete art, a comprehensive art.

Dancing is imminent in Life; whenever there is an emotional exuberance in a sentient being, it expresses itself in some outer movement of the limb; the nimble antelope leaps and jumps out of its exuberance of life, the bird sitting on a tree-branch at sunrise greets the sun with joy and bursts into song accompanied by graceful movement of its head; the little child shouts and jumps in upwelling joy. Why! Nature herself dances in joy at spring time, God himself dances in Ananda. In such movements expressive of inner feeling we have the beginnings of Dance. From the

mirthful leap of a deer to the highly developed and finished Dance of Bharatanatyam is a far cry, but one is only a natural development of the other.

The art of Dance had flourished in this country from time immemorial; it existed in the Vedic age, and in the Vedas and the Brahmanas we have references to the dance art and artists.

The principles of Dance Art are based on a study of the relationship between an inner experience and the outer expression of that experience. Certain general principles emerge from such a study and these have been embodied in the works of great writers like Bharata. On account of this fundamental relationship between an inner feeling and its outer expression in the body, when we see a dancer showing a certain gesture, our mind instinctively suggests the emotion of which it is the outer expression and we get into the spirit of the theme danced. Of course a certain amount of convention is inevitable, but anyone interested should have no difficulty in acquainting himself with the fundamentals of it.

History shows that in almost all the ancient civilisations Dance played an important part in religious functions, in one sense it was in itself a ritual. As in those days religion played a great part in the life of the community, dance also played an important part in the life of the nation. In ancient India, Dance was considered as a gift from Lord Siva; we are told that Siva and Parvati gave us the two great branches of Dance, Tandava and Lasya, for bringing some joy to the sorrowful world and peace to the saints.

Dance was part of daily worship; even now in our poojas we offer natya as one of the 16 offerings to the Deity. It pleased the very angels; they looked upon it as an act of sacramental worship. Lord Vishnu is highly pleased with Dance.

Temples being seats of religion, there were attached to their staff artists to supply the necessary music and dance items in the daily routine of worship. As a matter of fact some of the greatest works of architecture and sculpture were executed in and for temples in a spirit of devotion and consecration. A spirit of dedication characterised these artists in their service to Godhead; it was a great privilege to be so dedicated and artists who were so dedicated were held in great honour and reverence. The ladies who were thus dedicated to the temple as dancers were called devadasis, servants of the Lord, a glorious title indeed! What a privilege to be a server of the Lord in however humble a capacity! This idea of dedicating qualified women for temple service and temple ritual is not peculiar to India; it had been in vogue in other civilizations and religions. In ancient Greece and in Egypt and even in Japan, this custom had been current. We have all heard of vestal virgins. In India, if the art of Dance had stood the test of time and survived all the onslaughts which India had to face in the course of her history, we owe it in no small measure to these devadasis who have carried on the art tradition unsullied, especially in South India. (In music also, it is South India that has preserved the essential features of the Indian musical system.) Whatever may be said of the devadasi system from other standpoints, one cannot be too grateful to it for the great service it has done to ensure the preservation of correct traditions and technique. Even today we can find true tradition and correct technique only in the families of the old devadasis and nattuvanars (the dance masters).

The system of dedicating some women to temples for dance was a necessity. The dance art is in several ways different from other arts; not all can be creative artists, a certain inborn aptitude (*vasana*) is essential. In the case of dance several other factors have to be considered; the dan-

cer's mind should be alert and her physical features should be suitable for dance; the body should be agile and capable of swift and graceful movement, the figure should be well-proportioned; the eyes should be expressive like living pools of glowing emotional fire. Here are the qualifications prescribed for a dancer:—

“Handsome, sweet in speech, steady, sprightly, skilful in conversation, born of good family, learned in shastras, sweet voiced, expert in song, instruments and dance by long practice, quick in understanding and confident.”

Even if one is born with these natural gifts, the artist will have to stand the strain of strenuous training for perhaps several years. When all this is achieved there is the vital question: for how many years can she keep up the dancing? At the most, say from the 14th to the 30th year, I mean normally; there may be exceptions. And thus the number of persons who can take up dancing is rather limited and even this limited number can keep up the dancing only for about 15 years. And if, in addition, these dancers live the normal married life with all the responsibilities attendant on it and all the demands it makes on one's time and energy, the chances of their being able to carry on dancing become slender. And so, they had to live a life different from that of the ordinary house-holders, a life in which domestic responsibilities were reduced to a minimum, thereby enabling the dancers to devote their whole time to the art and at the same time preserve their physical fitness for dance for as long a period as possible. The Davadasi system was intended to serve these purposes.

Unfortunately, however, human nature being what it is, this great ideal was forgotten and the artist was dragged into the mire. It is not the dancer who was responsible for this degradation but the society which, dominated by lower passions, tempted the artist away from her high calling. All

degradation and falling off from true purpose is the result of human weakness. Are temples now what they were of old? Are the various mathas discharging their functions properly today? The human hand has polluted many an institution. In the name of God, man hates man; all the wonderful gifts of science which can make a heaven of this earth are prostituted for unholy and inhuman purposes. Why then should the devadasi system alone have been singled out for this victimisation? Has its suppression really improved the moral standard of the community? I wonder and wonder!

The degradation which set in went so low that there was launched an anti-nautch movement and this gained such momentum that the elite thought it beneath their dignity to attend a nautch. And an English lady named Miss Pennant came all the way from England to help and vitalise this movement. It was at this juncture that there came a wave of a general art renaissance in the country and, thanks to the pioneer work of Sm. Rukmini Devi, dance art which was under a taboo began to hold up its head. Reaction set in, the old prejudice against nautch began to wane, it looked as if the pendulum was swinging the other way. It generally happens that when a violent reaction sets in there is a tendency to over-do things. Let me quote here what I have said elsewhere:

"And now, in this swing back, where are we? What has been achieved? Has the art come back really to its own? Before we answer these questions it is worthwhile to keep in mind some fundamental ideas regarding the art of dance. Now the word seems to cover all kinds of movements; we hear of dance here, there, everywhere. A child of seven or eight dressed in costly clothes and decked with brilliant jewels, standing in front of footlights with coloured flood-light playing on her body in and out of season, with or without rhyme or reason, leaps and jumps on the stage

and hundreds and thousands of people forming the audience clap their hands lustily; the girl jumps all the more briskly. There you have a picture of what now often passes off as a dance!! The next day, the papers are full of it; and if the child is well-connected encomiums are showered on her in abundance. Poor child, I have only pity for her!"

Is this Bharatanatya? No, a thousand times no! It is a great art with its own highly finished technique; it is something like a great ritual in which every item has its significant part to play; the body and the mind are attuned in a kind of yoga.

"Music is to be produced by the throat, the hands to be used to bring out the meaning of the song, the eyes should express the appropriate bhava and the feet keep rhythm all the time."

Art is in one sense the essence of a Racial experience. To tinker with it with impunity is an inexcusable affront to the Muse of Art. We have somehow here in the South preserved the classical dance. Dr. Tagore witnessing the performance of a Kathakali actor said, "Those of us belonging to North India, who have lost memory of the pure Indian classical dance, have experienced a thrill of delight at the exhibition of dancing given by a student of the Kalamandalam, whose technique of dance was taken solely from Kathakali. I feel grateful at the assurance it has brought to us that the ancient art is still a living tradition of India with its varied grace and vigour and subtleties of dramatic expression". Shall we allow such a tradition to be vitiated?

There are two fundamental aspects to this Art which may be broadly called Tandava and Lasya. In the former, movement and rhythm are dominant features; in the latter, bhava and rasa are all in all. As we all know, rhythmic, balanced movements of the body well planned and carefully executed have a tremendous effect on our emotions. This

has been proved beyond doubt. Such exercises help in the first place to build a healthy, nimble and adaptable body. This in itself is a great thing. Then, if these exercises are done in groups they build up our instinctive sense of comradeship, cooperation, subjecting one's own personality to the needs of the group. Individual angularities are rounded off and a collective consciousness is developed. This is a desirable emotional reaction. If in addition the children are well dressed and the group chosen with an eye to artistic effect and the 'dances' are performed in artistic surroundings, the result will be remarkable and the spectators derive a real aesthetic pleasure, though this pleasure is mostly ocular.

When we come to Abhinaya (lasya aspect) it is an entirely different matter. There lies the whole of the snag. Here it is a question of bhava, feeling and expressing various shades (including the subtlest) of feeling through gestures, poses (mudras) and facial features. Though there is no definite restriction as to the theme of the piece chosen for abhinaya it has been an almost unbroken custom to choose *sringara rasa* pieces for the purpose. There are, among other reasons, two prominent ones behind this. All art is Divine and meant to lead Jivatma to union with Paramatma. Human soul is ever-seeking union (yoga) with the Oversoul and this search for union is bhakti, devotion. They speak of various forms of this devotion and one of the forms, perhaps the most effective one is nayaka-nayaki bhava, the human soul surrendering itself as the beloved (nayaki) of the One Lover (nayaka) of the Universe. Even the obviously erotic songs when properly interpreted will reveal this high purpose.

Also pieces composed for abhinaya are specially made for the purpose; they contain words which lend themselves effectively to the gesture language. A devotional or erotic song may be quite good as a song, but if it is to be danced

with abhinaya the composition should be pre-eminently "danceable"—if I may coin a word to express what I mean. Also the mudras used should be such as can be understood by all and the subject matter of the piece should be capable of arousing fundamental and almost instinctive emotions in the people. "Erotic" themes naturally meet these demands very well. I do not mean that other emotions cannot be roused or that pieces cannot be composed on other themes. But in our lyric literature *sringara rasa* themes have been found most suitable and so are available in plenty. There are also other themes fit for dance. The other day I saw the composition "*Innamum Orutharum*" of Gopalakrishna Bharati danced by a Kalakshetra artist; it was simply marvellous, and I was wondering why such pieces should not be sought out and danced. But such pieces are rare. There is no reason why good songs fit for dance should not be composed in other themes and in other *rasas* by competent composers. I have seen some other songs rendered in dance even now, for example, "*Varukalamo*" in Nandan Charitram, "*Thiruvadi saranam*", "*Ra ra Sita ramanee manohara*", a *kriti* by Thyagaraja. Frankly these fall flat, for the simple reason that they are not nor were meant to be "danceable".

So, considering the nature of the stock of songs available for dance purposes, the question arises, how far young children of 7 or 8, why even 11 or 12 can do justice to it. In abhinaya "*Tanmayatvam*" and "*Tajjatyam*" are indispensable. However clever the child may be she can at best only imitate (perhaps even to perfection) what she has been taught to show by gestures. I am not here referring to the professional dancing class child. Will that be abhinaya? No, thousand times no! If a grown-up girl who can be expected to understand *sringara rasa* dances such erotic songs and does them with good *bhava* and *tanmayatva*, what may be the result? I am not speaking of exceptional souls who

live in a higher plane and who interpret everything in terms of Divine play, Iswara Lila. Taking an ordinary young girl in her teens, one may consider the possible reaction on her emotional nature of dancing out such themes. I may be permitted to quote here what Sri N. Raghunatha Aiyar said in his presidential address to the South Indian Natyakala Conference held in December last :

“The feeling of grave exaltation and earnest devoutness, as of one participating in some holy mystery,..... has now all but disappeared. On the middle class households from which most of the votaries of the art of dance as well as the audience are now being drawn, secularism has settled like a blight. To imagine that a girl taught to render with abhinaya a Krishna Karnamrita sloka keeps her mind anchored firmly in the faith that it is not carnal love that she depicts but the lila of the Lord, is to assume the pervading influence of a home atmosphere which is simply not there.”

Many of the present day dance recitals are an eye-sore to a true art lover. It is more a tendency towards exhibitionism than anything related to art. “This tendency seems to be the dominant note in our modern dance performances. The undue importance which is being given to the loudness and brilliance of the costume and jewellery, to the lighting arrangements with flood-light playing on the person of the dancer, to the frequent change of dress lacking at times even a sense of appropriateness, all this indicates the growing “exhibitionistic” tendency, which if allowed to go uncurbed, may eat the very vitals of our social, moral and cultural well-being. In this respect our nautch-girls of old were definitely on the better and safer side. They were true to tradition in almost every detail; their technique was strictly traditional; their dress too was according to pattern evolved by long years of experience. They did not depend for the success of their art on such accidental

appurtenances like costume and lighting, they were so sure of their technique and had deep faith in its artistic perfection. Their dress on the whole was most suited for dance and was governed by consideration of modesty and decency much more than what we witness in some of modern dances, especially the dances in which our present-day cinema pictures abound. Perhaps the less said about this the better."

At one of the recitals of Balasaraswati I happened to hear some remarks which almost shocked me and showed to what extent the taste of the ordinary theatre-goer has been vitiated by this growing tendency towards "exhibitionism." Some of the ladies in the audience were making derisive remarks about Balasaraswati not changing her dress. One of them actually asked. "What is the meaning of giving a dance performance without changing dresses!" This clearly showed how the whole idea about Natya and attitude to a Bharatanatya performance had been vitiated and become even perverted. To that lady perhaps dance meant only dress-ringing and nothing more. She evidently forgot that she was witnessing a Bharatanatya performance and not a hotchpotch show with items like Kurathi dance, Snake-charmer dance, Peacock dance, Beggar dance and so on (heaven alone knows what these dances mean) all jumbled into a two hours "dance-performance." At this rate the real dance of India, the dance which was considered sacred and fit to be offered in devotion to the Lord, may go into oblivion, and in its place a kind of secular hybrid travesty of art may masquerade as the art of dance and lead us to a sort of artistic suicide. Heaven save us from such a calamity!

Even taking only the Tandava side of dance, one may doubt the wisdom of young girls exhibiting themselves in front of footlights, in gorgeous dress (or undress), to a packed house of a thousand and more people, not all of whom look to the higher side of art expression. Can we

say with any justification that girls of twelve or thereabouts who are coming out to dance in such large numbers of late, will be able to command the necessary inner poise and self-possession which come out of maturity and artistic intuition?

I know that several ardent dance promoters ask, "Did not our celestial damsels dance? Did not princesses in our ancient royal courts learn and practise dancing?" Well, the answer is quite simple. I trust that we do not wish our daughters to become Urvasis and Menakas whose ethical code is not in tune with ours. As for the princesses, in the first place we have no statistical data in the matter. It is quite probable that several of our ancient princesses were given training in dance. But did any of them come forward to dance before a crowded house in a public place? Certainly not.

There are some great enemies to Art which its votaries have to guard against. In the history of any art, there comes a stage when the life side and the form side of the art begin to pull at each other and in the struggle the form wins. This success of the form over the life sounds the death knell to the art. Then again the tendency to feel self-sufficient which comes to many artists leads to stagnation and hence to atrophy. A third enemy is mere imitation without imbibing the inspiration which makes the art a living thing. Perhaps the most potent and dangerous enemy is the pseudo critic who, calling himself a rasika, sets a wrong or spurious standard of appreciation, which is accepted without question by others, with the result that the dancer is slowly veered away from true and correct tradition to false though apparently popular standards. This is a subtle and therefore, dangerous enemy. If conferences and Sabhas can help in preserving correct and traditional standards in the art of dance by putting their foot down on the wrong and undesirable tendencies which are now

threatening to stifle the art and guarding the art against its enemies, it would be a great act of worship at the altar of the Muse of Art.

A cultured person should be able to appreciate dance, music and other arts; he should develop in himself the required sensibility to do this. This does not mean that a cultured person learns any art with a view to take it as his profession or a life job. So any training in art has to meet these two-fold objects: (i) to give intensive training needed for an expert who seeks to make a profession of it, (ii) to give some general training which will enable any cultured person to understand and intelligently appreciate the fine arts.