

# *Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Indian Classical Dance*

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## **1. Abstract**

Classical Indian dance mirrors traditional Indian culture. Culture diffuses from the lowest levels of simplicity to the strata of complexity. At all rungs of the cultural ladder, gender bias is prominent.

## **2. My Personal Experience**

Dance has been an integral part and ventricular parcel of my life since childhood. I began this endeavor at the tender age of three with Sri Kunhiraman and Srimathi Katherine Kunhiraman of Kalanjali Dances of India. They were a great source of encouragement as they were the only teachers who consented to accept me into their tutelage at a young age. They have indeed inspired me to great depths. I learned the basics of Bharatanatyam from them. As part of Kalanjali's production "Folk Dances of India", I ascended the stage at the age of 4. Due to geographical relocation of my residence, I continued learning Bharatanatyam from a lineage of Kalakshetra teachers including Sundara Swaminathan, K.P. Yesodha, K. Mohanan and currently back again with the Kunhiramans. These teachers have taught me several items in the Bharatanatyam repertoire. It was easy to transition between teachers as the Rukmini Devi pioneered Kalakshetra-style remained the same. Initially, my teachers corrected me minimally as I was too young to absorb the material in full detail. However, as I matured as a person and a dancer, my teachers were more strict and less forgiving of mistakes. I feel that such discipline is essential to perfect my dance movements as well as continually remind me to improve my qualities rather than stagnate. Having started dance at a young age, I was able to memorize the choreography pieces, eliminating the necessity to consider written notes. This capability provided me the additional advantage of independence from external sources to remember these pieces. Consequently, the corrections suggested by teachers were also internalized and preserved as accurately as possible.

In the interim I also had opportunities for several stage performances in India and abroad. I toured the United States and Canada in 1992, as part of International Dance Alliance's Krishnam Vande Jagatgurum, choreographed by India's Sudha Rani Raghupathy. I played the role of a youthful Krishna, stealing butter and kissing all the milk-maidens of the village. This role won several accolades in local newspapers.

In fact, my over-ambitious interest and motivation encouraged my parents to move our principal residence from California to Chennai, India so that I can pursue classical Indian dance more seriously. I spent four years at Chennai, practicing vigorously with Mohanan culminating in my Arangetram, a traditional graduation ceremony, in 1995. During these four years, I had dance classes almost every evening. Such rigor and regularity not only made me a disciplined dancer, but also a disciplined person. While academia is still my top priority, dance remains an essential part of my life. Thus, despite a heavy academic load at UC Berkeley, I have taken advantage of the opportunity to continue dancing under the guidance of the Kunhiramans.

It is a blessing to be able to have such inspiring Gurus. When I was just about ready to divert my full attention to academia, I attended a Kathakali demonstration by the Kunhiramans. When I saw the 70-year-old Sri KunhIRaman dancing with such energy and passion, I realized I am too young to let go of the art. Now, I am one of the senior dancers of Kalanjali and have been actively performing in their productions.

At UC Berkeley, I have also been fortunate enough to be exposed to Modern Dance. I took these dance lessons every day for almost 2 years. Such exposure kindled my self-introspection and passion towards this art form. Dance is not merely a physical activity; it involves strong mental focus and discipline. People cannot fully express themselves through dance unless they are physically and mentally tuned to the same goal. Perhaps dance not being my career choice, I realize that I must dance more for personal satisfaction than pleasing the audience. If I am dissatisfied, I cannot experience the essence of the piece I present. If I don't experience this essence, it is absolutely impossible to transfer the associated energy and emotions to the audience. Furthermore, the modern-dance training improved my knowledge of kinesthetics. When I move, I am more conscious of my internal energy and forces as well as the space surrounding me. I expanded my dance vocabulary and regular practice helped me fortify stamina. Every dance class is profusely demanding of energy, but once I exit class, I feel exhilarated. It is beneficial to my health and it has improved concentration. Without dance, I feel incomplete. To me there is no satisfaction greater than that of a good dance class during which I know I performed my best and my teacher concurs.

Dance class is not just an academic venue but it is also a place for me to socialize. In fact, I would readily equate all my teachers to surrogate parents as they not only provide knowledge and discipline but they also act as guardians and friends. I have been fortunate to have teachers who are as concerned about my welfare as they are about my dance. In India, Sri Mohanan's wife would meticulously cook delicacies for me during my visits. Their two children address me as *akka* (big sister) and shower me the same love and respect. Even in California, there have been several occasions when I have approached my dance teachers for moral support. Similar to my parents, they are always available to encourage me. Just as dance is a part of my life, so are these teachers and their families.

### 3. Dance Evolution

The ritualistic tradition of worship through dance and music has permeated Indian life providing a picturesque perspective on their culture. Initial dances that were folk traditions, mere ritualistic performances performed in villages, eventually attained the stature of theatre. Even today, folk dances are performed in villages during the festive season. In fact, in the village of Tenkasi, where I spent a year at the age of 5, I would process along the street along with other young girls performing the *kummi* (a folk dance performed by clapping hands and making circular formations) during the festive month of *Margazhi* (mid December to mid January).

Nowadays, religious lore and mythology dominate the classical dance forms of India; they do not represent imaginary folklore but are integrated into daily life and belief. Hindu mythology has its underpinnings on the concept of an unchanging Absolute. Ideally, in the portrayal of the image of a God, one can experience the essence of that God. All parts and characteristics of a particular image have special meaning. By means of a pose, gesture, clothing and attributes, the image depicts the aspect the God reveals, the identity the God approaches and the rich mythological historical perspective that is focussed to our attention. The God-centered themes are common to almost all Indian classical dance systems. "The classical India dance-drama developed many of the facial expressions, hand gestures, and stage conventions that have become a part of the later ethnic dances of Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Manipuri and Kathakali. While each of these used common elements and had common content, each is noted in its own local folk tradition and enjoys a unique and separate existence today" (Ellfeldt pg 99). Bharatanatyam is the most ancient and classic form of Indian Classical dance. Mohini Attam from Kerala, South India, is a simplified form of Bharatanatyam. Kathakali is a purely masculine style of dance with remarkable facial makeup and elaborate hand gestures, facial expressions and technique. Kathak is a North Indian style evolved during the Moghul period in India. Manipuri, a colorful, attractive and uncomplicated technique, evolved from local folk dances in Assam, Eastern India. Odissi is a distinct regional style preeminent in the cultural life of Orissa. Kuchipudi dance-drama was part of a general trend toward regional vernacular theatre in Kuchipudi village, Andhra Pradesh, South India. Despite living through a caste-ridden feudalistic society, these forms of classical dances have not been consigned to oblivion. Surprisingly, they have preserved their dance styles through times of political unrest and social upheaval. Credit is essentially due to dedicated exponents of the art who have nurtured these forms through their relentless pursuits.

Dance, the most delicate expression of human culture, is supposed to be an undiluted enjoyment for the art lover. As Lord Brahma communicated to Sage Bharata who wrote it as the *NatyaShastra* (the art of the play), the significance of dance "is not to flatter any party but to represent the true and essential character of the world". Ideally, the symbolism of its postures and gestures, the stories the symbols tell, and the myths behind these stories gives the audience the opportunity to study the world of experience and learn the interpretation it offers. Unfortunately, this mode of expression has been

(mis)used to convey gender through focus on sexuality. In male-dominant cultures, degenerate examples occur when dances are performed to entertain men.

#### 4. Classical Dance

Indian dance is closely linked with emotions. It resembles a perfect harmony between classical music and bodily movement. In fact, its objective can be summed up as the creation of different moods in the minds of the spectators. The concept of *Abhinayam* evolved, whereby through suggestion, the thoughts and feelings of characters in relation to their causes and effects were communicated. Dance spectators may have vicarious, empathetic experiences. An uncanny impression is transmitted to the spectators by remarkable modes of progression. The *Abhinaya Darpana* (mirror of gesture) states that "wherever the hands go, there the eyes should follow. Wherever the eyes go, there the mind. Wherever the mind goes, there the feeling. Wherever the feeling goes, there the mood (*rasa*) or flavor is found" (Coomaraswamy 36).

Classical Indian dance comprises of two main components: 'Nritta', the technical aspect and Abhinaya, the emotional aspect. Nritta uses body movements without any meaning to convey. Most of the movements of the *angas* (limbs) have been described in Bharata's *Natyashastra* that is the earliest codification about Indian dance, drama and music. Abhinaya uses a combination of codified hand gestures and facial expressions, sometimes stylized, otherwise natural, to transform the written script into dance. It is the expression of various emotions and moods through the face *angas* and *upa-angas* (sub-limbs) and through *hasthas* (hand gestures). Ritualistic gestures, known as *Mudras*, indicate gestures in dancing and in acting. A *Mudra* is a very artistic representation of holding the hands and fingers to indicate a particular meaning. Most of the gestures are finger-postures. They form the source of theatrical gesture-language symbolism. They are intended to evoke divine powers in the mind as well as to intensify one's concentration. Abhinaya is most effective when the accompanying music is modulated according to the mood and movement of the dance.

The combination of Nritta and Abhinaya is *Nritya*, or dance, that includes body movement together with the portrayal of emotions. In practice, it is the expression of words by the different parts of the body including major and minor limbs as well as subsidiary limbs. Without expression, the hand movements and gestures alone will be unable to bring forth the exact meaning of the situation. For example, anger and love can share the same hand gesture. To distinguish between the two, the facial expression must differ.

The *NatyaShastra* states that drama is described as a '*natya*' because the actor '*nata*' imitates and mimics various kinds of heroes. These roles were predominantly reserved for men portraying the power and glory of the male Gods Shiva and Vishnu. Simultaneously, the drama is also called '*rupa*' (visual form and beauty) as objects are offered for the visual delectation of the audience. The artistic complexes elucidated by Bharata embody basic human feelings in various situations as the plot develops. There are eight '*sthayi bhavas*' (feelings or stable sentiments).

Rati or sringara            -- desire, affection, erotic longing

Hasya	-- laughter, comical or farcical joy
Krodha	-- anger arising from ill-treatment
Shoka	-- arising from separation
Utsaha	-- pride in one's powers leading to the display of energetic enterprise and bravery
Bhaya	-- fear of reproach or attack
Vibhatsa	-- aversion or loathing
Adbhuta	-- childlike surprise

Each such 'bhava' is associated with three distinct processes: an external cause called 'vi bhava', immediate and involuntary reaction called 'anu bhava' and willful, deliberate or conscious reaction called 'vyabhichari bhava'. For example, for 'rati bhava', the stimulus would be season, flower, ornaments or anything beautiful and desirable. The involuntary reaction would be coy glance or sweet words. The 'vyabhicharibhava' would be lassitude, suspicion or jealousy. Similarly, 'adbhuta bhava' starts with seeing unusual things, achieving the desired or magic. The 'anubhava' is wide or staring eyes, thrill or exclamation and eventually the 'vyabhicharibhava' is standing stunned or overjoyed. Apart from these bhavas, there exist thirty-three unstable sentiments: discouragement, weakness, apprehension, weariness, contentment, stupor, joy, depression, cruelty, anxiety, fright, envy, arrogance, indignation, recollection, death, intoxication, dreaming, sleeping, awakening, shame, demonic possession, distraction, assurance, indolence, agitation, deliberation, dissimulation, sickness, insanity, despair, impatience and inconstancy.

The original intent of Abhinaya was to accurately convey human emotions, especially various forms of devotion. The closeness and intimacy of the love relationship by purposely graphic and vivid expression was supposed to portray a devotee's relationship with God. The best vehicle for approaching God is Sringara. Rasa is an aesthetic experience culminating into bliss. The NatyaShastra compares the experiences of 'rasa' in viewing a play to the tasting of spicy food. This experience can be described in an oversimplified manner as sentiment, feeling or mood. Drama gives this aesthetic experience to the audiences. There are many vivid life-like ideas that can be brought in Sringara, thus enhancing the portrayal of the 'bhava' and simultaneously generating the 'rasa' that is the whole object of the exercise. The NatyaShastra states that "rasas arise from the bhavas when they are imbued with the quality of samanya (universality)" (Chatham pg 21). Ideally, this blissful aesthetic experience is expected to compare with the blissful divine experience of 'Brahman' as portrayed in the Upanishads. The Taittreya Upanishad states that Brahman is rasa. The religion-theatre relationship must be maintained in all dance performances. It is here that dance becomes *yoga*, a discipline of perfecting the mind to mindless serenity. The expertise in rapidly changing distinctly different moods enables the artist to gain the moodless equipoise of *yoga* (yoked with the Divine).

Unfortunately, the original intent of devotion to God was eclipsed by the baser instincts in court dances. Sringara was used by the dancers to court kings and administrators. The erotic content, called 'rati bhava' or 'sringara rasa' was predominant in these expositions. These performances were arranged to praise and please kings and

administrators, particularly appealing to the baser instincts of humans. Serious questions about vulgarity arose. Moreover, religious teachers were afraid of theatre. They termed it a sensuous art and cautioned against its corrupting influence. Even in Indra's times, the character of the dancer and the benefactor were questionable. For example Indra's character itself was dubiously flawed. He molested Ahalya and was cursed by her husband, sage Gautama. In later years, the lack of devotion to the art combined with the absence of an artistic objective lead to degeneration. In addition, to appease spirits particularly to ward off evil, primitive people performed magico-religious ritualistic dances. In general society eschewed any of these dance forms and any talk of Bharatanatyam was taboo.

Several key personnel such as Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi emerged to revive the pure art and elevated it to carry divine content. "Dancing is the natural and therefore universal expression of the human species through which it finds unity with the cosmos and its creator. The cosmos is the dynamic expression, in orderly and beautiful movement, of the static source, the one Supreme Spirit" ... "This expression takes the form of dance" (Balasaraswati, pg 1). Dance is now considered a way of devotion. Only then did Bharatanatyam become socially acceptable. Posture and aesthetic adjustments were important. Every step, hand gesture and movement of the head, including facial expression must all be in rhythm. "At the conscious level, the dancer is not necessarily aware of the dance's inner spiritual meaning. He or she may even take that dance as nothing more than an exalted sensual experience" (Balasaraswati, pg 2). When Abhinaya becomes the outward expression of the inner self, an artistic pleasure is experienced when the artist depicts a 'bhava' with his/her creative skills. Aesthetic presentation with total involvement and a lack of self-projection on the part of the dancer alofted both the performer and the viewer to a refined and rarefied experience. "It is here that Bharatanatyam ... cuts deep into the conscious and subconscious levels ... ultimately and intimately oriented to the nucleus, *Atman*" (soul or Self) (Balasaraswati, pg 2).

Abhinaya exemplifies the emphasis on emotions and elevates the dancer as well as the audience close to the Almighty. For Rukmini Devi, dance was a form of worship. She introduced the image of Nataraja as an icon on stage in order to create an *in situ* temple. Indian temples are traditionally built in the image of the human body. In brick and stone, the temple carries the primordial blueprint of the human body. It is now customary to have Nataraja on the dance stage as He symbolizes Shiva's cosmic dance. Nowadays, almost all classical forms of Indian dance portray some form of divine possession. It is customary to intertwine religion, wisdom and art in these performances. They all have an underlying commonality in serving as a link to transcend the individual (jeev atma) to God (param atma).

## **5. Religious Influence**

Indian dance comprises of aesthetic movement and theatrical dances; the latter enormously influenced by Hindu mythology. The origins of Sanskrit drama are obscurely mythical and legendary; however, Sage Bharata's *NatyaShastra* is a clear exposition of Indian dramatic nature and practice (Rangacharya pg 1-77). It professes that dance

enactments of legends would "give guidance to the people of the future in all their actions" (Ghosh pg 1-34). The NatyaShastra deals not only with drama but also elaborately concerns music and dances as well. Sage Bharata codified the first rules of the Hindu dances between 100..300 AD. It is said that he composed the first syllables of Bhava (emotion), Raga (melody), Tala (rhythm) and Rasa (mood). It is interesting to note that the three syllables bha, ra and ta comprising the legendary name Bharata, signify the three fundamental elements of dance: bhava, raga and tala. Many scholars believe that classical Indian theatre originated in the recitation of the epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, on religious occasions. Bharata states in the NatyaShastra that a story taken from the Vedic lore for enactment is called drama. The divine origin of theatre is attributed to Brahma, the Hindu God of creation and knowledge. According to Indian tradition, it was Brahma who presented NatyaShastra to Bharata. Brahma created the science of drama with Shiva as the Lord of the Himalayas. Parvati, Shiva's consort embellished His performances with forceful and delicate modes of dancing. The Hindu God of preservation, Vishnu created dramatic styles. To enact female roles there existed heavenly danseuses called Apsaras. In the Puranic literature, Indra, the chief god of the Hindu pantheon of lower deities, is depicted as a deity fond of singing and dancing. The Rig-Veda describes Indra as a dancer delivering a grandiose monologue, under the influence of the intoxicating Soma juice, in conversation with his wife Indrani and his pet monkey Vrishakapi.

In the second century BC, Bharata was aware of bhuta nritya or ghost dances. The performances of Mahachari, a ferocious dance to appease hosts of bhutas, vikata nritya imitating the dress and dances of Pishachas (goblins) and other acrobatic dances have influenced modern sophisticated dance styles such as Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Odissi. They have evolved out of ritualistic dances in honor of the folk deities, retaining the forceful and acrobatic aspects inherent in the tradition. For example, Kuchipudi village has been the center of the art and dance-dramas were formerly presented before the Ramalinga Isvara temple in a narrow street in this village. Kuchipudi dance illustrates messages of female power that may modulate the exercise of male power. Teyyam ritualistic dances impersonating deities such as Gandharva, Yaksha and mother-goddess puliyirukali have unmistakable influence on Kathakali dance-drama. Yaksha-gana is a traditional folk-art revealing the beauty of ancient Sanskrit poetry and religious nature of dance-drama (Ashton and Christie, pg 3). Kathak is the only classical dance of India that has links with Muslim culture. It represents a fusion of Hindu and Muslim genius in art (Khokar, pg 103). It was originally a religious art performed in temples and royal durbars (courts) of Rajasthan in medieval India.

## **6. Cultural Impact**

The idea of drama or dance as a 'loka-charita', an art form portraying the social system is prevalent in many great Sanskrit plays. Most of such theatrical enterprises require an elaborate knowledge of the Indian cultural milieu. The Ram Lila is a dramatic representation of the epic Ramayana as told by Tulsidas. People throng to obtain the physical, psychological and religious experiences they gain from such performances by being a dedicated participant. Similarly, there are other performances that are partly

historical, partly invented, usually with some mythological ingredients. These presentations highlight personal conduct especially obedience to social and cultural norms; 'dharma', or a code of humane values is most important. For example, the Ram Lila has a paramount impact on the audience: the inculcation and reinforcement of values, as well as, of social and political attitudes. To contrast dharmic values from a-dharmic ones, mythological taints include various demonic races such as asuras, daityas and rakshasas that are hostile to the stability of the natural moral order. Some of these moral values are important within the "joint-family" structure, others are valuable within the global social framework outside family.

Traditional Indian culture has a profound impact on the roles offered to dancers with a strong androcentric bias. The foremost artistes of Kathak were all men who served as the principal expositors of this art in Northern India. They preserved the purity of Kathak dance both in the temples and, with the advent of the Muslim rule, into the courts. However, women had a distinctly derogatory role in Kathak. They were known as Naach Walis (dance girls), beginning with the Moghuls, and came to be associated with voluptuousness and lasciviousness. Similarly, Kathakali was in vogue in Southern India. The selection process for new students as well as the eagerness to play the role of male Gods such as Krishna, in particular as Kaliya Mardanam Krishna, led to bias against girls. Dancers, wearing a kaccha (loin cloth), underwent a rigorous daily schedule including special traditional exercises to induce perspiration. Kathakali utilizes physical training techniques from Kerala's military tradition. These techniques contribute to incredible stamina that sustains the performer through all-night renditions. The traditional training includes a uzhiccil (oil massage) (Jones, pg 6). They lie face down to the ground, legs spread with knees bent in a right angle. The guru (teacher), supported by horizontal hand bars fixed to poles, massages these students with their feet, exerting pressure on the back and root of the spine to stimulate the entire nervous system resulting in a supple body. When students fail to measure up to the teacher's standards, they were severely beaten and punished. Often teachers used a cane or a thick stick to hit students on the buttocks and other parts of the body. There were reports of bleeding cheeks, legs and inner thighs (Ashton-Sikora and Robert, pg 67). Such strict, strenuous and tedious training virtually eliminated the participation of females whose physical strength and innate power were devalued by society. Moreover the old system of teaching and learning in India was 'guru sampradayam', a system in which students and teachers lived and studied together. Females could not avail of this opportunity to live with teachers who were almost always males. Women, have throughout history, been possessed, exploited and abused by patriarchy. This bias roots from the tradition of arranged marriages and expectations of an ideal Indian woman that had a dominating effect on the females.

In contemporary times, such a *gurukulam* system for learning is very hard to sustain due to various socio-economic constraints. Dance training has become less intense because a majority of students adopt the art as a hobby rather than a profession. I have learned Bharatanatyam since the age of 3 from a series of teachers who are associated with Kalakshetra School of Fine Arts. While I was in India, I had classes regularly for two hours each day. However, in the United States, this discipline is hard to sustain so the classes are limited to an hour or two per week. The lack of frequency makes it more



challenging for teachers as well as students to preserve an arduous program for dance training. However, dance teachers in the United States are often one of the few sources of exposure to Indian culture that a student may have. Thus, the gender-related stigmas associated with dance have slowly worn off.

## **7. Gender Bias**

The majority of written sources in the Hindu tradition, including the great epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, tend toward androcentrism (male centeredness). Although, not quite misogynist, these texts regard women as marginal to religious concerns. Women are perceived as dependent on and subservient to males. Cultural attributes play a significant role in this chauvinism. The most famous and influential Hindu Law Book of Manu specifically mentions that young women must be under the control of their fathers, married women under the control of their husbands and widows under the control of their sons. Without male guidance and control, women are expected to be socially irresponsible and dangerous. An unmarried young woman is expected to learn the arts of being a good wife. In her married state, her entire thoughts and actions are expected to regard her husband as God. If a woman enters widowhood, she is expected to lead an ascetic life. It appears that their role in society is to serve, (re)produce and nourish males.

Gender bias existed during dance instructions that differed for men and women. Movement metaphors distinguish male from female. Males are portrayed with creative and vigorous powers. Females are portrayed with ferocious and destructive roles. Solo dances that have been performed and described in the literature are strongly influenced by religion and culture. Danced gender patterns serve to remind audience members of their respective identities and roles. Male dominance appears in the guise of masked men performing both male and female characters and dance movements. In Kathakali, an all-male cast portrays both male as well as female characters. As an example, the gesture for 'I' or 'me' is portrayed differently by males and females. A female character shows this gesture with an effect of softness using circular curving movements accompanied by upper-body bending. The smooth movements reflect feminine quality. In contrast, a male character depicts the same gesture by "a stronger, more masculine quality ... if the accompanying mood is one of humility, or love, the left hand in ... a fist is placed in front of the chest, and the right hand ... flat open ... is brought near it. To show arrogance ... the entire body is tilted backward (Namboodiri pg.199-200).

Despite attempts to subvert the androcentric bias, solo dance mirrors the cultural inheritance of male dominance. Male dancers have been ascribed noble roles and praised in the literature for their dedication and practice of the art. Dance can be understood as a medium through which choreographers interpret, reproduce and challenge gender and associated patterns of cooperation and conflict that order their social world (Ortner and Whitehead 81). For example, Kathakali was a reaction to foreign aggression; it reaffirmed the social status of heroic warriors, staging spectacular dance-dramas as a public ritual for the entire community. To affirm masculine pride, enacted dance-dramas presented the female as submissive and the male as dominant.

## 8. Dominant Male Role

The earliest evidence of male participation in dance are descriptions of the Gods themselves performing solo, specifically expressing power to overcome some predominating evil. They signify the victory of good over evil. Deities of the Hindu pantheon are fond of theatrical arts. Shiva is addressed as the Lord of the Cosmic Dance, NataRaja (king of dance), the symbol of the eternal movement of the universe. To Him, the most auspicious offering is dance. He symbolizes the rhythm of the universe, the perpetual creation and annihilation. Essentially, Hindu dances represent the vibration in every being and every atom in the universe.

The first prayer a dancer must recite at the beginning of each class or performance describes Shiva as the embodiment of the four-fold division of acting: Angika (physical), Vachika (verbal), Aharya (make-up, stage decor) and Satvika (emotional content) (Coomaraswamy 36).

*“Angikam bhuvanam yasya  
vachikam sarva vanmayam  
aharyam chandra taradi  
tam namah satvikam Shivam”.*

This text is taken from the ancient Sanskrit work, Abhinaya Darpana, written by Acharya Nandikeshwara. Shiva’s limbs are the world; his song and poetry is the essence of all languages; his ornaments are the moon and stars; to Him we bow, the benevolent one.

It is believed that Hindu dances originated for Lord Shiva's famous Tandava Nrithyam, the Dance of Eternity, a dance of universal death and joy. His cosmic dance is the symbol of rhythmic creation of order out of chaos. Long before science was discovered, the ancient sages knew that everything has its own vibration and responds to the proper rhythm. He dances in ecstasy on places where bodies are cremated accompanied by a host of ghosts. There are many versions of this dance. The first one is the horrendous dance of Lord Shiva with his crew after the annihilation of His father-in-law Daksha. Another version portrays the "dance of death" in which Bhririgi, a skeleton attendant, accompanies Lord Shiva. A third form is popularly known as Nadanta in which a toothless old male dancer desperately dances the vigorous dance of Lord Shiva. The last version is the dance of Shiva mounting Nandi (His bull) resulting in the creation of earth.

In the present day, most Bharatanatyam recitals incorporate a Shiva Tandava piece in the repertoire. These pieces are usually fast paced and often acrobatic. The dancer expresses extreme adoration for Shiva’s cosmic dance and describes how the devotees are stunned at the marvelous sight of his movements in the famous Chidambaram temple in South India where today, Shiva’s 108 poses are sculpted on the temple *gopuram*.

The next most significant Male character is Krishna, who is considered the Sutra Dhara, the string holder of the universal drama of life. All the three worlds, Swarga (heaven), Mrutyu (death) and Patala constitute a stage in which the eternal drama of life

is present. There existed a close relationship between the ancient cult of the Bhagavatas, worshippers of Vasudev-Krishna, and theatrical arts. Patanjali mentions the performance of the plays Kamsa Vadha (the slaying of the demon Kamsa) and Bali Vadha (the slaying of Bali) based on Bhagavata themes. Krishna killed demons such as Madhu and Kaitabha with varied, pure, expressive and graceful Angaharas that are major dance movements composed of smaller units known as Karanas. Of the various prominently enacted stories of Krishna, the Vishnu Kaliya Mardana dance is common. It is Krishna's triumphant conquest by dancing on the multi-hooded monstrous serpent Kaliya, subduing him to the music of His flute. In this dance, Krishna forcefully performs on the hood of the ferocious cobra Kaliya killing him to protect the people. Thus, when performed in Bharatanatyam, there are usually elements of mimicking the serpent's struggle as well as the eventual surrender, which Krishna seizes. Krishna is portrayed as holding the serpent's tail with one hand and dancing on its head while posing with one foot lifted.

There are also numerous classical pieces devoted to Krishna's childhood and his playfulness as a youth. In these pieces, the dancer narrates Krishna's expeditions to steal butter from the Gopis and share the butter and the blame with his friends. This category of pieces are among the first *abhinaya* pieces taught to young dancers as it is easy to imitate and express the various *bhavas* associated with the events being narrated. The next stage of Krishna's life that is often narrated in Ras, one is the most interesting dramatic dance that is associated with the cult of the Bhagavatas. Krishna danced with the Gopis and gave them salvation through "round drops of perspiration" that reflected the seahued Krishna" (Varadpande, pg 82). The result of Ras as a religious ritual is Para Bhakti of the Lord that is achieved from a pure heart that is free from carnal desire or lust. Thus, teachers refrain from teaching such pieces to their youngest pupils as it requires a higher level of understanding and emotional capacity to effectively portray this dance.

The dancing Ganesha, Nritya-Ganapathi, is a special manifestation of the eldest son of Shiva and Parvati. Hindus, Buddhists and Jains alike worship this elephant-headed God. To a casual observer, His dance may seem rather ungainly, but on the contrary, this dance has a deep significance similar to Shiva's cosmic dance. With the swinging movement from His left foot to His right foot, Ganesha makes the world appear and disappear. While Shiva's dance may be varied and elegant due to superficial choreography, Ganesha's dance reveals the heartbeat of the universe and the underlying rhythm that unites all existing manifestations, although they may be apparently bizarre.

Almost every performance commences with a tribute to Ganesha and the performer praises Him as well as offers flowers to His feet. Seeking Ganesha's blessings, the performer proceeds with the performance. Sometimes, an entire *kirtanam* may be devoted to Ganesha, in which the dancer describe him as one who removes all obstacles and often narrates a story where he won someone purely through his intellect.

The literature portrays male Hindu Gods as portraying power and performing good deeds such as destroying evil influences. These dances are in vogue today with men re-enacting parts of such Puranic stories during festivals that commemorate Shiva or

Vishnu. During these portrayals, male dancers not simply mimic but almost transform themselves into these characters, be it power exhibiting Gods or violent tendencies exhibited by rakshasas (demons). For example, in Kathakali, men playing demonistically violent roles tend to get possessed by these evil powers and they react accordingly. The mask designs that transform actors into symbolic characters such as divine beings, arrogant personalities or destructive demons, emanate plastic action in expressing moods and passions. The relics of dance-oriented magico-religious rituals still linger in many parts of India. When the “spirit” of a deity possesses a priest, in his trance he begins dancing in a ferocious manner.

Thus the male dominance in the Indian culture is captured in dance through the potency of the characters and their impact on the dancers themselves.

## **9. Devadasi System**

The ritual of dance is a key socio-religious expectation of Hindu women. Prior to the Devadasi Act of 1947, women were dedicated to temples. The term devadasi literally means slave (dasi) of God (deva). She is dedicated to a divine husband who can never die. Marriage with a God exempted a woman from the uncomfortable state of widowhood. The professional temple dancer's requirement of dedicated individual service to the deity was incompatible with human marriage and motherhood. Besides gaining freedom from the constraints of human marriage and widowhood, they could also learn to read and write, an opportunity denied to other women. This system of devadasis, temple-dancing girls, was promoted by the Shaiva cult. The Chozha king Raja-Raja Chozhan employed about four hundred dancing girls to serve Lord Shiva at the Brihadeshwara temple at Tanjore. All 108 dancing units known as Karana are depicted in the Gopuram of the Chidambaram Shiva temple as per Bharata's description. Similarly, the devadasi tradition was prevalent in Orissa too. The Maharis of Orissa are considered holy brides of Lord Jagannath. They are forbidden the company of men, not even to speak to them, and are vowed to chastity. When the temple of Lord Jagannath became the matrix of religious and cultural life of Orissa, the role of the Maharis in daily rituals and festivals was clearly defined. Temple servants that are appointed by the king supervise their sacred duties and daily life. Successive kings in Kalinga maintained dancers for the temples as an indispensable part of temple ritual. As per the Mahabharata, in the Indra Sabha, the king of heaven is entertained with songs, dances and musical instruments by Apsaras (alluring celestial dancers) and Gandharvas. In Yama's (the god of the dead) assembly hall, charming dances (lasya) were performed. Varuna, the deity of water, is worshipped by apsaras and gandharvas by singing and dancing. The Sabha of Kubera, the treasurer of the gods, retains the same atmosphere with beautiful dancing apsaras including Rambha and Menaka.

The devadasi's dedicated status made it a social privilege to maintain her. The honor of helping with temple duties, such as cleaning devotional vessels and decorating shrines belonged to her. A major task of a devadasi is to dance before the seeing deities, embodied in images, entertaining them. The task of waving the pot-lamp in front of a god or goddess in a temple is the most characteristic feature of a devadasi's position. The

ritual action of waving the lamp is complex symbolism. The aim of the action is to ward off jealous drishti (evil glance) at the object of worship. This rite arose from a notion of the divine being eternally ambivalent and omnipresent. The devadasi was a female ritualist whose power (shakti) could be ritually merged with that of the great Goddess (Parvati or Shakti). This quality of 'eternal auspiciousness' is characteristic of a devadasi with the ritual repertoire of costumes, jewelry, makeup, ritual actions, songs and dances. The temple dancers were regarded as auspicious and believed to possess power to ward off the effects of inauspicious omens.

In many temples, kings and patrons often attended during the festival for gods/goddesses in temples. In their presence, devadasis often performed full-scale dance concerts. Europeans often depicted devadasis as sacred courtesans. Their excellence in the various performing arts, including the art of love, and their artistic skills received less attention. The distinction between dramatic ritual and dramatic entertainment eroded over a period of time and society took advantage of the latter. The term devadasi became synonymous with temple prostitute. Girls were offered to kings through temples. There were many instances of beautiful courtesans and temple girls becoming queens or being taken to the royal harem as mistresses. The devadasi system degenerated fast and many immoralities crept in. The brides of Gods became concubines of priests, feudal lords and kings. Some of them amassed enormous amounts of wealth and stopped serving temples. Faith in old values dwindled and not much distinction remained between the common prostitutes and temple girls. Their profession is often misunderstood as a sensuous realization of God or "sacred prostitution" and the misuse of this term attached a social stigma to that community. As such, the dancer's profession was scorned upon by the society. Similarly, the conquest of North India by Muslim invaders stripped Kathak of its religious aspects and traditional music. Feudal Nawabs and Hindu Rajas followed the royal Muslim custom retaining mostly concubines as court dancers; thus began the social degradation of Kathak dance.

In its modern manifestation, Bharatanatyam occupies a niche in Indian society very similar to ballet in the West. However, the origin of Bharatanatyam from a religious ritual gives it an unparalleled dimension. The transition from temple ritual is marked by several changes. The hereditary component that determined how dancers were selected is no longer applicable. The introduction of new innovations and stage presentation has transformed the dance. Balasaraswati feels that although "the presiding Deity of Dance is a male God, Bharata Natyam is primarily a woman's art" ... "Because the lover is God, the union longed for is understood to be, not of the physical, but of the spiritual plane" ... "not achieved through elimination of the sensual, but through the seemingly sensual itself, thereby sublimating it" (Balasaraswati, pg 3). A mortal woman can thereby be transformed into divinity, albeit during the period of the dance performance.

## **10. Dubiously distinct Female Portrayal**

There are female Gods in the Hindu pantheon who are the wives of Gods. Usually, they do not have a pronounced character like the male Gods. In their roles as wives, these goddesses are subordinate, playing a role that women have been assigned for

centuries by society. In the literature, they are commonly depicted as riding on their husband's beasts of burden and appearing smaller in his company. Although male dominance is the Indian cultural pattern, male and female appear complementary in Hindu thought. An anthropomorphic religion, having deities of both sexes, and a deity with attributes of both sexes, perhaps articulates behavioral bounds on each sex. Implicitly, females who challenge the social order of male dominance can modulate male excesses towards females.

The independent role of the Mother Goddess is an exceptionally striking universal character with male and female qualities. She is viewed as a driving force of creation, and as the influences of popular belief increased in Hinduism, She is considered capable of placing the male God in a subordinate position. This female diving principle is worshipped in two aspects: the tender, amiable manifestations and the terrifying violent manifestations. On the one hand, female strength is the source of all life, whereas, on the other hand, it carries the destruction of life within it. In Her benevolent manifestation, Devi (goddess) is seen as a symbol of fertility, maternal abundance, marital fidelity, the protector of religion and art. In her terrifying manifestations, she is the great protector who guards and maintains the cosmic order as a fearless warrior. The unconquerable Goddess Durga represents female energy on earth when she kills the evil buffalo-headed demon, Mahisha Asura, who, having created havoc on earth, proceeded to terrify all the Gods. This particular incident of the war between Mahisha and Durga is often the subject of many Bharatanatyam *kirtanams*.

Kali is the Mother Goddess, the symbol of terror and death outside, but inwardly loving and compassionate. She reveals both Hindu tendencies, to affirm and support the world and to reject and gain release from the world. She is black in color and is also the consort of Lord Shiva. She is the force that governs and stops time (kala). She lives in the cremation grounds as the symbol of the all-consuming power of death. She is typically shown with a sunken stomach signifying her insatiable hunger and thirst for blood, revealing dramatically the truth that life must feed on death. She is ever fertile and ever hungry; everything emanates from her and she devours everything in her way. She is the embodiment of the force of destruction, divine wisdom that puts an end to all illusion. She is usually depicted wearing a necklace of human skulls and in her hands she holds severed heads that are dripping in blood. Sometimes she wears infant corpses as earrings and drinks blood from a skull. Goddess Kali embarks on a fearsome dance with wild, disheveled hair, after killing Raktavija, an Asura (demon), by drinking his blood, since each drop had the potential to become a demon like himself if it fell on earth. Although it is a victorious dance signifying the positive aspect of avenging evil, it signifies destruction. Finally, Her blood-spilling spree ends at the request of Shiva. She dances on the chest of her husband (Lord Shiva), subjugating Him completely and portraying enormous ferocity.

A mature, adult dancer is taught Krishna-centric pieces that portray his allure and appeal to the Gopis. The dancer is often transformed into the character of one of the Gopis and recounts her desire to be with Krishna while he is entertaining other Gopis. Krishna danced with the cowherd women and related especially to Radha who was

recognized as his eternal consort having descended to earth with him. Similarly, Andal, a ninth-century Tamil-language poet, was revered as a true eternal consort of Krishna, the Earth Goddess. In the human plane, several women learned to feel and taste the presence of the Lord by "re-living" the experience of *gopis*, the cowherd women, who were legendary lovers and devotees of the young Krishna. After Krishna departs, they attempt to recover his presence by remembering him vividly primarily through rehearsals of dances they had danced with him. In this context, Andal re-lived the experiences of the cowherd women in contemporaneous times. Andal's world is that of religious stability, devotion and piety. She very much wished to see Krishna and put her longing into words. In *Tiruppavai* (The Song of Our Vow), she evokes penance to entreat Lord Krishna to appear before young women directly. It draws on simple experiences to reveal what finding God is all about. In *Nacchiyar Thirumozhi* (The Lady's Holy Words), Andal intensely explores Krishna's presence in words that are both playful and intense. Her technique is surrender before God, completely and without condition. It is full of thirst, to imagine, yearn and awaken in God's presence, as did the cowherd women.

In India, the position of women in Hindu civilization has been submissive due to suppression. Society expected her to be a householder, fully religious and adhering to the duties of a woman (*stree dharma*). They are expected to undertake fasts and other ritual observances on behalf of others. For the past four thousand years, they have been subjected to various forms of humiliation ranging from torture including sati to court dancers. Their aspirations and earnest for a better life have almost always been subdued by male chauvinism. This forceful submission is usually relegated, albeit wrongfully, to the Hindu shastras or primitive Buddhism. In the scriptures, women are revered. For example, consider the Hindu Goddesses Parvati, Lakshmi and Saraswati. They are respectively the embodiments of power, wealth and knowledge. Religiously people perceive women as a 'mother' and they seek kindness and shelter from them. In practice, the animalistic tendencies predominate in mankind and they treat women as subservient weaklings. Roles and rituals were often prescribed to women.

Conventionally, perhaps due to socio-cultural norm, females have been portrayed as submissive roles in dance. Usually, the female dancer portrays a heroine of friend that talks about their hero, either the love pangs suffered by the heroine, or the distress caused by his neglect or deceit. Women portray graceful and tender gymnastics. In her dances Parvati, Shiva's consort, dances with *lasya* (tender, womanly), portraying submissive characteristics. Similarly, the Apsaras in Indra's court were almost always submissive, their role was simply to dance for their royal benefactor. In the Mahabharata, during his exile as a transvestite, the celebrated warrior Arjuna, plays a submissive role as Brihannala teaching dance to the women in the harem of King Virata.

Even among the portrayal of female dancers, there exists a strong socio-cultural bias. Four fundamental qualities associated with an ideal Tamil woman are Acham (fear), Nanam (sense of shame), Madam (stupidity), Payirpu (fertility). Usually, upper caste women are an embodiment of these traits and are expected to be domestic, docile, quiet and submissive. In mythical categories, upper-caste women do not participate in dance. Upper caste women appear to experience the eight basic rasas enumerated in an earlier

section. There is no distinction between the bhava such women portray and the rasa they experience. In contrast, the lower caste women extend their portrayal to the thirty-three sub-rasas. They can be more aggressive or devious in their portrayal. The character Mohini, in role-play portrays a lower caste woman. This portrayal misleads people by conveying the message that one has to be a female to lure a male especially a rakshasa (demon). The bhava she portrays is that of generosity, kindness and sweetness but her motive is deviously seductive. The rakshasi Surpanaka, Ravana's sister, makes abominable advances to lure Rama's brother Lakshmana. The Gopis, dancing with Krishna, were all lower caste women and in particular they were promiscuous. Menaka, the heavenly nymph, seduced sage Vishwamitra to eventually produce their daughter Shakuntala. In the quintessential Tamil poem, Ilango Atikal's Cilapathikaram, the female character Madhavi, a courtesan honored by the Chozha king in recognition of her talent as a dancer, is used to lure Kovalan. She induces extramarital love in his relationship causing *parattayirpirivu*, the act of forsaking his wife and seeking the company of a *katarparattaiyar* (courtesan) (Parthasarathy, pg 289). Similarly, to portray rati bhava, Kuchipudi choreographers often use strong lower-caste women. In addition, such women are well suited to portray arrogance and intense jealousy explicitly as necessitated, for example, by Krishna's beautiful consort Satyabhama's personality. Similarly, feminine roles have brought fame to Kathakali dancers that belong to the Rakshasi Maya Sundari class of characters. The rakshasi (she-demon) transforms herself into a maya sundari (beautiful maiden) to wreak vengeance, e.g., *Pootana Moksham* (Devi, pg 90). Buddhism also provides examples of women's character being more suitable for rati bhava. The Avadan-shataka depicts a story of Kunalaya who entices monks by a frank exhibition of her lovely body while dancing. Bhagawan Buddha became angry and punished her by transforming her into a hideous creature.

Thus dance reflects the notion that females possess destructive powers that need to be suppressed in order to maintain order.

## **11. My Arangetram**

A typical Bharatanatyam recital is comprised of various components that reflect the culture and trends of Indian society. The most important of a dancer's recitals is his/her Arangetram. The Tamil word, Arangetram (arangam, eetram) literally means ascension of the stage. It is the first formal presentation of a student (sisya) to the audience by the teacher (guru). It is a traditional ceremony where the guru and the sisya offer their knowledge of Bharatanatyam to the learned and discerning. I had my Arangetram during November 1995 at Mylapore, Madras, India.

There are several events starting from preparation for an Arangetram and leading to the grand finale. First, me, the dancer, Shri Mohanan, the dance teacher and the accompanying musicians undertook serious rehearsals almost on a daily basis for a period of about two months prior to the Arangetram. The rigor and stamina required for an Arangetram demands such tenacious practice. Such intense sessions are used to fine-tune the stage presentation, honing and polishing every item in the performance repertoire. During this period, my family provided meals and other logistical support for the



practicing artists. At the Arangetram, it is customary to provide some snacks during breaks and my mother arranged an elaborate variety of hors d' oeuvres. Financially, it was a significant burden for my father. Considering the rent for a performance hall such as Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Mylapore, a premium place in Madras, the expensive and specialized costumes specially tailored for me, food for guests and dakshina (monetary payments) and gifts for the teacher and accompanying artists, the Arangetram was almost as expensive as a traditional Hindu marriage! Furthermore, it served as a forum for all near and dear relatives and friends to get together on a joyous occasion. My relatives and friends arrived from remote corners of the world! I had my great grand mother visit from the United States, my dad's aunt and uncle visit from Australia and my mother's cousins visit from Japan. Most importantly, this event provided as much pleasure to my grandparents and well wishers, as would a traditional Hindu wedding.

Socially, ascending the stage indicates a green signal that the dancer is ready for marriage and on the lookout for potential partners. Traditionally such public display was one of many methods for embarking on the road to an arranged marriage. However, in my case, I was too young at that time for my family to consider any such implications. In general, an Arangetram appears similar to a real marriage ceremony. Several volunteers are necessary to make the Arangetram a reality. Consider the entrance or a marriage hall and also an Arangetram hall. The similarities are startling. The rose water greeting at the entrance, malligai (jasmine) flowers, sandalwood paste, kumkum (vermilion) powder and kalkandu (sugar crystals) are used by unmarried females to usher guests. My cousins at Madras undertook most of these tasks. I was indeed fortunate to have my Arangetram at Madras where I could avail of tremendous infrastructure help from my cousins, other relatives and friends. At the entry, the specific choice of unmarried females is cultural; essentially, females are responsible for alluring people inside rather than males. Sometimes there is an elderly male present at the entrance just to oversee and manage the entry greeting. In my case, my mother's granduncle undertook that responsibility. This setup is a sterling example of androcentric reflection on the culture. Similarly, before beginning the Arangetram, women are never delegated to introduce the dancer and the accompanying orchestra. This task is considered aggressive and relegated to the males. My father introduced me as well as the accompanying artists.

The actual Arangetram began with a Pushpanjali. With intricate footwork, I offered fresh flowers to the Supreme Dancer, Lord Nataraja seeking His blessings. Traditionally, flowers are carried to the temples and offered to the deity. However, nowadays this cultural aspect is preserved via a mock temple created *in situ* on stage. The basic idea is to recreate the aura of the temple environment where this ancient art originated. A puja (worship) of Lord Nataraja was performed to sanctify the forum before I placed my foot on the stage. This puja was private, conducted behind the curtains accompanied by my teacher, grandparents and parents; the general public could not perceive this ritual. I entered the stage with choreographed patterns of steps accompanying rhythmic syllables and offered flowers to Lord Nataraja. The pushpanjali culminated in a namaskaram (prostration); symbolically I begged forgiveness from Mother Earth, asking permission to dance with my bare feet on Her. A similar namaskaram was repeated at the end of the entire dance performance where I not only

thanked Mother Earth but also extended my gratitude to the accompanying musicians as well as the audience for gracing the occasion, showering blessings on me and validating the graduation. This initial invocation was followed by a series of dance items in increasing order of choreography complexity as well as sophisticated dancing patterns. Live musicians accompanied the entire dance recital. The artistic ensemble comprised Shri Mohanan, the dance teacher on the nattuvangam (cymbals), Shri Karaikudi Krishnamoorthy, a percussionist from London, on the mridangam to sustain rhythm, vocal singer(s) as well as non-percussion instrumentalists such as artists on the veena, violin and flute. Shri Krishnamoorthy is a well-known mridangam player who hails from Karaikudi and later played for performers at Kalakshetra, Madras. He was a colleague of Shri Kunhiraman while both worked at Kalakshetra. I was really fortunate to have Shri Krishnamoorthy visit from London to grace the occasion. He was the guiding light for all of us who were much younger to him in age and experience. We all benefited tremendously from his advice and experience and I personally could sharpen my steps to his beats. Overall, it made our presentation more crisp, clear and sharp.

The Arangetram performance lasted for about two hours. It comprised choreographed segments in the following sequence: an Allaripu, Jathiswaram, Varnam, a few specialty compositions (Padam and Kirthanam) and finally the Thillana. The Allaripu is a "warm-up" dance sequence, setting the stage for the next piece. The Jathiswaram is a scintillating pure dance expression wherein the routines are patterned into the framework of a set measure of swara (music basis) passages. I executed korvais (series of dance units) culminating in sharp and complex finishes, in various kala pramaanams (tempo) and also nadais (measured divisions) within the tala (meter). During this part of the performance, the dancer's anga shuddham or clarity of body parts is expected to be clearly visible to the audience and I ensured that I matched this expectation. The Padha Varnam is an exciting and challenging item in a Bharatanatyam margam (repertoire). It is fairly elaborate and time consuming. It tests the capacity, versatility and stamina of the dancer. Typically a Padha Varnam thematically expresses the love between a heroine and her Lord. Underlying this love and longing is the bhakti (devotion) that symbolized the yearning of the human soul (jeeva atma) for the Supreme (param atma). After rendering the Varnam, there was an intermission. The audience needed a break to snack and I utilized this opportunity to refresh and re-costume preparing for the remainder of the program. Usually, after the intermission there is a series of detailed story presentation usually involving Lord Shiva and Parvati or Krishna and Yesodha or the Gopis as well as Lord Muruga with special purpose themes. The Padam I performed was in praise of Lord Vishnu and described his ten incarnations and elaborated especially on two of these incarnations. Following this item, I performed a Kirthanam describing Lord Shiva's Ananda Tandavam (ecstatic dance).

The grand finale of the Arangetram is the Thillana. It is comprised mostly of Nritha, or pure dance patterns, interlaced through repeating verses of the pallavi of the song. It thoroughly tests the speed and stamina of a dancer. It is a dance of ecstasy that forms the epitome of pure dance artistry. It sets a happy mood and even the audience feels the excitement from the repetition of the pallavi lines accompanied by the dancer's fast paced footwork. The Thillana brilliantly and comprehensively explores the

intricacies of the basics of Bharatanatyam. I performed one of Kalakshetra's masterpiece Thillana's set to Natabhairavi ragam. This Thillana consists a small passage describing Rukmini Devi's contributions to art and the name and fame of Kalakshetra.

A short piece, Mangalam, formally terminates the Arangetram. The dancer thanks the Lord once again and also thanks the artists for their accompaniment as well as the audience for their appreciation without which the performance would not have been consummated. In my case, I was able to incorporate a specialized version for which the music was composed by my Grandfather. The poetry praised the mother Goddess and eventually blended into the traditional namaskaram.

After the performance was over, I was instructed to individually seek the blessings of all the elders who stayed back to meet me. I had to fall on their feet and take there constructive criticisms to improve my presentation. It was a wonderful, yet tedious, learning experience and there is no comparison to the sense of accomplishment that I felt upon completion of my Arangetram.

## 12. Conclusions

It is normal to expect traditions and customs, respected for centuries, to be cast aside and "dethroned". As a side effect, cultural treasures, also built up through the centuries, are usually destroyed and lost completely. Despite India's roller-coaster ride through feudalistic wars and foreign invasions, the exquisite traditions of Indian dance are not in danger of becoming blurred or sacrificed. Foreshadowing the freedom of India and its renaissance was the active interest in revival of its own arts. All of the classical Indian dance forms are still very much in vogue today. From the scornful and condemned lifestyle of dancers, an elevated aesthetic view has emerged, thanks to female pioneers who have relentlessly pursued the revival and revitalization of this art. They have made a significant breakthrough to mitigate, if not eliminate, the male supremacy in dance. Simultaneously, they have ushered in significant creativity to promote this art. There continues to be ample scope for the dancer to exhibit *sanchari bhava*, or spontaneous improvisations.

The male chauvinism has receded, albeit slowly but surely. This welcome erosion can primarily be attributed to a change in perception of women in India and their changing roles in family life. The perceptions of the declining position of women in ancient India are now being replaced by leadership expectations. Contrary to the interpretation of religious rituals encapsulated in texts that are written and compiled by men, modern India seeks out the voices of women and hearing their own evaluations. The past decade has witnessed the outcry of several women authors that have rushed to publish their points of view. Care must be taken that this rush does not lead to misogyny. Women need not necessarily have a radically different view that what is prescribed to them by men or male-authored texts. Perhaps the negative taint ascribed to them can be perceived in a more positive and powerful role.

It is heartening to note that in the field of dance, women's role is now being perceived in a more elevated light and sexual subordination is on the decline; it is almost on the verge of eradication. Despite choreographers who often cannot shed the ideology of a traditional upbringing, there is more encouragement for women to dance. Both men and women choreographers now portray women in roles of stature, including situations that demand exertion of physical strength. Moreover, male and female dancers are no longer given separate specialized training. In fact, India's dance kaleidoscope began with male dancers, who at some time taught the art to the guilds of male teachers, who in turn instructed women. Today, however, women are responsible for the survival and performance of these dance forms. Women are not only dancing their own gender roles, they are able to capably portray men's as well. During the recent past, they have slowly, but surely, ushered in role reversal and androgyny in dance. A proper appreciation of women's contributions as well as their unparalleled roles in various aspects of human life can lead to the return of the "sacred" female imagery and their consequent upliftment in society. Most importantly, they can help eliminate gender patterns in dance productions and dance images, expunging the tyranny of sexism and altering the gender dynamics in a wider world.

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