

# **INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE AND PRESENT-DAY CHALLENGES IN PRESERVING ITS ORIGINALITY**

## **An analysis from the Perspective of Repertoire and Academics**

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### **Abstract**

Art being an integral part of evolution of mankind, has occupied an important role in the life and culture of the modern human being and his society. Dance, which is considered an important part of performing arts genre, is classified into two categories viz., Classical and Folk forms. The classical dance form as its name suggests, has a particular system of learning, presentation and its own theory and practice. Classical dance must have certain aspects to it in terms of learning, tradition and presentation in order for it to be called classical. It is quite evident that it got influenced by the culture, society and tradition of the communities as well as geography where it evolved. Thus, classical dance forms got classified into 8 types majorly. As we go through the scriptures, Vatsayana in his scripture mentioned about 64 art forms or the skill activities. Among them classical dance is the one which fits in the category of Performing Arts. As the name suggests it is a presentation in the form of a repertoire. This involves the main artiste, supporting artistes and the audience along with the various settings required to become a repertoire. Once we look into the structure of repertoire we need to understand the various aspects of it. In this, repertoire maybe of traditional type or a contemporary one. Being an art form of Guruparampara tradition, classical dance has its essence based on the Rasa concept mentioned in the ancient scriptures, its Do's and Don'ts as per the tradition and so on. But as the time changes and marches on, everything in nature and the world changes, and it is not an exception in the field of art too. In this regard, we being the artiste fraternity of our country have a great responsibility to preserve and propagate it without altering the originality of the same. Ancient scriptures are an important source to understand the traditions of our culture as well as art forms. Over a period of time, we Indians got influenced by western culture, especially the present younger generation, and it has had a lot of influence in the field of classical dance as well. It is the responsibility of each one of us to educate younger generation to understand the depth of our culture and tradition through our Art forms. Among the five senses a human being is endowed with, the eyes are the most sensible and have a better effect on the brain than other senses. Audio-Visual effects have more influence in learning than just listening or reading. Thus, being an audio-visual art form, classical dance has more potential to attract, influence, refine and elevate a human being.

The problem occurs when a Guruparampara based art, that is classical dance, comes under the academic ambit such as a university where it would be a subject in the curriculum. The entire system of academics in the university is completely different compared to the system of Guruparampara. Here one can find it difficult to cope up with the system and it is true especially for the performing artists. We can mention here that many have become artists by imbibing the art through Guruparampara system only. So, till about the 20<sup>th</sup> century the classical dance had the strong foundation of learning and practice in Guruparampara system only. As it demands many hours and days of practice or 'Abhyas', it won't fit into an academic system like in a university or a college. In the academic system time will be limited for practice or 'Abhyas' as there will be pressure both on the faculty and students on covering other common subjects also. Practically it doesn't meet an artist's need to be an expert on the subject with deep practice and contemplation. This aspect will be of high priority to look into, when one considers how to create a really good professional in the field through academic education. In this process there will be a danger of either losing originality or altering the tradition by the practitioners, as well as the younger generation. In this system one can become either a performer or an academician only and combining both will be a real challenge for the artists. In this regard this paper tries to offer an analysis to finding solutions to this problem.

**Key words:** Abhyas, tradition, originality, Guruparampara, academics, repertoire.

## Introduction :

Classical dance in India as mentioned above is categorised into 8 types as per their geographical, cultural and historical background. These are mainly focused on the presentation in the form of a repertoire. As Bharata mentioned in Natyashastra text, classical dance has various aspects in terms of Nritta or the foot movement, the four types of Abhinaya called Angika, Vachika, Aharya and Satvika and some other aspects like Tala, Vadya and Music. All these aspects together make it a classical dance performance. As stated, it is a visual art form which leads to entertainment of the viewers as enunciated by Bharatamuni. When we go through the history, we can observe the ups and downs in the field of this art form clearly. Thus, after the revolution, scholars succeeded in preserving the classical dance form with its tradition. After this the Dasi Attam dance got the name of Bharatanatyam. Based mainly on practical aspects this dance form became popular in the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Dance that originated as an offering in the temples underwent changes after the anti-nauch bill and became a court tradition, then to be available for the public. The structure of Bharatanatyam in theory and practice was created by Tanjavur Brothers who are also called Tanjore Quartet and a revolutionary lady Dr. Rukmini Devi Arundale. They structured this dance with some basic steps called 'Adavus' followed by the items called Nritya bandhas namely Alaripu, Jathiswaram, Shabdham, Varnam, Padam, Slokam and Tillana. This was the order of learning. The learning and practice of the Adavus itself takes almost two years for the perfection and internalization. The basic learning will be hard for the beginners. Only a determined student can attain perfection in this. Thus learning of a complete 'Margam' ( all the above said dance items) will take more than 10 years in the system of Guru Parampara. In this system Guru is the ultimate master who decides the level of a disciple, whether he or she is capable of performing, teaching and so on. Even the decision of teaching any dance items is of Guru's choice only and not that of the disciple.

## **Guru Parampara :**

Our country is fortunate to have the system of Guru Parampara, a unique system of teaching and learning involving the teacher and the disciple who are bound by a unique bond transcending just that of a mundane relation between a teacher and the taught. Bharath or India is a country which is rich in culture, tradition and spirituality. The Guru Parampara system comes under the category of education of spirituality along with other 'Vidya's of the world. In ancient days Gurus were none other than Sages or Rishis. They are the ones who detached themselves completely from the outside world and did 'Sadhana' or the study of scriptures and moreover the ultimate education called 'Atmavidya' or knowledge of self or the ultimate Truth. When their consciousness merged with God they realized several 'Vidya's altogether. So, much of their knowledge they acquired was from the cosmic energy which we call God. In our ancient scriptures sages taught this knowledge in three ways called Shruti, Smriti and Puranas. This means that by listening from the cosmos or God, they contemplated and orated the knowledge to their 'Shishya Vrinda' or the group of disciples. In this manner the classical dance in the form of 'Natya' was originated. The first text regarding dance is Natyashastra which was written in 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. In this text the sage Bharata unveiled the various aspects of the art forms such as music, drama, dance, instrumental music along with the literature, architecture, rituals, tradition, types of people and their behaviour,

Do's and Don'ts, etc., thus it being akin to an encyclopaedia. He tells that Natya is nothing but 'Anukarana' or the imitation of the world activities. In this text the pattern of narration of the concept is through the conversations between Guru and Shishya, latter being a good disciple by asking frequent questions to get the doubts cleared. Not only the Natyashastra but also several other scriptures like Upanishads also follow the tradition and culture of Guru Parampara. In fact, the word Upanishad (upa-ni-shad) means that the disciple moves closer to the Guru and readies himself to receive knowledge. So, one can see how deep our scriptures and the sources of our tradition, Guru Parampara is.

## **Academics :**

In India, classical dance has a rich history and has been an integral part of the country's cultural heritage for centuries. However, its recognition as an academic discipline has evolved over time. Classical dance began to gain recognition as a performing art form, after the revolutionary development post anti-nautch bill. The whole art form was restructured and systemized with some changes from its previous version thus being recognised by the elite community in the society. Before, it was under valued by the society, making it a taboo for the higher community people. After the revolution the classical dances are called by their regional names or by the names related to the culture of the communities of those particular regions. In this process of revolution, the first and foremost name that the art fraternity must remember is that of Rukmini Devi Arundale. She was a very courageous lady and given to very modern thinking too, so she could make changes. In those years she caused flutter and a kind of revolution by getting married to a person of different religion and nationality and learned western Ballet first, before learning classical dance of India. Maybe because of the exposure she got from her parents and her husband, she could become the person of revolution in classical dance landscape. The first institution dedicated to the classical dances and music was established by her in the name of 'Kalakshetra'. This is how



the dance got the academic value in our country. Later it got introduced in the universities as a subject of higher learning like all other allied subjects. The first university founded after the revolution was Banaras Hindu University and it introduced the Performing Arts Department in the year 1950. Then in the year 1956, the Government of Madhya Pradesh established a university in Khairaghar dedicated only for Performing arts like music and dance. Thus the music and classical dance got a recognition in the academics.

### **Challenges in the preservation of originality :**

As said earlier, being a visual art form, the classical dance has an important role in the repertoire. This refers to the presentation by learning with ritualistic tradition and technicalities. In this regard the present generations need to understand our strong tradition and culture. Because of the influence of media and globalization thought, younger generation doesn't accept our tradition in toto and they question every aspect and rituals regarding the same. The reason for this may be that we and our ancestors blindly followed our tradition without knowing or questioning it properly and are trying to impart it to them in a similar manner. If only we are able to understand the reason behind the idea of following the rituals and tradition, only then can we make the younger generation to follow the same. For this, one has to study the scriptures thoroughly to follow or practice any idea of the ritualistic traditions. In this regard we have an abundant source of knowledge in the form of scriptures and Guru Parampara practices. Classical dance is also from the same tradition and practices. As our country is developing fast in various fields, and embracing the global trend of digitalization and economic and social integration, some of the transitional changes may occur in the process. So in this process the classical dance is not an exception as well. But there is a danger that these far-reaching changes may affect the originality in adverse ways.

Some of the reasons for this threat to originality may be pointed out as follows.

- Lack of deep knowledge in the subject
- Rebellious attitude towards the traditional rituals
- Lack of knowledge of the scriptures
- Being in a hurry to make money by performing and teaching
- Shortcut methods to get the fame and name and so on.....

As our ancient wisdom goes, there will be no short cuts for success; the statement holds equally true for the study of our ancient knowledge systems, like the classical dance too. One has to spend several years to get the mastery of the subject concerned in this regard. Because classical dance has got the recognition in the academics, it has to necessarily fit into the system. So many challenges are encountered in the process. The time limitations of covering and studying of the subject is a main concern. In Guru Parampara system there is no time limitation and only if the disciple is thorough in one subject, can he/she move on to the next one only to the discretion of the Guru or the teacher. But in academics getting thorough with the particular subject on hand is

not the criteria for moving on to the study of the next subject, with the curriculum moving as per the time table anyway. It will be like any other subjects and falls into the trap of 'finish the syllabus' kind of pressures. The conditions like the whole year's academic teaching should be finished within 3 months of commencement of the course puts a dampener to prolonged, deliberate and involved teaching as in Guruparampara system and, as such scuttles the prospect for the student to really master the subject before moving on to the next one.

The new set of education system criteria finds that curriculum of semesters doesn't compare with the rigours of the Gurukula system of teaching. This is one of the major hurdles of the new academic system. This leads to the dilution of the teaching as well as learning. The disciple and the teacher both will be under pressure and may have to compromise with the core learning. Thus, there may be a threat of losing the originality by shortening of teaching and shallowing of the subject which will pass on to the next generation. Moreover influences like media and social media have an inescapable imprint on how the art form is perceived. As the artistes are exposed to the social media, they will get defocused. In the urge of getting name and fame early, they may jump into 'go with the flow' kind of mentality thus neglecting the tradition or the Parampara. With the social media influences, they may also try to dilute or spoil the originality of dance by 'fusioning' of the dances, music or by adopting acrobatics within the dance items. This is the culmination of demeaning the originality of the art form and tradition. In the field of classical dance one can either be an academician or be a performer. It is very challenging being both simultaneously. This is because of the schedule and the system itself. For being an academician, one should go with theoretical aspects but if one has to be a performer only, one needs to concentrate on the practical aspects and practice for several hours a day. This is the main challenge for the artist who wants to pursue both academics and performance. Overall, all round development of an artiste is a big challenge in this case with time constraints playing a major dampening role.

## **Conclusion :**

With all these challenges analysed, only solution for the conflict of academics and Gurukula type of education in classical dance seems that one has to choose only one way of learning to get the mastery of the subject. And of course, as the whole life is a learning process, one has to focus only on one of the aspects and put continuous efforts to perfect it. In the holy text Bhagavadgeeta, Shree Krishna says 'Yogah karmasu koushalam' which means perfection in action is 'Yoga'. In this fraction of verse one can understand that any form of the knowledge is so deep that one life is not enough to acquire it. So, whatever is possible we the artistes must have content and fulfilment and should work towards it's perfection. Then only can we be happy within by not thinking of success, or achievement or economic benefits etc. So ultimate success for an artiste lies in the happiness within and being contented in whichever form of education one pursues- Academics or Guruparampara system.

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