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Art of Indian Dance and Impact on Society
Summary of lecture given by Mythili Kumar

Yatho dhrishtis thatho manaha
Whither the glances lead there the mind follows,
Yatho manas thatho bhavaha
Whither the mind goes there the mood follows,
Yatho bhavas thatho rasaha
*Whither the mood goes, there is **'rasa'** born*

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Classical dance in India is an eloquent expression of an ancient tradition, in which every action, be it the pursuit of knowledge, skills, craft, or an art form, became a stirring ritual and an offering to the divine. All art for example, poetry, dance, music, sculpture, painting, or architecture, was a way of life and was meant to be the divine torch that led man to spiritual awakening. As dance in particular was intricately woven into the religion, the term 'art for art's sake' did not apply here, because the ultimate goal of the dance was not merely for beauty, aesthetic pleasure, entertainment or a simple diversion from daily life. The goal was to bring one closer to the spiritual oneness when the finite soul merges with the Infinite Being.

Origin of Dance in India - Tracing antiquity
Mohenjodaro figurine-2300 BC
Rg Veda-2000 BC
Natya Shastra-200 BC
Literary works describing dance
Silappadikaram-Tamil - 2nd century AD
Malavikaagnimitra-Sanskrit - 4th century AD

In ancient India, the arts of dance, drama, and music were fused into one, as seen in the treatise called the Natya Shastra-the Science of Dramatics, written by the sage Bharata around the second century BC (Sanskrit). A description of the origin of the Natya Shastra is seen in the verse translated below:

By taking the words, 'paathya' from the Rg Veda, the art of visual representation, 'Abhinaya' from the Yajur Veda, music, 'geeta' from the Sama Veda and Aesthetics 'Rasa' from the Atharvana Veda, the creator Brahma fashioned the Natya Veda or Science of Drama and Dance.......This art is indeed capable of securing the four-fold objects of life, namely virtue 'Dharma', wealth, 'Artha', fulfillment of desires, 'Kama', and salvation, 'Moksha'.......It will drive away pain, sorrow, despair and mental affliction – nay it must be granted that the pleasure it affords is one degree higher than the Supreme Bliss attained by becoming one with the Lord!

While the various classical dance forms of India have taken birth in temples and places of worship, the basis has always been the philosophy, the cultural and traditional values, and the individual characteristics of the myriads of communities and villages throughout the country.

If you pick a book on Indian dance written or published in the 1940s to 1960, only four major styles of classical dance such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, and Manipuri would have been listed. In publications in the 1970s, this list became six, as Kuchipudi and Odissi were included. Later Mohini Attam was added in the 1980s, and less than two years ago, Sattriya dance from Assam has been also found its place among the classical styles making the number eight in all. Does this mean that newer classical dance styles are being created? Not really. After independence with more and more of the dances moving out of its original performing spaces, the village or the temple to a theater, with more research being undertaken by scholars on the technique, and the literature codifying the technique behind the dance in many regions, it becomes clear from time to time that each of these dance styles is dissimilar from the major ones listed

earlier and can therefore lay claim to a separate name with its own unique technique, costume, language, literary content, musical form and lyrics.

There are now therefore eight classical dances officially recognized. More may still be unearthed perhaps as time goes by. Here is the list and the region that they originate from.

Regional Styles of classical dance: (Eight)

Bharatanatyam –
    from South India-associated with the state of Tamil Nadu and adjacent areas.
Kathakali
    from South-west India- associated with the state of Kerala
Kathak
    from Northern India
Odissi
    from eastern India- associated with the state of Orissa
Mohini Attam
    from South-west India- associated with the state of Kerala
Kuchipudi
    from south central India - associated with the state of Andhra Pradesh
Manipuri
    from far eastern India - associated with the region of Manipur
Sattriya Dances
    from the eastern state of Assam

In addition to the classical dance styles described above, there are innumerable folk dances from every corner of India. Indian folk and tribal dances are simple dances, and are performed to express joy. These are performed for every possible occasion, to celebrate the arrival of seasons, birth of a child, a wedding and festivals. The dances are extremely simple with minimum of steps or movement but they are full of verve and vitality. Men and women perform some dances exclusively, while in some performances men and women dance together. Each form of dance has a specific costume representing the region of India that they hail from.

In the US, all dance that represents a region or country is termed ethnic dance irrespective of whether it is classical or folk. Which brings us to the question : What makes a classical dance different from a folk dance? A classical art evolves over a long period of time. It is not created overnight. Its technique is structured and stylized, predetermined and codified, and its projection conforms to a particular pattern. Emotion is not impulsive but is ruled by the intellect. The technique can only be imbibed through instruction. It has also stood the test of time. It is dance that stems from the inspiration and the work of the individual rather than the collective; it is dance that not only affords appeal to the senses but also stimulates the intelligence of the performer and spectator alike. On the other hand, folk dances express the mood of the moment, the celebration of birth, a harvest, or a festival. It is usually a group effort and often the performers can imbibe the technique in less time as it is comparatively simpler. Folk dances all over the world have become more sophisticated, more structured and more complicated with elaborate group choreography, but its projection is spontaneous and rarely associated or driven by literary instruction like classical dance. Folk dance forms such as Bhangra, Garba, are specific to a region, the language is also specific to that region and songs are traditional tunes sung by the common people of the region. Classical dance in India is particularly characterized by an oral tradition of instruction from the guru or teacher to the sishya or disciple, known as the guru-sishya parampara which has kept various intricate arts alive for thousands of years.

A popular dance form is **Bollywood** dance or film dance which is an amalgam of classical, folk, popular dance, western movement, etc. where anything that the director pleases is adopted. Famous dance masters have been associated with dancing in the films for many decades, (my Kuchupudi teacher Sri Vedantam Jagannatha Sarma, Pandit Birju Maharaj). Famous actresses knew classical dancing and incorporated those movements into their routines for example Vyjayantimala Bali, Madhubala, Waheeda Rehman, and even Aishwarya Rai and Kamal Hasan were trained in Bharatanatyam. The choreography for Bollywood dancing has become quite complicated and sophisticated in recent years so one cannot completely dismiss all film dancing. Many of these film dance sequences, however dazzling, still leave much to be desired.

Indian dancers have to often explain the difference between Western and Indian dance forms. Traditionally Indian dance was a religious experience-unlike the Western forms of ballet, modern, jazz or tap. Secondly, communication is through gesture and symbol in Indian dance and is based on contemplation – in western forms, the human body is a crucible of energy and is the primary communicator. This perspective has however changed both ways.

I would like to conclude with a note on spirituality in Indian Dance which has two connotations. One is inherent when the divinities in the Hindu religion are invoked through various lyrics, and hymns and other compositions. Their form, their worship, and stories that abound around them are described vividly and can give the dancer and the audience likewise a virtual spiritual experience. The longing of the human soul for the divine is expressed through compositions by saints and composers such as Tyagaraja, Gopalakrishna Bharati, Bhakti poets such as Meera, Tulsidas; Sringara Bhakti composers such as Jayadeva, Kshetrayya, the Alwars, etc. All of these in the dance form make it an enriching spiritual journey for the student of dance. The other aspect of spirituality is in the nature of the art form itself. The dance technique is believed to be an artistic yoga for revealing the spiritual through the corporal. The dancer has to learn the art, devote oneself to it and pursue it with zeal, so that it can prove the means whereby the soul or atma could relieve itself of its worldly ties and become one with the Paramatma- for the finite to merge with the Infinite Being. When a dancer moves her body to the beat or the rhythm, as in a yogic exercise, the dancer's body is rid of its human weaknesses and is purified and made into a conduit of the spiritual and the beautiful. The dancer thus dissolves her identity in the rhythm, melody, and meaning of the dance and makes her body an instrument, at least for the duration of the dance, for the experience and expression of the spirit. The variety of moods and feelings portrayed in a dance recital should also be universalized into aspects of divinity and should not remain the limited experience of an insignificant human being. The deep involvement of the artist while performing thus has to be intense enough to transcend him/her to a higher plane than that of the mundane everyday life, and take him/her to the realm of the spiritual.

References: Various texts on Indian classical dance