

## Bharatanatyam Performed: A Typical Recital

'Bharatanatyam' is the contemporary name for an idiom of dancing from Tamilnadu or Madras State in southern India. It is the most popular and well-known of the classical dance forms performed in India today. Until the early nineteen-thirties it was referred to as *Sadir Nac* or *Dasi Attam*, the dance of the *devadasis* of the temples of Tanjore, a district lying to the south of the modern city of Madras. The *devadasis* (literally 'servants of god') were women who were dedicated to temple service who performed dances as part of the many rituals connected with a temple. Their dedication included the performance of a marriage ceremony with the deity of a particular temple and incorporation into temple society.<sup>1</sup> Apart from their temple services, on special occasions such as weddings they would be invited to perform at the houses of leading citizens. Some were also attached to the courts of *rajās* (hereditary rulers) and were expected to dance at the palaces for which they received salaries.

To the British colonizers, many of whom were entertained by these dancers when they visited a local ruler, the name 'devadasi' became synonymous with 'dancing girl'. They disapproved of the custom, and in the nineteenth century an anti-*nautch* (anti-dance) movement was launched by a group of English social reformers who sought to prohibit the institution. A specific 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).

As patronage was withdrawn many *devadasis* became impoverished and some turned to prostitution, bringing further disapprobation on these women. By the early part of this century the few *devadasis* who pursued their profession were ostracized by society and their dances were similarly regarded as immoral.

The beginning of the twentieth century marked the growth of an Indian national consciousness and the development of a sense of common ethnicity that accompanied the struggle for independence from the British. Urban *literati* sought to revive ancient traditions in an effort to promote forms of pan-Indian identity as well as pride in the indigenous -- as opposed to colonial -- culture.

In Madras a group of dance and music scholars<sup>2</sup> fought the anti-*nautch* movement attempting to demonstrate that far from being immoral, the dance was an intrinsic part of Indian aesthetic, philosophical and religious beliefs and practices. In the early nineteen-thirties this group created a furor among the educated upper classes by presenting *Sadir Nac* on the urban secular stage. In spite of initial resistance these scholars were eventually successful. After about twenty years young girls from respected families began to study *Sadir Nac* and to present it to more receptive audiences in Madras.

The popularity of this idiom spread to the north of India, and today, it is the most widely performed idiom of dancing in India. In 1983, performers were from many different parts of India. The venue of their performances shifted from the temple or palace to urban theaters and there has been a proliferation of dance

schools where the technique is taught. Nevertheless, a typical recital still follows the practice of the *devadasis* of Tamilnadu.

Contemporary dancers see themselves as the inheritors of the *devadasi* tradition, and they have all been taught either by the few remaining *devadasis* or by members of the same families of teachers who traditionally taught the *devadasis*.

Although the past twenty years (i.e. from 1963-83) has also witnessed the popularity of many other idioms such as *Odissi*, *Kuchipudi*, *Kathak*, *Manipuri* and *Kathakali* dancing which are also performed all over India, Bharatanatyam is considered by many to be the paradigm of Indian classical dancing. The present generation of dancers -- even if they are known for their interpretations of other styles -- have in the main received their initial training in Bharatanatyam. Urban Indian audiences are most familiar with this idiom and it is the most frequently performed outside India as well.

### A Typical Recital

Bharatanatyam can be seen at many theaters throughout metropolitan India. While several theaters are permanent constructions built on the western model with a proscenium arch, raised stage, curtains and fixed tiered seats separated by aisles, there are some 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 space 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 about the occasion and women in particular are dressed in their best clothing.

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.

Bharatanatyam 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 on the right hand side of the stage facing stage left. Unlike northern 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 Bharatanatyam recital the separation between spectators and performers is spatially marked.

Although Bharatanatyam is easily adapted to a western-style proscenium arch theater, the semantics of the space in which a dancer performs is unlike those associated with western theatrical spaces. First, there is a sense in which for the duration of the recital, the stage is a consecrated space. Many dancers place an image of *Nataraja* (the deity Siva in his form as King of the dance)<sup>3</sup> on a pedestal towards downstage left, facing the audience. On some occasions, oil

lamps are placed on either side of this image or at the foot of the stage.<sup>4</sup> Since illumination is provided by electric stage lights, these lamps do not serve a practical purpose but are lit and placed there 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-space during an intermission, they would be expected to remove their shoes.

Apart from the cloth or rug on which the musicians sit, the stage itself is bare. There are no stage 'sets' as such and the rear of the 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 conforms to one of the conventions of Sanskrit theater where even stage properties are 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: Costume and Make-up

Bharatanatyam is performed by a woman who dances alone.<sup>5</sup> She enters from stage right and performs *namaskaras* (salutations; 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 *namaskara* to *bhumi* (the earth) by touching the floor, then her eyes. She ends by joining her palms. The *namaskara* as performed by a Bharatanatyam dancer is simply a more elaborate form of the greeting called *namaste* in Hindi.<sup>6</sup>

Her costume consists of six yards of hand-woven silk (a *sari*) interwoven with gold threads. The border and one of the ends of the *sari* are normally in a contrasting color. Traditionally this *sari* would have been especially woven for the *devadasi* but today it is acquired ready-woven from the weaving center of southern India at the temple city of Kanchipuram.

The *sari* 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 Bharatanatyam 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, armlets, a belt-like waistband 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 the hair is twisted into a chignon at the crown of her head and is encircled with flowers. The hairline above her forehead and the center-parting of the 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. Although Bharatanatyam gestures for the sun and the moon are both performed with the left hand, in the general symbolic classification of India, moon and sun are opposed as left/right. Around the dancers ankles are tied a strand of bells, about fifty for each foot, which sound as the bare floor of the stage is slapped with her bare feet.

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 of the feet and on the palms. Although this costume -- including make-up -- is associated all over India with the Bharatanatyam dancer, it is in fact that way in which a southern Indian bride is dressed. It is the most ornate costume that a southern Indian woman wears during her lifetime.

Much of the symbolism of the jewelry as well as the color red pertains to notions of auspiciousness and happiness associated with Hindu marriage. Unlike other idioms of theater or dancing, in which the actor-dancer wears a special costume associated only with performance of the danced idiom, in Bharatanatyam the performer's costume is an extension of the normal clothing worn by a *devadasi* who was the bride of a deity. It is still a prototype of bridal wear in the society at large.

### The Music

A Bharatanatyam recital, like all performances of traditional dances and theater in India begins with (and is always accompanied by), music. South India's school of music is called 'Karnatic', and the instruments used in Bharatanatyam are specific to that style. Unique to a dance recital, however, is the *nattuvanar* (dance master) who chants the rhythmic syllables that accompany some sections of the dance. The *nattuvanar* also beats the rhythms made by the dancer's feet with a pair of small cymbals called *talam*. The *nattuvanar* may be (and often is) the dancer's *guru*. The other musicians are

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

The musicians start with a song addressed to one of the Hindu deities,<sup>7</sup> sometimes even before the dancer appears on stage. Throughout the recital each dance begins with a prelude in which the musicians introduce the *raga* (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 *tala* (metrical or time cycle) and may include *sahitya* (lyrics or words). The dancer is essentially concerned with interpreting these three elements of the music - *raga*, *tala* and *sahitya* -- through movement.

*Jatis* (rhythmic patterns) are always communicated through *mrdangam* (drum) and the *talam* (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, "ta, tarita tana ta, tanata jhunu tei" which are chanted by the *nattuwanar*. *Jatis* are structured in accordance with the *tala* of the musical compositions in which they occur, which *tala* may be in cycles of three, four, five, seven or nine beats. More complex *talas* can also be formed, such as *adi tala* (eight beats) or *ata tala* (fourteen beats). *Jatis* need not be accompanied by a melody.

The melody or succession of notes structured according to a *raga* (musical mode or scale) may at times be sung to the Indian solfege system - "sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, no" which is similar to the "do, re, mi, fa ..." of western music. Those notes are called *svaras* and are also played by the *vina*, flute and violin. *Svaras* are always composed within a *tala* (or time structure). At times the melody is sung to words of lyrics (*sahitya*), 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 *sahitya* 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 elements of the music.

Any of these elements -- *tala* organized into *jatis*, *raga* presented through *svaras*, or spoken language meaning conveyed by the *sahitya* -- 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 Bharatanatyam program is identified by the *raga* and *tala* 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 *sahitya* portions into conventional forms such as *jati-svaram*, *tillana* or *padam*.

### The Repertoire

A typical performance lasts two and a half hours.<sup>8</sup> It 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 Karnatic music, just as certain forms of European dancing, such as *chaconne* and *minuet* also referred to European musical forms.<sup>9</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 Bharatanatyam program. It is this repertoire that confers identity on the idiom.

There are only seven main genres of dances in the typical Bharatanatyam repertoire. They are performed in the following order; *alaripu*, *jati-svaram*, *sabdam*, *varnam*, *padam*, *tillana* and *sloka*. Although a few other names are also employed, these can be regarded as sub-classifications of the basic seven forms of the dances.<sup>10</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 scholars and performers of music and dancing who were also *gurus* -- teachers or maestros -- of *devadasis*.

In the early nineteenth century these *gurus* transformed *Sadir-Nac* by introducing dances that have since then been taught by their descendants. These 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 Bharatanatyam practice and pedagogy, guiding the composition of 'new' dances. The novice dancer is taught these dances by rote. At the initial stages of her training she performs them exactly as taught, but, as she gains proficiency in the idiom, she begins to improvise portions of the dances.<sup>11</sup>

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 the piece 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 Bharatanatyam dancer as a musician who uses the medium of movement in order to interpret the music. Her whole body, rather than a flute, *vina* or the vocal cords, is the instrument with which she interprets the *svara*, *tala* and *sahitya* that comprise the musical accompaniment.

The initial dances in a Bharatanatyam recital concentrate on *nrtta* 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 Bharatanatyam and combines these movements into longer phrases 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 (*hasta mudra* - see Appendix, p. 188) 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 *abhinaya* ('mime') into her movements. Facial expressions and *hasta mudra* are now used to interpret the dramatic, narrative and poetic significance of the *sahitya* of songs. These songs are set to Sanskrit, Telugu or Tamil poems which mainly 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 to which she refers. 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 *natya* is a generic term for theatre as a whole. It includes the spoken or sung word, and music as well as movement. There are many ancient treatises on Indian theatre that stress the importance of body language in the communication of meaning (see Puri 1983: 49-53). *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, *nrtta*, mentioned above, that refers to those movements having no 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, i.e. *angika-abhinaya* (*abhinaya* through the body and limbs), *vacaka-abhinaya* (the *abhinaya* of speech and sound), *aharya-abhinaya* (*abhinaya* through costume, make-up and ornaments) and *sattvika-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 Bharatanatyam, *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 *nrtta* movements which are devoid of those kinds of meaning.

Both *abhinaya* and *nrtta* are included in *nrtya*, the word that is closest to the idea of 'dance' in India. And, *nrtya* is the main vehicle of *natya* (theatre).

In modern India the distinction between *natya* and *nrtya* often follows the distinction between the English words 'theatre' and 'dance'. The former word is normally applied to idioms that have less *nrtta* (non-narrative sequences) in them, where the dancer-actor makes use of speech rather than song. Both words signify that the idiom follows the codified principles of classical Indian drama.

In English, Bharatanatyam is called 'classical dance' and the phrase 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 to be vulgar and illiterate.* The Sanskrit words for this distinction: *margi* (classical) and *desi* (folk) encompass aspects of indigeneous social theory, first used in the *Sama Veda* with regard to music and dancing (Vatsyayan 1968: 153).

*Margi* means 'of the proper way' and refers to a 'high' style of acting, dancing or singing. *Desi* means 'of a region' and commonly refers to the 'vulgar' or 'popular' style of acting, dancing or singing. *Margi* traditions are those which most closely adhere to the precepts of the ancient texts, thus to the highest form of Vedic culture. *Desi* traditions are those which develop naturally -- from the people. They are consequently tied to local cultures and evolve without conscious reference to the constraints of the classical cultural tradition.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, the word *nautch* (a corruption of the word *nac*) was originally derived from *nrtya* and *nrtta*, but today, it is a derogatory term for those dances that do not maintain the aesthetic standards of *natya* and *nrtya*. One of the major points made by the Madras scholars who promoted the present popularity of Bharata-natyam was that far from being *nautch* in the derogatory sense, this idiom was a paradigm of *natya*.

Common to all forms of *natya* and *nrtya* 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 is classified as 'classical' is the extent to which the gesture-language of that idiom is elaborated. The use 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* ('flavor') and *Bhava* ('mood')

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, providing an underlying unity to all classical mediums of expression. The theory is difficult to articulate, for all discussions of it are based on 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 whether music, architecture, painting, sculpture, poetry or drama. It 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 the sage,

Bharata's writings.<sup>13</sup> Even if one can only present a glimpse of the concept of *rasa* in the available space of this essay, it cannot be ignored since it is essential to the concepts of *natya* and *nrtya*.

Fundamental to the idea of *rasa* is the notion of transforming nature into art (Coomeraswamy 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 *bhavas* ('moods' or 'states') that have their basis in nine emotions, i.e. love (*srngara*), valour (*vira*), wonder (*adbhuta*), compassion or grief (*karuna*), laughter (*hasya*), fear (*bhayanaka*), aversion or revulsion (*vibhatsa*), rage or wrath (*raudra*) and tranquility (*santa*), which are considered to be several steps removed from the passions or natural feelings. With the use of gesture, the dancer represents situations that lead the spectator to enter into the *bhava* (mood) that accompanies contemplation of these emotions.

Performers present these emotions transformed into sentiments that are removed from the subjective and personal realms of experience by referring to those episodes from stories about the lives of Divinities which best evoke these sentiments. He or she is expected to engender an intellectual apprehension of the idea of the heroic, the marvelous, the compassionate, the erotic, and so forth. The route to understanding these concepts is through reference to the senses and the emotions, but *final understanding is at a level freed from sensory awareness* and as far from nature as possible.

The actor or dancer conveys through movement the *bhavas* 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, every part of the body.<sup>14</sup> The ultimate aim of the actor or dancer, however, is not simply to "please the eye" or to "tell a story," although these are intermediate goals. The true purpose is to engender in the spectator an apprehension of *rasa*. The ability to apprehend *rasa* is eventually dependent on *the spectator's own capacity* for understanding.

The ideal spectator is the *rasika* (the 'taster of *rasa*') who is familiar with the conventions not only of drama and music, but also 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* must be as carefully trained and disciplined as the artist (Vatsyayan 1968: 3) and that *nrtya* and *natya* are on the whole, esoteric -- inaccessible to the ordinary spectator. Many scholars insist that properly to appreciate an idiom of dancing, one must know the significance of each gesture, the many associations of each word in the *sahitya*, and, they say it is also necessary to be able to identify each *raga* and *tala*.

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 not that complicated. The requirement is common cultural knowledge.

The *rasika* is distinguished as the person who possesses scholarly knowledge: the person who has studied the *sastras* (the treatises and sacred books), and 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 of what he or she knows which can be acquired informally through simply being exposed as one grows up to many cultural performances, including dances, religious rituals, dramas, and such. Cultural knowledge, then, is first acquired in the same way as one learns one's native language. Only afterwards does a *rasika* formalize this knowledge with reference to scholarly texts and disciplined study.

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

If organized by a south Indian community, it is not unusual during a recital to see spectators' heads moving from side to side signifying appreciation of a particular musical passage or sequence of movements. Many spectators mark the *tala* (time cycle) by hitting the right palm against the right thigh, or by clapping, then waving the hand in the air. Occasionally, during a particularly complex *jati* sequence a spectator might get up and mark this *tala* till the end of the *jati*, accenting the down beat that terminates both the *jati* and a cycle of *tala*. If the dancer's rhythm is precise, the spectator may turn around to face the rest of the audience and, with a smile, nod approval before sitting down again. To westerners, to whom such 'audience participation' is unfamiliar, these kinds of action are distracting, but for an Indian audience, they are a primary means of expressing approval. It may be, too, that discussion of the merits or demerits of a performer take place during the recital, although this is now frowned upon as western-style etiquette has begun to influence Indian audience's behavior.

#### *Padams* and the End of a Bharatanatyam Recital

The second half of a Bharatanatyam recital usually consists of a series of *padams* that mainly use abhinaya and have virtually no *nrtta* portions. These *padams* are 'love poems' that describe different situations that express the love between a woman and a man. The dancer might express 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 exhibit her impatience to see him again. Often, she exposes her suffering at

seeing him with another woman. This 'lover' is usually identified as one of many Hindu Divinities (i.e. Krishna or Siva), but 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 Divinity.<sup>15</sup> The dancer becomes an embodiment of the human soul wishing 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 *nrtta*, called *tillana*, with which she normally ends the recital. Before leaving the stage, she may interpret a *sloka* (a Sanskrit verse) sung to a particular *raga* but in no specific *tala*, in praise of a particular Divinity. After the *sloka* she does a *namaskara* (reverential salutation) called *mangalam* (auspicious) in which she invoked the blessings of all Divinities 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 anymore 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 *Nataraja* (Siva) before they put out the lamps and carry his image backstage, but this is a private affair -- not part of the public performance.

In conclusion: the above description of a typical recital is an attempt to convey a sense of the event as a whole from the point of view of a non-specialist spectator. Discussion of the theoretical aspects of Indian aesthetics, drama and music have been treated cursorily -- even oversimplified. Complex concepts such as *rasa*, *bhava*, *natya* and *nrtta* have been dealt with in terms of everyday understandings to as to avoid a more detailed presentation that would be cumbersome because they are beyond the scope of a single essay.

Indian dancing and theatre have been the subjects of an extensive literature dating back (at least) to the second century B.C., and most contemporary scholarship is based on literary evidence. A large part of the current writing is in English, and it deals with extant idioms from the perspective of earlier Sanskrit texts with reference to over-arching theoretical concepts that govern artistic mediums of expression such as sculpture, painting, poetry, music, the dance, and drama.<sup>16</sup> Writing on dancing and dances in particular focuses on the wealth of information that can be gleaned from those texts, which contain detailed descriptions of movement -- stances, poses, walks, gestures of different bodily parts as well as larger sequences -- but it is evident that the writers refer to traditions that have long since been lost or changed beyond recognition.

I am primarily concerned with the living idiom, the oral tradition and with understanding the *hasta mudra* as they are used in Bharatanatyam today. I have sought to understand what knowledges are conveyed by the medium of movement itself. At the same time, I wish to identify the kinds of knowledge that audiences must possess in order to understand a Bharatanatyam recital at all. Like Hart-Johnson, I believe that "laypeople must familiarize themselves with [the idiom's] 'code' -- with its rules and meta-rules and the ...practices that constitute the kind of body language that it is" (*infra*, p. 202).

Wherever they may be found in the world, the great traditions of dancing deliberately and consciously convey meaning. They are not simply mindless entertainments.

Rajika Puri

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although discussion of the societal role, kinship organization, duties and rituals of *devadasis* affected the development of *Sadir Nac*, it is beyond the scope of this essay. For detailed treatment see Marglin (1980) who deals with the ritual role of the *devadasis* at the temple of Jagannatha in Puri (Orissa).

<sup>2</sup> Noted among scholars who led the revival of dancing in southern India were E. Krishna Iyer, a dance teacher who on one occasion even dressed up as a woman and gave a recital of Bharatanatyam, and Dr. K.V. Ramachandran, an influential dance critic, learned in Sanskrit and music (Singer 1972: 173-176).

Singer also describes the rise of the Madras Music Academy, the most important cultural institution connected with the patronage and dissemination of Bharatanatyam, which was founded soon after the Madras meeting of the Indian National Congress in 1927 (1972: 173-176).

<sup>3</sup> This Divinity's name is also frequently spelled 'Shiva'.

<sup>4</sup> Specific information about the spatial relationships between dancer, deity and audience in the rituals of Tanjore *devadasis* 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 addressing spectators are directed towards the two front diagonals.

<sup>5</sup> In recent times dances from the Bharatanatyam repertoire have been performed by men, but apart from Krishna Iyer's performance mentioned in Note 2 above, their recitals do not adhere to the usual Bharatanatyam format and include innovations intended for modern Indian or western audiences. Moreover, men rarely dance solo. Instead, traditional formats of dances are often re-arranged as duets for a man and woman, in which artistic license is taken with Bharatanatyam. 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 Bharatanatyam dances. These kinds of presentations are rare in contemporary India, and would not be regarded as typical of Bharatanatyam.

<sup>6</sup> Performed simply, *namaste* or a *namaskara* is a hand gesture in which the palms are joined and the hands held near the front of the chest. Fingers are extended and held close together, pointing upwards, similar to the hand gesture for prayer among Christians.

<sup>7</sup> The generic name for this song is *Vinayaka Stuti* (song or poem to Vinayaka or Ganesh) It is addressed to the elephant-headed son of Shiva, 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 Bharatanatyam dancers present a *Vinayaka Stuti* through movement.

<sup>8</sup> Today, the length of a performance is governed by modern convention. In earlier times, depending on the occasion, the duration of performances varied from one half-hour to five hours.

<sup>9</sup> The main composition in a Bharatanatyam recital is called *varnam* and a dancer may take as long as an hour to interpret it. *Varnam* 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 dances.

The word *varna* basically means 'paint', 'color', 'tint'. It is also used for the four main divisions of Indian society (*brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaisyas* and *sudra*) and it also means 'depict', 'picture' and 'write'. Most Sanskrit words are polysemic, as can be noted by the many entries for each word in Sanskrit dictionaries.

<sup>10</sup> I refer to *keertanman*, *javeli* and *geetam* which may be regarded as special kinds of *padams*, and to *soorajatis* that are variations on *varnam*. [In transcribing Tamil words and other terms from the technical vocabulary of Bharatanatyam I have used the common forms that are found in most program notes which are today mostly written in English].

<sup>11</sup> See Puri and Hart-Johnson (1995: 158-186) for relevant comments about improvising and choreographing.

<sup>12</sup> The opposition *margi/desi* operates much more widely, as for example, in indigenous linguistic theory. *Margi* is virtually synonymous with *sanskrit* which means 'highly elaborated' and 'well or completely formed' in contrast to *prakrit* which means 'normal', 'ordinary' and 'natural'. The latter word (*prakrit*) is the generic name given to the local vernaculars of the Gupta empire, the languages of the market-place and of everyday discourse. Many plays of the Gupta period are actually written both in Sanskrit and in different *prakrits*, the former language being spoken by 'elevated' characters and the latter by 'lesser' characters and women. For more information, see Puri (1983: 45ff).

<sup>13</sup> Bharata's *Natyasastra* (circa third century A.D.) is the oldest extant text on Indian dramaturgy (see Ghosh 1967). The text is important to Bharatanatyam, but the subject is not developed here in this short essay (see Puri 1983, Chapter 3, for further discussion). [The Editors].

<sup>14</sup> The texts on *natya* and *abhinaya* describe in detail the different moves of each of these bodily parts — cf. Ghosh (1967), Coomaraswamy (1934) and Duggirala (1970).

<sup>15</sup> See Farnell (1996) for contemporary discussion of the metaphorical process and movement.

<sup>16</sup> See Vatsyayan (1968) and Coomaraswamy (1934 and 1918).

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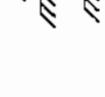
## ORTHOGRAPHY

••The following is a list of Indian words and expressions with the diacritical marks used in Puri's thesis. Because of reproduction problems beyond our control at this time, we have not incorporated the diacritical marks in the text of Puri's article [The Editors].

ādi tāla	nr̥tta
āharya-abhinaya	nr̥tya
alāriṣu	rāga
āṅgika-abhinaya	rājā(s)
aṭa tāla	rasāvastha
Bharatanāṭyam	ṣabdam
bhāva	Sādir Nāc
bhayānaka	sāhitya
bhūmi	ṣānta
Dāsi Āttam	ṣāstra(s)
devadāsi(s)	sāttvika-abhinaya
hāsya	śloka
jāveli	ṣṅgāra
kāruṇa	sūrya
mārgi	tā tarita tana tā
mṛdangam	tāla(m)
namaskāra(s)	tānpura
Natarāja	tillānā
nattwanār	vācaka-abhinaya
nāṭya	varṇam
	vīṇa
	vīra

### Appendix One (Puri 1983: 184-192)

The Thirty-One *Hasta* With English Glosses of Their Sanskrit Names and Standard Transcriptions into Laban Script. The English translations of these *hasta* and of the twenty-four two-hand positions in Appendix Two are based on entries in the Sanskrit-English Dictionary of Monier-Williams (1976, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal), originally published in 1899.

1. pataka	sign, flag, pennon, banner	
2. tripataka	three parts of a flag or banner	
3. ardhapataka	half-flag	
4. kartarimukha	scissors-face	
5. mayura	peacock	
6. ardhaandra	half-moon	
7. arala	crooked, bent	
8. sukhatunda	parrot's beak	
9. mushti	clenched fist	
10. sikhara	spire, peak, summit	
11. kapittha	fruit of <i>Teronia Elephantum</i> ('elephant-apple')	

12. katakamukha link in a chain, face of a chain link



13. suci needle or any sharp, pointed instrument



14. candrakala digit of the moon



15. padmakosa calyx of a lotus



16. sarpasirsha serpent-headed



17. mrgasirsha head of a wild beast, often antelope



18. simhamukha1 lion-faced



19. langula tail



20. alapadma lotus



21. catura charming, dexterous, clever, quick



22. bhramara large black bee



23. hamsasya swan



24. hamsapaksha swan's wing



25. mukula bud

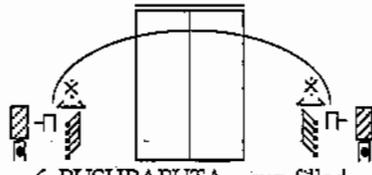


26. tamracuda	red-crested cock	
27. trisula	trident	
28. urnabha	spider, 'having wool on the navel'	
29. ardhasuci	half-needle	
30. bana	reed-shaft, arrow	
31. kataka	link in a chain	

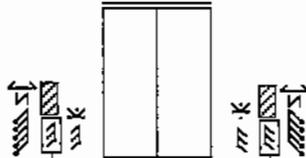
••N.B. For readers who do not read movement texts, the transcriptions into Laban script will be unintelligible, a fact which we regret. However, the transcriptions were added for the benefit of graduate students and others who are movement-literate, and to make the point that semasiologists rely on written transcriptions of the movements they discuss because they want to leave no doubt in anyone's mind about the identity of the action signs they analyze and discuss.

### Appendix Two (Puri 1983: 195-97)

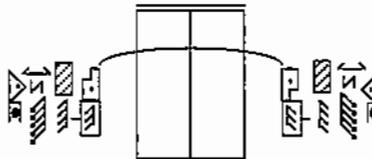
[The Twenty-Four Two-Hand Positions Mentioned in the *Abhinaya Darpanam* of Nandikesvara and Their Meanings, from Coomeraswamy and Duggirala, 1970].



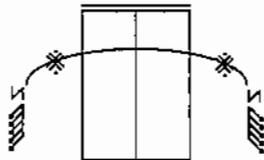
6. PUSHAPUTA - cup filled with flowers



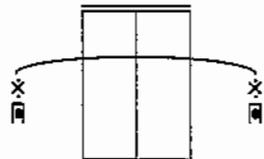
5. DOLA - swing



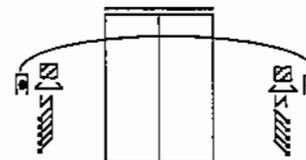
4. SVASTIKA - mystical cross, crossed



3. KARKATA - crab



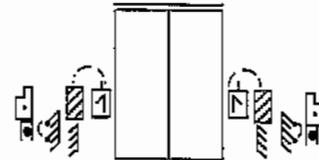
2. KAPOTA - dove, pigeon



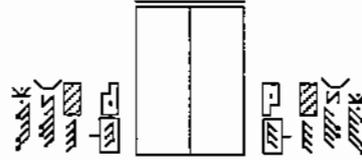
1. ANJALI - reverence, salutation, benediction



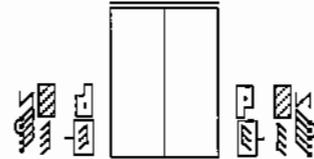
12. SANKHA - conch shell



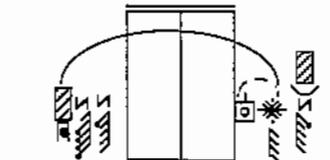
11. SAKATA - carriage, wagon, cart, or car



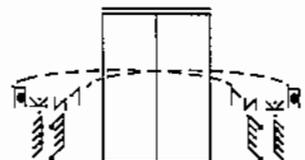
10. KARTARISVASTIKA - crossed scissors



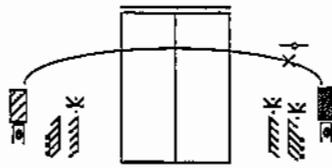
9. KATAKAVARDHANA - twist of straw or crossed link in a chain



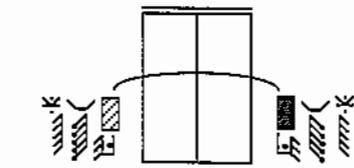
8. SIVALINGA - name of phallic emblem of Siva



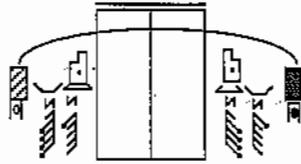
7. UTSANGA - embrace; union or the haunch or part of hip



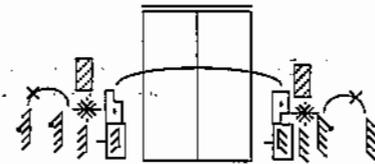
18. KURMA - tortoise; also second incarnation of Vishnu.



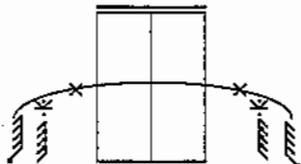
24. AVAHITTHA - dissimulation



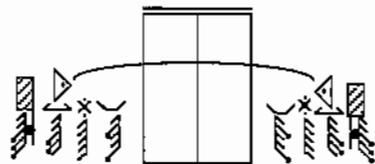
17. MATSYA - fish; also first incarnation of Vishnu.



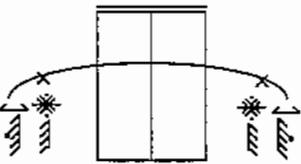
23. BHERUNDA - a species of bird



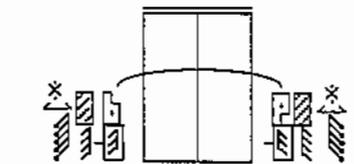
16. KILAKA - wedge, bolt, or bond



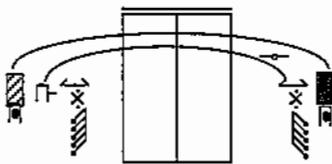
22. KHATVA -- cot or bed



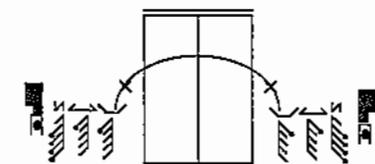
15. PASA - noose, snare, fetter: expresses contempt.



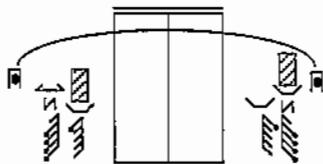
21. NAGABANDHA - serpent-tie; snake as chains or fetters.



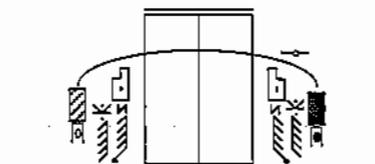
14. SAMPUTA - covered box or casket



20. GARUDA - mythical bird and vehicle of Vishnu.



13. CAKRA - discus, wheel



19. VARAHA - boar, hog; also third incarnation of Vishnu.

N.B. The above twenty-four double-hand positions represent a small subset of the full range of two-hand positions currently used in Bharatanatyam.