

4. Dance as Cultural Expression

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Abstract:

In human history over the ages, dance has always been a basic and universal method of communication skillfully used and in a complicated relationship with language and culture. Besides, in India, dance occupies an important place within the cultural framework of the country as it embodies its rich diversity of customs and ideologies. As far as the subcontinent is concerned, Indian dance can be divided into two broad categories – folk dances and classical dances – with each subdivision having its own characteristics and historical contexts. Nevertheless, folk dances are attributable to the social dynamics of a community, thus depicting the routine activities, special occasions and festivities; in contrast classical dances focus on form, narrative and spirituality. The significance of dance in Indian society is the main focus of the present paper its evolution from ancient to the glorified forms of today. It assesses eight classical dance forms which include Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniattam, Odissi and Sattriya focusing on their exceptional features, roots, and importance in the context of cultural continuity. It implements practical issues concerning dance in education, therapy and entertainment emphasizing instead the performance related aspects and its cultural expression.

Keywords:

Dance, Cultural Heritage, Folk Dance, Classical Dance, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniattam, Odissi, Sattriya, Dance Therapy, Choreography, Indian Dance Traditions, Cultural expression

“You have treated the arts as the cherry on the cake. It needs to be the yeast”.

- **Mallika Sarabhai** (An activist, Indian classical dancer and actress):

In our society, arts are viewed as a luxury or an optional rather than a fundamental part of life or education. Mallika Sarabhai explained that the arts are fundamental, transformative, and essential to the fabric of society, culture, and individual development. In short the quote suggests that the arts should be regarded as a vital, integral component of life and education, not just a supplementary or decorative addition.

India is known for its rich cultural heritage and classical dances are an integral part of this heritage. India is a land of performing arts. Dance, at its core, is the art of movement. While dancing dancers commemorate varied bodily expression by using different instruments to communicate ideas, emotions, and stories. In India Dance is a universal language that transcends linguistic and cultural barriers.

Dance is a cultural manifestation expressed through body movement, reflecting the identity, history, and traditions of different peoples. In addition to being an art form, dance has a significant impact on the job market. Now-a-days in India Dance professionals work commendable as choreographers, dancers, teachers, and even dance therapists. The various sectors such as entertainment industry, advertising, and corporate events frequently utilize dance to create memorable and engaging experiences.

4.1 What is Dance?

It is rhythmic movement of the body. Expression forum of communication. Used to convey a range of emotions and ideas. Used as a form of celebrations, entertainment and cultural expression. Dance is an artistic and a cultural manifestation that uses body movement to express once emotions, tell stories in an art or dance form, and celebrate events. The postures and gestures of which these visual patterns are

created suggest kinaesthetic experiences of tension, relaxation, and emotional moods and attitudes associated with them.

History of Dance:

In India dance has a rich and diverse history origin in our country that spans over a thousand of years. The evidence of Indian dance comes from the ancient Indus Valley Civilization. Archaeological excavations have revealed depictions of dances on poetry, seals and other artefacts, temples with different mudras. Generally, dance plays a crucial role in religious ceremonies, social celebrations, and community rituals. Each culture has developed its own and unique form of dance styles that reflect its traditions, values, and beliefs.

Definitions and concepts of Dance:

- **Cultural Dance:** Dance forms that refer which are inherent or generation to generation to a specific culture and reflect its traditions and values.
- **Choreography:** The art of creating sequences and various steps in synchronization teaching of various dance movements. A choreographer is responsible for planning and composing the movements to be executed by dancers.
- **Body Expression:** The use of the body to communicate thoughts, feelings, and narratives through movement.
- **Choreographic Movement:** A sequence of planned and structured movements that make up a dance.
- **Cultural Diversity:** The variety of cultures that exist in the world, each with its own traditions, customs, and forms of expression, including dance.

There are different forms of dances but mostly we observe classical and folk form of dances in India.

4.2 Dances Generally Are of Two Parts:

1. Folk dance - enjoyment, celebrating, performing
2. Classical dance - technical aspects

4.2.1 Folk Dance:

Folk dances are a vibrant reflection of a community's cultural identity and heritage, passed down through generations. They are often tied to various aspects of daily life, such as customs, ceremonies, and labor. These dances commonly originate from religious traditions and encompass themes like passions, superstitions, festivals, life events (birth, marriage, and death), courtship, and even war. This cultural expression is universal, with each community worldwide having its unique set of folk dances that tell their stories and preserve their traditions.



Figure 4.1: Folk Dance

Dance should meet the following criteria to be considered as;

1. It is conventional

2. It is expressive
3. The simple, fundamental rhythm dominates folk dance and defines a movement pattern.
4. It has unknown choreographers or created through communal efforts.
5. Dance plays an essential role in the life of folk people.

Folk dances, on the other hand, are often more energetic and collective, reflecting community life and work.

4.2.2 Classical Dance:

A. Origin of Dance:

The Natyaveda, also known as the "5th Veda," is often referred to as the "Science of Dance." According to the story behind its origin, people in ancient times were overwhelmed by ego and anger, leading to widespread unhappiness. Seeking a solution to these problems, they approached Lord Brahma for help. In response, Brahma created the Natyaveda, an art form designed to bring joy and positivity into people's lives. He assured that by understanding and embracing the teachings of the Natyaveda, individuals could lead a more fulfilling and harmonious life. This Veda encompasses the essence of dance, drama, and music, aiming to uplift the human spirit and promote cultural values. All the four Vedas such as;

- Music - Samveda
- Expression - Yajurveda
- Emotional - Atharveda
- Lyrics - Rigveda

After the compilation of the Natyaveda, it was assigned to the sage Narada Muni to promote and disseminate its teachings. The Natyaveda, which combines elements of the existing Vedas, encompasses the art forms of dance, drama, and music.

Narada Muni, being a celestial sage and a master of music and art, was entrusted with the responsibility of spreading this knowledge to help people lead more joyful and meaningful lives. Through the promotion of the Natyaveda, Narada Muni played a crucial role in sharing the spiritual and cultural significance of this art form, ensuring its place in human society.

There are two basic aspects of classical dance;

- Masculine - powerful, emotions, express anger (Thandav)
- Feminine - Gentle (Lasya)

These two aspects, Thandav and Lasya, together create a balanced portrayal of emotions and energies in classical dance.

Three basic element of classical dance act;

- **Nritta (Pure form)** - basic dance steps performed rhythmically, drama expression but devoid of any expression and mood
- **Natya** - dramatic representation and refers to the story that is elaborate through dance
- **Nritya** - combination of both the dance Nritta and Natya. Work more on foot management, hand gesture, expression including mudras.

Guru Shishya Parampara:

The Guru-Shishya relationship is based upon on mutual respect, dedication, and discipline. The Guru provides p guidance, helping the student to develop their own unique expression within the framework of the dance tradition. Throughout the years of practice and learning under the Guru's observation and teaching, the Shishya gains mastery over the art form, ensuring its preservation and continuation for future generations.

Rasas:

There are nine Rasas of classical dances like wonder, valour, revulsion, love, tranquillity, anger, fear, grief and humour.

There are eight classical dances recognised by Sangeet Natak Academy, the National academy for performing arts in India.

Now We Will Understand and Discuss About 8 Classical Dances Forms:

1. Bharatanatyam (Tamil Nadu):

Bharatanatyam, originated from Tamil Nadu, is the oldest among the **contemporary classical dances** and is considered to be over 2000 years old. It is one of the oldest and most popular classical dance forms of India. Theoretical base of this form traces back to Natya Shastra.

Bha - Bhava, ra - raga, tha - rhythm or thala, Natya - dance. The dance is accompanied by a live orchestra consisting of musicians playing instruments such as the Mridangam (a two-sided drum), the Veena (a straight instrument), flute **Manjira, Violin, Kanjira, Surpeti, Venu and Tanpura.**

The costume consists of a richly embroidered dhoti of silk for both male and female dancers. There is a pleated or frilled cloth hanging from the waist to the knees which is laced over the Dhoti.

Bharatanatyam is traditionally a team performance art that consists of a solo dancer, accompanied by musicians and one or more singers.



Figure 4.2: Bharatanatyam

2. Kathak (Uttar Pradesh):

Kathak is believed to be one of the classical dance styles that has its roots in ancient Northern India and has a clear link to the art of theatre as well as to the Bhakti sect within particular the portrayal of Krishna's childhood and legends. The dance significantly transformed itself during the Bhakti movement a devotion movement that focused on the love and the divine and became a tool in the narration of epic stories mostly involving Krishna. Kathak is comprised of three independent regions or Gharanas:

- Jaipur Gharana: It is well known for its tatkar style of dancing in which details to the footwork and its rhythm patterns are taught.
- Banaras Gharana: It is softer and includes grace and stylized expressions with spirituality.
- Lucknow Gharana: this is popular for its storytelling or dance which is called abhinaya and for its graceful dance.

In the Mughal period, Kathak had gone through change and adopted features from the Persian and central Asian dances. Because of the change of the royal courts' traditions, the dress code and performance style of Indian classical dances began to assimilate Hindu and Muslim features in Kathak. Kathak is also characterized by the use of footwork as the central aspect of the dances. Dance is accompanied by ankle bells Ghungroos which are important to emphasize the weak rhythmic parts of the dance. When the dance moves from one stage to another and from simpler to more complicate the quantity and the heaviness of the ghungroo.

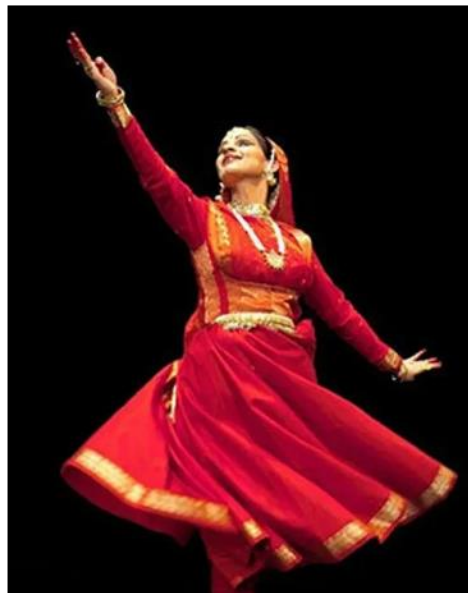


Figure 4.3: Kathak (Uttar Pradesh)

3. Kathakali (Kerela):

Kathakali is a classical dance-drama from Kerala, India, known for its elaborate storytelling. It primarily developed in Hindu temples and monastic schools, making it deeply spiritual and ritualistic in nature. The dance form uses a combination of intricate footwork, expressive facial gestures, and detailed hand movements (mudras) to convey stories, often derived from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana.



Figure 4.4: Kathakali (Kerela)

4. Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh):

Kuchipudi, a preeminent Indian classical dance form that originated in a village of the same name in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh. It is closely associated with Lord Krishna and the tradition of **Vaishnavism**, focusing on stories and themes from Hindu mythology, particularly those involving Krishna.

Kuchipudi includes:

- **Fast-paced Footwork:** Kuchipudi is known for its brisk and intricate footwork, which showcases the dancer's agility and precision. The rhythm is lively, and the movements are fluid, often characterized by graceful leaps and swift turns.
- **Use of Props:** Dancers often incorporate elements such as a brass plate and a pot, adding both visual and auditory interest.
- **Expressive Storytelling:** Like other classical dance forms, Kuchipudi relies on expressive facial gestures and hand movements (**mudras**) to convey stories and emotions.

Kuchipudi is not just a dance but a comprehensive performance art that involves singing, acting, and dancing, making it a vibrant and engaging form of cultural expression.



Figure 4.5: Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh)

5. Manipuri (Manipur):

Manipuri is a classical dance form that originated in the north-eastern state of Manipur, India. It is known for its unique style and repertoire, particularly the Raslila, which portrays the divine love of Lord Krishna and Radha. This dance form is deeply spiritual and devotional, often performed as an offering in temples. Manipuri include:

- **Fluid, Circular Movements:** The dance is renowned for its soft, graceful, and fluid movements, which are said to be inspired by the celestial beings in Hindu mythology. Unlike other classical dance forms, Manipuri places less emphasis on footwork and instead focuses on the upper body and the use of hand gestures (mudras).

- Traditional Music: The music that accompanies Manipuri dance is played on traditional instruments such as:
 - a. Pung: A barrel-shaped drum
 - b. Pena: A stringed instrument
 - c. Bansuri: A bamboo flute, evoke the presence of Lord Krishna.
 - d. Colourful Costumes: The dancers wear elaborates and vibrant traditional costumes, typically made of silk. Female dancers don a distinctive skirt called the Potloi, which is cylindrical and richly adorned with intricate embroidery and mirror work.

Manipuri dance embodies grace, devotion, and a deep connection to nature and spirituality. It is less theatrical and more meditative.



Figure 4.6: Manipuri (Manipur)

6. Mohiniattam (Kerela):

It is known for its slow, fluid, graceful movements, subtle facial expressions and lyrical storytelling. Originated as a temple dance performed by the Devadasis.

Costumes are generally in colour white or off-white. Sari with a golden border and a matching blouse. The themes often centre on stories of love and devotion as well as beauty of nature. Music played on the traditional instruments such as the Veena (a stringed instrument) and the Mridangam (a percussion instrument).



Figure 4.7: Mohiniattam (Kerela)

7. Odissi (Odisha):

Odissi has its roots in the temple culture of Odisha. It is known for its graceful movements, intricate footwork and expressive facial expression. The dancers wear, which include a long, flowing skirt and a fitted blouse with a veil. The jewellery worn is often made of silver and gold. Odissi is characterised by its use of sculptures poses, known as Bhangis, which are used to convey different emotions and meanings.

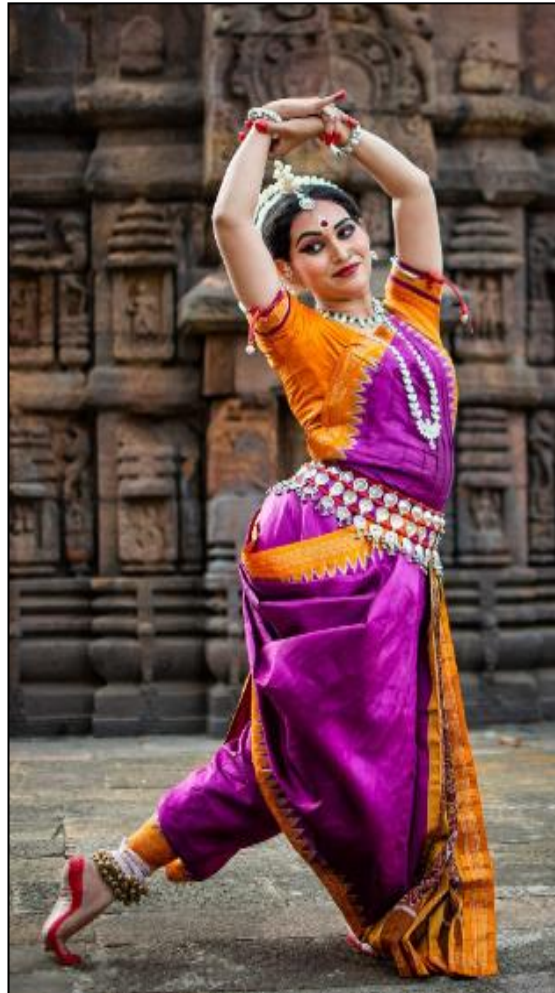


Figure 4.8: Mohiniattam (Kerela)

8. Sattriya (Assam):

It is deeply rooted to the culture and the tradition of Assam. The dancers wear traditional costumes made of silk and decorated with intrinsic embroidery and mirror work. The music of Sattriya dance is typically played on traditional instruments. Such as the khol (a barrel – shaped drum), the Taal (a pair of cymbals) and the flute. Dance often centres on stories from Hindu mythology, as well as the daily life and customs of the people of Assam.



Figure 4.9: Sattriya (Assam)

4.3 Applications of Dance:

Dance has its own practical applications in various fields, from education to therapy and entertainment.

- Education, in schools and dance academy, students learn dance techniques, skills of expression, teamwork, and discipline.
- Therapy, dance is used as an expressive therapy to help individuals cope up with his/ her emotions, improve physical mobility, and promote mental well-being. Dance therapy is a recognized practice that combines the physical and mental well-being.
- Entertainment market, dance is an integral part of theatrical productions, music shows, movies, and live events. Choreographers and dancers work together to create performances that captivate and move the audience. Corporate and advertising events also use dance to create impactful experiences. Companies hire dancers and choreographers for presentations at product launches, advertising campaigns, and marketing events, highlighting the versatility and economic importance of dance.

Useful tools and resources for practicing dance include:

Dance studio mirrors to correct postures and movements, ballet bars for support during training, online platforms like Dance Plug and Steezy for dance classes and tutorials, and software such as Dance Designer to plan and visualize choreographies.

4.4 Conclusion:

In this chapter, we explored dance as a form of cultural and artistic expression around the world. We understand the importance of dance not only as an art form but also as a vibrant industry that offers numerous career opportunities. We understand that dance is a powerful tool for communication and cultural preservation, and our understanding can open doors to various opportunities in the future. Each culture has unique dance styles that reflect its traditions, values and beliefs. Dance plays a significant role in various areas, including education, therapy, entertainment and advertising. Dance professionals can work as choreographers, dancers, teachers and therapists. Understanding dance theoretically and practically is essential to connect art to the reality of our life and society.

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