

Performing Arts and Artistes in Modern Times



- Given above are some photos of different performing arts. How many of them can you identify? Write down the names under each of the photos.
- Did you see any of them being performed in your area? Share your experience with the class.

In this chapter, we will read about performing *artistes* in the 20th century. By performing *artistes*, we mean those who dance, sing, perform plays etc. They are different from other *artistes* like painters, sculptors and writers in that their work cannot be preserved – they have to perform afresh each time.

Many of the folk arts are performed by the people themselves. People sing and dance as part of their work and also during leisure time and festivals. The *Chuttukamudu* is one of the art form of Telangana that came out of the daily labour of the peasants. Their work songs were

molded into dancing songs. Usually, they are performed by women who gather under the moonlight, sing *Chuttukamudu* songs and dance to the rhythm of clapping. Similarly, village girls hang swings on trees and sing the *Vuyyala Patalu* with devotional stories of Goddess Lakshmi and Gowri. Many other art forms are performed by special people.

- Find out from your parents and grandparents about the songs sung and dances performed by family members on special occasions. Make a chart listing these songs, the occasions on which they are performed and some sample songs. Have any changes come in these performances in the recent years? Share your findings with the rest of the class.
- If any of you know some of these songs and dances, perform them in the class.

Different forms of dances

Yaksha Ganam

Yaksha Ganam or Jakkula Bhagavatham or Veedhi Bhagavatham is a popular telugu folk art. As the artists dance rhythmically, this is also called “Chindu Bhagavatham”. Books like *Panditharadhya charitra* and *Basava Puranam* tell us that it became popular from the 13th century. They perform on a stage that have a cover on the public places. Initially, all the different roles were played by a single person by singing and dancing. But today, each role would be performed by a different artist. It is not the action itself that is important but the narration of the story which is important. These are a mix of dialogue, songs and poem. The stage performers are accompanied by tabala, harmonium and singing chorus. Movement of the actor’s legs and hands exhibit different expressions according to the role and its importance. The roles played by different artists can be identified by their costumes and specific props or weapons with them. Each story can have different roles such as Gods, kings, ministers, soldiers, brahmins, peasants, common people, jokers etc.

Some of the most narrated stories are *Sugreeva Vijayam*, *Bala Nagamma Katha*, *Rambha Rampala*, *Chitrangada Vilasam*, and *Krishnarajuna Yuddam*.. Traditionally, plays were performed mostly by people of *Chindu* caste. Today, however, many people, irrespective of caste, come forward and learn this performing art.

Gusadi :

Raja Gonds of Adilabad celebrate Deepavali with a lot of fanfare. The dance they perform during this celebrations is called ‘Gusadi’. They decorate themselves in colourful costumes of peacock feather, deer horn etc. It is accompanied by musical instruments like *Dappu*, *Tudumu*, *Pipri* and *Kalikom*.

Sadir Natyam :

A solo dance form performed for centuries by *devadasis* in temples and eventually, in the royal courts of South India, especially in Tamil Nadu.

Lambadi :

Lambadi, a semi-nomadic tribe in Telangana, has dances inspired by the movements associated with daily tasks like harvesting, planting and sowing. The costumes, embroidered with glass-beads and shining discs, are beautiful. When they perform on festivals like Dussehra, Deepavali and Holi, people pay them money.

Kuravanji :

A group dance by women, interpreting literary or poetic compositions, typically on the theme of fulfillment of the love of a girl for her beloved.

Kuchipudi :

A group form of dance drama from Kuchipudi, a village in Andhra Pradesh, with all roles performed by men and themes based on mythology.



Fig 21.1: Yaksha Ganam

Over the ages, artistes like dancers, storytellers, singers, actors etc. have not only entertained people and given them aesthetic experience, but also helped to communicate spiritual messages and criticise the ills of our society and suggest alternatives. Performing *artistes* could play a powerful social role by mobilising people for important social causes. *Fakeer patalu*, *Bairagi patalu*, *Dandaganam*, *Latkorusaab* etc. were songs sung by travelling *fakirs* and *bairagis*. They were sung in Telugu and Deccani Urdu and mixed language.

Several other art forms required larger teams like in Burrakatha and *Golla Suddulu*. It is said that initially these

Golla Suddulu were practiced by shepherds who migrated from place to place. Some of them were associated with religious groups like *Virashaivas*.

- Have you seen any such performances by travelling *artistes*? Tell your class mates about them, who they were, what they sang and how were they treated by the audience.
- If any such artistes live nearby, meet them and find out about their lives and art.

How did the performing *artistes* earn a livelihood? Some *artistes* travelled from place to place giving their performances. Such *artistes* were patronised by the village headman or the landlord and ordinary villagers. They also collected grains from the villagers. They were highly regarded as *artistes* and were welcomed in any village for the entertainment they provided. They were an essential part of temple festivals and annual village festivals. People also organised special performances as they believed that they would help in bringing rain and ward off evil.

Many *artistes* did not travel like this but were attached to the palaces of zamindars, kings and emperors. They spent most of their



Fig 21.2: Gusadi Dance

time learning and teaching and performing for their patrons in courts and palaces.

We will first read about some travelling artists - Burrakatha and Tholubommallata performers.

Burrakatha

Burrakatha is a Telugu art form of storytelling. The origin of *Burrakatha* is associated with *Virashaiva* movement in 12th and 13th centuries.

The term '*burra*' refers to '*tambura*' a stringed instrument worn across the right shoulder of the main performer (*kathakudu*). Usually, this art is practiced by a team of two or three people from the same family of certain social groups like *picchuguntla* or *jangalu*. In this form of narration, the main storyteller tells the story while playing a *tambura* and dancing wearing *andelu* (anklets). He dances rhythmically forward and backward on the stage while reciting a story. The performer also wears a hollow ring over his right thumb with which he beats the basic tempo of the songs. One or two associates assist the main narrator with a two-headed earthen drum called *dakki* or *budike*. The drummer

to the right of the performer comments on contemporary political and social issues even if the story is mythological and the drummer on the left provides comic relief.

'*Vinara Bharata Veera Kumara Vijayam Manadera*', '*Tandana Tana*' is the popular refrain of the *Burrakatha*. Performance begins in the evening with songs in praise of various gods. Then the *kathakudu* introduces the main story by telling about the place, time and context of the story, while the assistants repeat the refrain of the narrative.

Burrakatha is performed mostly during Dasara or Sankranti festival seasons. Mostly, mythological stories from epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and some stories of kings like *Kambojaraju katha*, *Bobbili katha*, *Palnati katha*, *Katamaraju katha* etc. are told.

Nazar performed many *Burrakathas* during the Telangana movement. The Telangana *artistes* also began to compose and perform new *Burrakathas* to campaign among people. The more notable among these were Tirunagari Ramanjaneylus '*Telangana Veera-yodhulu*', Aduri Ayodhya Rama's '*Naizam Viplavam*' S.K. Chaudhary's '*Kasim Razvi*' and Sunkara Satyanarayana's '*Kashta Jivi*'. These *Burrakathas* focused on the socio-economic problems of the people and the heroic deeds of the leaders of the movement. For example, Sunkara Satyanarayana's '*Telangana*' was



Fig 21.3: Photo of Burrakatha performance

written in 1944. It focused on the heroism of Shaik Bandagi, a Muslim peasant, who fought valiantly against the oppression of the feudal landlord, Visnuru Deshmukh.

Presently, Burrakatha troupes are being patronised by the Government for creating awareness on various social issues like literacy, AIDS etc. *Burrakatha* performances are broadcast on TV but the traditional performers have left this art form as their place has been taken over by other forms of entertainment and have no more patrons in the villages.

Tholubommatalata

This is a shadow puppet show performed by travelling *artists*. Puppets are made of animal skins. These hides are tanned, made translucent and cut into various shapes and sizes. The sizes of puppets range from one to six feet depending upon the age and nature of the characters. The brightly painted puppets have joints at the shoulders, elbow and hip, all secured for manipulation by a string.

Performance

Traditional shadow theatre has a narrative text, which is presented in poetic form. Neither the narrator nor the singers

are visible to the audience. Through variations in pitch, the actor gives each puppet its own voice.

Performances begin at 9 p.m. and last through the night. The troupe of shadow puppeteers consists of eight to twelve artistes. The troupe have at least two women for singing and speaking the dialogues for female characters, two men for male characters, three instrumentalists to play the harmonium, *sruthi*, and cymbals and one assistant who quickly supplies puppets and maintains the lamps.

They select an open place in the village for the stage, planting four-bamboo sticks to form a rectangle shape with a white cloth tied to the poles. The commentator is behind the curtain and there is a row of lights that throws the shadow on the screen.

The Themes of the plays

The performances draws from the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata and local legend with raucous humor and wisecracks about current events. For epics, the troupe uses regional versions. They write new stories very rarely. Performers are mostly wandering troupes. They wander for nine months in a year from village to village giving performances in return for money and grains.

With the advent of modern means of information and entertainment like films and television, people are turning away from traditional forms of performing arts. The landlords and headmen no longer patronise *artistes* as they did in the past. As a result, the folk *artistes* are facing a decline and



Fig 21.4: Tholubommatalata

crisis of livelihood. Since they are travelling *artistes*, they also lack modern school education and the only other profession they can adopt is that of unskilled workers.

The government has stepped in to use some of these art forms to propagate government programmes. Many traditional troupes are now performing plays on themes like sanitation, healthcare, girl's education, family planning and environment. Such scripts are generally provided by the government who sponsors the shows.

Some families of *Tholubommatalata artistes* have also opted for alternate sources of livelihood like production of decorative lampshades and wall hangings of leather.

- Do you think it is important to preserve the folk art traditions when TV and films are becoming the dominant forms of entertainment? Give your reasons.
- What changes do you see in the position of the *artistes* and the subject of their performances since the time of the national movement?
- Why do you think did the nationalists and communists try to revive and renew folk arts?

Bharatanatyam : Its decline and revival

A large number of classical dance forms of India trace their origin to Bharata's book 'Natyashastra'. Today, the name Bharatanatyam refers to a particular dance form of Tamilnadu. However, a hundred years ago, the name Bharatanatyam was not in use.



Mogulaiah Playing Kinnera Instrument

What we know as Bharatanatyam today springs from *Sadir Natyam*. These dances were actually performed by *devadasis* as a part of temple worship.

A *devadasi*, whose name means slave (*dasi*) of god (*deva*), is an artist dedicated to the services of a temple. The dance of the *devadasi* was integral to the temple ritual and worship. Young girls were dedicated to temples as an offering to gods by their parents. They were not allowed to marry and were exploited by priests and influential men. Their children continued to live like them. *Devadasi* families specialised in the arts of music and dance, and with the *nattuvanars* (dance masters, who usually were male children of *devadasis*), they maintained these traditions from generation to generation.

A law ending the *devadasi* system (of dedicating girls to temples) was enacted between 1934 and 1947 in Bombay and Madras Presidency. Bhagya Reddy Varma led a campaign against it in Hyderabad state and persuaded the Nizam to end the *devadasi* system in the state.

- Imagine the plight of a young devadasi girl who does not want to live the life

of a devadasi. Describe her feelings in an imaginary letter written by her to her friend.

Revival

E. Krishna Iyer was a freedom fighter and lawyer who had also learnt Bharatanatyam. He would perform it in female costume to remove the stigma associated with the dance, and campaigned to raise public interest in the art. He also played a role in founding the Music Academy in Madras (now Chennai), and used its platform to present Bharatanatyam performances by *devadasis*.

Bharatanatyam attracted young *artistes* from respectable families. Initially, met with shock, their participation ultimately helped to shift public opinion in favour of reviving the art. Also during this time, Western *artistes* like the Ballerina Anna Pavlova started taking interest in the artistic heritage of India, while the spiritual heritage of India was being promoted by Westerners in the Theosophical movement.



Fig 21.5: Oggu katha Performance

Rukmini Devi had trained in ballet under a pupil of Anna Pavlova's, but Pavlova advised Rukmini Devi to learn Indian classical dance instead. Raised in a Theosophist family, Rukmini Devi's unique background equipped her to reform the



Fig 21.6: Rukmini Devi

existing Bharatanatyam to emphasise its spirituality.

An association of *devadasis* joined the effort to revive Bharatanatyam. Its ranks included a teacher of Rukmini Devi as well as *artistes* like Bangalore Nagaratnamma and the legendary dancer Bala-saraswati. They advocated preserving the tradition, and also keeping it in the hands of the *devadasi* community. Their argument was that the art would die if separated from the community, while advocates for Bharatanatyam from the educated

community argued that the art had to be transferred to respectable hands to be saved. Ultimately, both communities carried on with the dance. It was, after all, the *devadasis* and *nattuvanars* that trained the new dancers from other castes.

Rukmini Devi's debut performance in 1935 was a milestone. Her efforts won over much of the orthodox community of Madras. She went on to found the Kalakshetra institute, to which she attracted many great *artistes* and musicians, with whom she trained generations of dancers.

Balasaraswati promoted the traditional art of the *devadasis*, maintaining that reforms were unnecessary and detracted from the art. Staying true to her *devadasi* lineage, she achieved recognition for her excellence.

The renewed awareness about Bharatanatyam in Indian society allowed many *nattuvanars* to resume their training

activities, and many *artists* to enter the field of classical dance. A diversity of styles like Pandanallur, Vazhuvur, and Thanjavur, named after the villages from which the *nattuvanars* came, became recognised. Bharatanatyam soon became the most widespread and popular of the Indian classical dance forms.

- Why do you think it became important for other caste to take over the dance in order to revive it?
- What kind of changes do you think they would have made to the dance to make it respectable?
- On one hand, the traditional custodians of the dance were not allowed to practice it and on the other hand, people of other castes took over the dance to make it respectable. Do you think there is something unjust about this development?

Bharatanatyam today

In the vital decades after its revival, Bharatanatyam achieved such esteem that by the late 20th century, the demand for learning Bharatanatyam exceeded the infrastructure to support the art and maintain its standards. Today, it is the demand for learning it, rather than a growth in its audience or sponsorship, that fuels the spread of Bharatanatyam.

Dancers, rather than the *nattuvanars*, have become the custodians of the art form. The generation of *nattuvanars*



Fig 21.7: Balasaraswati

that trained dancers during the revival period was the last generation of exclusive *nattuvanars*. Due to sheer numbers of aspiring dancers, *nattuvanars* no longer are the only trainers.

Many are forced to use recorded music in dance performances to keep the costs down. Dancers today usually can't make a living by performing. With a few exceptions, Bharatanatyam is today a secondary career, or a profession for those with family support. Few dancers can devote their entire lives to training and developing as dancers. To earn money, dancers start teaching early in their careers. This affects the quality of their dance and also their teaching.

Without *nattuvanars*, and with more and more dancers becoming teachers, the unbroken lineage of instruction that maintained the integrity of the dance form has been lost. In the hands of many dancers rather than a few trainers, Bharatanatyam is now subjected to numerous innovations.

While this has been the experience of Bharatanatyam, many other dance forms like *Kathakali*, *Yakshagana*, *Odisi*, *Manipuri* and *Kathak* went through similar experience and struggles. Try to find out about them too.

- What was the special role of the *nattuvanars*? What impact do you think it will have on the dance if they are replaced by dancers themselves?
- In what way has the immense popularity of Bharatanatyam helped it. Has it also created some problems?

Perini Nrityam : The dance was performed to worship Lord Siva aggressively in front of a Nataraj idol at the Siva Temples and to motivate soldiers before going to wars. The dance is performed only by males with a breath taking enthusiasm. This dance form has been in practice since the 13th century. A detailed description of perini nrityam 'Nritya Ratnavali' written by 'Jayapa Senani', (brother-in-law) a colonel of the Elephant troop under the Kakatiya king Ganapathi deva. Nataraj Ramakrishna, a well-known dancer brought this dance into lime light, performed it along with his disciples and made it popular all over the world.



Dappu Natyam : The musical instrument 'Dappu' made with the hide of goat attracts and makes the people to dance when it is played with two sticks. A group of 15-20 dancers play the drums (Dappu), wearing *Gajjelu* and dance before and during the celebrations and processions.



Dappu Natyam

Keywords

- | | | | |
|-------------|----------------|---------|---------|
| 1. Cymbals | 2. Anklets | 3. Alms | 4. Mime |
| 5. Tarangam | 6. Nattuvanars | | |

Improve your learning



1. Correct the false statements:
 - a. All dance forms emerged as part of devotion.
 - b. Historically, *artistes* were supported by big Zamindars.
 - c. *Burra Katha* was adopted to mobilise people.
 - d. Today, Bharatanatyam is largely taught by *nattuvanars*.
2. Discuss the changes that have come about in the lives of folk *artistes* during the last 50 years.
3. Do you think folk arts are declining? What loss do you think it will cause to our culture?
4. Is it possible to orient folk arts to new requirements of modern life and revive them?
5. What are the major changes that have taken place in Bharatanatyam dance since the days of *Sadir*?
6. Who among the following were the supporters of *devadasi* system and those who opposed it and who wanted to reform it:
Balasaraswati, Rukmini Devi, Veeresalingam, Bhagya Reddy Varma, Krishna Iyer, Bangalore Nagaratnamma.
7. Why has it always been difficult for *artistes* to earn their livelihood by practicing their art? How can *artistes* be supported to stand on their own feet?
8. Collect and prepare a table with the information about arts and dramas performed by the *artistes* of your area.

Interview:

Invite a local artist to your class room and conduct an interview on their arts and their future.