

THE STERLING BOOK OF

*Indian*  
*Classical Dances*



Shovana Narayan

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*The Sterling Book of: Indian Classical Dances*

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## Preface

India is endowed with a rich cultural heritage founded on the profound faith of the Indians on religion. Tracing down the history of Indian classical dances, one would find that the temples provided the platform for expression of many forms of art, particularly dance, which had ‘Bhakti’ or devotion as its underlying essence.

This book throws light to all the eight classical dance forms of India, highlighting their individual styles and presentation. The evolution of each dance form has been a gradual process. Each form underwent a mingling of drama, music and rhythm with emphasis on stylisation, individualism, concentration and elaboration of themes relating to major deities of Hinduism, as well as a development of a vocabulary of repertoire arranged in a systematic fashion.

In this study the author has made a synopsis of the dance forms, including their background in details. The interesting element that comes to light is that those dance forms which were practised by male artistes did not require any rechristening while few of the others needed a change of name to gain respectability. The social renaissance that ensued in the twentieth century, brought about a cultural resurgence, and the former glorified status of all the dance forms has been regained, which in turn has added colour to India’s identity in the international arena.

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## *Chapter One*

### Indian Classical Dances

Man had always been overwhelmed by the beauty of creation, which in turn, had inspired within him a feeling of humility before the ‘power’ behind all creations. Man felt an urge to express himself before Him by using the most readily available materials in translating his beliefs and emotions in various forms of art.

India is a subcontinent known for its rich cultural legacy and its profound religious and philosophical thoughts. The enmeshing of pre-Aryan, Aryan, as well as other historical trends have contributed to the evolution of a versatile and rich cultural heritage in India which has been founded on the abiding faith of the Indians in the divine power, and its worship, that found expression through dance.

‘Bhakti’ or devotion was the underlying essence of the various dance forms that developed in India. Through this representation of devotion, it sought to uplift both the viewer and the performer and therefore, the practice of performing arts was considered to be a high form of ‘yoga’. Herein, the dancer goes through all the states of meditation or ‘yoga’. Even the audience is not left untouched by it because the emotional process that occurs during any dance performance, transports the audience too along with the dancer, into a realm of beauty binding them together in the thread of ‘rasa’ (or ultimate bliss). It is this experience and realisation of spiritual ‘ananda’ (sublime joy) that is emotionally satisfying and which goes beyond mere entertainment.

Hindu mythology is full of tales on gods and goddesses. In Hinduism, God manifests himself in the ‘many’, thus creating diversity out of oneness, while at the same time, paradoxically, emphasising oneness within this diversity. Folk and mythological tales did not remain untouched. Most of the gods and goddesses, more often than not, are represented as artistes. Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, though seen in reverence, are also viewed

through various manifestations as dancers. Hence Lord Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, as the ‘Natwari’ represented the beauty, charm and sublimity of all dancers while Lord Shiva as the ‘Natraj’, himself, symbolised the striking dancer or the king of dancers. They became the subjects for enactment through dance.

Temples provided the platform for the birth and nurture of all the classical dances. Here tales from Indian mythologies were told through dance movements. Most of the forms were largely solo in delineation. Hardly any stage props were used. Thus the onus fell on the dancer for effective communication for which they utilised ‘mudras’ (hand gestures), ‘bhavas’, ‘rasas’ (moods and emotions) and expressions for enabling characters and situations to be described. Hence all dance forms were similar in their origin and ultimate aim, as they all originated as the outward manifestation of expression, borne out of a deep religious sentiment. They all ended with the taste of ‘rasa’. It was only the regional development that gave each dance form its characteristic flavour.

In the creation of the ‘rasa’ along with the prowess of the dancer, the personality and execution, aesthetic and spiritual involvement of the dancer cannot be set aside. Nardas, in his *Sangita Makaranda*, defines the attributes of a dancer as—

‘ange ‘na lamba ye’gditam haste, nartham pradarshayet.

netrabhyam bhavyedhatam padabhyam tala nirnayal’

implying that by his body he (dancer) indicated the general import of a song, with his hands its meaning, with his eyes he expresses the feelings and sentiments, and with his feet he keeps the ‘tala’ and time.

In an atmosphere that regarded expression through arts as an accepted way of life, since the pre-historic times in India, the first recorded codification in the field of arts was contained in the *Natyashastra*. According to the *Natyashastra*, it is believed that in the Himalayan region, at the instance of Lord Indra, Lord Brahma created the fifth veda, namely the *Natyaveda* that includes dance by incorporating ‘lyrics’ from the *Rigveda*, ‘music’ from the *Samaveda*, ‘histrionics’ from the *Yajurveda* and ‘rasa’ (emotions) from the *Atharvaveda*.

The *Natyashastra*, written approximately about two thousand years ago and which was believed to have been lost, was accidentally rediscovered by F. Hall in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Hall printed the relevant chapters of the *Natyashastra* as an appendix to his edition of the *Dasarupa*. The original Sanskrit text was subsequently brought out in 1894. Accredited to author sage Bharata, it is a treatise of the entire panorama of theatre seen in the Indian subcontinent encompassing the elements of dance, speech, music, instruments, etc. In the context of dance, this treatise on dramaturgy is a codification of all possible postures and gaits such as the ‘mandalas’ (10 modes of standing), ‘sthankas’ (6 modes of resting), ‘utplavanas’ (5 kinds of leaps), ‘bhramaris’ (7 kinds of pirouettes), ‘caris’ (32 kinds of gaits that include the ground movements known as ‘bhaumi’ and movements with one or both legs in the air known as ‘akasiki’), 28 single hand gestures (‘asamyukta hastas’), 24 combined hand gestures (‘samyukta hastas’) and 30 ornate gestures (‘nritta hastas’). In addition there are detailed codifications on various minor limbs such as eye and neck movements along with other important fields such as speech (‘vacika’), emotions (‘bhavas’ and ‘rasas’), types of heroes (‘nayaks’) and heroines (‘nayikas’) and musical instruments. Dance, music and drama were classified as ‘margi’ (that for the gods) or ‘desi’ (that for the people). Expressions in performing arts could be rendered through three limbs—‘nritta’ (pure dance denoting movements to rhythm), ‘nritya’ (movements employing histrionics) and ‘natya’ (drama). These representations were further categorised as ‘tandava’ (masculine) or ‘lasya’ (feminine) in nature.

Histrionic representation is known as ‘abhinaya’. Derived from the Sanskrit root ‘to convey’, it can be conveyed in four ways: namely, ‘angika’ (through body language), ‘vacika’ (through speech), ‘aharya’ (ornamentation) and ‘sattvika’ (of temperament and expression). Stories or legends were manifested visually as they became the subjects in temple sculptures and frescoes and dance forms all over the country. The ‘angika’ has, in turn, three sub-sections that are categorised as ‘anga’ referring to head, feet, hands and neck, the ‘pratyanga’ for arms, wrists and knees and the ‘upangas’ for eyes, brows and chin. The *Natyashastra* dwells on the deep relationship between ‘bhava’ (mood) and ‘rasa’ (sentiment), the two important limbs of ‘abhinaya’ (expression).

The essence of an individual identity within the classical dance forms had been instilled through a gradual process. A theatre production in the *Natyashastra* at the beginning of the Christian calendar, seemed operalike in nature for they included drama, music and dance. It was only with the passage of time that the three main elements namely drama, music and dance developed in individual streams coalescing together to give rise to various forms and schools within each stream of art. These formed the genesis of the various forms of classical dance traditions. Even in the development of dance styles, it is seen that early frescoes and the statue of the dancing girl from Mohenjodaro indicate an almost vertical stance in dance. Ornamentation, in terms of curvatures of movements and exaggerated bends or half-sitting positions became evident in sculptures from ninth century onwards. Thus, it can be concluded that this period provides the watershed for the development of characteristic strains of identity in each dance form.

In their journey towards classicality, each of the dance forms saw emphasis on stylisation, individualism, concentration and elaboration of themes relating to major deities of Hinduism, usage of Sanskrit verses and texts, incorporation of major ‘*karanas*’ and ‘*angaharas*’ of the *Natyashastra*, as well as, a development of a vocabulary of repertoire arranged in a systematic fashion. Most of the dance forms emphasised on the ‘*ekapatraharya anga*’—namely, enactment by a single artiste (‘*patra*’) taking the ‘*rasika*’ through the aesthetic and spiritual experience of ‘*natya*’, ‘*nritta*’ and ‘*nritya*’. In the delineation of dance, great emphasis is placed on the involvement of ‘*bhava*’ or mood, ‘*raga*’ or melody and ‘*tala*’ or rhythmic timing.

The various classical dance forms seek to depict the perfect movement of balance along the vertical median: namely, the ‘*brahmasutra*’, assuming geometrical shapes in time rather than in space. A coordinated movement of ‘*sthanaka*’ (position), ‘*cari*’ (gait) and ‘*nritta hasta*’ (gesture) is the ‘*karana*’. Combination of two ‘*karanas*’ gives a unit of movement that is known as the ‘*matrika*’ and a combination of a few ‘*matrikas*’ is then known as the ‘*angahara*’. The *Natyashastra* has listed out 108 ‘*karanas*’ and 32 ‘*angaharas*’.

The two important accompanying limbs of dance are music (‘*sangeet*’) and rhythm (‘*tala*’). In India, there are two widely known and predominant

musical systems—namely, the Hindustani (northern and central India) and the Carnatic (southern India) music. Both these forms are based on ‘ragas’. ‘Raga’ is a Sanskrit word that denotes colouring. In musical terms, it is a melodic scheme built on a structural combination of the seven basic notes and five supplementary notes. The various permutations of the available twelve notes along with quarter tones give rise to a host of ‘ragas’ and ‘raginis’ that may be pentatonic, hexatonic, septatonic, etc, in character. Thus it is no wonder that there are over 360 ragas and raginis in the family. The *Sangeet Ratnakar* has mentioned the existence of 664 ragas and raginis; however, many of them are not in common use.

A family tree of this pantheon of ragas has been made. According to the Carnatic music system, there are 72 ‘melas’ or family leads whereas in the Hindustani system, these were further tightened to 22 and which have been further narrowed down to 10 ‘thaats’. The same raga structure may be known by two different names within the two music systems. At the same time it is not necessary that the same name in the two systems would refer to the same raga. Another difference is that in the Hindustani system, according to masculine or feminine appeal of a raga structure, they have been classified as ‘ragas’ or ‘raginis’. Further more, there are definite ‘ragas’ for each hour and time of the day, for different seasons, as well as for different festive occasions in the Hindustani system. By and large, these distinctions are not available in the Carnatic music system.

Delineation of music can be ‘anibaddha’ (not bound and seemingly free) and ‘nibaddha’ ( bound). Inspired by sounds of nature, Abul Fazl in the sixteenth century sought to identify the source of the seven basic notes. According to him, the ‘shadaja’ or ‘sa’ emanated from the call of the peacock, ‘re’ or ‘rishabh’ from the call of ‘papiha’ bird, ‘ga’ or ‘gandhara’ from the bleat of a goat, ‘ma’ or ‘madhyama’ from the cry of a crane, ‘pa’ or ‘panchama’ from the sweet call of ‘koyal’ bird, ‘dha’ or ‘dhaivata’ from the croak of a frog and lastly ‘ni’ or ‘nishada’ from the trumpet of an elephant.

As mentioned earlier, the other important limb of dance is rhythm—namely, ‘tala’, that is a measurement of time. It is derived from the words ‘tal’, namely, palms of the hands that are used to clap in order to produce a beat. In Sharangadeva’s *Sangeet Ratnakar*, due importance has been given to ‘tala’ which can be seen in the following verse:

*talastalapratishthayamati dhayorghana smritah  
gitam vadyam tatha nrityam yatastale pratishthitam*

(Experts dwell on the importance of tala, rhythm, as it is closely interlinked with vocal, instrumental music and dance).

The ‘tala’ therefore consists of a prescribed number of beats and has an identifying feature in terms of its starting and finishing point called ‘sama’ and the classification of the sections, ‘doosri tali’ or ‘teesri tali’, as the case may be, and the ‘khali’. These sections also help to denote the point at which the ‘tala’ cycle is traversing at that particular moment and what is the distance in terms of time measure that is to be traversed before arriving at the ‘sama’. The ‘tala’ cycle plays an overwhelmingly important role in all the Indian classical dances. ‘Tala’ cycles could be of various number of beats, such as 4 to 18, maybe more or maybe less. ‘Tala’ cycles with fractions are also known and favoured by some artistes, such as a time cycle of  $5 \frac{1}{4}$  beats,  $7 \frac{1}{2}$  beats,  $15 \frac{1}{2}$  beats, etc. However, the all time favourites are ‘teentala’ that is also known as ‘tri-tala’ in the Hindustani system consisting of 16 beats or its counterpart, and the ‘aditala’ with 8 beats in the Carnatic system. In addition, other much used time cycles are those of 7 (‘rupak tala’), 10 (‘jhaptala’), 12 (‘ektala’ or ‘chautala’ depending on the accent and division of sub-sections) and 14 (‘dhamar tala’) beats.

Giving embodiment to music and rhythm are instruments that have been classified into four categories in the *Natyashastra*. These are: ‘tata vadya’ (string instruments), ‘sushira vadya’ (wind instruments), ‘avanaddha vadya’ (percussion instruments) and ‘ghana vadya’ (solid instruments).

The tracing of historical development of classical dance shows that the influence of Sanskrit was perceptible from the second century BC to about twelfth century BC since the classical Sanskrit works of Kalidasa’s (fourth century AD), as well as those of his successors, indicate the great degree to which these authors were well-versed in the knowledge of dance. By the time of Bhavabhuti in the eighth century AD, inaccurate use of dance terminologies perhaps indicated a slight weakening of the influence of *Natyashastra*. By the tenth century, Rajasekhara’s play *Karpurimanjari* indicated the popularity of musical play tradition that included dance. From the tenth to the thirteenth century, temples saw carving of dance sculptures.

Institutions revolving around women dancers were not uncommon in ancient India, whether known as ‘nagar badhus’ or as ‘devadasis’, ‘bhagtans’ or ‘kalavangtis’. With the decline of Buddhism and resurgence of Hinduism, temples were constructed. Along with it, came various rituals, amongst which was the institution of dedicating women servants to God. The marriage of a ‘devadasi’ to God was symbolic. However, it meant that a ‘devadasi’ could never be widowed. In a society that was taking undue and undignified advantage of a system, notional status was bestowed on her when her presence at auspicious occasions became part of a ritual. Historical evidences also show the existence of a number of excellent women dancers in the Gangetic belt such as Amrapali, Salvati, Kosha and Padmavati from sixth century BC onwards. Decorations of dancers were evident in all parts of India such as the title of ‘manikkam’ (ruby) that was given to a ‘natya ganika’ in southern India in the tenth century AD.

While tracing the history of our great dance traditions, in a newly found self-pride, it is not uncommon to resort to temples as basic pillars of evidence. Literary evidence, even though abounding in great volumes, containing valuable information, does not hit the eye immediately. Also, in this quest, the naked eye sometimes does not see through the layers of curtain that hide historical facts. Political developments, as well as the nature of materials used to build temples, play a significant role in seeing whether temples are surviving or not. This is particularly important for those regions where there are no surviving temples yet their dance traditions are as old, sometimes older, than those areas that have surviving temples. In this historical journey another feature that emerges is that present day insecurities or misplaced pride colour the viewing of a dance form according to the faith of the patrons and the kind of patronage that was bestowed on the practitioners of the dance forms.

Another notable feature that stands out is that those dance forms that have been named after a region, as well as those forms that have their origin and practice in male performers such as Kathakali, Kathak, Kuchipudi, did not have to undergo re-christening, in other words, change of names, in an effort towards gaining respectability.

At the turn of the twentieth century and till its middle, there were only four known classical dance styles in India—namely, Kathak from the Indo-Gangetic belt, Bharatanatyam from Tamil Nadu, Andhra and Karnataka,

Kathakali from Kerala and Manipuri from the north-eastern state of Manipur. Three other classical dance forms, namely, Odissi from the eastern state of Orissa, Kuchipudi from the south-eastern state of Andhra Pradesh and Mohiniyattam from Kerala were subsequent additions in the post independent era. In the year 2002, the Sangeet Natak Akademi has recognised ‘Sattriya’ from Assam as a classical dance form.

A question can be asked as to why some dance forms such as the Kudiyattam or Chhau or even Raas Leela, are still not recognised as ‘classical’ in spite of containing quite a few of the qualifying features. There could be various arguments, some convincing and some not. But it is a matter of time when perhaps, with concerted efforts, they too would be enveloped within the classical fold.

The various classical dance forms have been discussed in alphabetical sequence in the pages that follow namely, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniyattam, Odissi and Sattriya.

# *Chapter Two*

## Bharatanatyam

### **Background**

Bharatanatyam is chiefly associated with the southern regions of India comprising Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Till the midthirties of the twentieth century, this dance form was known by the name of ‘Dasiattam’ or ‘Sadirattam’. Thereafter it was rechristened and popularised by its new name Bharatanatyam. ‘Dasiattam’ was the dance of the ‘devadasis’ (i.e., servants of God). The tradition of dances in southern India can be gleaned from the classic Tamil literary work *Silappadikaram* (the Epic of the Anklet) by Illango between the second and fifth century AD. This story revolved around Madhavi, a dancer (‘natya ganika’). The Bhagwata Mela Natakams played a predominant role in the development of the dance form.

Historically, with the ensuing of the golden period of Hinduism, especially after the sixth century AD, temple-building saw a great spurt bringing within its fold the institution of ‘devadasis’, namely, lady devotees dedicated to the service of temples. Women dancers fell into two predominant categories: ‘devadasis’ and ‘rajadasis’, the latter also known as ‘alankardasis’. Women entered this profession primarily in case of two instances—one, when they were voluntarily dedicated to the profession by their parents and the second, when compelled due to pressure of circumstances. The duties of the ‘devadasis’ included fanning idols of deities with a ‘chamar’ and to carry the sacred lamp, ‘kumbarti’, in a procession. Some were also required to sing and dance before the Gods. This gave the dance form its name. ‘Dasiattam’, as the name suggests, was danced chiefly by women, for they were considered as harbingers of luck. As they were ‘married’ to God, they could never be widowed.

According to the southern treatise, *Natanathi Vadya Ranjanam*, male dancers were not encouraged as they were considered to be harbingers of

bad luck. Daughters of ‘devadasis’ usually followed their mother’s footsteps whereas their sons became accompanying musicians or gurus or ‘nattuvunars’. But the existence of the word ‘kuttar’ in early Tamil works shows that there was the involvement of male dancers. Perhaps, these male dancers participated in social, victory or celebratory dances and not as dancers dedicated to temples.

‘Devadasis’ received great patronage from the Chola rulers between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly, during the reign of the Chola ruler, Rajaraja I. This patronage was continued by the Pandya rulers. The interest of such patrons saw a number of temple sculptures relating to dance. These are particularly evident in the Brihadeswara temple at Tanjavur, Gangasikonda Choliswaram temple at Cholapuram, Meenakshi temple at Madurai and the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram.

With the expanding influence of Muslim rule in the north, southern regions were also affected and the Hoysala and the Pandya kingdoms witnessed decline. But this did not affect the practice of ‘dasiattam’ to a great extent. It once again received patronage and saw great developments with the establishment of the powerful Vijayanagar Empire. The Deccani Sultans themselves being great patrons of art, devoted themselves to the task of propagation and enrichment of ‘dasiattam’. This interest of Muslim rulers saw the introduction of items such as the ‘salamu’ (which has now been discarded) and ‘tillana’. ‘Sadirattam’, the name by which ‘dasiattam’ was known in the courts ('sadr'), received a definite shape in the hands of these rulers.

Reference to ‘devadasis’, their customs and training, has been made by Methwold who, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, visited Golconda, then ruled by a Muslim ruler. Similar accounts have been given by Domingo Paes, a Portuguese diplomat to the court of Vijayanagar Empire, and others like Fernao Nuniz and Abbe Dubois. Even though all ‘devadasis’ were attached to temples, yet over a period of time, those who were increasingly patronised by courts came to be known also as ‘rajadasis’ and those who danced primarily for social occasions as ‘alankaradasis’.

The institution of ‘devadasis’ went through many vicissitudes. Meant to be an institution whereby temples would be kept clean and at the same time rituals would be performed, it also provided the opportunity of providing an

alternate patronage and way of life towards the betterment of the inner souls of the ‘devadasis’ themselves as is borne out by the two following verses extracted from the *Bhavishyapurana* and the *Padmapurana*.

*veshyam dabakam yastu dadyat sooryaya bhaktitah  
sa gachchhet paramam sthanam yatra tishthati bhanuman*

(Bhavishyapurana)

*krita devaye datavya dheerenaklishtakarmana  
kalpakalam bhavetsvargo nripo vaso mahadhani*

(Padmapurana)

Both these verses exhort rulers to dedicate girls to temples so as to ensure their own place in heaven (‘suryalok’).

However, they succumbed to the baser needs of society in a bid for survival that also saw their gradual marginalisation from the mainstream. But the credit of preservation of the tradition of dance goes to them. This tradition was kept alive by the ‘devadasis’ till the beginning of the twentieth century when, once again, due to new social values, influenced by Victorian prejudices of the colonisers, ‘devadasis’ became synonymous with temple prostitution and, therefore, the practice was banned by a Government legislation. This period was also one of social ferment as the anti-Brahminical movement was on. The two combined, created a fertile ground for search of identity. It was at this time that the Madras Music Academy in 1931 took up the cause of the survival of the dance form. The first momentous step was the rechristening of dance from ‘Dasiattam’ or ‘Sadirattam’ to ‘Bharatanatyam’. The new name was derived from the discovery of the theatrical treatise, Bharata’s *Natyashastra*, and proved to be a brilliant psychological measure. Enlightened members of society such as E.Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale took up the related tasks of formalisation and stylisation and finally gave it a noble status. Rukmini Arundale, who took to dance not only when she was thirty, but also in the thirties of the twentieth century, was the first Brahmin dancer.

These efforts paved the way for women from the upper social strata to take to dance thereafter, echoing part of the scenario of yore when Queen Santala danced in the pillared halls of Halebid and Belur about nine

hundred years ago. The task of sanitisation of the newly rechristened Bharatanatyam, has been attributed chiefly to Rukmini Devi by disassociating the ‘devadasi’s’ dance from erotic and overtly romantic overtones and making it more pristine and sombre. Interestingly, the caste of the main performers have changed hands, namely, from the lower caste ‘devadasis’ to now a brahmin stronghold.

However, prior to the steps taken by E.Krishna Iyer and the Madras Music Academy, the earliest task of redefining the content and formalisation of the repertoire of ‘dasiattam’ was carried out by the four Tanjore brothers known as ‘Tanjore Quartet’, by the names of Chinniyah, Punniah, Vadivelu and Shivanandan. It was rather unfortunate that the licentious life styles of the ‘devadasis’, in spite of the art that they represented, caught the attention of the puritanical colonial powers who dubbed the dance of ‘devadasis’ of the area as ‘Tanjore Nautch’, since in the past, the Maratha court of Tanjore was particularly known for its patronage to dance and dancers.

Literary content of Bharatanatyam was provided not only by the Nayanmars (Shaivites), the early worshippers who were devotees of Lord Shiva, but also by the Alwars (Vaishnavites) whose influence grew when Vaishnavism, with its cult around Lord Krishna, spread its wings especially from the tenth century onwards. The saint-poets of later medieval period and of the early modern period of Indian history further enriched the literary repertoire. All these works laid down the foundations of the present repertoire of the dance form.

## **Salient Features**

The dance form conceives the body in triangles. The shoulders to the waist form an inverted triangle while the second triangle is conceived through the outstretched knees to the heels placed together. Even though the ‘samabhanga’ (linear position) is first employed, it quickly descends into the familiar ‘ardhamandali’ or the ‘araimandali’ (half-sitting position with outstretched knees) that imparts the imagery of triangles. The hand movements are linear in nature and the mood of the dancer is grave and serene.

While doing an ‘adavu’, the hands are stretched to the fullest. The ‘adavu’ is the basic unit of dance and is considered to be a derivative of the ‘karana’ described in the *Natyashastra*. There are about fifteen groups of ‘adavus’ with further sub-groups within them. A series of short brilliant ‘adavus’ form the ‘tirmanas’. The ‘tirmanas’ usually explore the range of ‘jatis’ that are complex rhythmical patterns.

In its rendering, the dancer follows one basic principle, namely, that every action that is done, say to the right, has to be mirrored on the left side too, for it is believed that the right side representing the masculine or the ‘tandava’ has to be balanced by the feminine or the ‘lasya’ assumed to be on the left side. This arises from the concept of ‘Ardhanareshwar’ wherein Lord Shiva is represented on his left as a woman and on his right as a male, both indivisible parts of a ‘whole’. The adornment of the head by brooches with sun and moon shapes seems to have been influenced by the following Sanskrit verse:

*angikam bhuvanam yasya vacikam sarvavaangmayam  
aharyam candrataradi ta numaha sattvikam shivam*

(We bow to the sattvika Shiva whose ‘angika’ (body) is the world, ‘vacika’ is the entire language and whose ‘aharya’ (adornment) are the moon, the stars, etc.)

## Format of Presentation

An evening’s repertoire would first feature the ‘alarippu’ that is derived from the Telugu word ‘alarimpu’, meaning ‘to decorate with flowers’. As the name suggests, it is an offering to the Lord through pure dance and is danced to the recitation of the ‘sollu-kuttu’ or rhythmic syllables. This item unfolds some of the basic positions employed in the dance form where it begins with the dancer adopting a stance where the feet are placed slightly apart and the knees are bent outwards. Horizontal movement of the head and eyes followed by a sequence of ‘adavus’ that are units of dance patterns and postured movements, are danced thereafter. The ‘alarippu’, generally short, ends with a crisp ‘tirmana’.

‘Jatiswaram’ derived from the words ‘jatis’ (time measures) and ‘swaram’ (musical notation) is again a pure dance sequence involving

rhythmic patterns, ‘adavus’, but accompanied by a melodic structure. Next follows the ‘Sabdam’ that is an expressional piece interpreting the text in adoration of the deity. The ‘Sabdam’, in a way, is a prelude to the ‘Varnam’ that embodies alternate pieces of artful expression, melodic richness and technical brilliance. It usually consists of four parts. The ‘Varnam’ tests the interpretative and rhythmic skill of the dancer and is the focal point of a dancer’s recital.

It is time for the dancer to now dance the purely expressional piece, ‘Padam’, that are usually seven line lyrical songs on the theme of love. Here the ‘pallavi’ or the theme line is repeated many times as the dancer emotes out the ‘sanchari bhavas’ (series of pictures or conceptions to elaborate the main theme). Other expressional pieces of a Bharatanatyam repertoire also include the ‘javeli’ (expressional piece dealing with anger and frustration of a person in love) and the ‘kirtana’ (emphasis on devotional text) that may be danced, if the dancer so desires. The repertoire has an equal balance of items devoted to Lord Shiva as well as Lord Vishnu and his various incarnations. Most of the items are usually performed at medium tempo.

The ‘tillana’, a brilliant abstract pure dance based on rhythm and melody, is usually performed as the finale item. Sculptured poses and footwork are its hallmarks. The performance ends with a short ‘slokam’, a concluding prayer to the Lord.

## Music and Costume

Musical accompaniment to the dance includes the ‘nattuvanar’ (the conductor reciting rhythmic patterns, often wielding a pair of cymbals that strike out beats, i.e. ‘talams’ and rhythmic patterns), percussionist on the ‘mridangam’ (horizontal drum), singer, flautist and violinist. Sometimes the ‘veena’ (a plucked string instrument) and the ‘ghatam’ (an earthenware pot) are also used to accompany the dance. The accompanying music follows the Carnatic style of rendering.

The costume is rich and is a modern stitched adaptation of the sari worn between the legs. The dancer is heavily bejewelled. On the head the dancer wears a head-set (thalai saman) that has a moon and the sun adorning the head on either side of the middle parting. A ‘rakodi, namely a circular piece, is placed on the crown of the head. The hair is usually worn in a long

braid decked with white jasmine flowers and orange kanakambharam and a ‘kunjalam’ at the end. ‘Mattal’ and ‘jhimki’ attached to the ‘thodu’ adorn the ears. Nose rings are optional. ‘Chokker’ or ‘muthu malai’, the neck-hugging necklace, are worn along with the long chain known as ‘kasumalai’. Armlets (‘vankis’) and bangles adorn the arms and wrists of the dancer. A golden metal belt ‘odyanam’ is worn around the waist and silver anklets known as ‘kolusu’ on the ankles. A belt of thirty to forty ankle bells is tied around each ankle.

## *Chapter Three*

### Kathak

#### **Background**

Kathak is the acknowledged classical dance form of northern and central India comprising the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, northern regions of Gujarat and Maharashtra and some of the areas that are now in Pakistan. It derives its name from the Sanskrit words ‘katha’ (story) and ‘kathakar’ (storyteller). It was born in the temples of the Indo-Gangetic belt when the temple priests, while giving sermon to the gathered congregation, entered into a state of rhapsody and started utilising song and dance as a ritual for working. Rooted therefore in Brahmanical Hinduism, it enacted and interpreted familiar classical mythology and folklore, with a familiar code of gesture and expression. Kathak finds mention in the Adiparva section of the religious epic Mahabharata.

*kathakascapare rajaṇ sravaṇasca vanaukasah  
divyakhyānani ye capi pathanti madhuram dvijah*

(O Lord, Arjun, on his departure to the forests was accompanied to the edge of the forest by the kathaks, who through their graceful renderings of stories, sweet to the ears and, feast for the eyes, captivated the hearts of all!)

Within the group of kathaks, there are two streams—one who narrate stories through recitation—namely, the ‘pathakas’, and the other who does the same through enactment, the ‘dharakas’. Kathaks in the context of Indian classical dance, belong to the ‘dharaka’ stream. Indication that the kathaks were brahmins are given in the *Anusasnikaparva* of the Mahabharata. The verse dwells on various categories of brahmins. According to this source, it can be inferred that though the kathaks had fallen from their prior superior rung within their own caste, yet they still

ranked above those brahmins who were relegated to conduct the ‘sraddha’ ceremonies only.

The legacy of enactment of stories in the Indo-Gangetic belt can be seen in the ‘kushilav’ tradition that is associated with Lav and Kush, sons of Lord Rama. According to a legend described in the *Natyashastra*, dance was first taught on earth by celestial beings at the behest of King Nahusha of Pratishthanpur, an area identified as Jhusi on the banks of the holy Ganges, near Allahabad.

Dance received a great fillip during the reign of the post-Mauryan rulers, especially the Gupta rulers, with their capital at Patliputra, and later the Pala rulers. Chinese travellers like FaHien (AD 399 to 414) and HiuenTsang (seventh century) have commented on the exalted state of music and dance in the region. Between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century, the ‘Bhakti movement’ (religious renaissance) brought in an element of romanticism. Portrayed through popular tales of Radha and Krishna, human emotions of devotion, yearning, grief and joy were given prominence.

Evolving further from temples to the courts in the Mughal period, Kathak was given a new impetus. The first introduction in the Mughal courts was due to the interest of Jodhabai, wife of Emperor Akbar, who was a Hindu Rajput princess from Rajasthan. This sensitivity was evident in her son, Jahangir, too. However, the fullest expression of patronage came later with Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Oudh (also known as Awadh, region around Lucknow located in Uttar Pradesh), whose personal interest in Kathak urged him to learn this dance from a Brahmin guru, Thakur Prasad. The latter sowed the seeds of the Lucknow ‘gharana’ that was to make a mark in times to come with outstanding dancers in each of its seven generations. The Jaipur ‘gharana’ is another prominent Kathak gharana having more than one lineage in Rajasthan and also boasts of several Kathak stalwarts. The other well-known schools of Kathak, are the Benaras and the Raigarh gharana.

When the Brahmin kathaks danced in the Mughal courts, there was a clash of interest. Used as they were to dancing before the statue of their Hindu Gods, these Brahmin dancers could not afford to antagonise their Muslim patron by asking that a statue of a Hindu God be placed in the court. They found a compromise in the ‘tulsi mala’ or a ‘rudraksha mala’,

that symbolised Lord Krishna or Lord Shiva respectively, and which they placed before them while dancing. Chronicles of the British period have described such situations.

Even though predominantly danced by male Brahmins, Kathak's adoption by women temple dancers, though little in number, was not unknown. Records of Chinese scholars, historical records like the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana, recorded chronicle of Abul Fazal during Akbar's reign, and later, British census and records mention their existence. However they have been referred to as 'kalavangtis' and 'bhagtans' rather than 'devadasis' even though they played a similar kind of role in the temples.

For its literary content, Kathak relies heavily on verses from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, works of fourth century poet Kalidasa, as well as works of Bhakti Movement's Ashtachhap poets—Surdas, Nanddas, Parmanand, Kumbhadas, Krishnadas, Chaturbhujdas, Govindaswami and Chittaswami, as well as the great scholar saints from the twelfth century to the nineteenth century such as Jayasi, Swami Haridas, Raskhan, Kabir, Vidyapati, Bihari, Nardas and Padmakar. Contemporary Hindi poetry has now been added to its repertoire. Dancers of the Lucknow gharana lay emphasis on the poetic works of Bindadin Maharaj.

*Natyashastra* by Bharatmuni, *Abhinaya Darpana* by Nandikeshwara, *Sri Hastamuktavali* (a sixteenth century treatise on hand gestures as utilised in dance) by Maharaja Shubhankar of Mithila, the *Nartananirnaya* by Pandarika Vitthala, *Varnaratnakar* (a treatise on music and dance) by Jyotishwar Thakur and *Ragatarangini* by Lochan are some of the treatises that are related to Kathak as is evident in the usage of stance, poses, hand gestures and repertoire.

Even though the philosophical heights of earlier kathaks have watered down considerably through its historical evolution, yet some remnants expressed in physical terms are still available. The Hindu belief in the cycle of rebirth and the cyclic nature of various actions was expressed in dance through the pirouette. However, in the medieval period of Indian history the pirouette became a pièce de résistance of showcasing technical virtuosity. Misrepresentation of Kathak by the popular film world of Bombay has cast a dusty veil on the temple origin of the dance form and its hereditary Hindu

Brahmin practitioners such as the great legendary artistes belonging to the Lucknow and Jaipur ‘gharanas’ even during the Muslim period. Efforts of enlightened dance practitioner-scholars like Madame Menaka helped to put the dignity and status of the dance form in its right perspective. The pace is slow, for the missionary zeal, that is so evident in the practitioners, scribes and fellow countrymen of other dance forms, is still to pick up in this case.

## **Salient Features**

Kathak adopts a vertical median in execution and goes through all possible positions, stances of movements as utilised in life itself. Essentially adopting the ancient vertical stance, use of half-sitting and bent positions are not known. These are used as part of dynamic movements. In terms of the stances adopted, it is seen historically that sculptures between the third century BC till fifth century AD show an almost vertical stance, not unlike what is seen in Kathak today. There were no exaggerated ‘ardhamandali’ or the ‘tribhangi’ for a considerable length of time except as part of a dynamic movement. However, sculptures from fifth century AD till about the twelfth century AD do reveal usages of curvaturesque poses for a considerable length of time, namely, greater usage of ‘ardhamandali’ (half-sitting), ‘tribhangi’ (exaggerated hip deflection) and ‘urdhavajanu’ (highly raised leg) positions.

The next phase, namely, from twelfth century AD till about the nineteenth century AD, shows a co-existence of the above two periods as is evident from the paintings of the time, whether during the reigns of Akbar, Jehangir or of Shah Jehan. However, from the nineteenth century onwards, there is a re-appearance of the near vertical stance that again is commonly seen in Kathak today. Perhaps it indicates that though brahmin Kathak practitioners were known to have danced in the courts between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, yet it was only when Thakur Prasad, a brahmin priest, originally from a temple near Allahabad, became the guru of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah at Awadh or Oudh (present day Lucknow), that visible changes in stance came about. Perhaps, the influence of the etiquette prevalent in the air during the late medieval period of Indian history, may have also been one of the underlying reasons in this dynamic process.

But from the twentieth century, the taboo against usage of curvaturesque poses has disappeared and the status quo of the position as it existed between the twelfth and the nineteenth century, is slowly gaining ground. However, the basic underlying principle for the starting and resting positions, remain ‘samabhanga’, i.e. mirroring real life itself.

The basic ‘mudra’ of Kathak is standing erect with the feet placed together and the hands pointing towards each other at the chest level. This position represents an arrow that is ready to travel upwards, released from its bow in its journey to meet the Infinite. The two hands towards each other at the chest level indicate harmonisation and balance essential in life, as well as meeting of the real and spiritual hearts. In the dance form, while the hands are stretched fully, it stops short from the elbow bone straining out, thus embodying grace with strength.

This is the only classical dance form where the dancer himself or herself conducts the programme and even recites the rhythmic patterns before executing it through dance. This is known as the ‘padhant’. This is in keeping with the storyteller legacy of the dance form wherein narration preceded enactment. It also highlights the ‘pranayama’ (breath control) aspect of ‘yoga’ that is practised by all kathaks.

Till the late fifties, some of the kathaks did not hesitate to show their prowess of being able to dance on the edge of a brass-plate, on a bed of ‘gulal’ (red powder), on beds of nails, swords and ‘batasha’ (sugar puffs), feats that have been mentioned by Abul Fazl in his *Ain-e-Akbari*. But owing to criticism by some sections of art critics in the late fifties of the twentieth century, the performers refrained from incorporating these in their performance repertoires. Of the various acts, dancing on the edge of a brass plate existed for a longer time in kathak, which has also been discontinued in the last few decades! Ironically, dancing on the edge of a brass plate still continues to thrive without criticism in Kuchipudi.

## **Format of Presentation**

Predominantly, Kathak has eight major features, all of which are represented while performing. Thus an evening’s programme begins with a ‘sloka’ or ‘vandana’ wherein obeisance is paid to the Lord. The ‘nritta’ section follows this. Herein a ‘tala’ is taken up by the dancer for detailed

rendering through a breathtaking array of rhythmic patterns, first at a slow tempo ('vilambit'), then at medium tempo ('madhya laya') and finally at the fast tempo ('drut'). While performing these rhythmic sequences, namely, 'thaat', 'amad', 'tora', 'tukra', 'paran', or 'pirmilu', the time cycle is maintained by a musical melody known as the 'lehera'. This also induces the element of 'upaj' or improvisation in the rhythmic sequences. A notable feature is that this section illustrates the 'tala' danced by the dancer that is distinct from compositions set to a particular 'tala' structure.

As a prelude to the expressional sequences, the 'gat nikas' follows where 'chalis' or 'caris' or gaits executed by kathaks, as an indivisible part of the repertoire, fully mirrors the gait classification of the *Natyashastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana*. Usually done as a prelude to a 'gat-bhava', it is indicative of the type of character that is about to be enacted. The 'gat bhava' is performed next wherein a story is told through the language of dance movements and histrionic expressions alone, highlighting the use of the full range of hand gestures and 'navarasas'.

Expressional interpretative items based on text such as 'thumri' and 'bhajan' follow this. 'Thumris' are literary gems around the nayak-nayika, i.e. hero-heroine sequences, the all-time favourite being Lord Krishna and Radha, while a 'bhajan' is a devotional interpretative sequence. 'Chaturang' ('four colours'), a collage of four different structures involving melody, interpretative and pure rhythmic sequences, as well as the 'dhrupad' and 'dhamar' that are grave in nature, may be taken up if so desired by the dancer. For the finale, the brilliancy of 'tarana' rich in its melodic and rhythmic structures is presented before the audience, which is topped by breathtaking panorama of complicated footwork ('tatkar'). The brilliant 'tatkar' and the long sustained pirouettes are unique to the Kathak dance alone.

The repertoire is quite exhaustive for it also consists of short musical compositions known as 'swarmalas' (in other words, a garland of musical notes) and recited texts or verses to the accompaniment of drums, known as 'kavitts'.

Nowhere is such an exploration of sounds—of nature, musical instruments, or those emanating from different placement of the feet resulting in rhythmic patterns is as visible as it is in Kathak. Rhythmic

patterns based on sound of dance syllables alone are categorised as ‘amads’ and ‘natwaris’ (the latter believed to have emanated from the dance of Lord Krishna after subduing the poisonous river serpent, Kaliya) whereas those based on syllables of dance and tabla are categorised as ‘toras’ and ‘tukras’. Rhythmic patterns based on syllables of ‘pakhawaj’ or ‘mridanga’ are called ‘parans’ while those that incorporate a melody of sounds of nature, percussion instruments such as ‘tabla’ and ‘pakhawaj’ and dance are called ‘primilus’ or ‘parimelus’. While dancing the rhythmic patterns, it is imperative that every syllable of the pattern should be clearly enunciated through the sound of ‘ghunghurus’ or ankle bells and the feet.

In the ‘gat-nikas’, full depth of expression of that particular movement, has to hit the viewer with economy of actions, somewhat akin to a Japanese painting that lays stress on economy of lines. This also comes through with full force in the delineation of the unique and difficult, ‘bhava batana’ that can be described as the pièce de résistance of ‘abhinaya’. Once again, precision, inward emotional journey, internalisation of dance is called for before Kathak can manage to do full justice to this item as it demands interpretation of emotion of a word or a sentence from the text with economy of movements. Thus emphasis on the use of ‘nayan-bhava’ (through eyes) and suggestive gesture is highlighted. It, in a way, enjoins the dancer to embody the ‘uttama’ (the highest and noblest) character in enactment. Also highlighted is the treatment for it demands going beyond the mere literal translation in dance language but exhorts the Kathak dancer to explore layers of referential, symbolic and philosophical interpretations.

The repertoire of Lucknow ‘gharana’ is predominantly devoted to Lord Krishna mirroring the personal belief of the founding family of this gharana. The Jaipur ‘gharana’s’ repertoire, on the other hand, is equally rich in items dedicated to Lord Shiva and to Lord Krishna. This is because Bhanuji, one of the pillars in the founding of the Jaipur gharana was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. The other two ‘gharanas’, namely, Benaras and Raigarh also lay equal emphasis on items devoted to Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna.

## **Music and Costume**

A Kathak performance is usually accompanied by a ‘tabla’ (a pair of vertical drums), which provides the main percussion support followed by the ‘pakhawaj’, the popular name of the north Indian ‘mridanga’. The other musicians include the vocalist playing the ‘harmonium’, ‘sarangi’ (a bow string instrument), ‘sitar’ (a plucked string instrument with frets) or a ‘sarod’ (another variety of plucked string instrument without frets) and flute. The north Indian style of classical music, namely Hindustani music, forms the pillar of the accompanying music.

The costume is a heavy ornate version of the costume of the people of the Indo-Gangetic region. While the bejewelled women wear ‘lehengacholi’ (ankle length skirt and blouse) or ‘churidar-angarkha’ (tight-fitting pants and long dress), male dancers sport a ‘dhoti’ or ‘churidar-kurta’ (tight-fitting pants and long tunic). Existence of both these costumes are evident in the sculptures of third century BC and fifth century AD. Jewellery comprises the ‘tika’, which adorns the parting of the dancer’s hair, large earrings (‘jhumkas’ or ‘kanphool’) a close fitting necklace (‘chokar’ or ‘hasuli’) along with a long chain (‘kantha-mala’), a nose ring (‘nath’ or ‘nathiya’) which could be optional, and a ‘kamarbandh’ for the waist. The fingers are ornated with beautiful stone-embedded rings (‘angoothi’) while the delicate wrists are covered with bangles (‘churi’) or (‘kangan’).

Discussion on Kathak is incomplete without a word on ‘ghunghurus’ or ankle bells. Perhaps, this is the only dance form where a dancer wears hundred to two hundred ankle bells on each ankle. Conforming to the precepts prescribed in the treatise, *Abhinaya Darpan*, the following verse states:

*suswarashca surupashca sookshma nakshatradevatah  
kinkinyah kansyarachita ekaikangulikantaram  
badhniyaannilasootren granthibhishca dridham punah  
shatdwayam shatam vapi padyornatyakarini*

thereby meaning that the ‘ghunghuroos’ or ‘kinkinis’ (tiny bells) should be made of bronze and should be having a pleasant tinkling sound. At least a hundred or two hundred should be bound around each ankle with blue thread in tight knots. The reason for such a practice is attributed to the dance of the ‘kathaks’ as temple priests inside the sanctum sanctorum.

## *Chapter Four*

### Kathakali

#### **Background**

Kathakali, the classical dance form of Kerala in southwest India actually means “story-play” for it is derived from the words ‘katha’ (story) and ‘kali’ (play). It is usually performed in the open under the canopy of the starlit night. The light from the shining grass oil lamps gives the character of the dance play a supernatural look which is highlighted by the elaborate costumes, facial make-up and headgear which are so characteristic of this dance style. This dance form is a synthesis of many arts and traditions, pre-Aryan and Aryan, within the framework of the Sanskrit theatre. With the waning of the need for self-preservation and therefore, the extended practice of ‘kalaris’ as they became increasingly objects of stylisation and entertainment, the warrior clan, Nayars, however kept the knowledge of kalari and Kathakali alive. In a way, the position of the knees and the soles of the feet that are employed in Kathakali is a logical extension of a combat position for they serve to absorb the shock of landing.

The Aryan influence of story-telling was seen in the recitation, known as Chakyar-kuttu, by the Chakyars who claimed descent from the ‘sutras’ of Mahabharata. The Chakyar-kuttu tradition finds mention in the second century literary work, *Silappadikaram* (Epic of the Anklet). Later, two or three Chakyars started performing together giving rise to the tradition of Kudiyattam. This new dance drama received patronage from most of the rulers, notable being the Perumal dynasty. Accompanying a Chakyar recitation was a drummer belonging to the Nambiar caste. The performers of Kudiyattam could be both men and women.

The origin of Kathakali is attributed to the Zamorin of Calicut in the seventeenth century for having designed Krishnattam plays, and to the Raja of Kottarakara who designed the Ramanattam plays. By the sixteenth century, Jaideva’s *Geet Govinda* had found its way into the repertoire of

Kudiyattam. In 1650, the Zamorin of Calicut, inspired by a vision of Lord Krishna who, according to local belief, presented the Zamorin with a peacock feather, authored a play around Lord Krishna titled ‘Krishnapadi’. When presented as a full-fledged dance drama, lasting eight nights, it was called ‘Krishnattam’. With the passage of time, the staging of Krishnattam in the temple, especially Guruvayur Temple, became a ritual.

Hearing its fame, the ruler of Kottarakara sought to have the Krishnattam troupe stage the play in his kingdom. However, the Zamorin refused to oblige. This refusal saw the designing of the Ramanattam, plays woven around Lord Rama, by the Raja of Kottarakara. Tampuran, ruler of Kottayam, later added other themes to the repertoire such as themes from the Mahabharata, *Shiva Purana*, *Bhagwada Purana*, etc. Because of the expanding repertoire, the name was changed to a comprehensive one that is ‘Kathakali’. All these plays were written in Malayalam, a language that was understood by the common man unlike the Sanskrit recitation by the Chakyars, and were performed over eight nights.

The later Maharajas of Travancore also patronised the dance form in all possible manners including their scholarly prowess. Maharaja Karthika Tirunal, who ruled towards the end of the eighteenth century, not only wrote seven plays but also wrote a treatise on dance called ‘Balaram Bharatam’. Later his grand nephew, Prince Aswathi also wrote four plays. Maharaja Swathi Rama Varma is supposed to have written over seventyfive padams for Kathakali. Other works within the Kathakali repertoire include those written by poet Thampi and Thankachi in the late eighteenth century. Later, the task of revival and propagation was left in the hands of the Malayali poet, Vallathol Narayana Menon, with the establishment of Kerala Kala Mandalam.

## **Make-up, Costume and Music**

Colour of the base make-up and costume inclusive of headgear (‘mudi’) and beard (‘tadi’) of the dancers are important for they lend a meaning. Equally important are the categorisation of characters. For example, ‘pacca’ represent the heroic, kingly and divine, ‘katti’ represents the demonic with noble characteristics, ‘kari’, the black type stands for a demoness, ‘tadi’ stands for the bearded, ‘teppu’ refers to those painted representing a special

class and ‘minukku’ with realistic make-up suggests female characters, ‘brahmans’, messengers or the common man. In other words, green suggests a god-like character, red a demonic character and yellow a wondrous character. Some characters are seen sporting a ridge-like white beard, made of ‘chutti’ or rice paste and lime, and looking like layers of paper that is glued to the face. Other beards are made of jute. Among the bearded variety too, there are the white beards or the ‘veluppu tadi’ signifying good luck, the black beard or ‘karuppu tadi’ signifying barbaric forest hunters and the red beard or ‘chokanna tadi’ for demonic characters. The finishing touches are provided with two white pith knobs on the tip of the nose and the forehead that are known as ‘chuttipuvvu’. The more demonic the character, the larger is the size of these knobs. Sometimes, these could be accompanied by fangs.

The costume of Kathakali is as unique as its make-up. The dancers wear full skirts that are multi-layered, reaching just below the knees while the top is a full-sleeved, high-necked jacket covered with jewellery covering the entire front up to the waist. The skirts are normally white in colour and have a striped border while the colour of the jacket depends on the character being depicted. Only the skirts of demonic characters are either black or dark coloured. Some of the characters may wear hats that bear strong resemblance to the early Portuguese hats. Minukku characters wear no skirt but sport a ‘dhoti’ instead. The female characters wear full skirts with a coloured jacket on top, again laden with necklaces that cover the entire front. On the head a long veil covers the bun that is made towards one side of the head. Wrists, forearms and shoulders of both men and women characters are decorated with jewellery. Some of the principal characters wear, in addition to the multi-layered necklaces, additional scarfs with bordered ends, bound at intervals ending in tassellike shape, sporting a mirror at one end, called ‘uttariyam’. Finally, a set of silver coloured long finger nails are worn on the left hand. The ankle bells in Kathakali numbering twenty or so, are not worn at the ankles but are tied just below the knees.

The musical instruments accompanying a Kathakali performance are—three kinds of drums called the ‘chenda’, ‘madallam’ and ‘edakka’, large cymbals and a vocalist who strikes a metal gong. The ‘sopan’ style of music within the fold of Carnatic musical system is predominantly used.

## **Salient Features**

In this dance form, the body is essentially straight with knees in the ‘ardhamandali’ or the ‘ukkara’ (half-sitting) position. The feet are placed apart with outer soles touching the ground, with the toes curled, in a position known as the ‘mandalasthana’. The dancer usually moves in rectangles and squares with clear extensions of the leg. In no other dance is the classification of the glances as visible as in Kathakali. It emphasises on ‘netra-abhinaya’ for here not only should the eye be able to keep open for incredibly long periods without blinking but also be able to interpret random passages through eyes alone. Indeed, the ‘nokki kanuka’ is an interpretation of the text through the eyes alone before enactment. Similarly, the twitching of nerves comes only through long hours of practice for portrayal of violent anger is to be accompanied by twitching of the surrounding eye muscles. Following suit is the movement of the eyeballs that is practised within Kathakali alone.

Some of the hallmarks and exercises practised by a Kathakali performer relate to the feet or ‘kal sadhakam’, to the body, that is, ‘mai sadhakam’, to gestures or ‘mudra sadhakam’ and to facial expressions or ‘mukhabhinaya sadhakam’.

## **Format of Presentation**

Kathakali is a highly stylised form for it is heavy in dramatics. Drumbeats herald the staging of the dance drama that usually lasts the entire night. At the start of the dance play, a wick lamp is lit and the curtain removed to reveal the supernatural character. Slowly, various characters of the story appear. Traditionally, only male dancers enact all roles.

In the beginning an invocatory dance, ‘todayam’ is performed followed by the ‘puruppadu’. The musicians then sing a piece with the word ‘manjutara’ from the *Geet Govinda*. The play now unfolds to the singing as each character is danced out with detailed interpretation of the text. This is interspersed with short bursts of rhythmic patterns, ‘kalasams’, that act as punctuations between four line stanzas known as ‘khandas’. Rhythmic sequences also include the ‘adakkam’ or ‘tomakaram’. Whether an item from the life of Rama or from the Mahabharata or from Krishna’s life may be taken for enactment, each sequence however, merits a detailed and

elaborate display. The play ends with the last verse ('sloka') when the curtain is slowly re-introduced as the dancers dance their way out.

## *Chapter Five*

### Kuchipudi

#### **Background**

This dance form derives its name from village Kuchipudi, situated near Masulipatasm in Krishna district in the state of Andhra Pradesh. It traces its heritage to three types of dances—namely, the dance of the ‘devadasis’, the dance dramas of Yakshagaan and the secular dances of the court dancers. The ritualistic dances corresponded to the Aradhana Nritya described in the treatise *Nrittaratnavali* by Jayapa Senani (thirteenth century) of Warangal, Bahunatakas and Brahmana melas. The earliest reference to the ‘Brahmana melas’ is from the sixteenth century, when with the migration of the Bhagavadulus, who were well-versed in the dance and music traditions, from Vijayanagar to Tanjore, a number of ‘raj nartakis’ (court dancers) also migrated with them.

With the deterioration of the prevailing system of dance by ‘devadasis’, concerned brahmin gurus and experts assembled at village Kuchipudi and formed groups that came to be known as ‘Brahmana melas’. These ‘melas’ travelled from place to place, performing dance dramas on themes from Indian mythologies. Reference to these ‘melas’ can be found in sixteenth century records relating to the reign of Viranarasimha Raya of Vijayanagar. *Machupalli Kaifiyat*, one of such books written in 1502, throws light on how the common man got relief from the tyranny of Gurava Raju when this theme was presented as a dance drama before the local ruler, Immadi Narasa Nayaka, who understood the message of the play. Pandita Radhya Charita, in the late sixteenth century, had commented on the high standard of Kuchipudi dance dramas.

Over a period of time, the practitioners of this art came to be known as ‘bhagvatulus’, well-versed in dance, scholarship and music. Predominant among the ‘bhagvatulus’ was Bhakta Siddhendra Yogi whose verses became themes for enactment of various dance dramas in the style of dance

that developed in this village. Most famous of the dance dramas was ‘Parijat Haranam’ that was later remodelled to become the ‘Bhama Kalapam’.

However, the existence of dance dramas around legends pertaining to Lord Shiva, known as ‘Shiva Lila Natyam’, was known even in earlier times. ‘Brahmana melas’ that included various religious dance dramas, were known to have been performed around the tenth century AD. It was the rise of Vaishnavism that contributed to the bridging of the gap between the poor and rich since Lord Krishna had been raised as a cowherd. It saw the evolution of the ‘Bhagwada mela’. In 1675, impressed with the performance of ‘Parijatapaharana’ by Kuchelapuram brahmins, the Nawab of Golconda, Abdul Hassan Tahnisha, of the Islamic faith, became a patron of this Hindu art form. He encouraged and fostered its growth by granting the surrounding areas of the village to the dancers with the stipulation that the practice should carry on. This, in fact, was engraved on a copper plate that served as the royal decree.

## Salient Features

In its development, there was an unceasing interaction of the ‘bhagvatulus’ with the ‘devadasis’, and the ‘raj nartakis’ (court dancers), the latter being influenced by the Yakshgana tradition. This cultural exchange enriched all three styles, yet at the same time, retained its own individuality and fundamental characteristics. In addition, the knowledge of *Natyashastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana* and *Nrityaratnavali*, enabled incorporation of various fine elements of these authoritative dance treatises into the Kuchipudi dance form. ‘Nritta’, ‘Nritya’ and ‘Natya’ were used to enact the dance dramas with introductory passages called ‘daruvus’ introducing each character of the dance drama. The ‘daruvus’ or ‘darus’ were followed by pure dance interludes that were accompanied to the recitation of rhythmic patterns called ‘sollakath’. Thereafter, the performance saw the expressional delineation of the ‘sabdas’ (verses) that were dramatic lyrics based on a theme and rendered in the ‘pathya’ musical style in the Carnatic system of music. In this manner, full scope of utilisation of the four branches of ‘abhinaya’ (‘angika’, ‘vacika’, ‘aharya’ and ‘sattvika’) was visible.

The basic feet and hand position employed in Kuchipudi is not very different from that utilised in Bharatanatyam. ‘Ardhamandali’ or the halfsitting position with outstretched knees, is once again the hallmark. This form also conceives the body in terms of triangles. However, it is the mood of delineation that distinguishes the two styles. While Bharatanatyam is performed in a grave and sombre manner, Kuchipudi is light and effervescent, bringing with it the fresh spontaneous aura of a village life.

## Format of Presentation

In the sequential rendering, a performer first performs the invocatory number followed by a number of interpretative pieces such as padams, varnams, sabdams and slokams, similar to what has been stated for Bharatanatyam. Some of the favourite items in the Kuchipudi repertoire are legacies of the Kuchipudi dance drama tradition. These include the ‘Bhama Kalapam’, ‘Krishna Lila Tarangini’ by Tirtha Narayan Yati, padams written by Kshetraya of Muvvu, kritis of Thyagaraja, ‘Gola Kalapam’ of Ramaih Shastri and Sarangapani, and of course verses from Jayadeva’s *Geet Govinda*. The finale pièce de résistance is the ‘Tarangam’, an item that is melodic and rhythmic in character. These are poetries usually containing five stanzas that are interspersed with ‘sollukuttus’ and set to music. This item is performed at a fast tempo, punctuated by statuesque poses, and finally showcasing the dexterity of dancing out complicated rhythmic patterns while balancing on the edge of a brass plate. Sometimes an ornate brass pot is also balanced on the head while dancing. Among the host of ‘Tarangams’ available, ‘Balagopal Tarangam’ is a much favoured piece from ‘Krishna Lila Tarangini’.

The ‘nritta anga’ or the pure rhythmic sequences make use of ‘adavus’, ‘jatis’, ‘tirmanas’ in ‘jatiswarams’ and ‘tillanas’, similar to what has been stated for Bharatanatyam earlier. However, a pure rhythmic piece based only on footwork, called the ‘kannakole’ is not practised in Bharatanatyam. ‘Kannakole’ footwork, like the expressional rendering of ‘slokas’, are on the other hand, very similar to Kathak, and where there is the inherent element of improvisation. ‘Padams’, ‘varnams’, ‘sabdams’ and ‘slokas’ constitute the ‘nritya’ elements in Kuchipudi. ‘Padams’ that are quite favoured by dancers are those written by Thyagaraja, Sarangapani, Maganti Subba Rao and Jayadeva. Even though many ‘sabdams’ are common to

Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi, yet there are a few that are seen in Kuchipudi alone. These are the Mundaka Sabdam, Vinayata Kavita and the Abhishekams on Lord Rama, Sita, Prahlada and some other mythological deities and characters. The rendering of ‘slokas’ with improvisation elements can perhaps be attributed to northern influence during the Mughal period when Andhra Pradesh was part of the Mughal Empire where governors came from the imperial court at Delhi, bringing along with them part of their culture.

Traditionally a male dance form, it was not uncommon to find histrionic performance of female characters of the story, being performed by men. This gave the dance its uniqueness in terms of ‘abhinaya’ renderings. This male bastion fell with the introduction of women performers in post-Independent era. However, women artistes have continued to retain the unique rendering of ‘abhinaya’. This has imparted a curious sensuousness in rendering.

## **Costume and Music**

The traditional costume of a Kuchipudi male dancer was a ‘dhoti’ and for the female counterpart was a ‘sari’. But today, women dancer’s costume has been replaced by the one that is now worn in Bharatanatyam recitals, namely, loose flared stitched pants with a pleated fan in the front. It however has one subtle difference. Unlike the Bharatanatyam costume, this ‘dhoti’-like Kuchipudi costume has a ‘laangh’, namely a folded pleat, at the divided portion at the back of the costume. The nose ring and the hair braid plays an important role in Kuchipudi. Forsaking the nose ornament or ‘mukkera’ signifies, in one of the dance item called ‘Bhame kalapam’, as the parting of the most prized possession, drawn synonymous to the shedding of one’s ego. Like Bharatanatyam, either side of the top of the head is adorned with a moon and sun. The forehead ornament has a small parrot motif that is considered to represent nature while the other end of the ornament bears a hooded serpent that is taken to denote supreme knowledge. The braid ends in three bunches representing the three worlds (“tribhuvana”), each end branching again into three smaller ones that total nine.

A Kuchipudi performance is usually accompanied by a mridangam (percussion), a singer, a nattuvanar or conductor wielding cymbals, a violin and/or a stringed or wind instrument. The compositions follow the Carnatic style of music prevalent in southern India.

## *Chapter Six*

### Manipuri

#### **Background**

In order to understand Manipuri, it is necessary to comprehend the culture of that region, Manipur or the Jewelled City. According to local legend, the whole area was lit up by the brilliance of the jewel ‘mani’ that adorned the forehead of the ‘naga devata’ (serpent king), when Lord Shiva descended on earth in that region beside a lake, nestling among the hills, and danced the Raas dance with his consort Parvati for seven days and seven nights. Subsequently, the local people, Meitis, followers of Bratya religion which had inputs of Saivism, Shakti cult and other primitive beliefs, danced the ‘Jagoi’, namely dance, in the Meiti language. This led to ritualistic dances dedicated to Lord Shiva or ‘Nongponkningthu’ (somewhat similar to male power) and Parvati ‘Panthaobi’ (symbolising a female entity). The ‘Thangkus’, some of the predominant dancers, regard themselves as descendants of Sage Tandu who, according to belief, taught the art of dance to the people residing here.

An early copper plate inscription shows King Khowai Tampak as a great patron of the arts and has been credited with the introduction of drum and cymbals as dance. The institution of ‘loisang’ or an art guild, the highest committee of experts on various aspects of Manipuri dancing, was established. The tradition was continued and thereafter, each and every king became the chief patron of the arts and was also the head of ‘loisangs’. Among the various ‘loisangs’, the one devoted to dance was known as ‘Palaloisang’. It had an important role to play in recognising an artiste and continues till date as most of the present day gurus are found to be members of the Palaloisang.

## Constituents of Manipuri Dances

Manipuri dances can be divided into two groups—namely, pre-Vaishnav and post Vaishnav influences. In the pre-Vaishnav period, amongst the oldest Manipuri dances is the ‘Chingkheirol’, namely, Dance of Usha (Dance of Dawn) for it is believed that the people of Manipur regard themselves as disciples of Usha, the Goddess of Dawn, for it was she who taught the dance of Parvati to the women of India! Similarly, the Tangkhous, hill people on the eastern border of Manipur, regard themselves as descendants of sage Tandu, disciple of Lord Shiva who had taught the art of dance to sage Bharata, the author of *Natyashastra*. The word ‘Tangkhu’ is supposed to be a derivative of Tandu.

Another popular story that is enacted through dance is the tragic love story between Khamba and Thoibi, based on a Manipuri epic, *Moirang Parba*, a semi-historical legend, written in the eleventh or twelfth century. The ‘Lai Haroba’ or ‘The Festival of Gods’, wherein Lai stands for God, is a dance drama of the Meiti culture that mirrors the tantric and early Hindu cultures. Danced during the month of Chaitra (spring), a performance usually spreads over several days and nights. This dance drama is based on the Meiti concept of cosmology which believes that the earth was brought down from heaven by nine gods and seven goddesses. The principal male and female dancers are known as Amaibas and Amaibees or sometimes shortened to Maibas and Maibees. Both Maibas and Maibees were temple dancers. Unlike the ‘devadasis’ of southern India, women temple dancers of Manipur, namely Maibees, could simultaneously lead a normal married life even while sanctified as a temple dancer. The Maibas and Maibees are usually dressed in distinctive white costume.

The first part of ‘Lai Haroba’ is the ‘Laihunba’ or scattering of flowers symbolic of infusing life in the deities wherein the dancers move in an anti-clockwise circle, the ‘jagoi’. This is followed by the ‘Lai Pou’ commencing with the words, ‘Hoiru’ and ‘Hoya’ sung seven times in seven different notes. These are followed by love duets enacting the love between Nongponkningthu and Panthoibi, somewhat akin to Lord Krishna and

Radha respectively. In the last stage, the dancers dance for the pleasure of the gods depicting various sports.

There are three kinds of ‘Lai Harobas’—namely, the Chakpa, the Konglei and the Moirang, each a little different with its own particular flavour. The ‘Moirang Lai Haroba’ owes its birth to Khamba and Thoibi who, it is believed, were fond of dancing the ‘Lai Haroba’. Therefore, it is little wonder that this forms part of the Manipuri repertoire.

The costume for the ‘Lai Haroba’ is the traditional Meiti costume, the Phanek, which consists of a sarong-like skirt with black and red stripes sporting a border with the traditional pattern of a lotus and bee. The upper part of the body is covered by a tight-fitting blouse, and a veil is taken over the head. In ‘Khamba Thoibi’ dance, Princess Thoibi is usually in a red Phanek with an emerald green velvet blouse with gold and silver embroidery while Khamba is attired in a purple and gold dhoti and a green velvet jacket with gold trimmings. On his head he sports a white turban with red and gold embroidery and a peacock feather.

Besides these expressional dances, there are the Cholam dances that are masculine and virile in nature. These ‘tandava’ dances belong to the Chalanam group and are danced by men alone. The two most well-known Cholam dances are the ‘Pung Cholam’ and the ‘Kartal Cholam’. However, there are also the ‘Duff Cholam’ and the Dhol Cholam. In the ‘Pung Cholam’, the male dancers attired in spotless white dhotis, white turbans and a folded shawl over the left shoulder, with a ‘pung’ or the ‘mridanga’ drum hung horizontally in front with a strap going over the shoulder, play incredible rhythms while executing some of the most difficult leaps and pirouettes but maintaining an effortless grace. Today, these Cholam dances have become an indivisible part of ‘sankirtanas’ of Vaishnav tradition.

The other ‘sankirtana’ Cholams are similar, yet the instruments used are according to the names. For example, ‘Kartal Cholam’ would employ large cymbals, the ‘Duff Cholam’, a kind of tambourine and the ‘Dhol Cholam’, a kind of large drum usually seen played with folk music. These Cholams can be performed all through the year and at important religious occasions

too. The ‘Mandilla Cholam’ is performed by women alone who dance decoratively, using cymbals as accompaniment to devotional songs.

In addition to the above, the well-known image that is conjured in the minds while speaking of Manipuri dance is the image of dancers in round box-like skirts, faces half shrouded in veil, dancing the Raas dances. This owes its origin to king Bhagyachandra in the eighteenth century. In fact, not much is known during the period between the twelfth and seventeenth century except for stray references to cultural exchanges between Manipur and neighbouring areas such as Burma and China. It was only in the eighteenth century that Vaishnav missionaries from Bengal who were worshippers of Lord Krishna, made their way to Manipur. Moved by the teachings based around Lord Krishna, king Pamheiba converted to Vaishnavism and made it its state religion. With the introduction of Vaishnavism in fifteenth century AD, Maharaja Bhagyachandra, the grandson of king Pamheiba, in 1764, adopted Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the cult of devotion to Lord Krishna, as advocated by Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

King Bhagyachandra, being an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna, saw a vision wherein Lord Krishna was seen dancing the Raas dances with the ‘gopis’ or cow maidens. Inspired by this dream, he composed the Raas Leela dance of Manipur that was first performed at the Govindji Temple at Imphal wherein the main idol of Lord Krishna was carved out of a particular wood, again based on a vision. He is accredited with the composition of three out of the six Raas Leela dances. These are the ‘Maha Raas’, ‘Vasant Raas’ and the ‘Kunj Raas’. Bhagyachandra sought to give life to his vision that resulted not only in the compositions but also in the style and technique of dancing. The series of movements with their variations came to be known through the composition, Achouba Bhangi Pareng where ‘Bhangi’ stands for dance poses and ‘Pareng’ for a series. The *Govinda Sangeetlila Vilasa* is an important text on the details and fundamentals of Raas dances of Manipur and is supposed to have been authored by king Bhagyachandra himself.

Like everything else, the box-like costume called the ‘kumil’, was a result of Bhagyachandra’s vision. This skirt, like the velvet blouse, is

elaborately decorated with gold and silver embroidery and exquisite mirror-work. The ankle length stiff box-like skirt has a short sequined white gauzy top skirt. A small, embroidered stiff belt rests over this on one side. The face is half covered with a diaphanous white gauzy veil imparting an ethereal and elusive look. This costume enhances the effect of gliding as it seems that the dancers float on stage! Unlike other dance forms, the Manipuri dancer is hardly ever seen to sport ankle bells. On the other hand, the feet of women dancers are adorned by an elaborate piece of ornamentation.

The kings that followed Bhagyachandra carried on the tradition and contributed to the cause of arts by enlarging the repertoire of Manipuri dance. The ‘Goshta Bhangi Pareng’ and the ‘Goshta Vrindaban Pareng’ are attributed to Maharaja Gambhir Singh while Maharaja Chandra Kirti Singh, being a keen drummer himself, composed as many as sixty-four dances for the drums, besides composing another variation of the graceful ‘Vrindaban Pareng’, the ‘Khrumba Pareng’ and the ‘Nartana Raas’.

## **Salient Features**

The dancers in Manipuri dance lay stress on expression through graceful movements of the body. Expression emoted through the face can be categorised as the highest state of controlled display of emotion, cloaked in serenity, for all feelings seem to emanate from the movements of limbs. The predominant mood that seems to emanate is that of ‘shringar’ or love even with its two counterpoints of ‘viyog’ (separation) and ‘sambhog’ (union). As the Manipuri dancers weave figures of eight or ‘s’ or make circular patterns and serpentine movements, graceful movements of the hand follow suit, imparting a haunting lyrical grace of unparalleled fluidity and softness. As a result, the arms are never stretched out to the fullest nor are the hands ever raised far above their head or very low. The women never jump while the men are known for their swift movements, leaps and sudden sitting positions.

Slow and restrained movements are known as ‘smitangam’ while the comparatively faster movements are known as ‘sfuritangam’. The ‘tandava’ movements are basically categorised under three heads—namely, the ‘gunthanam’ where the feet are kept close together but are accompanied by

strong movements, the ‘chalanams’ that involve raising the feet up to the calf, the knees or even the thighs, and the ‘parasaranam’ where the limbs are stretched to the fullest. Between the canvas of the ‘cholams’ to the ‘raas’ dances, most of the standing and sitting positions, gaits, leaps and pirouettes as enunciated in the *Natyashastra*, are seen to be practised.

Within the Manipuri dancer’s repertoire are compositions that are quite akin to the ones found in the Kathak repertoire. These are, for example, short musical compositions known as ‘swarmalas’, compositions with four different combinations of music, rhythmic pattern, poetry and text known as ‘chaturangs’, songs with rhythmic sounds called ‘kirtiprabandhs’ or recited texts or verses to the accompaniment of drums, known as the ‘sheigonnabi’.

The musical accompaniment is usually provided by percussion instrument called the ‘pung’, in addition to other varieties of drums, the flute, cymbals, conch shell, trumpet-like horn and a vocalist. The style of music rendered is typical of the northeastern region.

## *Chapter Seven*

### Mohiniyattam

#### **Background**

Mohiniyattam literally means the dance of the enchantress (Mohini). According to legend, in order to kill the demon Bhasmasura, who had been granted the boon of being invincible, Lord Vishnu took on the form of the enchantress Mohini. Vishnu knew that this invincibility could be marred if Bhasmasura placed his palm over his head since then he would be reduced to ashes. Hence Vishnu, disguised as Mohini, started to dance a duet with Bhasmasura, who had been mesmerised by her (Mohini) beauty and was led by her during the dance, to place his palm on his head unknowingly, whereby he was reduced to ashes. It is locally believed in Kerala, the land where Mohiniyattam has originated, that this was the dance that had been danced by Lord Vishnu as Mohini. Not surprisingly, the dance is performed by women only.

Some scholars trace Mohiniyattam to second century AD, namely to the Nangyar Kuttu, the female presentation of Chakyar's dance, that was evident even in the oldest Sanskrit theatre tradition of the area and is best symbolised by Kudiyattam today. The existence of 'lasya anga' or the graceful female dance Nangyar Kuttu is gleaned from the literary work *Silappadikaram*. However, others maintain that it was created in the middle of the eighteenth century in the court of Maharaja Swati Tirunar of Travancore. But what is striking is that this land with swaying palm trees and rounded edges of the backwaters of Kerala, seems to have inspired the development and growth of Mohiniyattam, reflecting the sensuous beauty and the captivating grace of the women of the area.

Sculpturally, in Kerala, the temple sculptures of women dancers depicting the 'lasya anga', is very different from that found in the temples of the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu. And it is not surprising that by the eighth century AD, Kerala's distinct identity in terms of language and

culture, had evolved into its own. The tenth century Chollur inscriptions bear out the presence of women temple dancers due to the occurrence of words such as ‘Nangyar Tali’ wherein ‘Nangyar’ refers to a ‘woman’ and ‘Tali’ stands for temple. There are also various references to the existence of such a practice in certain temples of the region such as the Tripunithura and the Suchindram temples.

Literatures of the Manipravala era in the fourteenth century, considered to be the golden period of Malayali literature, dwell upon the celebrated and exalted status of the courtesan who was also an accomplished dancer. She was known by various names such as, Unnaichi or Cherukarakutthatti. The sixteenth century book, *Vyavaharamala* by Narayan Namboodri, mention payments that had been made to such dancers. Similarly, other literary gems such as the *Goshayatra* revolving around the Ottanthulal folk art form, and the *Balarama Bharatam*, a treatise by Kunchan Nambiar, considered to be a regional equivalent of the *Natyashastra*, contain references to the dances performed by women that was essentially ‘lasya’ in nature clearly referring to Mohiniyattam.

The art form received greater fillip with the matriarchial system of society that came into being with the tradition set by the Raja of Travancore some four centuries ago. Added to it was the strong Vaishnav cult that saw Lord Vishnu as Padmanabha, as also the Bhagwati cult with strong tantric overtones. It is therefore no wonder that the dance form, in a manner of speaking, was born out of the wedlock of two cults—namely, the Shaivite and the Vaishnavite. This is also evident in the wellknown story of Bhasmasura and Mohini. Mohini, therefore, came to be venerated, and it is noteworthy that in Kerala even the manifestations of Surpanakha or Pootana as Lalita are elaborately dwelt upon.

By the time of Maharaja Swati Thirunal, in the eighteenth century, it had come into its very own. The Maharaja is accredited to its popularisation and further development in terms of text and musical compositions. In a way, Maharaja Swati Thirunal’s effort was the first significant landmark in the history of Mohiniyattam. Through his patronage, he not only contributed in terms of various musical compositions and texts but also gave the dance form its due. In this effort, he even had the help of the well-known Tanjore Quartet. The next major landmark came with the efforts of Vallathol and the establishment of the Kerala Kalamandalam. Thereafter, extensive research

works and interest shown by various performers further supplemented such efforts. These helped to give the form a fresh lease of life.

## **Salient Features**

In terms of technique, Mohiniyattam makes extensive use of the ‘araimandali’, namely, the half-sitting position, but with the feet kept apart. This helps in imparting a certain characteristic sway in the movements that follow. In order to maintain extreme grace, movements seem to sway and swing, as does the body in a sensuous lilt. Therefore, it is quite natural for the movements of the torso, hands and limbs to be rounded and circular, imparting its distinctive languid quality. While moving, there is elaborate use of the serpentine gait along with languorous dips and swaying of the body, adding to the sensuous charm, perhaps a reflection of swaying palm trees, heavily intoxicated by its own youthful ardour and beauty! The mood of the dance is languorous, slow to medium tempo. Every gesture and nuance is deliberated upon in depth.

One of its characteristic features is its deceptive simplicity like that of Manipuri and the apparent ‘internalisation’ of movements as each movement unfolds from the centre of the body as it traverses to the periphery. In terms of technique, some scholars opine that it is inspired by ‘kalaripayetu’, the martial art form of the area whereas for ‘abhinaya’ (expression), it seems to draw inspiration from Kudiyattam. However, the usage of eyes is subtle and not as exaggerated as seen in Kathakali. The ‘Hastalakshana Deepika’ forms the bulwark of the application of ‘hasta-mudras’, both for Kathakali as also for Mohiniyattam.

## **Format of Presentation**

In terms of presentation, the dancer usually begins with an invocation to Lord Ganesha. This is followed by the ‘mukhachalam’ wherein a garland of rhythmic patterns, ‘cholakettus’ based on rhythmic mnemonics called ‘vaitharis’, are unfolded. This pattern is quite similar to the dancing of the ‘nritta ang’ of Kathak or the ‘jatiswarm’ of Bharatanatyam. It is now time for the expressional and interpretative element to be displayed through ‘padams’ and ‘ashtapadis’, testing the subtlety of the dancer’s histrionic

skills. Maharaja Swati Thirunal's poems form the most popular text for the 'padams' in a Mohiniyattam repertoire.

Owing to the spread of the wings of Vaishnavism and the Bhakti movement, poetic verses to Lord Krishna and Radha written by the famous poet, Jayadeva, came to be adopted in the temples of this region, especially the temple at Guruvayur since the fourteenth century. It was therefore, not surprising to find the incorporation of these 'ashtapadis' (poems with eight verses) in the Mohiniyattam repertoire.

One of the significant recent additions to the repertoire that has now come to stay is the 'Tharattu', also known as the 'Omanatingal'. This is an 'abhinaya' item based on the verses written and composed by Iryamman Thampi as a lullaby to his nephew, Swati Thirunal.

And finally, the intensification of the dancer's spiritual experience, symbolic of the union of the soul with the Absolute, finds expression in the item 'Jeeva' that is akin to the 'Moksha' of Odissi. This item sees the gradual building up of the rhythm to a crescendo. This may, at times be followed by another item, 'Touratrika', that encompasses within its textural fold, elements of 'gitam' (melody), 'vadyam' (rhythm) and 'nrityam'(dance). It is stated to be inspired by the 'thaiyambaka' or the percussion ensemble, so characteristic of the area. Herein the rhythmic progression is not linear and is unique in the 'unexpected'.

## Music and Costume

The 'tala' structure followed in Mohiniyattam is complex and belongs to a genre of its own. Of the frequently used 'talas' from the rich array possible, are 'aditalam', 'lakshmitalam', 'chambatalam' and 'marmatalam' namely cycles of 8, 16, 12 and again another variation of 8 beats respectively. The accompanying music, even though belonging to the family of Carnatic system, is unique to the area and is known as 'sopana'. The word 'sopana' literally means 'step' and in keeping with its meaning, there is a slow and deliberate elaboration of both dance movement and vocabulary, as well as music at every step.

The accompanying percussionists to a Mohiniyattam performance are usually on the 'edakka', 'madallam', 'mridangam' and the cymbals. Of

these, the ‘edakka’ occupies a special place of pride as it is capable of emitting all the seven notes of the musical scale. The other musicians making up the orchestra are the vocalist, the veena player and the flautist.

To round off the discussion on Mohiniyattam, it is essential to say a word about its costume. Traditionally, the dancers are dressed in ivory silk costume with gold brocade borders. This is inspired by the ‘kasava mundu’ or the gold bordered, sarong-like attire. The long and elaborately pleated skirt with gold borders is topped by a wide pleated fan, again sporting a gold border, resembling a large palm leaf with its pleated ribs, framing the front. Gold ornaments add to the gorgeous lustre of the costume. The hair is tied in a bun tilted on one side of the crown and is bedecked with flowers. Ankle bells numbering about twenty-five to thirty, adorn the ankles.

## *Chapter Eight*

### Odissi

#### **Background**

In the eastern region of Orissa, is found one of the oldest dance forms that was employed as temple worship. Frescoes and friezes in caves and on temple structures lend credence and bespeak of antiquity and great activity in dance as can be seen in the sculptures of the Ranigumpha caves. The Odissi of today traces its origin to Odhra, the Magadhi style of dance. This living dance tradition of the area has been kept alive by the ‘maharis’ (‘devadasis’) and the ‘gotipuas’ (dance of the male dancers dressed up as girls). The tradition of the ‘maharis’ and ‘gotipuas’ came into limelight with the resurgence of temple building activities in Orissa, as most of the surviving temples of this area are traced to the period between the tenth and twelfth centuries. From the time of the Bhakti movement, the lyrics of *Geet Govinda* of poet Jaidev became the main repertoire of Odissi dancers.

As part of temple ritual, dedication of girls to serve in temples became a norm. They came to be known as ‘maharis’, some of whom became adept in the arts of music and dance. Fanning the image of the deity, and dancing and singing in the procession as the image of the deity was taken out in a chariot, became part of their duties. This institution received great patronage from rulers such as Chodaganga Deva in the eleventh century and a later day ruler such as king Kapilendra Deva. The latter is accredited to have got the Nata Mandir built in the Jagannath Temple at Puri for enabling devotional dancing by the ‘maharis’. He is also stated to have defined the duties of the ‘maharis’ that included dancing twice a day as part of the ritual. Those who danced in the Nata Mandir during God’s meal times (‘bhoj’), came to be known as ‘bahari maharis’ or ‘baharjani’ or ‘bahari-gauni maharis’, while those who danced in the inner shrine when the deity was adorned in the morning and in the evening, were known as the ‘bhitari maharis’ or ‘bhitarjani’ or ‘bhitari-gauni maharis’.

Simultaneously, young male counterparts, usually the male offsprings of these ‘maharis’, before reaching the age of puberty, dressed themselves as women, and danced like the ‘maharis’. These young male dancers were known as ‘gotipuas’. Owing to the suppleness of young bodies and combined with the imitation of a woman’s gait, the dance of the ‘gotipuas’ had a unique elfin-like quality about it and was rich in exaggerated movement of the torso and acrobatic feats. On attaining puberty, they had to leave the temples and continue with their art outside, either as performers or teachers.

Like all other dance forms that had their origin in women temple performers, the institution of ‘maharis’ saw disrepute and decline owing to its abuse by society. The task of rediscovery and reconstitution came about in the fifties of the twentieth century. As in the case of Bharatanatyam, the name of the dance form was first changed to rid itself of unhappy connotations of its historical past. In order to identify it with the region of its origin, Orissa, the name Odissi became the name of the redefined dance form. The task of reconstitution of its repertoire, presentation and costume was taken up thereafter predominantly by the Jayantika group of scholars and artistes in the fifties. Most of the changes incorporated were inspired by similar changes that had been adopted by Bharatanatyam, as most of the new breed of dancers who had become converts to Odissi had been trained in Bharatanatyam. Thus, an intelligent blend of the old and the new came about. The zeal of the newly converted practitioners as well as of the people of Orissa who were desirous of showcasing Oriyan culture, became catalysts in the process of development and popularisation of the dance form.

*Natyashastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana* and the *Abhinaya Chandrika* are the sources of inspiration for Odissi, even though according to some practitioners, *Abhinaya Chandrika* forms its real backbone, as majority of the ‘karanas’ used in Odissi today, can be found in the *Abhinaya Chandrika*. But this treatise itself is only a slight variation of the earlier two treatises. The significant identifying factor of the dance form is its extensive use of the ‘tri-bhangi’ position where the body is broken into three deflections emphasising the ‘lasya’ (graceful) tenor of the dance form. Some maintain that it came about due to the exaggerated use of hip deflections of the ‘gotipuas’ while others maintain that in the process of

redefinition, serious attempt was made to adopt poses as depicted in temple sculptures. Perhaps, it may be both. The result is a beautiful sensuous swing of the body that is also highlighted by the accompanying music, while determining the pace or tempo adopted by the dance form.

## Salient Features

The dancer from the ‘samabhanga’ position quickly descends into the ‘chowka’ position where the feet are placed apart and an ‘ardhamandali’ position or the half-sitting position, is adopted. The other oft-used position is the ‘abhanga’ where the body has two deflections but as stated earlier, the hallmark or the flavour of every movement is the ‘tribhang’. This alternate movement of the torso from the left to the right to maintain the image of ‘tribhang’ is known as the ‘bhasa’. The joyous ‘burha’ or ‘borrho’ is a quick movement with small leaps and quick foot contacts. The other much used foot contacts is the ‘gothi’, namely on the heels, and a ‘cari’ that weaves an ‘s’ pattern, while ‘palis’ are the quick retreats at the end of a sequence. The ‘bhramari’ or ‘bhaunri’ is a pirouette that can be taken both clockwise and anti-clockwise, once at a time. Units of rhythmic syllables are known as ‘ukuttas’.

## Format of Presentation

A usual Odissi recital begins with a ‘bhumi pranam’. This is a prayer or salutation to mother earth. Thereafter, the ‘bighnaraja puja’ is performed wherein Lord Ganesha is invoked for removal of obstacles. This is then followed by a rhythmical melodious piece, that does not utilise text, known as the ‘batu nritya’. Usually, this item is seen as a dedication to Lord Shiva. Melodious items that follow are called ‘swara pallabis’ or ‘swarapallavis’.

Thereafter, a series of interpretative items are performed, known as ‘gita-abhinaya’ or ‘sa-abhinaya’. It is no wonder that compositions and verses from the *Geet Govinda*, written by the twelfth century poet Jayadeva, who hailed from the region, are taken as the central pillar of the interpretative text. One record goes to the extent of suggesting that instructions had been issued in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century that these verses would form the main texts for interpretation by ‘maharis’ in the temples. Today, in

addition to the revered verses of *Geet Govinda*, verses of various other poets such as Banmali Das, Surya Baldev Rath, Upendra Bhanj and others are being increasingly used. Needless to say, the ‘Dashavatar’ or the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu by Jayadeva, is a must in an Odissi dancer’s repertoire. The majority of Jayadeva’s works revolved around Lord Krishna who is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The verses on love episodes between Krishna, ‘sakhis’ (friends) and Radha, are captivating in terms of imageries, mood and music.

For the finale, the ‘tarajan’ and the ‘moksha’ is performed that is topped by a closing ‘sloka’ or verse in thanksgiving. The ‘tarajan’ is a beautiful item revolving round a musical and rhythmical composition that are full of sculpturesque poses while the ‘moksha’ is a rhythmical piece of extreme beauty wherein the dancer reaches a state of climax.

## **Costume and Music**

The present day costume has been inspired by the newly developed one of Bharatanatyam with stitched loose pants reminiscent of ‘dhoti’ and a pleated fan (‘nibi bandha’) in the front. However, in terms of material it maintains the guidelines laid down in the *Abhinaya Chandrika*, namely, the Orissa ‘patta’ or ‘patola’ sari. The traditional exquisite silver filigree craftsmanship is evident in the use of jewellery, for only silver ornaments are worn by the dancer, including the waistband known as the ‘jhoba’ or ‘benapatia’. ‘Jhumkas’ or ‘kapas’ adorn the ears, a moon-shaped ‘tika’ is worn on the forehead and a ‘matha mani’ frames the hairline and the parting of the hair. The hair is coiled into a bun that could take the shape of a flower (‘pushpa-chanda’) or a semi-circular bun (‘ardha-bathaka’). A huge silver brooch adorns the centre of the bun while a small tallish crown of flower emerges as a mini ‘shikhara’ (mini tower) on top of the bun.

Musical accompaniments include the percussion drum known as ‘mardala’ or ‘mridanga’ or ‘pakhawaja’, a vocalist, sitar, violin or any other stringed instrument, flute and cymbals. The guru or the ‘mardala’ player usually delivers recitation of rhythmic syllables. On her ankles, the dancer sports ankle bells, about thirty to forty in number, plaited on a string. The style of music is ‘raga’ based and forms a bridge between the Hindustani and Carnatic music systems.

## *Chapter Nine*

### Sattriya

#### **Background**

The newest addition to the Indian classical dance panorama is the Sattriya dance from Assam. Originally starting out as a ritual dance form in the latter part of the Bhakti movement (sixteenth century) when there was an upsurge of Vaishnavism, it was performed by celibate priests in the monasteries or ‘satras’ of the area. Based on Sankaradeva’s *Chinha-yatra* and ‘*Ojapali*’, incorporation of theatrical elements from the Ankia Bhaona or the Ankia Nat theatre and Ojapali tradition, endowed the dance form with emotional content. Sankaradeva, a great devotee of Lord Krishna, was a poet philosopher of the fifteenth century who wrote his verses in Brajawali Bhasa that was a blend of Maithili, Assamese, Brajbhasha and Hindi. His verses provide the bulk of textual content for interpretation. Interestingly, in the Ankiya Nat tradition that has been incorporated in the Sattriya dances, little importance is given to Radha while Krishna is worshipped more as a king and less as a cowherd. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that Radha was not a significant character in the *Bhagwada Purana* or in the *Bhagwad Gita*, the base on which Ankiya Nat and Sattriya are anchored. Radha-Krishna theme found its reflection in the Bhakti cult tradition in which salvation is sought by the longing of the soul (symbolised by Radha) for a merger with the universal soul, namely Krishna.

With the introduction of women artistes, this stylistic ritual dance has undergone a subtle change in the nature and treatment of movement. In its journey to the proscenium, the ritualistic core has been further elaborated and many items from mythologies have also been added. The rhythmic patterns have also seen further development and emphasis in delineation. Thus, present day performances demonstrate the defined ‘ora’ that is different for the ‘purusha’ (male) and ‘prakriti’ (female). The teaching

methodology with emphasis on breathing exercise, amongst other exercise, is attributed to Mahadeva, disciple of Sankaradeva.

## **Salient Features and Presentation**

The movements employed in Sattriya are basically circular in nature with a number of leaps and jumps being frequently employed. Owing to the fact that a number of the present day stage performers have had training in other classical dance forms, the subtle influence of such forms is an ongoing process in the ever-expanding repertoire. As such, in the music and development of the form, the incorporation of ‘kavitt’ is so familiar to Kathak. Also, there are some of the movements that are familiarly used by the ‘gotipuas’ of Orissa.

A traditional Sattriya dance drama begins with ‘Dhemali’, a musical prelude followed by the dramatic entry of the ‘sutradhar’, the narrator, from behind a curtain, to the accompaniment of rhythmic drums and clashing of cymbals. The ‘sutradhar’ plays a crucial role for he is the one who links up various limbs of the evening’s play. The ‘sutradhar’ is sometimes seen reciting and enacting out Sanskrit verses. This heralds the unfolding of the play as various characters enter and enact out their roles through the medium of dance. Some of the traditional items of the repertoire are the ‘Gosai Pravesar Nritya’ or the ‘Dance of the Lord’ describing the valorous deeds of the hero, the ‘Gopi Pravesar Nritya’, ‘Jhumuras’, ‘Yuddhar Naach’, ‘Nritya Bhangi’, ‘Naach of the Natwas’ and the ‘Sattrra Raas’. Not only is the treatment and sequencing of items quite similar to the Vrindaban Raas Leela, but also in the practice of tradition, for here too, like in the Vrindaban Raas Leela, it is only young boys before reaching the age of puberty who dance the role of maidens.

However, in today’s scenario and with the entry of women dancers, an evening of the Sattriya classical dance virtually follows a format of presentation that is similar to other classical dance forms.

## **Costume and Music**

The traditional male Sattriya dancers are dressed in a white ‘kurta-dhoti’ and a white turban peaked at the front. Some scholars regard the special

‘kurta’ more as an adaptation of a ‘jama’ with its long sleeved coat as though from a Mughal miniature painting. A traditional ‘tulsi mala’ (rosary) adorns the neck. The women are dressed in traditional Assamese long skirts bearing floral motifs, with stiff fans adorning the centre of the front, as well as on two sides of the waist, reminiscent of the elaborate stiff fan of a Manipuri costume. The jewellery consists of earrings (‘lokapara’), a neck hugging necklace (‘golpata’), a little long chain around the neck (‘dugdugi’), a longer chain around the neck (‘gajera’), broad bracelets (‘gamkharu’) and anklets (‘junuka’).)

Musical system followed by Sattriya dancers is the characteristic music of the northeast that also follows the ‘raga’ cycle with its own distinctive variation. The ‘tala’ (rhythmic cycle) structures employed in Sattriya are mixed, for a cycle could contain an arrangement of a series of different ‘tala’ cycle patterns. The rhythmical accompaniment is chiefly given by a horizontal drum, from the family of ‘mridanga,’ known as the ‘khol’. Other instruments giving musical accompaniment include the pair of cymbals, a vocalist and stringed instruments.

# Conclusion

With minor variations, each of the eight classical dance forms traces its features to the basic treatises, *Natyashastra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana*. Each one of them owes its birthplace and ground for nurture to the Hindu temples. Equally true is that their inherent dynamism has been their strength for enabling each of the forms to have survived through various socio-political vicissitudes and external influences. It is equally interesting to see how the groups of practitioners have changed, thereby influencing the development of these dance forms.

The process of ‘classicalisation’ is an ongoing process and many dance forms that are today dubbed as folk art, also contain several features that are akin to their classical counterparts. It requires re-designing, modification in presentation and development in repertoire together with a sustained effort and interest of the group of promoters to see that they too, in times to come, become ‘classical’. However, nothing is achieved without losing something, for such a process means that much of the spontaneity, local flavour and traditional rituals are lost. But what is not lost is the essence of ‘bhakti’ or devotion that is the underlying principle of all the art forms of the great Indian subcontinent!

This panorama of Indian classical dances provides an answer to the unique yet diverse cultural heritage of the different regions of India by embodying the threads of religious, cultural, philosophical unity that is running throughout the length and breadth of the country yet imparting to it its particular strain and character, despite the seemingly overt differences. It seems to uphold the truth behind the statement of ‘unity in diversity’ and the saying from the Upanishad—

‘The Ultimate Truth is One but the paths leading to it are many’!

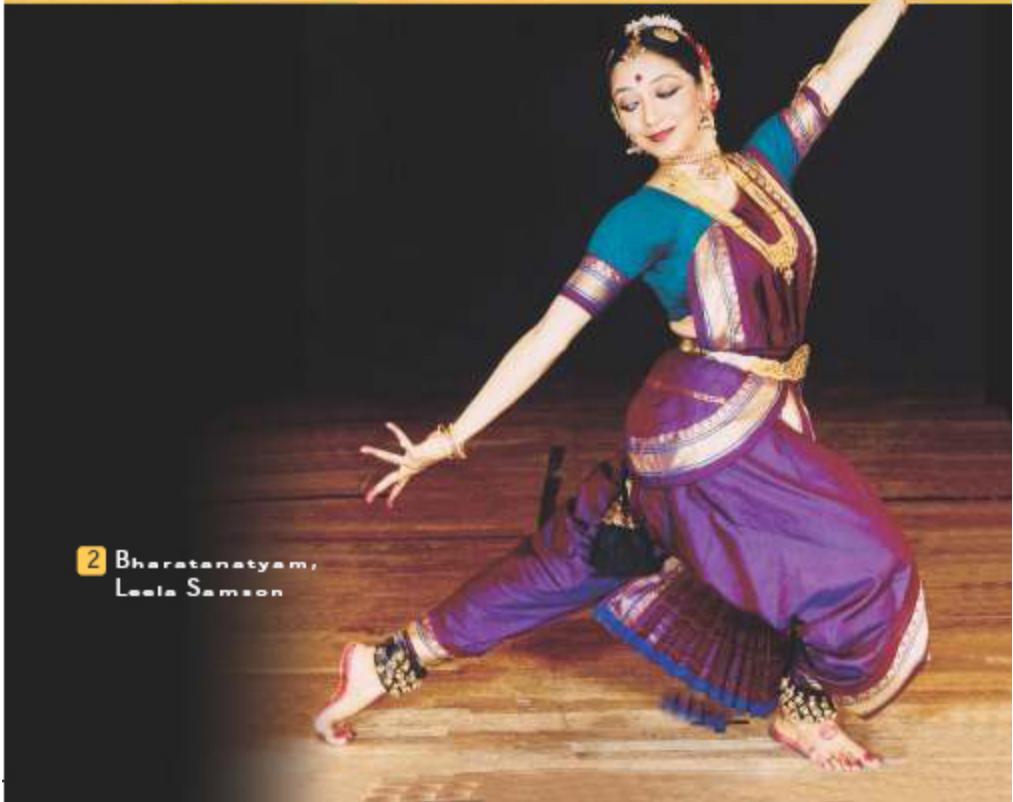
‘*ekam sat viprah bahuda vadanti*’



1 Bharatanatyam,  
Kanaka Srinivasan



2 Bharatanatyam,  
Leela Samson





3 Bharatanatyam,  
Kanaka Srinivasan



4 Kathak,  
Shovana Narayan





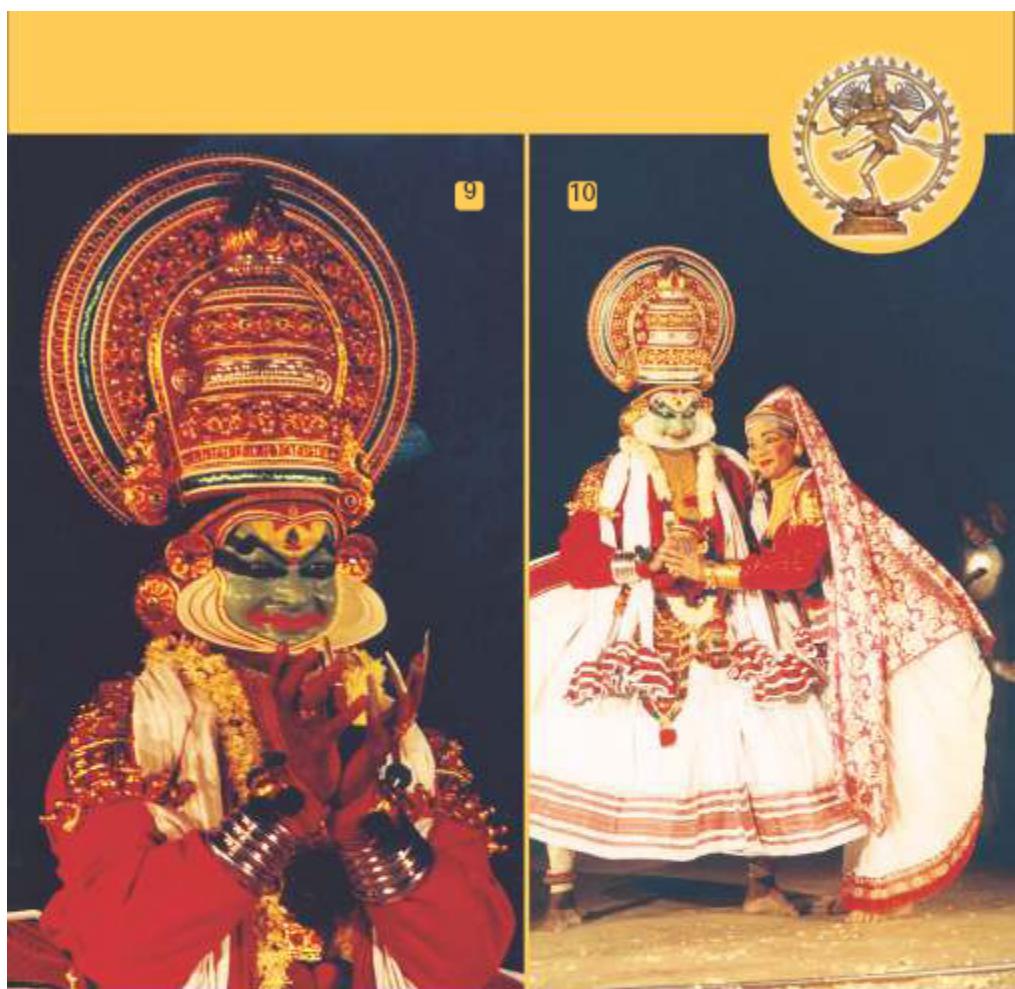
6 Kathak, Atreyee Roy



7 Kathak, Atreyee Roy



8 Kathak,  
Madhura Phatak



9 Kathakali,  
Deva  
(godly character)

10 Kathakali,  
Male and female  
characters

11 Kathakali,  
Opening sequence





12 Kathakali,  
In the role of Putana



13 Kathakali,  
In the role of Hanuman



14 Kuchipudi,  
Guru Vedanta Sathyanarayana

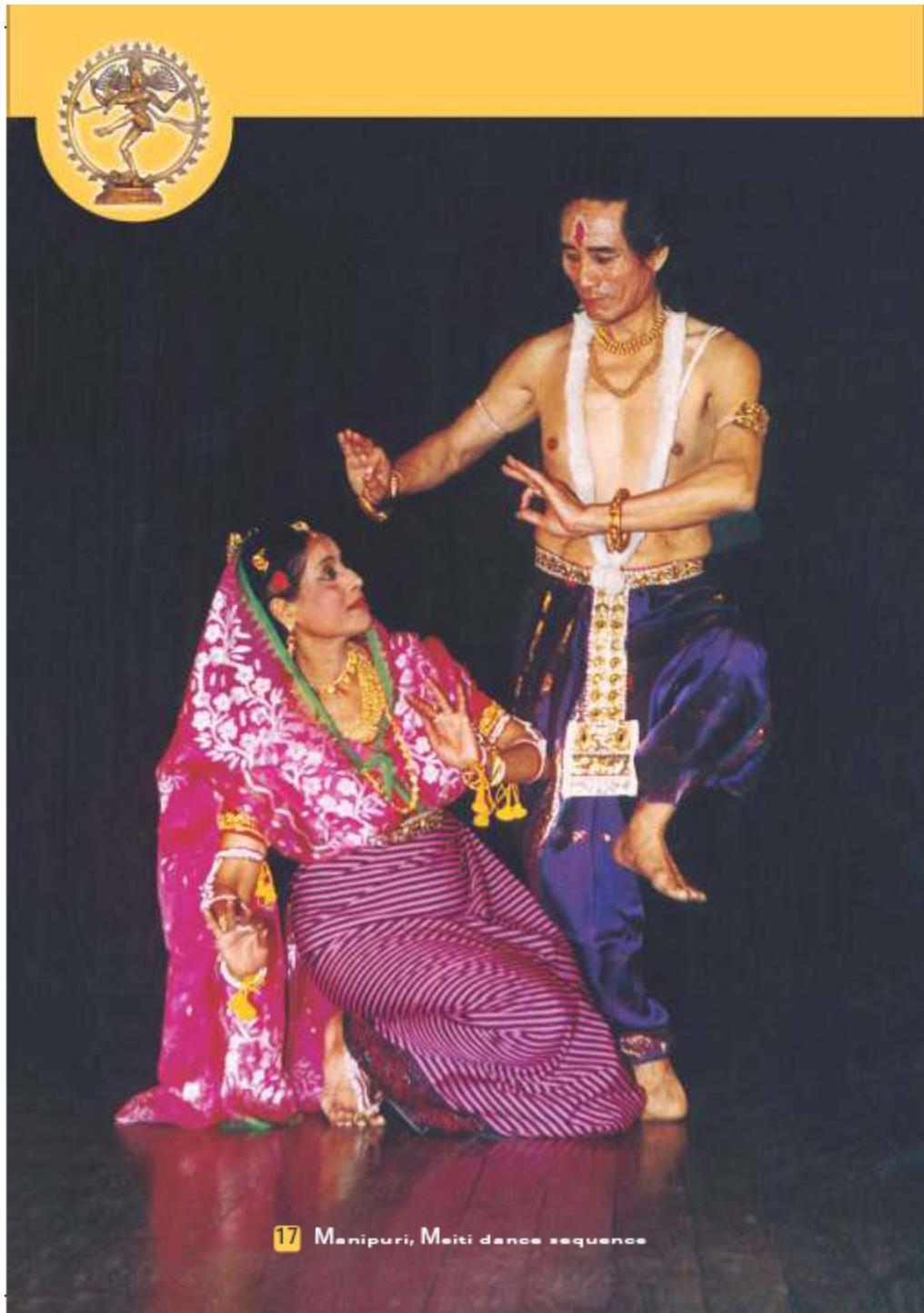




15 Kuchipudi,  
Radha Reddy



16 Kuchipudi,  
Shobha Neidu



17 Manipuri, Meiti dance sequence



18 Manipuri, Ras Leela sequence



19 Manipuri, Meiti dance sequence with the 'pung' (drummer)





23 Odissi, A 'chowka' position

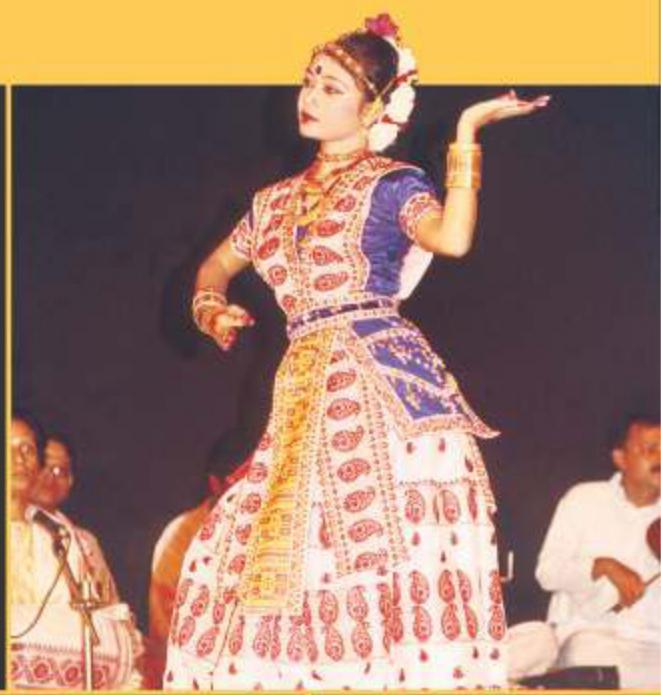




27 Sattriya, Group dance



28 Sattriya, Group of drummers



29 Sattriya,  
Solo dancer



30 Sattriya,  
Female dancer in  
male costume

India's rich cultural legacy has been founded on the abiding faith of the Indians in the divine power, whose worship had found expression through dance. 'Bhakti' or devotion was the underlying essence of the various dance forms that developed in India.

*Indian Classical Dances* is a unique presentation of the eight classical dance styles – Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniyattam, Odissi and Sattriya, through a concise portrayal of the background of each dance form, the salient features, format of presentation, music and costume. The simplistic approach of the narration coupled with the unique collection of photographs, will enable the lay reader to visualise, comprehend and appreciate the diverse dance forms of India.



*Hailing from an illustrious family of freedom fighters, Shovana Narayan is one of the foremost and renowned dancer 'par excellence', whose name has become synonymous with Kathak. Her individualistic, contemporary and dynamic choreography shows a unique blend of both the schools of this dance form. Her in-depth researches on the development of dance in general, and Kathak in particular, have found expression in many of her works and have received great acclaim.*

*Her creativity and contribution to the art has been admired and recognised through numerous awards including the coveted Government of India President's award the 'Padmashri' (1992) and the 'Sangeet Natak Akademi Award' (1999-2000).*

*She is also a member of the Indian Audits and Accounts Service. She is married to Dr Herbert Traxl (Austrian Ambassador) and has a son.*



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