

Classical Dances of India

By

Dr. Aparna Pradhan

aparna.amit@gmail.com

Abstract

Indian classical dances have mesmerized the audience worldwide with its breathtaking graceful intricate movements, facial expressions, expressive hand gestures and elaborate costumes. Classical dances are a vivid reflection of the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of the country. Dance in India is not just a form of entertainment but an integral part of the religious rituals, social events and celebrations. Each dance form reflects the unique traditions, rituals and artistic expressions deeply rooted in the region of its origin.

Keywords

Classical dance, storytelling, mudras, facial expressions, rhythmic movements, foot work.

History

The history of Indian dance spans thousands of years. It can be traced to Pre-Vedic period i.e. Indus Valley civilization. The dancing figurine found during the excavations of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa revealed the importance of dance in social life of people, primarily a means of connecting with the divine.

In the Vedic period dance and music was considered an integral part of the rituals performed by the Aryans. They believed dance as a powerful medium for purifying the soul and elevating the state of mind.

Natya Nritya (dance drama), Geet nritya (Song and dance), Roop Nritya (abhiyana and dance) and Bhav Nritya (emoting through dance) were developed which elevated the level and content of dance. During the period of Ramayana and Mahabharata Nritya was fully developed.

Post-Vedic period with the development of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, dance in India began to take on more structured forms. Regional dance forms began to evolve and classical dance styles started emerging. Natyashastra written by Sage Bharata Muni around 200 BC emerged as one of the most significant texts in the history of Indian dance. This laid the guidelines on movement gestures (mudras), facial expressions (abhinaya) and stagecraft.

The Medieval period 500 AD to 1500 AD due to Islamic invasion led to the decline of devadasi system; however classical dance continued to be nurtured. Dance forms such as Kathak absorbed elements from Persia, Mughal and Central Asian dance traditions.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, classical Indian dance was revived and popularized both in India and abroad. Major classical dance forms got recognized and codified. Post independence the Indian classical dances went through a process of modernization such as better presentation, make up, dress, use of musical instruments, light and sound effects but despite the changes the dances maintained their traditional roots.

Introduction

India is a home to a variety of dance forms both classical as well as folk dances. These dance forms showcase its rich cultural heritage blending spirituality, storytelling and artistry. Indian dance is broadly classified into classical, folk and contemporary styles. Each dance form has its distinct characteristics and regional influences. The classical dance forms include Kathak, Kathakali, Bharatnatyam, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Mohiniattam and Manipuri.

Types of Classical Dance Forms

Kathak: Kathak, one of the classical dance forms stands as a testament to the rich cultural heritage of India. It is not just a dance form but a profound expression of culture, tradition, and history. Originating in northern India it has its roots in the temples of Uttar Pradesh. A blend of grace, rhythm, hand gestures and storytelling, Kathak brings together elements of music, poetry and dance. The name kathak is derived from the Sanskrit word “Katha” meaning a “story” and “Kathakar” meaning storyteller. Thus, kathak dance can be described as a dance form that tells a story, often through intricate footwork, expressive gestures, graceful and fluid movements.

The key elements of Kathak are – Rhythm (Tala), Footwork (Tatkaar), Pirouettes (Chakkars), Abhinaya (Expressive gestures), Costume and makeup. Rhythm is the heart of Kathak. Great emphasis is laid on abhiyana or art of expression. The emotions, stories and characters are conveyed by the dancer through facial expressions, hand gestures (mudras) and body movements. Women dancers usually wear Lehnga, choli and dupatta complemented by the jewellery and heavy ghungroos. Traditional makeup accentuates the facial expressions. Male dancers wear Churidar Pyjama, Kurta and Angarkha.

Styles of Kathak : Kathak has three main schools or Gharanas (styles) each with its unique characteristics though they share core principles. Jaipur Gharana, Lucknow Gharana and Banaras Gharana.



Image 1: Kathak Dance

Bharatnatyam: Bharatnatyam is one of the oldest and most revered classical dance forms that has its origin in Tamil Nadu, Southern part of India. It has its deep roots in religious rituals and temple performances. The key elements of Bharatnatyam are Nritta (Pure Dance), Nritya (Expressive dance where the dancer tells a story through facial expression) and Natya (drama – dramatic portrayal of characters and stories). Bharatnatyam is usually performed to narrate the stories from Hindu mythology especially those involving deities like Lord Shiva, Vishnu and Radha-Krishna.

The traditional costume consists of a silk sari with pleats arranged in a way that allows easy movements. The costume is complemented by elaborate jewellery. The accompanying music is usually classical Carnatic music featuring instruments such as mridangam, violin, flute and veena.

The credit for global recognition of this dance form goes to Artists like Sonal Mansigh, Rukmini Devi Arundale, Bala Saraswati.

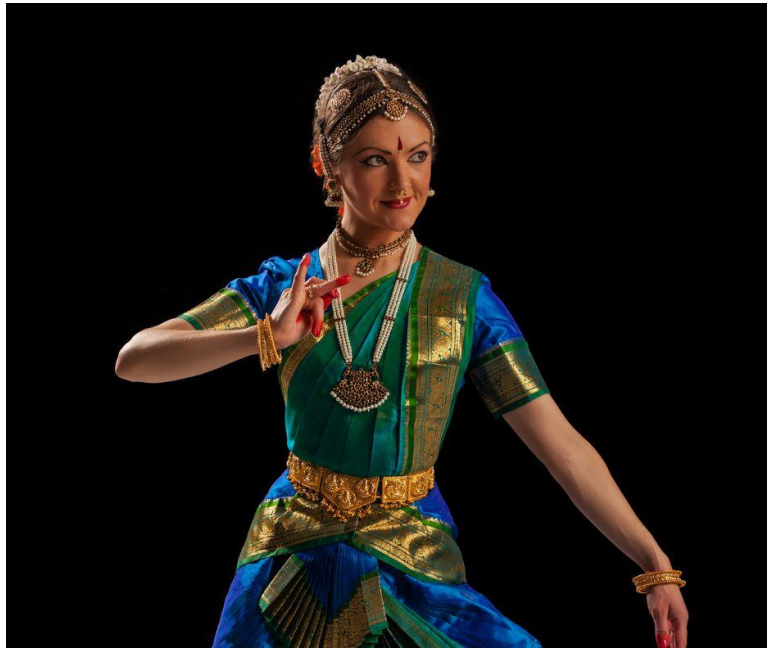


Image 2: Bharatnatyam Dance

Kuchipudi: Originating from Andhra Pradesh Kuchipudi has a rich tradition of rhythmic movements and blends nritta, nritya(expressive dance) and natya which form the main elements of the dance form. Other elements are chowki and Tungabhadra Pose, Gaurippu (opening ritual)and Jaiswaram, Varnam and Padmas. . The traditional costume consists of a sari draped in a specific style. Female dancers wear a “Kacchika”, a piece of cloth wrapped around the waist and jewellery.

Carnatic music featuring instruments like mridangam (a drum), violin, flute, veena and tambura. The vocal music forms an essential part of this dance form. While Kuchipudi retains its traditional elements it has evolved over the years.

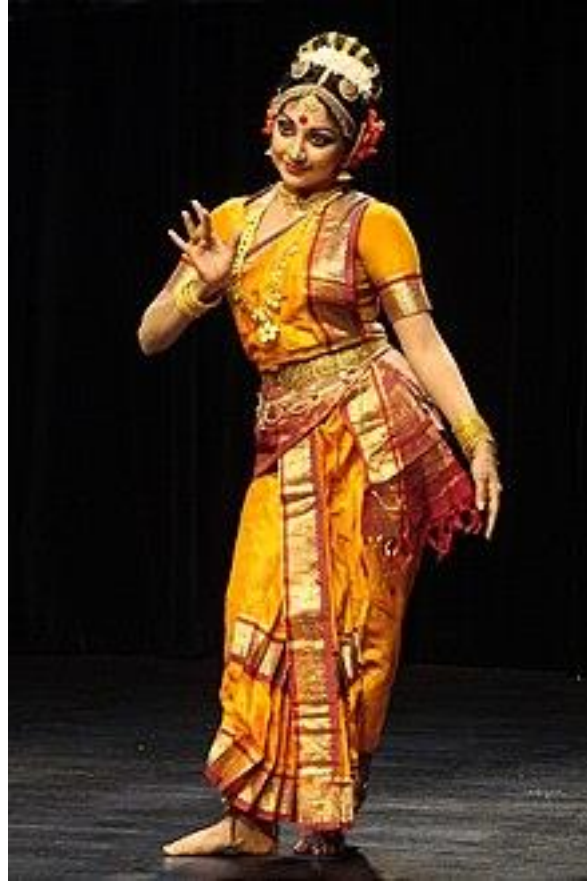


Image 3: Kuchipudi Dance

Odissi: This dance form originating from the eastern state of Odisha with its rich cultural heritage is known for its graceful movements, sculptural poses and spiritual expressions. It is one of the oldest dance forms in India with its roots dating back over two thousand years. It relates to the cultural and religious traditions of the state especially the worship of Lord Jagannath.

The key elements of the dance are Hasta mudras, Chouka and tribhangi, mudras and Abhinaya, Bhangis (Postures), rhythm and footwork. Odissi is performed to classical Odissi music which follows the traditional ragas and talas (rhythmic cycles).



Image 4: Odissi Dance

Mohiniattam: This dance form can be traced back to 16th century and has its roots in Kerala's temple dance traditions. It is believed to have evolved from Devadasi or temple dance forms. This dance form developed its distinct identity over centuries blending traditional Kerala dance with elements from Bharatnatyam.

The key elements of Mohiniattam dance include graceful movements, nritya, postures and stances, footwork, costume and makeup and music and accompaniment. The costume worn by Mohiniattam dancers is typically a white sari with golden borders, draped in the traditional Kerala style called "Set Mundu". The traditional jewellery compliments the dancer's attire. Hair of the dancer are tied into a bun on the left side of the temple and adorned with fresh fragrant flowers. The dance is performed to Carnatic music, with a focus on melody and rhythm.



Image 5: Mohiniattam Dance

Kathakali: Kathakali is one of the most spectacular and intricate classical dance drama form of India. Originating in Kerala it is a dance form like no other, where every gesture, facial expression and rhythmic beat is carefully crafted to convey complex emotions and epic stories. It is fusion of dance, drama and music, where mythology comes to life in a visually stunning and emotionally charged performance often lasting several hours. Kathakali is known for its elaborate costumes, vibrant makeup and powerful storytelling. The costumes of these dancers and makeup of the dancers are one of the most distinguishing features. The makeup plays a crucial role in conveying the emotions and involves intricate designs on the forehead, eyes and mouth. The headgear is large and ornate enhancing the dramatic effect.



Image 6: Kathakali Dance

Manipuri: Manipuri dance can be traced back over 2000 years and has its roots in temples traditions of northeastern state of Manipur. It is a blend of delicate footwork, elegant hand gestures and expressive facial expressions. The dance form reflects the deep cultural heritage of Manipur. The dance is influenced by the Hindu religious rituals, especially the worship of Lord Krishna and his divine consort, Radha.

The key features of this dance form are graceful movements, circular movements, footwork, hand gestures, facial expressions, costumes and music and accompaniments. The most important instruments include Pung (drum), khol, flute, dholak and sitar.

The music of Manipuri dance is slow, meditative, and devotional, designed to reflect the grace and serenity of the dance.



Image 7: Manipuri Dance

Conclusion

Indian classical dance represents the rich cultural heritage that spans thousands of years. These dance forms are not just artistic performances but also a reflection of India's philosophical, spiritual, religious and social fabric that continues to thrive through both preservation and innovation. The graceful movements, expressive storytelling and intricate rhythms of these dances continues to captivate audiences and embody the richness of Indian traditions.

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About the Author

Dr. Aparna Pradhan, doctorate in Zoology is an artist, bilingual writer, author, poetess, and moderator. She has authored eight books and has contributed to around 60 National and International anthologies. She is recipient of Prestigious Rabindranath Tagore Award for outstanding contribution in the field of Literature, Panorama Golden Book Award, Orchid Women Achievers of Goa Award, Savitribai Dada Saheb Phalke Women Achievers Award, Asia's prestigious Golden Book Award, Indian Women Achievers Award in Literature and Arts.

