



The Philosophy and Practice of Indian Classical Dance-Changes and Challenges with Digital Humanities

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Abstract

Traditionally, Indian dance forms were taught through the Guru-Shishya system, where the student stays at the abode of the Guru to develop a strong foundation in the field. This enabled the Guru to nurture the disciple and prepare them to become experts in the vocation alongside all the important values that go with any system of knowledge in ancient Indian tradition. The unique features of Gurukul were deep love, respect and mutual communion. There are significant changes in the current world, where digitization is an unavoidable trend. An objective of this paper is to identify the aspects that are 'modified' and sometimes, lost in the process of digitizing Indian Classical dance. It would not be of any help to fight natural evolution and dismiss growth but care has to be taken, not to cut asunder the very purpose of the creation of an art which is to restore righteousness in the world through an aesthetic medium. The spiritual role that it plays in the world, needless to add, is indeed as an agent to kindle peace and friendship between people, beyond all barriers. It would be helpful if the potential attributes that are in threat of getting submerged through digitization, are identified by researchers and artists. For example, during dance training, the pure dance technique and structure can become translated to a satisfying extent as the basic emotional stance is that of vigour. On the other hand, the intense involvement in the expressional mode, the devotional ascent and the one to one transmission during actual presence of teacher and taught in close proximity, seems amiss

Keywords: Classical Dance; Philosophy; Expressional Mode; Moksha; Tantra

Introduction

Indian classical dance treats the human body as three sheaths, the aim being the perfect utilization of all faculties on gross, subtle and causal levels towards the highest state of bliss or self-realization. Having evolved out of the most ancient Vedas, these dances are believed to liberate one from the worldly bondage or 'Moksha'. At the same time, Natya or dramaturgy promises a good life for an individual and a civilised society. The body itself is thought of as a piece of classic engineering designed to enable positive physical, emotional and above all spiritual enhancement. The art of dance, when co-related with esoteric science, called Tantra is the union of Shiva - consciousness and Shakti - energy, when

the half-man/ half-woman, Ardhanareeshwara within one's subtle body is in action. The philosophy in which such dance forms are rooted, poses questions such as - What is that essence or principle that connects ONE to the dance, connects dance to LIFE, connects one with audiences, crossing all barriers? Is it the body owning a spirit, that wants to express something or is it the spirit that has manifested in this form in order to express? Indian typical way follows the ethereal dictum that it is the eternal soul that manifests in the divine dance. Aesthetic enjoyment, called RASA, is realized when the life forces and dramatic stories are first appropriated within and then transmitted across to the world around in creative, ecstatic and emancipatory ways. Divine experience and aesthetic experience are one and the same experience, a

glimpse and taste of supreme joy.

Traditionally, Indian dance forms were taught through the Guru-Shishya system, where the student stays at the abode of the Guru to develop a strong foundation in the field. This enabled the Guru to nurture the disciple and prepare them to become experts in the vocation alongside all the important values that go with any system of knowledge in ancient Indian tradition. The unique features of Gurukul were deep love, respect and mutual communion. There was exchange of knowledge of various related subjects among the exemplary Gurus, leading to noble character and wisdom above all.

In general, dance is called the MOTHER of all art forms, according to Curt Sachs in his book- *The World history of dance*. Dance is universal to many cultures and may have origins as early as 1.8 million years ago. It has offered contributions to Neuroscience by providing pathways to study the brain's plasticity. Additionally, there have been studies that evaluate the therapeutic effects of dance and movement in the brain. There are significant changes in the current world, where digitization is an unavoidable trend. An objective of this paper is to identify the aspects that are 'modified' and sometimes, lost in the process of digitizing Indian Classical dance.

The philosophy and practice of Indian dance

The imaginative faculties visualized in art are expressed with a religious fervor and devotion in Indian dance. Even erotic sentiment, called Sringara is considered as the longing of the individual human soul to unite with the supreme soul. Humanizing the divine and divinizing the human is the process in the artistic work, be it the poetic description or dance delineation. The classical dance artist meditates on the individual as an energized diagram or Yantra with its sacred geometry in which life forces are invoked by the movement, akin to the process of 'Prana Pratishtha' in Indian temples whereby deities are energized. The five elements of ether, wind, fire, water and earth, along with mind and consciousness are as in Yoga, existing within one's own self and also without. The integration of all these is expressed through the ritualistic temple dancing as the dancer is an instrument for both the dancer and audience, who facilitates a journey towards the sublime spirit.

Breath is vital and the dance movement offers natural cleansing and harmony through the innate Pranayama. The Vyayamas or exercises and Asanas or postures along with the discipline of Yogic control of senses and good conduct- Yama and Niyama are all very well embedded in the training. The subtle body is composed of seven energy centres called Chakras. The hand gestures, called Hastas, ample

having evolved from temple worship or Mudras, offer scope for visualization of a narrative as well as therapeutic means. Several thousand years have passed by but dance in India has stood the test of time and historical invasions, basically as it has originated from the imperishable Vedas that are without beginning or end, 'Anaadi-Ananta'. The origin of sound, inarticulate and articulate, unheard and heard or spoken, is discovered in the seed syllables recited and performed in the dances in tandem with the Indian classical music. The creator of this being the Indian deity of creation, Brahma, it is but easy to understand why this dance is extremely popular, appealing and equally meditative, soothing and ennobling. In dance, the divinities are accessed in first person by taking on their characters, roles, episodes and events, in second and third persons by treating them as fellow humans with the inherent feelings of love, anger, fear, disgust, humor, wonder, courage, compassion by either addressing them directly or communicating about them to others, through their songs in praise. The dividing line between the dancer and the character or even the DANCE gets blurred, even vanishes.

"In these, all forms of objective "this" are absorbed into the universal "I" in the realization "I am this" (ahamidam). There is no difference between I and you or this and that. In his *Rasādhyāya*, Abhinava explains the experience of rasas in a very similar way, in terms of a dissolution (vigalana) of all items of experience into, or removal of a veil (avarana) regarding their resting in consciousness (samvidiśrānti, a term also equated with pratibhā) (Nagar and Joshi 1981-1984, 6, 1:260-336; Masson and Patwardhan 1970). (SERAS) *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* Volume 35 (2013): 90-102. The Self of the self-realised yogin experiences itself as a sheer actor in the drama of life in the world playing various roles in his outer being but remaining absolutely detached from the entire play essentially" [1].

The Traditional temple motif and its inherent science

"As vibration, the spanda is a sonic manifestation of divinity whose interwoven aspects are melody (rāga) and rhythm (tāla). As a Tāntric messenger she brings to her lord and husband a knowledge contained in that continuum of rasa that binds refined aesthetic moods to bodily fluids identified as microcosmic equivalents of the geological and cosmological life energies that all reflect the flow and vibration of shakti within the extended interwoven body of the Tāntric godhead" [2]. The science of Yantra Shastra, depicts the forms as geometrical figures, each one with its intense implications and meanings capable of deeper interpretations. While physical sciences are with reference to known realities, Mantras or incantations, Tantras or the scientific procedures, and Yantras or divine imageries are dealing with unmanifest realities and the immense

potentialities of nature. It is said that the concentration of the mind at a single point is nuclear in its effect and powers can be developed and invoked. In the vibration of dancing, forces of attraction automatically embellish the dancer. She uses the various gestures and creates geometric shapes and forms like pyramids to draw energy.

All the Chakras converge when vibrated into the central point or Bindu, as in the Sri-Chakra, the mystical Indian worshipful image. The diagram consists of nine interwoven triangles, four points upwards, representing Shakti, the primordial female essence of active energy, and five points downwards, representing Shiva, the primordial male essence of unmoving rest. The triangles are 44 with the central triangle, the *bindu*). The Sri Chakra with its pinnacle, Mahameru, the tip of the iceberg, is the one, eternal, indescribable, attributeless- Nirguna, reflected as the world of Maya, moving, filled with attributes- Saguna. A cosmic creative vibration called Sphota or explosion arises between Shiva and Shakti, called Nada and this gets consolidated into Shabda Brahman, differentiated sound energy, also called, the universal cosmic resonance. This resonance is symbolised by 'Aum'. From this arises Cosmic Intelligence that is responsible for all existence to become manifestations.

The movements in Indian dance merge into triangular motifs like a rising flame. Sri Chakra or Sri Yantra is the model upon which many a temple design is made with the central dot of the potential universe or Parabindhu within the sanctum sanctorum. There is this format, marking a journey into the temple layout and there is further, another temple, in the body itself. The point is that, when the presentation is a place of worship, the central piece is the heart of the deity and when body is the temple, the dancer again takes the course of entering that temple's heart within, to unite with the deity. The epitomic personage Abhinavagupta calls Rasayana [the science of art, of the rasas, or of vegetables juices, etc.] more or less the Indian equivalent of alchemy, an esoteric science. For Abhinava the aesthetic performance and experience leads the adept towards identity with Shiva, supreme consciousness by disclosing his or her possession of his immanent Shakti, supreme will, power, knowledge and creation.

The Dance of Shiva

The world identifies Indian dance as the DANCE OF SHIVA. The multitudinous facets of the format incorporate a strong foothold to explore the infinite nature of time and space. "Laya is self- absorption and dissolution-Shiva Vyapti/ fusion with Shiva through the path shown by Shakti, energized in the yantra of body-mind-spirit.

A Contemplative discipline and an art process are

connected" [3]. Sound waves unite with energy and rhythm is tapped. When this rhythm is kept as the basic quality of an enterprise, one can imagine the extent to which it can expand and create endlessly. It is the sound as energy that consents to go from word to word, from thought to thought. It is the first moment of will, the initial motion of the spirit, which is presupposed by consciousness. There are many who recognize the fact that the ancient Rishis might have possessed knowledge of Spanda, this mysterious energy and absorbed, transmitted and utilized it with astounding results. What perplexes the modern investigators is that it seems to defy the well-known material sciences or physical laws. It is neither electrical nor electromagnetic and appears to exhibit certain characteristics of consciousness. It is this consciousness that speaks to the great mystics in deep meditation. "Scientists have taken the pattern of the DNA molecule as being the instrument that guides life along certain directions; they have missed the underlying principle behind the DNA molecule itself, i.e.-consciousness" [4].

Study of scientific laws of kinetics, kinematics, calisthenics and iconography give a periscopic perception. Einstein remarked that the most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the most mystical. It is the source of all true art and science, he thought. His theory of relativity comes close to Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta, the core philosophy of the ABSOLUTE ONE STILLNESS which reflects as the many dancing forms appearing when in light. This also assumes the crux in the Indian dance movement. Fritjof Capra became well known for his investigation of quantum physics and the core philosophies of various Eastern religions. He was mesmerized by the beauty and mystery of the cosmic dancer, Nataraja, and the close connection between the dance of vibrations in the quantum theory- Dancing Atoms and the dance of Nataraja. The intensive study of electric energy, quantum physics and so on, has revealed this wonderful connection between the truths propounded in the ancient Indian Upanishads, including Natya Shastra, the treatise by Saint Bharata, and modern scientific theories.

The Trend today and Digitization

From one dance form to another, the cafeteria approach of the budding artistic generation has led to a conflated identity and the canons have been replaced, if not subverted. The trend today is to conjecture a hypothetical presentation, mainly for social media, a mixed bag, often flavored with fusion and innovation and making any unequivocal interpretation genuinely unlikely. Brief appearances seem sufficient instead of full- fledged performances. Dancer artistes, have more glamour but are becoming increasingly common place and hardly anything much sustains for long in this modern race. It is easy to cut, paste and substitute pre-

existing works created by true maestros, out of sheer sweat and panache.

The esoteric significance in the dance can be better realized as a solo dancer with intense concentration. It is not possible to generate this while one has to dance in tandem with large groups and mechanically rehearsed movements. Spontaneity, called Manodharma, being cornerstone to determine the overall mettle of a dancer, we can rarely see the scope for it when artists perform to pre-recorded music increasingly. Often we see dancers perform for the gallery, for example modify the dance movement to include acrobatics or dance steps beyond acceptable standards to attract the cyberspace audience who is watching within a shortest span of time. Teasers and trailers are presented instead of a full-fledged repertoire. Choreography is important in the virtual dance world too but benchmarks in this have been laid to a pan- Indian treasure-house of knowledge, predominantly from a western perspective.

The traditional process of reading relevant books on paper has transformed to digital texts through various web portals. On a positive note however, the digitization of these texts has led to possibility of borrowing literature from various domains and facilitating interdisciplinary research. This leads to fast dissemination of research and developments. All the same, this possibly creates 'holes' in the art-forms and enterprise, which are not always identified.

Digital humanities- The challenge in dance training methods

"Together, the fields of theatre and dance can not only draw from the digital humanities, but also propose new means to consider embodied experience in terms of dynamic spatial histories of movement. Popular media screenscapes have reoriented the circulation of dance, shifting its presumed locus from the concert stage or dance club to computer and television screens, through which videos are shared widely and rapidly" [5]. This field presents results from testing the old system under different scenarios and provides ways for creative practitioners to adopt computing technologies in their works. An art is an expression of creative skill, aptitude, talent and expertise but necessitates the technique, the craftsmanship, the science behind it which codifies and provides the key to this. The art and the science are moving together, co-existing in the dance. Generally speaking, art is imaginative, subjective, psychological, creative and science is technical, objective, experimenting, material, logical. For example, an artiste would describe a tree while the scientist would give its dimensions. But both pre-suppose the existence of intuitive thinking, not pure accident. Artists have always incorporated scientific developments in their times.

Movement is a complex phenomenon that would require sophisticated sensors to digitize it. Whatever be the scientific theory, it comes into relevance and importance if and only when it is practiced. Discipline is but an indispensable characteristic as there is need for indoctrination and instruction, system and orderliness, training and control, rules and codes. Indian dance has rhythmically dominating aspects like Nritta, accompanied with Abhinaya, which requires years of expertise in subtle facial expressions. Video recordings in YouTube, Vimeo, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) have allowed many learners and enthusiasts to learn by watching. However, we need to ask -how much essence of the dance can be captured through watching a video? Researchers have explored the use of Kinect sensors to study motion of the performer's body. Kitsikidis presented a novel study on using 3D gaming technology and multi-sensors for dance learning. It was a contribution towards using virtual environments as learning systems. Several kinect sensors were placed across the performer's body to study their movement. However, the core problem when it comes to Indian dance, lies in the fact that majority of this research is conducted in Western universities and hence, they study Western dance.

The misinterpretations and misrepresentations can unfortunately extend to the core religious ideologies and customs, thereby the significant symbols, artistic images and faiths!

Considering the loftiness of the philosophy, the sanctity of the practice and the transcendence in the experience that form the substratum of spirituality in Indian dances, it is indeed a challenge to devise and utilize computerised techniques in the pedagogy without diluting the spiritual essence. A new language to articulate the many ways in which digital humanities practice can be placed in consonance with traditional roots and culture and regularly followed by scholarly inquiry would be the need of the hour. In this way practice-based research can cultivate a fluid back-and-forth exchange between Shastra and Prayoga, theory and practice. 'Digital humanities' has opened up pathways for practitioners to enhance their methodologies and creative processes. It would not be of any help to fight natural evolution and dismiss growth but care has to be taken, not to cut asunder the very purpose of the creation of an art which is to restore righteousness in the world through an aesthetic medium. The spiritual role that it plays in the world, needless to add, is indeed as an agent to kindle peace and friendship between people, beyond all barriers. It would be helpful if the potential attributes that are in threat of getting submerged through digitization, are identified by researchers and artists. For example, during dance training, the pure dance technique and structure can become translated to a satisfying extent

as the basic emotional stance is that of vigour. On the other hand, the intense involvement in the expressional mode, the devotional ascent and the one to one transmission during actual presence of teacher and taught in close proximity, seems amiss. It takes years of hardwork, dedication and study to master the nuances and achieve the Guru's approval and the spectator's relish. Almost an entire lifetime passes by to make that full circle from student to performer to teacher to researcher and ONE CONTINUES to be in each of these roles to maximize self-contentment. It is the dedication and perseverance that matter as an artist as the goals expand.

It is time then to manufacture this new man-made Bharatiya [Indian] model of a dancing goddess who stamps foot on the earth and takes us on a flight to the stars!

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