



Emotions Ethereal

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Art is the expression of the vitality and depth of a culture, a manifestation of man's desire for perfection, a vehicle for prayer, and a stylised depiction of the aspirations and moral values of the people. In the environment of a rich and varied heritage and culture of a country like India, it is only natural that different art forms took birth and flourished, leading to a bewilderingly rich mosaic that we see today. Through a process that took hundreds of years, many art forms acquired a structure with sets of principles and rules that defined them, which led to an establishment of a strong scientific foundation and helped students to take a disciplined approach to the form. The framework was further expanded through many practitioners and the art forms developed and evolved through centuries to a more distinctive form.

The post-independence period, when the country was divided on the basis of language and customs, principles pertaining to art practices underwent many modifications; but again the structure became more delineated; by re-identifying and linking to its regional roots. Thus separate art forms developed their own respective bodies of guiding directives, teaching methodology and techniques. In the field of classical dance, this evolutionary process is well etched out. Different dance forms flourished at the same time, drew sustenance and inspiration from common texts and legends; yet these 'desi' forms became more and more distinct and reflected the cultural values, social ethos and practices of regional societies. Contemporary concerns, or socio political situations have always influenced the art practitioners and art.

Indian classical dance is also a form of theatre, where one can visualise a macro-universe within micro-universe. In Natyasastra, sage Bharatha says, "No art, no craft, no action, no device, no wise maxim that is not found in Natya".

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*“Na tat gnanam; na tat silpam
na sa vidya; na sa kala
na sa yogo; na tat karma
natyesmin anadrisyate...”*

Dance as a form of art has a quality of this adaptability or interpretative flexibility. Dance has traditionally been the principle that has been affected by and has reflected the societal problems. Even while devotional themes dominated the content, contemporary issues found their way into narratives and compositions. Or in other words, the socio-political situation imposed and determined the type and treatment of solo dance forms. In the field of Mohiniyattam, the upper class had a strangle hold on art and this resulted in Mohiniyattam depicting themes that entertained the patrons of the age. Mohiniyattam became obsessed with themes, almost entirely concentrating on the *sringara rasa*, where the captivating and essentially erotic beauty of the woman became the mainstay of all performances. There were also instances when the dance form deviated substantially from its classical standards basically to fulfil the requirements of the affluent and debauched audience.

The post-independence period witnessed a sea change in the treatment and content of all dance forms. Many came forward, learnt and practised classical dance forms and started trying new themes. The serious problems and issues the nation confronted: poverty, caste hatred, the low position of woman in family and society, peasant uprisings etc. have been effectively handled in literature and other forms of art by artists as responsible citizens to their society. This had captured the imaginations of the dancer community also and the result was an outpouring of creative works that redefined classical dance. The idea of a traditional recital or *sampradaya* was crossed over by adding up new theme-based items, which sometimes challenged the conventional idea of classical dance patterns. In Mohiniyattam, though this movement was slow (which had its own reasons), the dancers who handled the form tried themes which raised questions



about unhealthy tendencies of the society. ‘Chandalabhikshuki’ on caste dilemma, Magdalana Mariam (dealing with a non-Hindu theme) were the early attempts, which brought this art form closer to the common man. After the eighties, more effective dance themes like the futility of war and power, degradation of moral values, national integration and unity, feminism, women with substance, communal violence, alcoholism... etc were featured by Mohiniyattam dancers. This does not mean that a particular performance or recital of a Mohiniyattam dancer is not successful if she doesn’t venture to do any novel themes, or a traditional repertoire is inferior. On the other hand, the fact was that almost all dancers liked to venture into these themes, which influenced them; or these ideas which

they wanted to experiment or experience through their dance idioms. This brave approach continues and it naturally widened the possibilities of the form. Modern dancers enjoy this freedom to decide what their Mohiniyattam should say to the modern art connoisseurs and common man. While adhering to the principles and aesthetics, they are aware of the fast-moving world and a cosmopolitan audience they face as artists representing an age old form of dance.

When one thinks about artistic expression on contemporary themes or presentations in classical dance, two approaches can be seen. One is the direct method of handling the theme; where there can be more or less a complete departure from the constraints and principles of a classical tradition. Here the creative attempt will fulfil its destination while communicating frontally with the audience. The second method will be indirect where the modern theme will be interwoven with the traditional ones and the classical discipline with all its finesse would be kept intact. Some artists adopted the activist line of the former and dispensed with tradition and text. To them, the old principles were far too constricting, preventing theme from giving full expression to their intentions.

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In the latter approach, the emphasis can be reinterpretation of traditional characters or incidents, cleverly interweaving the messages of contemporary society into age-old stories. Here the artistic licence that is available in old texts is exploited to the maximum by intelligently interpreting the situations to give a powerful message to the modern audience.

These artistic expressions enable both the artists and the art form simultaneously to expand their potential. Fortunately in Mohiniyattam, most dancers have chosen the second way, where the themes deal with common human problems with universal appeal and spoke of larger issues concerning societies, provoking deep understanding and informed discussion in the larger audience. Let us discuss some fine examples:-

Kanak Rele, a senior dancer in Mohiniyattam talks about a teenager in orumakal, who elopes with a boy at an immature age. Here the mother's lament becomes any person's concern in this society where such cases are not

run away from the eternal or cruel realities of life. Another dancer as Sakuntala, the lovely hapless maiden who is used and discarded by the king, does not want to live as a slave in his palace, nor to pine with eternal hopes and hang around him, but decides to face life as it comes. Amrapali the courtesan, gives a strong message about the futility of war. All these are instances of imaginative and creative interpretations of traditional characters within the ambit of Mohiniyattam. Unniyarcha, Draupadi, Yasodhara, Seetha are all strong female personalities who have faced unfortunate situations

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uncommon. In her another presentation 'Gandhari', the mother of the Kouravas says as a strong and defiant person that she preferred to be blind folded rather than seeing the 'adharma' of her children around. Another dancer in the famous poem of G. Sankara Kurup, 'Ente Veli' describing the day of her marriage also contrasts the eternal marriage to death, the inevitable end of every human being born on earth. An art form, which had been conceived to deal with the gentle emotions of a seductive Mohini, does not

in life, interpreted by leading dancers in the field. All these presentations crossed the barriers of language and region and won the applause of art critics and rasikas across the world.

However, there are many challenges and difficulties the dancers face to produce a presentation of this manner. As classical dance forms can never be detached from the principles and aesthetics governing them, it is the responsibility of every artiste to honour this ancestry and ensure that her own

experimentation in the process of introducing novel ideas and themes does not endanger the purity of the form. Hence the creative challenge before every artist to present a contemporary matter into an idiom of an ancient form does not become an easy task. Adopting present social themes into a text or literature that conforms to classical requirements is the biggest bottleneck. The music accompanying should not compromise the seriousness and depth of the literature or issue, yet should keep the classical ethos and satisfy a traditional rasika as well. Further, the dance technique should also be explored in different dimensions so that one can give best expressions through new and thoughtful hand gestures with scientific reasoning, appropriate angika and satvika abhinaya sometimes suggestive and sometimes loud, with appropriate stage craft. And also aharaya or the costumes designing should fit the choreography while not superimposing the gentleness of the form by going overboard.

No artist can remain immune to the changes that churn society. The manner in which every artiste interacts with the pulls of the society and the extent to which these social problems are adopted in her creative spaces depends not only on the person, but also the form. An artistic endeavour should be the consequence of a genuine urge from a creative mind. As a responsible practitioner of classical arts, one should understand the constraints and possibilities of the form and should be able to differentiate it clearly from a street play. The educated dance practitioner may stay far from the madding crowd, yet should not be silent in recognising her artistic responsibility. She should not fail to understand that the relevant space occupied by her creative endeavours has to protect the cultural and moral values of society.

Only then, the best of creative talents would come forth positively influencing the thoughts of the society even while enriching the dance form.

(Reference: Post colonial identity construction by Dr. Neena Prasad; Post Doctoral Research study at AHRB Centre, Department of Dance, University of Surrey, UK). ■

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