

PARADIGM OF INDIA'S CLASSICAL TRADITION:  
BHARATANATYAM AS PERFORMED TODAY

The following paper is an ethnographically oriented extract from research concerned with the analysis of human movement systems as systems of cultural knowledge (Puri, 1983). Following Mauss, we believe that cultures store a large part of their collective thought in sign systems other than spoken language (Crick, 1976:65; Mauss, 1964:125). In particular they make use of body language, or action sign systems (Williams, 1979) both to encode beliefs and to express them in social life. Analysis of the medium of action, i.e. one which involves bodies moving through time and space, whether in dances, martial arts, sports or ritual, can give us insights into the belief systems that govern a particular social system. So while the material presented here is largely descriptive and introductory, a fundamental assumption that underlies this paper is that the study of an idiom of movement such as Bharatanātyam is an entry point into more general anthropological understanding of a society.

Dance of the Devadāsis

'Bharatanātyam' is the contemporary name for an idiom of dance from Tamilnadu in south India, which is the most widely known and popular of dance forms performed in India today. Until the early nineteen-thirties it was referred to locally in the Madras area simply as nāc ('dance'), or as sādir nāc and dāsi āttam, which means 'dance of the devadāsis'. Devadāsis (literally, 'female servants of god') were women dedicated to temple service, who performed dances as part of the many rituals connected with a temple. On special occasions such as marriages they would be invited to perform at the houses of prominent citizens. Some were attached to the courts of kings and expected to dance at the palace, for which they received a salary.

British colonial officials who were entertained by these 'dancing girls' when they visited a local ruler thought of devadāsis as 'loose women' and equated their way of life with prostitution (cf. Thurston and Rangachari, 1909), an attitude which affected the way in which upper class Indians came to regard them as well. Disapproval of the custom led to the launching of an anti-nāc (anti-dance) movement in the late nineteenth century by a group of social reformers who sought to prohibit the devadāsi institution itself.<sup>1</sup> As temple and court patronage was withdrawn, many devadāsis became impoverished, turned to less prestigious patrons and also to prostitution<sup>2</sup> which in turn brought further social disapprobation on them. By the first quarter of this century those devadāsis who continued to pursue their profession were ostracized by the upper classes; their dances, too, were regarded as immoral by many.

The beginning of the twentieth century marked the growth of an Indian national consciousness and the development of a sense of pan-Indian ethnicity that accompanied the struggle for political independence from the British. Nationalists and urban literati sought to promote a pride in, and to revive, traditions that reflected an indigenous culture and which pre-dated periods of alien domination, such as by Turks, Mongols and Europeans. In Madras, a group of music and dance scholars<sup>3</sup> attempted to demonstrate that, far from being immoral, sādir nāc was an expression of the best of ancient Indian aesthetic, philosophic and religious beliefs and principles. The first few public performances organised in the late 'twenties created a furor among those who supported the anti-nāc movement, and led to a vigorous controversy between them and the revivalists. This was reported in the press, and in turn made more people aware of the revivalist position with regard to the dance.

1933 is considered a turning point in the history of this idiom, for on the first of January of that year an extremely successful performance was held under the aegis of the respected Madras Music Academy (Iyer, 1955:9; Kothari, 1979:28). Over the next twenty years young girls from 'respectable' families began to study sādir nāc, or Bharatanātyam, as it was now called, and to present it to urban audiences not only in Madras, but in the major cities of the north as well. Today it is regarded by Indians both as a paradigm of dance and as an epitome of their ancient culture.

The name given to the idiom has played a not insignificant part in its present popularity and status. 'Bharatanātyam' means 'the dance-theatre of Bharata', the writer to whom is ascribed the oldest surviving treatise on Indian theatre -- the Nāṭyaśāstra -- dated at not later than the third century, A.D. By referring to the dance of the devadāsis by this term the revivalists made the point that these dances followed aesthetic and technical precepts that had been laid down in the ancient Sanskrit text. In a sense they separated the life-style of devadāsis from the content and form of the dances they performed. For while the former could be regarded as immoral, the latter expressed highly valued moral ideals. So although the institution of devadāsis has virtually disappeared (it was banned by the Madras Government in 1947), their dances continue to be performed all over India and abroad.

### The Theatre of Bharata, and the Classical Age

The Nāṭyaśāstra is an encyclopaedic description of the theory and practise of theatre as it developed in India in the early part of the Christian era. The thirty-six chapters of the treatise deal with such topics as the origin of drama (mythological), prayers to the gods, descriptions of the playhouse, and rules on the use of language. Other

chapter headings are: Costume and Make-up, Types of Dramatic Characters, and Kinds of Play (Ghosh, 1967). More relevant to Bharatanāṭyam are chapters devoted to movements of different parts of the body (e.g. the eyes, neck, feet, and limbs, and, in particular, the hands or hasta), and extensive discussion of rasa (sentiment) and bhāva (emotion). (See section below.) Each of these elements is analysed, described, given a particular Sanskrit name, and then placed within a classificatory schema, so that the work is in effect a detailed manual of dramatic technique.

Several commentaries on the Nāṭyaśāstra were written over the centuries. Many of these involve a re-exposition of Bharata's material, and often differ in the number of elements within a particular taxonomy, and in the names given to them. One in particular, the Abhinaya Darpanam of Nandikesvara, who lived during the 13th century (Coomaraswamy and Duggirala, 1967), is regarded by Bharatanāṭyam dancers as most closely resembling present day usage, particularly with respect to abhinaya (mime) and the use of hand gesture (hasta mudra). Discussions of the finer points of dance technique make reference to the whole body of this literature, which in turn is added to by contemporary scholars who produce translations and commentaries in English and in various vernacular languages (Gairola, 1971; Naidu, Naidu and Pantulu, 1936; Varma, 1957, et al.).

Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra was written between the second century, B.C., and the second century, A.D., but the earliest extant texts of actual plays date from about the fifth century, A.D., during the Gupta age of Indian history. Sanskrit scholars regard these plays as representing a high point in the development of Sanskrit, and believe them to have been performed in the manner described by Bharata. Not only the literature of the Gupta period, but also most other aspects of its culture are regarded as representing archetypal Indian forms. The period itself is called the 'Classical Age'. As one historian puts it, "For historians writing in the early twentieth century, the 'golden age' had to be a utopia set in the distant past and the period chosen by those working on the early history of India was one in which Hindu culture came to be firmly established" (Thapar, 1966:136). This view of the past was particularly appealing to Indian nationalists, and is adhered to by most modern educated Indians "who see India as a great civilization that reached an apex or classical period in the fifth and sixth centuries" (Cohn, 1971:58).

The scholars who promoted a revival of sādir nāc were particularly concerned to establish that this idiom of dance was a 'classical', as opposed to a 'folk', or 'less elevated', form of expression. The Madras Music Academy was founded by them for the promotion of classical dance and music; they published articles that included detailed analyses and explanations of classical technical and theoretical precepts with reference to dance and music. The pedagogical system of newly established dance schools, as well as the language of dance reviews, now included explicit references to concepts and terminology from the Nāṭyaśāstra literature. As an effort was made to make audiences conversant with

the subtleties of classical Indian aesthetic theory, the notion of rasika, or ideal spectator informed in the esoteric aspects of aesthetics, was emphasised (see section below), along with a deploration of unlearned and superficial understandings of classical art (cf. Singer, 1972;172). By implication, of course, many other dance and theatre traditions were now classified as 'vulgar' or 'folk' and relatively negatively valued.

#### A Pan-Indian Ideal, and the Modern Notion of 'Dance'

The Bharatanāṭyam revival movement spread to the rest of India, carrying with it connotations of both a classical and a pan-Indian reformation. Bharatanāṭyam was transformed from a locally specific idiom of movement into one of national relevance. For the nationalist movement was equally concerned with establishing a pan-Indian identity which crossed regional, ethnic and religious boundaries, as it was in promoting a sense of pride in classical traditions. As Bharatanāṭyam was adopted by urban, educated Indians from different castes and from different linguistic and regional areas, it acquired a non-ethnically specific connotation, in spite of the fact that the lyrics of songs that accompany dances are in south Indian tongues. Contemporary dancers of national and international renown come from several different regions of India, as do some teachers and musicians as well, and are not always familiar with the spoken languages in which the dance was originally taught.<sup>4</sup> The main lingua franca of dancers is English; musicians and teachers often communicate in Hindi, a north Indian tongue.

The appropriation of Bharatanāṭyam as an expression of a pan-Indian culture is reflected by the fact that in the north it is often called 'Bhārat Natyam', the dance-theatre of Bhārat, an ancient name for India. (The linguistic shift is facilitated by the Roman script in which the word is most often written, and in which the distinction between a short and a long 'a' is not made.) Thus to many Indians, Bharatanāṭyam means primarily 'the dance of India'. Contemporary dance literature focuses primarily on this idiom; and although many well-known exponents of classical dance perform other idioms as well, a majority has received a basic training in Bharatanāṭyam.

The special position of Bharatanāṭyam influences the technique as well as the presentation of dance forms from other parts of India. In fact, the very notion of a 'dance recital' connotes a performance by a female soloist (accompanied by musicians) of a series of dances, a majority of which are interpreted with hand gestures and mime, and which deal with religious and mythological themes, conventions that are not necessarily shared by all Indian theatrical traditions. Classical texts make it clear that 'dance' per se is not separable from the notion of acting, and that it is only an element of a total concept of theatre which includes music, costume, and spoken language

as well as action. Strictly speaking, 'Bharatanāṭyam' is descriptive of a number of theatrical traditions, some of which perhaps better deserve the nomenclature since they are performed in Sanskrit (Kuttiyāttam of Kerala), involve a number of male actor-dancers, and employ the spoken as well as the sung word, i.e. more closely resemble theatre as described by Bharata. But while other idioms are known by their local names, 'Bharatanāṭyam' refers specifically to the idiom of movement that was performed by the devadāsis of south India.

Attempts to make certain idioms of dance, such as Kathak and Odissi, 'more classical' usually use Bharatanāṭyam as a model. Excerpts from theatrical traditions, such as Kuchipudi of Andhra, normally performed by groups of male actors during annual religious festivals, are presented in Bharatanāṭyam-like recitals and become associated across India (and outside the country) with 'dance' as opposed to 'theatre'. Given that the distinction dance/drama is contrary to the classical theory of natya, it is ironic that Bharatanāṭyam -- a paradigm of classical theatre -- should have led to the creation of such a categorical distinction.

#### Sanskritization and Modernization

Two simultaneous trends affect the theory and practise of Bharatanāṭyam (and thus also of other dance idioms). First, there is a tendency towards making it more overtly classical. For example, the hand positions (hastā) are increasingly known by Sanskrit names; Tamil names that may have been used prior to its revival are lost to the tradition. Also, Bharata's rasa theory of emotions and sentiments (see section below) is applied more rigorously to interpretations of its mime (abhinaya) even though sādir nāc developed within a Hindu bhakti (devotion) tradition,<sup>5</sup> in which the primary rasa (sentiment) is srngāra ('romantic' or 'erotic'). A bhakt (devotee) expresses his adoration for a personalised deity in terms of love between a man and a woman. A devadāsi too expressed in her dances a passionate yearning to be united with a deity, who was primarily addressed as a male lover. In order to give equal weight, as it were, to the other rasas (sentiments) many dancers introduce dances set to Sanskrit slokas which permit the expression of them. This tendency to make Bharatanāṭyam more classical could be described as a process of Sanskritization, here used in a more literal sense than that employed by Srinivas to describe upward mobility within castes (Srinivas, 1952:30).

The second trend is one of modernization, and of secularization in the sense that Bharatanāṭyam is more often associated with the cultural activities of modern India -- with the celebration of events such as India's Republic Day, national and international conferences and conventions, and presidential banquets -- than with specifically ritual or religious contexts. Few contemporary dancers and musicians are

members of devadāsi families, and as the present generation of gurus (teachers) who were hereditary pedagogues of sādir nāc, dies out, it is replaced by one composed of people who have made a name for themselves primarily as dancers. Many schools of Bharatanātyam are sponsored by secular organizations such as the Indian government; dance classes constitute only a part of the activities in a students' life, and dancing is regarded more as a valued social accomplishment than as an expression of a total way of life. A modern audience is more likely to be composed of government officials, prominent business men, and foreign diplomats and tourists, than of pilgrims to a temple city or invitees to a Vedic wedding ceremony.

On surface the first trend focuses on the movements themselves, their syntactic structure and semantic content. Contemporary dancers see themselves as inheritors of a classical temple tradition; they try to create an atmosphere of religious devotion during a performance and to re-introduce gestures and poses described in Sanskrit texts. The second overtly concerns the socio-cultural context in which performance takes place.

In practise, of course, the idiom itself and the cultural contexts in which it is performed and taught are affected by both these trends, which results in a dynamic interplay between several apparently contradictory forces. The conservatism of the elitist Sanskritization process is counteracted by the liberalism effected by its popularity among people who are not necessarily versed in its classical principles. The ideals of Sanskritic presentation and the atmosphere of religious ritual often give way to the exigencies of the modern stage and its purposes of popular communication and commercial viability. Thus over time even the movements and the semantic content of dances are affected. Dances are composed to songs in non-south Indian languages, to locally popular music, and sometimes deal with themes relevant to modern India.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, festivals of dance and music are frequently arranged in temples on the occasion of the installation and consecration of deities. Contemporary religious sects often introduce dancing into their devotional rituals.

The complementary trends of 'purifying' and 'democratizing' Bharatanātyam have regional implications. In Tamilnadu many dances originally performed in a Sanskritized register of Telugu (the spoken language of Andhra) are today accompanied by lyrics in Tamil translation. Movements particular to the body language of Tamils are introduced into the idiom. In other parts of India, gestures from local body languages, themes from local versions of Hindu legends and local music are employed in dances. Over time Bharatanātyam is influenced both by a more widespread Tamil culture and by aspects of the popular cultures of other regions. It is thus difficult to distinguish those elements of present Bharatanātyam practise which reflect adherence to a Sanskritic ideal from those which are the result of modernization, particularly if one takes the anthropologically oriented view that the two trends are simply currently identifiable

factors in more long-term processes of social change. A living dance tradition, like a living spoken language, is simultaneously acted upon by many forces. Context affects form; in turn, form (syntax and grammar) is affected by historical and other kinds of context (etymological and socio-linguistic factors).

In the following description of Bharatanāṭyam I present a picture of the idiom based both on overtly conscious and out-of-awareness conceptions which underly how it is performed, taught and watched today. It is important to remember that most of the constituent elements of Bharatanāṭyam performance in fact belong to a culturally specific idiom of movement which developed within a particular socio-cultural framework -- south Indian temples and courts of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The details of its technique, pedagogy and performance should be regarded as pertaining to a medium of expression which reflects first Tamil, then south Indian, and only after that a more general pan-Indian culture. In other words, in spite of the significance of Bharatanāṭyam to the rest of India, as an idiom of movement it is rooted in and tied to a limited socio-cultural milieu.

#### A Typical Recital

Bharatanāṭyam can be seen at any of a number of theatres in the larger metropolises of India. While many theatres are permanent constructions built on the western model with a proscenium arch, raised stage, curtains, and fixed tiered seats separated by aisles, there are many 'theatres' that are of a temporary nature, constructed especially for a dance or music festival. These too have an elevated stage, but there is no curtain and the audience may sit on a rug that covers the ground. The stage itself is covered by a tent-like canopy that might also extend over the audience area.

Compared to a modern western theatrical presentation an Indian dance or music recital seems quite informal as people stream in and out of the audience area, and children run around at the foot of the stage. Since most performances are organized in order to celebrate some special event -- a religious holiday, the birth anniversary of a poet, or the visit of a political dignitary -- there is a festive air to the occasion and women in particular are dressed in their best clothes. Speeches are made prior to, and often before the close of, a performance. Dancers, musicians, and guests of honor are garlanded with flowers and votes of thanks are offered to almost everyone connected with the organization of a recital.

Bharatanāṭyam is performed on a bare floor, while members of the audience sit facing the stage; they do not surround the performance space and so are able to gain a frontal view of the dancer's body at all times. The musicians who accompany the dancer sit at stage right

facing stage left. Unlike north Indian music performances at which musicians are accustomed to having their students and special music lovers seated close to them (at a 'conversational distance' as it were), at a Bharatanāṭyam recital the separation between the spectators and the performers is marked spatially.

Although Bharatanāṭyam is easily adapted to a western style proscenium arch theatre, the semantics of the space in which a dancer performs are unlike those associated with a western theatrical stage. There is a sense in which for the duration of the recital the stage is a consecrated space. Many dancers place an image of Natarāja (the deity Siva in his form as 'king of the dance') on a pedestal towards downstage left, facing the audience. On occasion oil lamps are placed on either side of this image or at the foot of the stage.<sup>7</sup> Since illumination is provided by electric stage lights, these lamps do not serve a practical function but are in honor of the deity. Once a recital is in progress no member of the audience steps onto the stage. If any of the organizers were to enter the stage during an intermission, they would be expected to remove their shoes.

Apart from the cloth or rug on which the musicians sit, the stage is bare; there are no 'sets' as such and the rear of the performance space is marked by a plain (usually black) curtain. The front curtain, if there is one, is drawn open at the beginning of a recital and is not normally used during a recital. The lack of scenery is in conformity with one of the conventions of ancient Sanskrit theatre where even stage properties were rarely used. Instead, the actor is expected to suggest changes of scenery or objects that are part of the action by the skillful use of hand gestures.

### The Dancer

Bharatanāṭyam is performed by a woman who dances alone.<sup>8</sup> She enters from stage right and performs namaskāras (salutations, or obeisance) to the figure of the deity, to her guru (teacher) who usually leads the musicians, to each of the musical instruments, and to the audience. She then takes a position center stage and executes a final namaskāra to bhūmī (the earth) by touching the floor, then her eyes, and ending by joining her palms.<sup>9</sup>

Her costume consists of six yards of hand-woven silk (a sāri) interwoven with gold threads; the border and one of the ends of the sāri are normally in a contrasting color. Traditionally this sāri would have been especially woven for the devadāsi but today it is acquired ready-woven from the weaving center of south India at the temple city of Kanchipuram. The sāri is draped similarly to the way in which it is worn by most Indian women today, except that it is either (i) worn short so that its lower edge is nine inches off the floor, or (ii) one



end is draped between the legs (so that the legs look trousered) and then tucked into the front of the waist to fall in vertical fan-like folds down to the knees. Both these variations on normal wear allow more freedom of movement for the limbs. The upper part of the body is also covered by a tight fitting choli (short-sleeved blouse) tailored in matching silk and gold fabric.

The dancer wears at least ten pieces of gold jewelry set with rubies -- a necklace around her neck, a long garland-like necklace that reaches her waist, dangling ear-rings, bangles, armllets, a belt-like waist band and three types of hair ornaments. Her hair is parted along the center; some of it is woven into a long braid that hangs free down her back to the end of which is tied a brightly colored tassel. The rest of her hair is twisted into a chignon at the crown of her head and encircled with flowers. The hair line above the dancer's forehead and the center parting of her hair is covered by a piece of jewelry to which is attached a circular pendant that falls over the center of her forehead. She also wears two brooch-like ornaments called the candra (moon) and surya (sun) to the left and right, respectively, of the central parting of her hair.<sup>10</sup> Around her ankles are tied a strand of bells, about fifty per foot, which sound as she slaps her bare feet on the floor of the stage.

The dancer's facial make-up consists of heavily kohled eyes, darkened eyebrows and lipstick as well as the red tilakam (mark) placed at the center of her forehead, which is the traditional sign of a Hindu married woman. Her hands and feet have designs painted on them in red, particularly around the edges of the soles and on the palms. Although this costume (including the make-up) is associated all over India with the Bharatanāṭyam dancer, in fact it is the way in which a south Indian bride is dressed, and is the most ornate costume that a south Indian woman would wear during her life. Much of the symbolism of the jewelry as well as the color red pertain to notions of auspiciousness and happiness associated with Hindu marriage. Unlike other idioms of theatre or dance in which the actor-dancer wears a special costume associated only with performance of the idiom, in Bharatanāṭyam the performer's costume is an extension of the normal clothing worn by a devadāsi (who was also the 'bride' of a deity), and is still a prototype of bridal wear in south Indian society at large.

### The Music

A Bharatanāṭyam recital, like all performances of traditional dance and theatre in India, begins with (and is always accompanied by) music. The school of music is south Indian, called 'Karnāṭic', and the instruments used in Bharatanāṭyam are specific to that style. Unique to a dance recital is the nattuvanār (dance master) who chants the rhythmic syllables that accompany some sections of the dance and who always beats the rhythms made by the dancer's feet with a pair of small cymbals called tālam. The nattuvanār is often also the dancer's guru (teacher). The other musicians are:

- (i) a drummer who plays the two-headed mrdangam;
- (ii) one or more singers accompanied by a tānpura ('drone') that sets the pitch or key; and
- (iii) two or more instrumentalists who play, for example, a vīna (sitar-like stringed instrument), a bamboo flute, or a violin (which was introduced into Karnātic music in the eighteenth century).

The musicians start with a song addressed to one of the Hindu deities,<sup>11</sup> sometimes even before the dancer appears on stage. Throughout the recital each dance begins with a 'prelude', in which the musicians introduce the rāga ('musical mode' or 'scale') to which that dance is set, by presenting an improvised sequence of notes that leads into the first phrase of the musical composition that the dancer will interpret. Each musical composition is also set to a particular tāla (metrical or time cycle) and may include sāhitya (lyrics or words). The dancer is essentially concerned with interpreting these three elements of the music -- rāga, tāla and sāhitya -- through movement.

The theory and content of Indian music is extremely complex and is an important factor in the aesthetic theories that govern dance and theatre.<sup>12</sup> Without oversimplifying the musical accompaniment of Bharatanātyam, however, it could be said to fall into three main categories: (i) rhythmic patterns or jatis,<sup>13</sup> (ii) melody or the succession of musical notes, and (iii) lyrics or sāhitya.

Jatis (rhythmic patterns) are always communicated through mrdangam (drum) and the tālam (small cymbals), as well as by the slapping of the dancer's feet against the floor and the sound of the bells tied around her ankles. They may be stressed during certain passages by the enunciation of conventional syllables that are intended to express these rhythms, for example, 'tā, tarita tana tā, tanata jhunu tei...', and which are chanted by the nattuvanār. Jatis are structured in accordance with the tāla of the musical compositions in which they occur, which tāla may be in cycles of three, four, five, seven or nine beats. More complex tālas can also be formed, such as ādi tāla (eight or ata tāla (fourteen beats)). Jatis need not be accompanied by a melody.

The melody or succession of notes structured according to a rāga (musical mode or scale) may at times be sung to the India solfa system -- 'sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni', which is similar to the 'do, re, mi, fa...' of western music. Those notes are called svaras and are also played by the vīna, flute and violin. Svaras are always composed within a tāla (or time structure). At times the melody is sung to words of lyrics (sāhitya), which convey a spoken language meaning. Although there can be passages where the melody to which these words are sung is not structured within a specific time measure, the sāhitya passages are always set to a melody; they are never spoken or even chanted.

Each of these three aspects corresponds to different categories of movement sequences. In order to understand what is being interpreted at any particular moment during a performance, a spectator must be able to recognize the musical elements, because the dancer's movements are dependent on the content of the music. For the dancer these elements are arranged in an hierarchy in the sense that the lyrics take precedence over the melodic or rhythmic content. If words are being sung, she must interpret them with her hands and face, even though she continues to beat the time cycle or simple rhythmic patterns with her feet. When there are no lyrics, she uses her whole body to interpret the rhythmic element of music.

Any of these elements -- tāla organized into jatis, rāga presented through svaras, or spoken language meaning conveyed by the sāhitya -- may be stressed at different times of a dance recital. Passages that include all three are considered the highlights of a program. Each dance in the Bharatanāṭyam program is identified by the rāga and tāla to which it is performed, as well as by the first phrase of its lyrics where appropriate. Further description of a dance is based on the organization of its jati, svara and sāhitya portions into conventional forms such as jati-svaram, tillānā or padam.

### The Repertoire

A typical performance lasts two and a half hours<sup>14</sup> and consists of a series of dances each of which has a specific musical form. The names of these dances are similar to those used in Karnāṭic music, just as certain forms of European dance, such as chaconne and minuet, also refer to European musical forms.<sup>15</sup> There is a set pattern to the recital and although the dancer may choose to omit certain dances, each type of dance has a specified order in the traditional Bharatanāṭyam program. It is this repertoire that confers identity on the idiom.

There are seven main genres of dances in the typical Bharatanāṭyam repertoire, which are performed in the following order: alaripu, jati-svaram, sabdam, varnam, padam, tillāna and sloka. Although a few other names are also employed, these can be regarded as sub-classifications of the basic seven forms of dances.<sup>16</sup> In each recital only one dance of each type is performed, with the exception of padams (literally 'portion or foot of verse') more commonly understood as 'sung poems', of which three or four may be presented. This repertoire is attributed to four brothers, known as the 'Tanjore Quartet' who belonged to a family of dance and music scholars and performers, and who were also gurus (teachers or 'maestros') of devadāsīs.

In the early nineteenth century these gurus transformed sādir nāc by introducing dances that have since then been taught by their descendants, and which are still performed by contemporary students of the idiom. The structure of their compositions, and the vocabulary of movements used in them is the basic content of Bharatanāṭyam practise

and pedagogy, and guides the composition of 'new' dances. A novice dancer is taught these dances by rote, and at the initial stages of her training she performs them exactly as taught. As she gains proficiency in the idiom, however, she begins to improvise portions of the dances.

An accomplished dancer is expected to improvise many of her movements during a recital; while she explores some of the ways in which a musical phrase can be interpreted in movement, the musicians repeat that phrase until they receive a signal from her to continue with the next phrase. The basic skeleton of a piece is set beforehand; how it is interpreted, and the variations that a performer might be able to present, depend on the skill and proficiency of the individual performer. This procedure is not unlike what happens in a performance of Indian music, in which the soloist (singer, drummer or instrumentalist) improvises the actual melody (svaras or notes) and rhythms that he or she presents, within the rules of the raga and tala to which a piece is set. One can therefore think of the Bharatanātyam dancer as a musician who uses the medium of movement in order to interpret the music. Her whole body, rather than a flute, viṇā or the vocal cords, is the instrument with which she interprets the svara, tala and śahitya that comprise the musical accompaniment.

The initial dances in a Bharatanātyam recital concentrate on nṛtta or movements executed principally to bring out the melodies and poly-rhythms suggested by the music. These are performed to songs in which the singer either sings jati syllables or enunciates the names of the svaras themselves. The dancer chooses from the movement vocabulary of Bharatanātyam and combines these movements into 'enchainements' that complement the accompanying music. In these sequences she is concerned with melody and rhythm. While her feet beat complex rhythms on the floor (as if it were a drum), her eyes, neck, shoulders and wrists mark the basic pulse of the tala. A striking aspect of this idiom, which is common to all idioms of dance theatre in India, is the use of stylized hand-positions or hasta mudra, that complete the movements of the arms. By tracing patterns in space, the arms and hands express the melodic phrasing of the svaras as well as the rhythmic patterns of jatis.

As the program continues, the performer begins to incorporate 'mime' (abhinaya) into her movements. Facial expressions and hasta mudra are now used to interpret the dramatic, narrative and poetic significance of the śahitya of songs. These songs are set to Sanskrit, Telugu or Tamil poems which in the main address a particular deity such as Siva or Krishna. At times the dancer describes the deity, at others she seems to address him directly. She also presents episodes from Hindu legends and mythology in order to illustrate an emotion or mood that she wishes to evoke, first playing one character then another as she recreates the scene that she refers to. It is during these sections that one begins to understand why Bharatanatyam is often classified by Indians as 'theatre', and why the term 'dance' alone is insufficient to describe the idiom.

### Dancing and Acting

The Sanskrit word nāṭya is a generic term for theatre as a whole and includes the spoken or sung word, music as well as movement. The many ancient treatises on Indian theatre stress the importance of body language in the communication of meaning. Nrtya refers to the movement element in particular and includes both the notions of acting and dancing (Coomaraswamy and Duggirala, 1970:5). There is the further term, nr̥tta, mentioned above, that refers to those movements that do not convey dramatic or narrative significance. This term is often translated as 'abstract' or 'pure' dance in contrast to the idea of mime contained in the term abhinaya.

Strictly speaking abhinaya carries the sense of 'communication' or 'the bringing forth of meaning'; it is also used to describe the various mediums of expression used by the actor -- āṅgika-abhinaya (abhinaya through body and limbs), vācaka-abhinaya (abhinaya of speech and sound), āhārya-abhinaya (abhinaya through costume, make-up and ornaments) and sāttvika-abhinaya (abhinaya of inner mental states or 'sentiments'). Although dance scholars through the ages have attempted to analyze the many meanings of the term 'abhinaya', they have reached no definitive consensus on its proper significance. For most dancers and teachers of Bharatanāṭyam, abhinaya refers to the mime element of dances in which facial expressions and hand gestures in particular are used to convey dramatic, narrative and spoken language meanings. In this latter simple sense it is opposed to nr̥tta movements which are devoid of such kinds of meaning.

Both abhinaya and nr̥tta are included in nr̥tya, the term that is closest to the idea of 'dance' in India, and nr̥tya is the main vehicle of nāṭya or theatre. In modern India the distinction between nāṭya and nr̥tya often follows the distinction between the English words 'theatre' and 'dance'. The former term is normally applied to idioms that have less nr̥tta (non-narrative sequences) in them, and in which the dancer-actor makes use of speech rather than song. Both terms signify that the idiom follows the codified principles of classical Indian drama, but nr̥tya is often subsumed by the word nāṭya (as in 'Bharata nāṭyam').

Bharatanāṭyam, referred to in English as 'classical dance', retains the notions of dancing and acting. The acting element elevates an idiom to the ranks of classical theatre and the classical tradition. Without this element a dance form is considered vulgar and illiterate.<sup>17</sup> The term 'nautch', which is a corruption of the word nāc, was originally derived from nr̥tya and nr̥tta, but today it is a derogatory term for those dances that do not maintain the aesthetic standards of nāṭya and nr̥tya. One of the main points made by the Madras scholars who promoted the present popularity of Bharatanāṭyam was that, far from being nautch or nāc in the derogatory sense, this idiom was a paradigm of nāṭya. Thus there is an inherent contradiction in the current categorization of Bharatanāṭyam as 'dance'.

Common to all forms of nāṭya and nṛtya is the use of an elaborate 'gesture-language' which includes facial expressions, hasta mudras, as well as movements of the whole body. A principle by which an idiom of theatre-dance is classified as classical is the extent to which the gesture-language of that idiom is elaborated. The presence of gestures is not, however, considered enough in itself, unless they are used in accordance with the aesthetic ideals of classical Indian dramaturgical theory.

### Rasa and Bhāva

One of the basic concepts that has preoccupied all writers on Indian theatre and dance since the third century is the theory of rasa (glossed as 'taste', or 'flavor'), which is at the root of Indian aesthetics and provides an underlying unity to all classical mediums of expression. The theory is extremely difficult to articulate, since all discussions of it have their bases in complex metaphysical concepts.

"The theory of rasa, as conceived by the Hindu aesthetician and as practiced by the artist, has two aspects. The first is the evoked state (rasavastha) in which transcendental bliss is experienced; the second is the sentiments, the moods, the permanent and transitory states, which were the object of presentation. The second provided the content of art; the first was its ultimate objective... The technique of the arts was directly conditioned by these principles, and the techniques of the Indian arts are the rules through which these rasa states can be evoked" (Vatsyayan, 1968:6).

Interpretation of this theory is a constant theme that recurs in every treatise on Indian art forms such as music, architecture, painting, sculpture, poetry or drama, and differs slightly for each medium of expression. Discussion of the first aspect mentioned in the passage above involves inquiries into the very nature of aesthetic experience. The second aspect bears directly on the forms and presentations of what are known as the 'transitory' and 'permanent' states, in the various mediums. These have been the foci of writers on dramaturgy since Bharata. Even if one can only present a glimpse of the concept of rasa in such a short space, it cannot be ignored since it is essential to the very concepts of nāṭya and nṛtya.

Fundamental to the idea of rasa is the notion of the transformation of nature into art (Coomaraswamy, 1934) which may be demonstrated with reference to the navarasa (nine rasas) as codified in Indian dramaturgy. As Vatsyayan says, "Significantly, the one point on which all the commentators agreed was the intrinsic difference between aesthetic emotion and emotion in real life" (1968:7). The Indian actor-dancer evokes rasa through the presentation of one of nine complementary bhāvas ('moods' or 'states') that have their bases in nine emotions --

love, valour, wonder, grief, laughter, fear, aversion, rage and tranquility<sup>18</sup> -- which are considered to be several steps removed from the passions or natural feelings. With the use of gesture, he or she represents situations that lead the spectator to enter into the bhāva (mood) that accompanies contemplation of these emotions. The performer presents these emotions transformed into sentiments that are removed from the subjective and personal realm of experience by referring to those episodes from stories about the lives of deities which best evoke these sentiments. He or she is expected to engender an intellectual apprehension of the idea of 'the erotic', 'the heroic', 'the marvelous', 'the compassionate' and so on. The route to understanding these concepts might be through reference to the senses, and the emotions, but final understanding is at a level freed from sensory awareness, i.e. as far from nature as possible. As was mentioned earlier, although the over-all theory of several equi-valent rasa is applied to the semantic content of dances, the dominant rasa expressed in Bharatanatyam is srūgāra ('romantic', 'erotic').

The actor or dancer conveys through movement the bhāvas evoked by the music. He or she 'brings forth the meaning' of the words and the melody by using conventional movements of the eyes, eye-brows, cheeks, neck, hands, limbs, torso, legs and feet, indeed of every part of the body. But the ultimate aim of the actor or dancer is not simply to 'please the eye' or to 'tell a story', though these are intermediate goals. The true purpose is to engender in the spectator an apprehension of rasa, and the ability to apprehend rasa is eventually dependent on the spectator's own capacity for understanding. The ideal spectator is the rasika ('taster of rasa') who is familiar with the conventions not only of drama and music, but of sculpture and painting. It is also assumed that the rasika understands Hindu philosophy and is conversant with the mythology and literature of India.

### The Rasika and the Ordinary Spectator

From the many treatises on art, music and drama one is led to believe that the ideal rasika needs to be as carefully trained and disciplined as the artist (Vatsyayan, 1968:3), and that nrtya and nātya are by and large esoteric, inaccessible to the ordinary spectator. Many dance scholars insist that to properly appreciate an idiom one must know the significance of each gesture, the many associations of each word in the sāhitya, and be able to identify each rāga and tāla. While it is true that the more one knows, the more levels there are at which one can appreciate a dance recital, a major part of the knowledge expected of the ordinary spectator is common cultural knowledge. The rasika is distinguished as the person who possesses scholarly knowledge, who has studied the sastras (treatises and sacred books), and who can comment on various aspects of a medium of expression with the use of a highly technical language. While this level of understanding is

definitely specialized, there are aspects to what he or she knows that can also be acquired informally through simply being exposed as one grows up to the many cultural performances<sup>19</sup> of the society. Cultural knowledge is first acquired in the same way as one learns one's mother tongue. Only afterwards does a rasika formalize this knowledge with reference to scholarly texts.

Throughout his or her childhood an individual participates in religious ceremonies, readings from the scriptures and literature, and in musical performances that take place around him or her. Since Bharatanātyam is allied to south Indian traditions -- the music is Karnātic, and the spoken languages used (with the exception of Sanskrit) are south Indian -- a south Indian audience is familiar with the gods and heroes referred to by a dancer and with many of the melodies and songs that she interprets. At an informal level (as opposed to a scholarly or analytical level) most spectators can discern the different elements of the music and poetry and also of the movements.

During a recital (particularly if this is organized by a south Indian community) it is not unusual to see heads being moved from side to side to signify appreciation of a particular musical passage or a sequence of movements. Many spectators mark the tāla (time cycle) by hitting the right palm against the right thigh (or by clapping) and then waving the hand in the air. Occasionally, during a particularly complex jāti sequence a spectator might get up and mark this tāla till the end of the jāti, accenting the down beat that terminates both the jāti and a cycle of tāla. If the dancer's rhythm is precise, the spectator may turn around to face the rest of the audience and, with a smile, nod his or her approval before sitting down again.

To a westerner used to the formality of classical music and dance recitals in Europe and America, these kinds of actions on the part of the audience might be distracting, but for an Indian audience they are a primary means of signifying approval. Discussion of the merits (or demerits) of a performer take place during the recital, although such disturbances are nowadays frowned upon as a western-style etiquette has begun to influence audience behavior. Audiences have also begun to applaud performers by clapping at the end of each dance, but by western standards such applause is relatively half-hearted.

#### Padams and the End of a Recital

The second half of a Bharatanātyam recital usually consists of a series of padams that mainly use abhinaya and have virtually no nr̥tta portions. These padams are 'love poems' that describe different situations which express the love between a woman and a man. The dancer expresses the yearning of a woman for her lover, often speaking to an intermediary, a sakhi (female friend). She might describe how struck with love she was when she first saw him, or express her impatience



to see him again. Often she describes her suffering at seeing him with another woman. This 'lover' is usually identified as one of the many Hindu deities, though in some songs he may remain unnamed. Sometimes the dancer might also interpret songs addressed to, or descriptive of, the child Krishna in which case the love expressed is that of a woman for a child. In both cases human love is regarded as a metaphor for the love of a devotee towards a deity; the dancer represents the human soul in its wish to be united with the divinity who, according to Hindu philosophy, has no name or form.

After a series of padams, the dancer performs a composition that consists mainly of nr̥tta, called tillana with which she normally ends a recital. Before she leaves the stage she may interpret a śloka (or Sanskrit verse) sung to a particular raga but in no specific tāla, in praise of a particular deity. After the śloka she does a namaskāra (reverential salutation) called mangalam (auspicious) in which she invokes the blessings of all deities on her performance. The recital has come to an end; the musicians pick up their instruments, and all performers leave the stage. No one applauds any more and the curtain, if there is one, is closed. Behind this curtain the musicians and the dancer might offer a final prayer to the figure of Natarāja (Śiva) before they put out the lamps and carry his image backstage, but this is a private affair and not part of the performance.

### In Conclusion

In the above description of a typical recital I have tried to give a sense of the event as a whole from the point of view of a non-specialist spectator. Complex concepts such as rasa, bhāva, natya, and nr̥t̥ya, have been dealt with in terms of everyday understandings and with reference to the extent to which they underlie communication between a dancer and an average spectator. While a dancer is consciously aware of a theoretical level of knowledge, a spectator will often say that he or she is unfamiliar with the intricacies of the dance. Many north Indian aficionados of Bharatanāṭyam will take the stance of 'I don't know much about it but...' What they mean is that they are not well versed in Sanskrit terminology, or in the more esoteric aspects of theory, and cannot claim to be rasikas. A majority of concepts that underly dances are however familiar to audiences. For these are not specific to Bharatanāṭyam alone but overarch other areas of Indian society, and are part of everyday cultural knowledge in India. Indeed I take the position that Bharatanāṭyam is itself expressive of a commonly shared socio-cultural world view.

I have dealt with Bharatanāṭyam as a living idiom, as an 'oral' tradition that has been affected by historical factors. The latter include the formation of a modern, secular state and a penchant among modern Indians to refer to authoritative classical sources. The idiom's very status as a paradigm of classical tradition reflects more widespread

Indian attitudes about the past (Cohn, 1971:51-59) and their relationship to the future. I hope therefore to have highlighted those criteria which Indians themselves apply to their cultural institutions, criteria which over time affect not just the development of theatre and dance, but also other aspects of society, such as its constitution and legal systems, the status of women, and the place of religion in modern society.

I hope also to have demonstrated that Bharatanātyam is not simply an epitome of ancient Indian civilization. Its recent history and the way in which it is currently performed also express values that are paradigmatic to, and very much alive in, Indian society today.

Rajika Puri

#### NOTES

1. A particular example of social reformers who sought to prohibit dancing was a "Miss Tenant, who came all the way from England to persuade cultured and highly placed Indians in Madras and elsewhere not to have anything to do with this art and collected signed promises from them to this effect" (Iyer, 1955:27).
2. As brides of a deity devadāsīs did not perform wedding ceremonies with other men. They did, however, enter into sexual relationships with certain men, such as temple brahmins (Marglin, 1980, Thurston and Rangachari, 1909). Since these were usually long-term relationships rather than one-time exchanges of sexual services for money, I make a distinction between the notion of prostitution and the ideas of concubinage and secondary marriage (cf. Dumont, 1983:109-112) which are also more akin to relationships entered into by Nayar women (Gough, 1959). With the decline of the institution and changes in perceptions of the devadāsī way of life, they themselves accepted the negatively valued term 'prostitution' as descriptive of their sexual practices.
3. Noted among scholars who led the revival of dance in the south were: (1) E. Krishna Iyer, a dance teacher, who on one occasion even dressed up as a woman and gave a recital of Bharatanātyam, and (2) Dr. K.V. Ramachandran, an influential dance critic, learned in Sanskrit and music. (See Singer, 1972:173-176.)
4. In Tamilnadu sādir nāc was taught in Tamil, the native language of Tanjore devadāsīs and their gurus (teachers). When performers of sādir nāc migrated to Kerala, Mysore, and Maharashtra, they included Telugu and Kannada songs in their repertoire, and perhaps communicated in tongues like Malayali and even Maharashtrian. Nevertheless, the spoken language associated with Bharatanātyam is Tamil.

5. See Basham (1967:332-337) and Singer (1972:156-158) for an overview of various bhakti cults over the centuries. The bhakti movement represented a reaction against Sanskritic and brahmanical learning. Its proponents maintained that Vedic sacrifice and knowledge of the śāstras were not the only path to mokṣa (salvation, liberation) which could also be achieved by personal devotion to a deity.
6. A case in point is a dance performed on Republic Day in 1972 (just after India's 'liberation' of Bangladesh) by Yamini Krishnamurthy, one of the most popular Bharatanatyam dancers. The dance was set to a śloka (Sanskrit verse) addressed to Devi (the goddess) in which her various forms as śakti (female power principle) are described. It was made clear from announcements that preceded the dance and from programme notes that homage was being paid to Indira Gandhi, who had herself appeared at the annual parade that morning wearing an orange sari and thus associating herself with Durga (Devi as goddess of war).
7. Specific information about the spatial relationships between dancer, deity and audience in the rituals of Tanjore devadāsīs is not available, but it is likely that the dancer stood to the right of the deity, facing the audience. In Indian temples the deity's image usually faces east, and in the few extant dances that are addressed to the guardians of the eight corners of the universe, 'east' is always towards the audience, i.e. the direction in which the image of the deity faces. On the other hand, when addressing a deity during a dance, the dancer's gestures are directed to a point straight in front of her body but behind the audience, while gestures that address the spectators are directed towards the two front diagonals.
8. In recent times dances from the Bharatanātyam repertoire have been performed by men, but apart from Krishna Iyer's performance mentioned in note 3 above, their recitals do not adhere to the usual Bharatanātyam format and include innovations intended for a modern Indian, or western, audience. Moreover, men rarely dance solo. Instead, traditional formats of dances are often re-arranged as duets for a man and a woman, in which artistic license is taken with Bharatanātyam. Movements from other idioms are included, costumes are adapted to suit a male figure and themes are introduced that diverge from the normal content of Bharatanātyam dances. These kinds of presentations are rare in contemporary India, and would not be regarded as typical Bharatanātyam.
9. The namaskāra as performed by a Bharatanātyam dancer is simply a more elaborate form of the greeting called namaste in Hindi, in which the palms are joined and the hands held in front of the chest.
10. Bharatanātyam gestures for the sun and the moon are both performed by the left hand, but in the symbolic classification of India, moon and sun are opposed as left:right.

11. The generic name for this song is Vināyaka Stuti (song or poem to Vinayaka or Ganesh). It is addressed to the elephant-headed son of Siva, who is also guardian of beginnings and remover of obstacles. He is invoked at the beginning of all music concerts as well as before the commencement of a reading of Hindu epics such as the Ramayana. Ganesh also features at the top left hand corner of paintings and sculptures that narrate a well-known story or legend. The first character presented in all Indian theatre, he is either represented by an actor wearing an elephant mask or invoked in a dance that describes his attributes. Many Bharatanātyam dancers present a Vināyaka Stuti through movement.
12. Popley (1950) gives a concise and thorough description of Indian music, including the Karnatic system of south India. Other books that are more readily available outside India, such as Jairazbhoy (1971), deal mainly with the north Indian school. Although the main principles of the two systems are similar, the terminology differs as do the subtleties of many of the general concepts.
13. The word jati has no relationship to the word jāti (long 'a') which means 'type' and which is familiar in anthropological discourse as the term for 'sub-caste'. As mentioned in the notes on orthography, words that are italicized have been pluralized according to the conventions of English.
14. Today the length of a performance is governed by modern conventions. In earlier times, depending on the occasion, the duration varied between half-an-hour and five hours.
15. The main composition in a Bharatanātyam recital is called 'varnam' and a dancer may take as long as an hour to interpret it. Varnām is also the longest and most elaborate of musical forms. The organization of sahitya and svara is the same in both cases, except for the interpolation of jatis in varnams composed specifically for dance.  
  
The word 'varna' basically means 'paint', 'color', 'tint'. It is also used for the four main divisions of society (brahmin, kshatriya, vaisya and sudra) and to mean 'depict', 'picture', 'write'. Most Sanskrit words are polysemic, as can be noted by the many entries for each word in Sanskrit dictionaries.
16. I refer here to keertanam, jāveli and geetam which may be regarded as special kinds of padams, and to svarajatis that are variations on varnam. (In transcribing Tamil words and other terms from the technical vocabulary of Bharatanātyam I have used the common form as found in Bharatanātyam program notes, most of which are today written in English.)
17. The Sanskrit words for this distinction are mārgi (classical) and desi (folk), which is related to the distinction Sanskrit/prakrit, highly elaborated and well formed/ordinary and natural, applied to the spoken languages of India.

18. The Sanskrit terms are sr̥ṅgāra, vīra, adbhuta, kāruna, hāsya, bhayanaka, raudra, and śānta.
19. Singer uses the term 'cultural performance' to refer to "...those observable units of cultural organization from which a 'cultural structure of tradition' could be abstracted..." (1972:58). I use the term here more generally to refer to the organized rituals, ceremonies and other group activities of the society.

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