

INDIAN DANCE

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Prior to his or her performance, the dancer touches the Ground (Floor) to ask permission to batter the floor with his or her feet and, at the finish, he or she asks forgiveness for having done so.

This gesture demonstrates how everything in India precipitates a mystic, higher connotation. From the simplest functions to the greatest gestures, everything is lived in a sacred manner.

There are seven classical dance forms from India: Bharata Natyam (the most ancient), Kathak (which contains the origins of Spanish flamenco), Manipuri (influenced by local folk dances), Odissi (sinuous and sensual that had inspired the temple builders), Kathakali (potent and masculine: a dance where even the female character was impersonated by a man), Mohini Attam (feminine and close to the mysticism of Mother Earth. The female role of the Kathakali), Kuchipudhi (where dancers sometimes perform their dances on top of metal plates balancing a jug full of water on their heads).

Indian dance has its roots deep in Indian mysticism, legends and Indian rituals, depicting achievements of heroes and Gods. The stories are told by the body, face mimic and different positions of the hands, each movement expressing a well defined role. Kajal rimmed eyes draw attention to facial expressions. The body, seen as the temple of the soul, is adorned with jewels; the ankles and feet, beating the rhythm, symbolize the creative vibration as well as dissolution of the Universe. The hands and feet draw geometric forms in the air, the so called yantra describe the qualities and symbols of each divinity or the tale; those who understand Indian symbology can easily read and interpret these movements.

In an ancient scripture, the Natya Shastra, it is written:

.....where the hands go, the eyes follow...

Where the spirit rests, a state of being manifests itself,

where a state of being intensifies, supreme joy is awoken.....

In general, a performance of Indian dance, with its magnificent costumes and enchanting atmosphere becomes an emotive experience displaying a high level of emotion:“ “Dancer’s hands open like the petals of a lotus flower and her fingers splayed out plunge and soar like birds in flight. Her body movements are proud, now sensual, now they manifest devotion or great power....femininity and

masculinity.....

Her facial expressions are constantly changing, mimicking sentiments and emotions. The eyes and particularly eyebrows express love, then contempt, suspicion, compassion, disgust, horror and great devotion". This dance rises from the heart, the soul and the spirit. The movements are scouring a millennia old concept, and in its melodies they find something special, something impalpable which escapes our normal ways of interpretation.

They can provoke deep emotions which are difficult to control rationally. India is a world far removed from us and yet well anchored within a well-defined common framework; and this is why those who start to follow and interpret this dance can seldom leave it

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In India dance is considered to be a form of yoga because it focuses on connecting the physical energy with spiritual strength. In effect, Indian dance represents a *trait-d'union* between the philosophical thought derived from the complex science of yoga and the simple mind, pure and partly instinctive and partly a product of human ingenuity.

In the beginning it was only performed by the sacred Devadasi celibate temple dancers and priestesses, who dedicated their lives to prayer, were offering their bodies and their dance to divinity.

Later, during the reign of a Moghul emperor, it was banned under Muslim tradition which forbade women to expose their bodies in public.

Even with the intervention of the British domination this practice was not allowed. British Puritans did not approve of dancing by women as a pretext for worship. There was a dancer, Rukmini Devi, who belonged to a higher cast and was passionate about Indian culture and traditions. A towering personality, she was the pioneer of the revival of Indian classical dance. She married an Englishman and with courage and determination she dedicated herself to dance, which was almost extinct, taking it from the temples to an academic level.

Rukmini Devi was a great supporter of Indian dance and fought against discrimination and prejudices to bring back the splendour and mysticism of the past and this most fascinating Indian classical dance known as Bharata Natyam, by reassessing it and re-establishing its sacral values held in the past.

She believed that: If the Bharata Natyam could not be performed in a temple, we would bring sacredness into the dance.

It was during the political disorders at the beginning of the century that she offered hospitality to artists, authors, musicians and nattanars at one of her properties in Madras, thus saving them from repression and.....starvation. She established the Kalakshetra Academy of Art, which is still a major centre for performing arts education, known and recognized throughout the world for

extreme quality, authenticity and prestige.

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For those who practice this dance it is said that they bear a regal countenance. The warming up (practice) before the proper dance (using many positions of the Hatha Yoga), is measured by the strength of articulations and elasticity of the vertebral column. The movement of micro muscles of the face and eyes during the Abhinaya (mimic) describes the high concepts of oriental philosophy; this, in addition to the physical development and facial mobility, turns into a real knowledge leading to personal spiritual growth. The movement of the hands (called Mudra) and the whole body allows an exceptional ability to control movement and coordination, serving to develop and synchronise both cerebral hemispheres, which is useful in achieving psychophysical balance. Every dance uses the body as an effective means of communication; the expression of a dance is perhaps the most intricate and developed, but it's also a form of art which is far the easiest to understand.

In India dance is expressed through poetry, sculpture, architecture, literature, music and theatre. It was born more than 8000 years ago. In fact, the first archaeological findings include a pretty statuette of a dancing girl, dating back to 6000 years BC.

However, dance was formally mentioned only recently. It is believed that the Natya Shastra of Bharata writings (sacred Indian scriptures on the art of dance and theatre) was written between the second century BC and second century AD and represents the earliest valid example of dramaturgy. All forms of classical Indian dances owe allegiance to Natya Shastra, regarded as the fifth Veda. There are four Vedas and it is said that Brahma, the Creator, created Natya by taking the literature from RgVeda, the holy songs from SamaVeda, the *abhinaya* (expressiveness or mimics) from YajurVeda and *rasa* (states of mind or aesthetic experience) from AtharvaVeda.

All the dances are structured around the nine *rasas* or emotions: *lasya* (happiness), *krodha* (anger), *bhibasta* (disgust), *bhaya* (fear), *shoka* (regret), *viram* (courage), *karuna* (compassion), *adbhuta* (surprise) and *shanta* (serenity).

The dances differ from one another due to different ethnic reasons however, the hand movements or *hasta mudra* are the same for all the *rasas*.

Most Indian dances take their themes from India's rich mythology and folk legends. This is the

trait d'union between the science, the level of consciousness raised to the level of the soul and the simple human mind.

The genesis of the contemporary styles of classical dances can be traced as far back as 1300-1400 AD. India offers a number of classical dance forms, each of which can be traced to different parts of the country or ethnic groups.

Baratha Natyam from Tamil Nadu, Kathak from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, Kathakali from Kerala as a pure Mohini Attam, Kuchipudi from Andhra Pradesh,

Manipuri from the homonymous Manipur and Odissi from Orissa.

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Kathak: this dance inspired by the Indian origins of gypsies from Andalusia is the mother of flamenco.

Kathak is recognized as one of the seven classical Indian dance forms and one of the youngest.

Originally it was practiced by wandering monks who sang and enacted mythological stories called “Kathaka”, giving it its name, by using facial expressions and a complex series of hand and body gestures (Mudra). Following the Islamic invasion of India, Kathak dance travelled from the temples to the Moghul courts, becoming richer in choreography, movements and profane elements which make this dance one of the most sophisticated forms of art found in Northern India.

Being no longer tied to the original devotional cult so typical of the most ancient Bharata Natyam, during the Moghul period the Kathak dance had a significant value as pure entertainment and was an art form in itself.

Hindustani music is the music normally found in the accompaniment of Kathak dancers – this genre is the closest to the Western taste – the rhythmic element has a superior character and contains cyclical rhythmic patterns known as “TAALAS”.

A traditional Kathak performance is characterized by rhythmic footwork, i.e. complex feet movements developed to extreme levels that can not be rivalled by any other type of dance and although performed in bare feet, they reveal the past’s influence on flamenco. Numerous quick spinning movements (Chakkar), graceful and harmonious movements of the hands and wrists, and tiny cymbals and characteristic castanets which can also be found in flamenco as well as most ancient Middle Eastern dances (Egypt-Tunisia-Morocco). After enduring severe and protracted persecution by the Temurs, Indian gypsies finally reached the destination of their pilgrimage.

Another inseparable component of Indian dance is called Abhinaya, the mimic part of the dance through which the dancer communicates her interpretation of internal psychological states. Compared to other over-codified styles, Kathak appears very formal, offering more room for improvisation.

As I was saying, the Kathak dance form originated in the North although its true roots lie in Central India, and as is true of almost all classical Indian dances, the common root of all classical dance forms can be traced to Bharata Natyam. Subsequently it acquires its very own connotation.

Persian and Muslim influences as well as the Mughul tradition are still evident in

its virtuosisms and soft spinning movements.

We have said that it came with the story tellers who used songs and dance to embellish their stories. In Central India this took the form of Kathakalakshepam, in Southern India Harikatha and in the North Kathak.

The dance witnessed an abrupt change around the 15th century to the influence of Persian culture in the Moghul courts. During the sixteenth century the costumes changed too. They became regal and the tight fitting *churidar pyjama* became the staple attire of a Kathak dancer.

Contrary to other Indian dances, another characteristic of this dance, apart from feet stamping, intricate pirouettes, sinuous and quick movement of the wrists, the basic standing position for Kathak is a straight back.

Whilst in other classical dances (more or less) dancers work mainly with their legs bent, the Kathak dancer keeps his legs straight. The Katak dancers also wear pellet bells tied around their ankles. Costumes become increasingly elaborate, made of precious brocades and silk.

As in other classical dances Mudras described in the ancient scriptures as the Fifth Veda, the Natya Shasta, are used in the Kathak. The stories are inspired by the great epics of India, found in Ramayana, Mahabharata and other Purans.

The story-tellers' songs about the life of Krishna have remained almost unchanged throughout the ages and even today the choreography still focuses mainly on the cosmic love between Radha and Krishna and his spiritual love for the shepherdess.

In the beginning it was a solo dance with one dancer who played alternatively Krishna and Radha

(Today it is performed by a couple or even a group of dancers).

Kathak dancers must learn the basics of Hindu music; they must have a conventionally beautiful voice, must know how to sing, know the music well and have rhythmic ability to play percussions, Tabla, and other accompanying instruments, Sitar, harmonium, and finally, to have a great scenic presence in order to select positions reminiscent of fine specimens of Moghul miniature art.