



Śiva as a hunter, a Kathakali dance pose from a performance by Ram Gopal

KAY AMBROSE

Classical Dances and Costumes of India

Second edition revisions by
Ram Gopal



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Contents

Foreword by Arnold L. Haskell	vii
Preface by Ram Gopal	ix
Introduction	1
Summary of dance styles	
<i>Natya Sastra</i>	
General features of Indian dance	
<i>Devadasis</i>	
The male tradition	
Note on technical sketches	
ONE Gods, Mythology and History in Indian Dance	10
TWO Indian Music	20
THREE The Geography of Indian Dance	24
FOUR <i>Kuchipudi</i>	28
FIVE <i>Bhagavata Mela Nataka</i> of Tamil Nadu	32
SIX <i>Bharata Natya</i>	33
SEVEN <i>Krishnattam</i>	64
EIGHT <i>Kathakali</i>	67
NINE <i>Yakshagana</i>	86
TEN <i>Orissi</i>	87
ELEVEN <i>Chhau</i>	90
TWELVE <i>Kathak</i>	91
THIRTEEN Dances of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam	102
<i>Manipuri</i>	
<i>Naga</i>	
<i>Satriya</i>	
<i>Ojapali</i>	
FOURTEEN Dances of Sri Lanka	108
FIFTEEN A Patchwork of Indian Folk Dances	110
SIXTEEN Costumes of India	112
Index	116

Illustrations

This edition is illustrated throughout with the original drawings by Kay Ambrose. Additional drawings on pages 28, 30, 31, 67, 78, 80, 89, 95 and 97 by Eileen Pearcey. Map on page 25 by Tony Garrett.

Photographs

Ram Gopal as Śiva the hunter	ii
Ponniiah Pillai, Ram Gopal and M. S. Pillai	x
Kunju Kurup, K. Baratha Iyer, Ram Gopal and M.S. Pillai	xii
Ram Gopal as Śiva in the <i>Dance of the Setting Sun</i>	14
<i>Kuchipudi</i> dancers in a <i>Bhagavata Mela Nataka</i> drama	29
Sculptures depicting three aspects of Śiva, God of the Dance	34
Ram Gopal as Śiva, from <i>Bharata Natya</i> performance	38
Ram Gopal before statue of Gompteswara	40
Ram Gopal as Śiva in the <i>Cosmic Dance of Creation (Bharata Natya)</i>	59
Another moment from the same performance	60
Ram Gopal dancing for Cecil Beaton (<i>Bharata Natya</i>)	61
Ram Gopal and Kumudini Lakhia performing the <i>Krishna Tillana (Bharata Natya)</i>	62
<i>Krishnattam</i> dancers as Krishna with devotees	65
Four poses of Ravana (<i>Kathakali</i>)	72
<i>Kathakali</i> students at Kottakal Dance School	75
Ram Gopal as Garuda, the Golden Eagle (<i>Kathakali</i>)	84
<i>Yakshagana</i> dancers	86
<i>Chhau</i> dancers	90
Ram Gopal as Shah Jahan (<i>Kathak</i>)	93
The outsize cymbals of <i>Kartal Cholom (Manipuri)</i>	104
<i>Pung Cholom</i> drum dance (<i>Manipuri</i>)	105
Naga warriors prepare to dance	106
Naga warriors in battle dance	106

Foreword to First Edition

I am convinced that Kay Ambrose has asked me to write a foreword to her book because she knows that I know nothing about Indian dancing. I enjoy it immensely and that is important, but the maximum enjoyment only comes with real understanding. Therefore she has written this book for me. It is clear, vivid, enthusiastic and contains some of her finest work as an artist. It is going to add enormously to the enjoyment of Indian dancing. I may even be able to borrow some of her knowledge and get away with a reputation as a pundit. Many a reputation has been founded on less.

The great hindrance to the pure enjoyment of the Indian, or for that matter the Spanish, dance lies in the use, often by the spurious critic, of the word *authentic*. I have seen dancing in India and I realise that it cannot be transferred to the Western stage without a process of translation. The real thing dumped on one of our stages would be intolerable, it would in fact be unreal. Authenticity is a word that needs amplification. Authenticity of spirit is the thing that counts. Ballet people have often misunderstood that when they have taken *Giselle*, *Swan Lake* or *Les Sylphides* and set them down in some vast sports arena. I feel that Ram Gopal has thoroughly understood this point. Some experts may tell me that he has taken great liberties with the Indian classical dance. Of course he has, because he knows what our stage demands. But the essential spirit remains. Ram Gopal is a highly conscious artist and this translation is a conscious process. It works in practice and only when we know everything can we differ with him on points of detail. Like Kay Ambrose, I feel strongly that we must steer a clear path between semi-punditry and the intoxication of the oriental bazaar so very prevalent with those who see in every Indian a highly spiritual being. This book will help enormously in such clear thinking.

I would like to close on a personal note. Many years ago a common friend sent me a letter about Kay Ambrose. She was a ballet enthusiast and would like to sketch dancers. Of course I ignored it. Practically everyone seems to be a ballet enthusiast and wishes to sketch dancers. Then she rang me up and asked to see me. She had an attractive voice and I consented. I am glad that she had an attractive voice.

LONDON, 1950

ARNOLD L. HASKELL

Note to Second Edition

Arnold Haskell died in 1980. He would otherwise have revised the foreword for the new edition, bearing in mind the great development and rediscovery of much Indian dance since 1950.

Acknowledgments

Ram Gopal would like to express his thanks to David Bland for his advice and support; to Champak Khanna for her valuable assistance in preparing typescript; and to Eileen Pearcey for her drawings.

These acknowledgements must record once again the author's gratitude to Kay Ambrose herself, whose work has so well recorded, and caught the spirit of, Indian dance and whose friendship has remained a source of inspiration.

Preface to Second Edition

by Ram Gopal

It is a great pleasure for me to revise and expand Kay Ambrose's book with the object of providing the contemporary student of the dance with a fuller insight into the oldest living dance tradition.

I first met Kay Ambrose in 1939 during my first visit to London's theatreland. Miss Ambrose was at the beginning of her career as an author and artist of dancing and particularly Russian ballet, and was preparing her first work with Arnold Haskell, and she came back-stage at the Aldwych Theatre to make sketches of my performance and gather information for her book and thus we met.

I answered Miss Ambrose's questions as simply as I could and we soon became good friends. I told her she ought to study the Indian dance with a view to preparing a book on the subject, as she seemed to catch movement with ease and accuracy. On my next visit to London less than a year later, the Vaudeville Theatre in 1940, there was Miss Ambrose with an enormous sketch-book and quantities of pencils, energy and determination to learn all she could. She watched me practise, attacked all Indian subject-matter including our music, and accompanied my little group and myself during our small tour of England immediately after our stay in London. Then the war-clouds which had been gathering burst, my musicians grew anxious and I had to return to India.

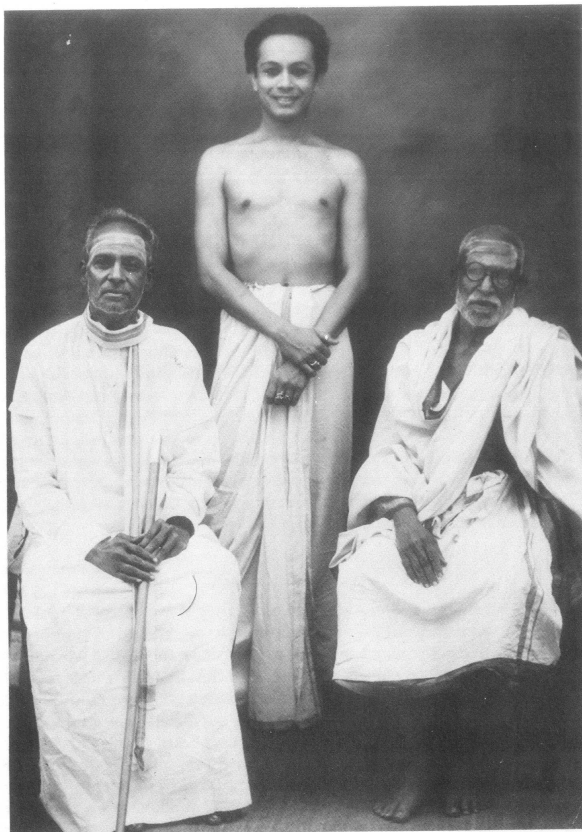
Bangalore

My Dear Kay,

Your letter reached me safely and I am glad you got my parcel of books. If you absorb them thoroughly, and continue to refresh your memory of the Indian dance in the way I suggested, by visiting the British Museum's stock of sculptures and paintings, you'll find that later on when you can visit India you will understand the Indian dance far more readily. And keep your eyes open in London—you'll be surprised how many junk-shops have real treasures of Indian art in them, brought over by English people who learned to love and understand our Indian expression of beauty. (I don't mean you to *buy* them, only to *look* at them!)

I often think of the ballets I saw in Europe and the lovely long, straight lines of the dancers. Carry on with your studies of the ballet and do lots of books. I know that ballet is in its infancy compared with our ancient dances over here, but it's a lusty infant and by far the best medium of dancing I saw in the West, and there is no doubt that whereas our dancers could teach yours a good deal, yet in India we have everything to learn from you concerning organisation and stage presentation. I have a strong feeling that through ballet, dancing is going to become a part of everyday life in the West as well as the East—and I bet you A. L. H.* will have a good deal to do with that transformation; he was telling me his ideas of a National ballet in England when we met in Bournemouth, and I told him we should have something on the same lines over here in India.

* Arnold L. Haskell.



Left to right:
Ponniah Pillai, the young
Ram Gopal and
Meenakshi Sandaram
Pillai, the greatest
teacher of *Bharata Natya*.

You remember I told you the story of *Bharata Natya*, the ancient dance of the bayadères that I'm sure Pavlova was seeking and never found because everyone in India told her that it had died out? And I showed you some of the movements? Well, I am going to put in some really high-pressure work with Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. Krishna Iyer, the greatest critic and writer of *B. Natya* over here, says that some of the dances and movements can be best performed by men, and Meenakshi S. is the greatest teacher of all in vigorous style. So Krishna Iyer and I are going to Tanjore together soon and I'm going to work like mad, live in a hut and dance till I drop on Meenakshi S.'s mud classroom floor, until he

says I am perfectly trained. If only those ballet-dancers of yours could see our classrooms in India, how they would appreciate their mirrors, bars and nice level wooden floors!

As soon as possible I will come back to England and bring a real company with me this time. You'll be able to join my tours and then come to India with me, and see for yourself the things I've described to you, done my best to show you and told you how to read up and study on your own. I always make my dancers *study* the dance as well as practise it, and you as a writer and artist should study far, far more than they do.

So you work hard and I'll work hard, and we'll see what we can do about this book between us. But you **MUST** see the dance in its proper setting here in India first. Just you wait till you see Balasaraswathi—I'll ask her to dance specially for you. I have the instinct that this poor old world is going to need all the spiritual consolation the real Indian dance can give, and the sooner the better.

Incidentally I enclose a taste of what you'll see one day soon—some photos of my recent performance in Belur Temple in Mysore State (Karnataka). The floor was specially made for dancing, and the last person to dance on it did so nearly 2,000 years ago....

Yours,

During the Second World War I continued to seek the rhythm of the dance and for the first time visited the east coast of India and the province of Orissa. Not far from Puri and south of Bhubaneswar I spent hours lost in wonder before the sculptures at the Sunya or Sun temple in Konarak, which depict Brahma, Śiva, Vishnu, Krishna, and their Divine female consorts dancing, embracing, creating going into battle and destroying. Elephants, horses, birds, sea serpents, dragons and other mythical beasts abound. Everywhere the dance of birth, life and death.

Later I returned to London with my company and found Londoners, along with the rest of the world, more than ready to welcome the Indian dance and Miss Ambrose, now well-versed in Indian mythology and literature, ready and equipped to deal with the realities of authorship. I started my second European tour with a season at London's Princes Theatre in December, 1947, with Miss Ambrose in attendance, making copious notes and sketches. As I had foreseen, she accompanied me on my European tour, working furiously all the time, and finally returned with me to India and completed her Indian dance education by meeting all the old great dance-masters, their prize pupils, and attending performances of every kind including classes, rehearsals, village festivals and many other occasions which included dancing of any sort. We spent most of this time in Kerala, Tanjore, Mysore (Karnataka) and Sri Lanka. In Bombay, Calcutta and Manipur we met and watched the finest artists and gurus of the Kathak and Manipuri schools.

I have since made countless visits to the National Museum of India in New Delhi, and to the age-old temples throughout India which depict in their sculptures the true essence of the dance. Always Śiva, god of the dance; always Krishna summoning beautiful women to dance to the



Left to right: Kunju Kurup, the supreme *Kathakali* teacher, K. Baratha Iyer, doyen of *Kathakali* dance critics, Ram Gopal and M. S. Pillai. Such teachers as Kunju Kurup and M. S. Pillai were repositories of dance traditions going back thousands of years. They and their disciples have kept alive the spirit of classical Indian dance. Highly subsidised centres in cities such as Madras, Bombay and Delhi, teach the dances without the spirit that is vitally essential, but fortunately there are still serious students who seek out the great teachers and carry on the genuine traditions.

magic of his flute; always Vishnu, the Preserver—all with their beloved female consorts.

Such gurus as Kunju Kurup (*Kathakali* dance), Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai (*Bharata Natya* dance), Jailal (*Kathak* dance) and those of the *Manipuri*, *Kuchipudi* and *Orissi* dance, with their profound knowledge of the art of dance, scarcely exist today. Teachers, however, abound. They know how to transmit the basic techniques but too often lack understanding of the spiritual and mystical nature of the classical dance. The great gurus were able to demonstrate in their teaching both the metaphysical and the technical aspects of the sacred art. They had over a period of relentless practice to develop a close spiritual union with their pupils before they were willing to impart their guarded and esoteric secrets. Only in this way were they able to pass on a tradition going back thousands of years.

The aim of 'self-realisation' among the innumerable students of the dances of Siva and Krishna is attained only by those who through humility, hard work and dedication come closest to the Divine Godhead.

Introduction

It is both customary and sensible to introduce a book on dancing with a clear and brief description of the distinguishing features of the dance with which the book deals. In this case it should be explained without further ado that the main schools of classical Indian dancing do not lend themselves easily to either brevity or clarity, which is why books on even one style of Indian dancing usually have the effect of confusing instead of enlightening the reader.

Here an attempt has been made to treat the main schools with the greatest clarity and economy, and in relation to each other. It is hoped that even the casual reader, in giving a cursory glance at the drawings, will get a strong impression of the essential precision which governs Indian dancing, and rid himself of the confused idea that the Indian dance consists mainly of snake-like movements of the hips and arms.

A Summary of the Various Dance Styles (see also Chapter 3)

The six main schools of Indian dance today are:

- 1 *Bharata Natya(m)*, or *Devadasiattam*, originally the dance of the temple dancing girls of Tanjore, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. It is nowadays performed by men and women though there are certain dance dramas performed by men only.
- 2 *Kathakali*, the dance drama of Malabar, in the south-west state of Kerala, is performed by men only, though there are certain decorative dances performed by women.
- 3 *Kathak*, the whirling dance of northern India and Pakistan, is performed by men and women.
- 4 *Manipuri*, the rhythmical, swaying sinuous and sometimes powerful dance of north-east India. It is performed by men and women.
- 5 *Orissi*, originally dance drama in the style of *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* from the temples of Orissa, the state on the east coast of India, is today redeveloped as a series of mostly solo dances for men and women.
- 6 *Kuchipudi*, dance drama derived from the ancient *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* of Andhra Pradesh, the state in south-east India, north of Madras. Traditionally performed by men only, it is now danced by both sexes.

In all the Indian dance styles it is the choreography which is in the greatest danger of disappearing, owing to the superficial study accorded to the techniques required. *Kathakali* dances were choreographed for temple courtyard performances; *Kathak* for palace court dancing with the audience all round the performers; *Bharata Natya* for gliding up and down long, mysterious temple chambers; and *Manipuri* often in circular fashion, like folk dances, against a rustic background. Although these principles must sometimes be modified for the theatre, they must always be borne in mind, or the character of the individual style is lost.

Natya Śāstra

Bharata's *Natya Śāstra*,* the ancient treatise on drama, music and dancing, is the most complete Sanskrit work which remains to us in the great Sanskrit centres of India. All the now-fragmentary dance dramas and styles that exist in both the south and north of India are to a certain extent linked to the *Śāstra*—this monumental treatise is described more fully later (see page 33).

Many movements of gesture, expression and choreography have been lost over the centuries. The *gurus* or masters of the Indian dance today have personal views concerning the original dances. For instance, the *Kathakali* dance drama of Kerala has developed contrary to some of the precepts of the *Śāstra* and is therefore condemned by some Sanskrit professors; but if the deviations are carefully considered, and with a local purpose, they may be considered healthy. In dancing, it is lack of principles of any kind, or unthinking adherence to pedantic traditions, which cause damage and limitation.

* Bharata's Science of Dancing



The Sage,
Bharata Muni
writing the
Natya Śāstras.
(After an Indian
lithograph.)

General Features of Indian Dance

Each of the classical styles comes from a different part of India, and usually features a different physical type. A dancer from one school cannot readily perform another style, and as a rule refuses to admit that any other important style exists. It requires ability, long study and some secret power to be able to transform mind and body and to dance each style 'as to the manner born'.

All Indian dancing is divided into certain categories, and those which concern only particular styles will be dealt with as occasion arises.

Tandava and *lasya*

Here we can mention two terms that are sometimes translated respectively as masculine and feminine dances; this is rather misleading. *Tandava* should imply a vigorous dance, *lasya* a soft one. Unless otherwise stated, both aspects may be performed by both sexes. For instance, in the terms of Western ballet, the male role in *Les Sylphides* may well be in the *lasya* category, with its soft and lyrical flavour; whereas a brilliant technical solo for a ballerina may equally be *tandava*. The terms refer to execution, not gender. Naturally a woman performing *tandava* dances such as those of Siva, or a grown man attempting the *Mohini Attam* of Kerala (a female solo dance that is wholly and typically *lasya*), represents a sad infringement of taste.

Neck movement (*rechakas* is one term)

This is characteristic of all Indian dance styles and consequently often exaggerated by amateurs, but it should be performed with subtlety. There are several varieties, the head moving from side to side, either slowly or quickly, with the shoulders immobile. The main functions are: emphasis of mood or time, *rhythmical embellishment* (as with an *entrechat* in Western ballet), or purely decorative. No particular virtuosity is needed to perform the neck movement. It is not a matter of developing extra muscles, rather of discovering for oneself where the requisite muscles are situated and of controlling them suitably.

Abhinaya and *bhava* (mood)

These cover gesture and expression. In the *Natya Śāstra*, Bharata classified nine moods (*rasas*) and described the means of expressing them. There are nine basic movements of the head, eight glances of the eye, six movements of the eyebrows, four of the neck, and at least four thousand single and combined gestures of the hands, specific postures for the body, the legs—specifications for everything, and each with its special name.

The only schools of dance where the nine moods are shown in their full power and subtlety have been and remain the *Kathakali* and *Krishnattam* of Kerala (see pages 81 and 64); some of the more lyrical are also expressed in the *Mohini Attam* of Kerala.

It is more practical to consider the complete study of this monumental technical curriculum as being in the province of the pundit, or scholar, and to enjoy the delights of Indian dancing with just those rudiments of technique which will increase our pleasure.

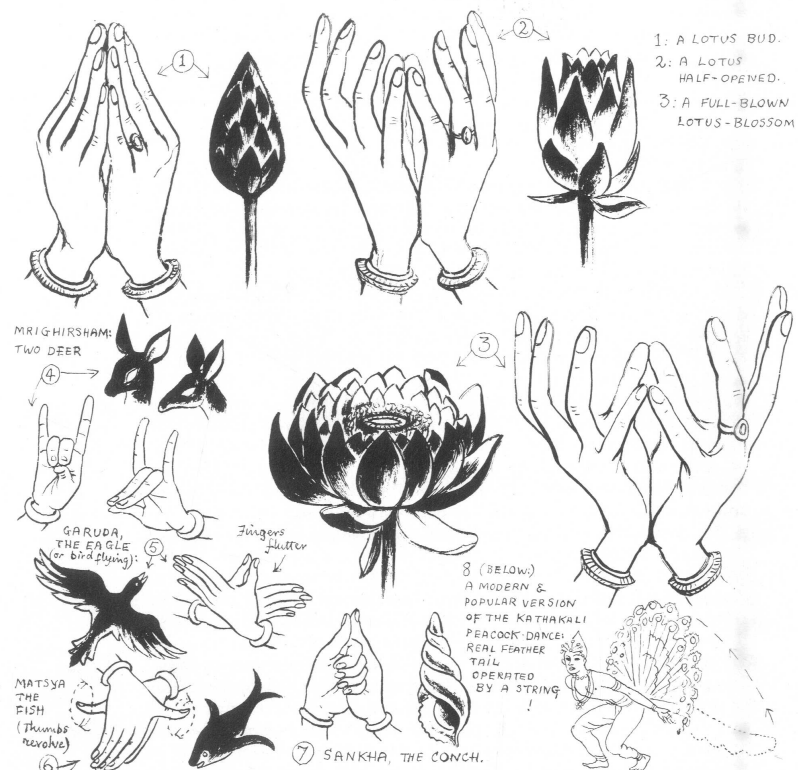
Mudras

Here are a few examples of hand gestures. Where the *mudra* represents an object or an animal or bird, there is little confusion. The name of the object is given as the name of the *mudra*.

There are, however, confusing differences between the names of Kathakali and Bharata Natya mudras. In Kathakali alone, there may be many



names given by different teachers for one *mudra*, and considerable feeling expressed on the matter. Consulting books only increases the confusion. There is no point trying to set down all the alternatives. The ones mentioned in this book are the most frequently used—with attention drawn only to genuine contradictions, e.g. the reversed interpretations of the *pataka* and *tripataka* hand gestures in Bharata Natya and Kathakali (see pages 45 and 76).



Introduction

Feet

Bare feet are a feature of Indian dancing, and one of the means by which the genuine Indian dancer can be recognised. Slap-slap-slap go his feet on the floor; he wears bells round his ankles, to be sure, but he must be able to maintain a clearly defined and clearly audible rhythm without them. To do so, he often practises without bells.

The *Natya Sastra* says: The Bells should be made of bronze or copper or silver; they should be sweet-toned, well-shaped, dainty, with asterisms for their presiding deities; tied with an indigo string, with a knot between each pair of bells. At the time of dancing there should be a hundred or two hundred for each foot, or a hundred for the right foot and two hundred for the left ...—the latter probably because most dancers stamp harder with the right foot than with the left. Today dancers do not always tie their bells; mounting on a leather strap or sewing to velvet-lined silk is quite common. (Investiture with bells is a great ceremony for a dancer and heralds life as a professional.)

Devadasis

The Indian dance that has fascinated Western ballet throughout its own development is that of the *devadasis* (literally Servants of God)—who were dancing girls dedicated to dance in the service of a temple—in other words, ancient *Bharata Natya*. As *bayadères*, these temple dancers were a favourite subject of nineteenth-century romantic ballet.

Bharata Natya was for centuries an elegant, refined and highly religious dance which was held in great esteem. It is not hard to understand how it tended towards degradation, propounding, as it did, the subject of Divine love danced by such dancers! Eventually, with their innate admiration of the rare and the beautiful, the princes saw that these wonderfully trained and lovely *devadasis* would provide a surpassingly piquant entertainment in their courts. They gave large sums to the dancers and their teachers, with the result that the dances soon came to be addressed not to a deity but to the maharajah or prince, with the teachers competing with each other to produce the most erotic dances and the most seductive dancers as bait for wealth and patronage.

The dance remained an art, despite royal whims and extravaganzas (*Bharata Natya* being 'too remote a goddess' to be easily learned), until it became the custom for girls and women to perform lewd and suggestive dances at village weddings for the entertainment of foreigners. This custom earned an evil reputation for the 'Nautch dance' and resulted in the steady degradation and total disrepute of *Bharata Natya*—and ultimately indeed for practically the whole of the classical dance of India. Except for a very few cases, the *devadasi* system, which had for thousands of years preserved the ancient dance in its true form, became decadent and misunderstood. It is interesting to quote from the personal observations of the Abbé Dubois who was in the Madras Presidency and in Mysore State (Karnataka) in the 1820s and witnessed the bewitching art of the temple dancing girls. In his book, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, which was published in 1899, he wrote:

'Dancing girls are called "Deva Dasis", servants or slaves of the gods, but the public call them by the more vulgar name of prostitutes.

'They are bound by their profession to grant their favours to anybody demanding them, in return for ready money.... These lewd women who make a public traffic of their charms, are consecrated in a special manner to the worship of the divinities of India. They dance and sing within the temple morning and evening. The first they execute with sufficient grace although their attitudes are lascivious and their gestures indecorous. Their singing is almost always confined to obscene verses describing some licentious episode in the history of their gods. All the time which they have to spare in the interests of the various ceremonies is devoted to infinitely more shameful practices; and it is not an uncommon thing to see even sacred temples converted into mere brothels. They are brought up in this shameful licentiousness from infancy, and are recruited from various castes, some among them belonging to respectable families. The "Deva Dasis" receive a fixed salary for the religious duties which they perform; but as the amount is small, they supplement it by selling their favours in as profitable a way as possible. They employ all the resources and artifices of coquetry.

'Yet of all the women in India, it is the courtesans who are the most decently clothed. Experience has no doubt taught them that for a woman to display her charms, dampens sensual ardour instead of exciting it, and that the imagination is more easily captivated than the eye.'

Laymen thought they saw a connection between the erotic sculptures with which many temples are decorated and this version of the nautch-dance, and they wrote indignant and condemnatory articles on the subject which described *all* Indian dancing as abominable; and this seems to have given many Western-educated Indians a mistaken inferiority complex regarding their dances and arts, from which they have but slowly recovered.

The result was that from the middle of the nineteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth, dancing in India went into almost complete oblivion. At this time the 'Anti-Nautch Campaign', as it was known, was in full blast.

In 1959 Baijnath was to write of *Kathak* dance in *Marg*, the magazine of the arts:

'It is evident by the interest taken by the various Courts in the Nautch girls that they reduced dance art merely to entertainment. This does not mean that the Kathak style which the Nautch girls practise fell into complete decay. Some of these practitioners were highly accomplished dancers who devoted their whole lives to learning this art. The fact that their patrons had reduced them to a low caste naturally brought a bad name to the dance art as practised by them. Besides the feudal noblemen and courtiers were more interested in their bodies than in their art. Indian society disintegrated and the whole concept of creativeness fell into disrepute.

Today, after three decades of renascent effort on the part of enlightened pioneers, Indian Dance Art is just emerging before the still corrupt, ignorant and obtuse middle sections of our society. And perhaps the debt our people owe to the hapless Nautch girls will come to be



NAUTCH-GIRL or
DEVADASI
from Baroda.

Late 19th century.

Introduction

recognised for preserving the continuity of Kathak style at a time when the caste-ridden feudalistic society might well have consigned it to oblivion.'

Gradually, however, flickerings of interest in the Indian dance began to show through this wet blanket of morality and oblivion. Poet Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan tried to stimulate interest in 1917. In the 1920s, Pavlova's performances in India and her own interest in Indian dancing had some effect. Poet Vallathol tried his best by establishing his Kerala Kalamandalam Centre for *Kathakali* dancers. But perhaps the most impartial, just, progressive and energetic figure, and the one who played the most important part both figuratively and literally at this critical stage in the survival of dancing, and particularly of *Bharata Natya*, is that of Mr. E. Krishna Iyer. We will, in fact, proceed to study briefly some aspects of his career, which will give a good practical idea of the violent antipathy which was felt for all Indian dancing at that time, by Indians and Westerners alike.

At the time described, E. Krishna Iyer was a young and handsome artist in Madras. He had studied law and was bound for the High Court; but he cherished an unquenchable flame of desire to see the once sacred temple dance, *Bharata Natya*, revived and restored to its former prestige. Just visualise his task: not only was he faced by the Anti-Nautch Campaign, but also by a public engaged in cutting the wild capers prescribed by the Charleston, 'Black Bottom' and 'Shimmy' of the Roaring Twenties, against which the plaintive, angelic voice of the traditional veena and the insistent rhythm of the cymbals and drums of delicate *Bharata Natya* could not be heard. However, Iyer learned all he could of the dance himself, in order to be a fit prophet, and approached some young ladies of respectable birth, asking them to study this ancient dance. His requests were misinterpreted in the worst possible way, owing to the fact that *Bharata Natya* was connected solely with *devadasis*, and they, in turn, were connected by prejudiced minds with another profession even older than dancing. Therefore Iyer boldly decked himself up as a young woman and proceeded to perform the ancient dance himself.

Despite the tremendous prejudice and din of saxophones at that time, people began to wonder whether, if a successful young advocate could dress as a girl, appear in public and win acclaim, there might be something in the ancient dance of India after all. Timidly, some of the musical societies in Madras invited Iyer's prize discovery, Balasaraswathi, a young *devadasi* of great voluptuous charm and a talent which put her in a class by herself. She was a sensational success. Her art and that of Gowrie Amma testify to the grand tradition of the hereditary temple dancers with a technique of strength, power and speed, and an unashamed sensuousness, mainly erotic in its theme and sentiments. Iyer also presented Varalakshmi, a veritable dancing goddess from Kumbakonam, who had been forced to retire by the heat produced by the 'Anti-Nautchers', and the Kalyani sisters from Pandanallur near Tanjore (Tamil Nadu) trained by the great guru, M. S. Pillai. To have witnessed these two dancers is not only unforgettable but unsurpassed within living memory. Never before or since have they been equalled.



and her sister Rajalakshmi, Kalyani.

Introduction

Iyer knew that Terpsichore is an inscrutable goddess and he just kept quiet, watched all that passed, and was well pleased to see that the Anti-Nautch Campaign quietened down completely, and that more respectable families were beginning to patronise the great old teachers of this ancient form of the dance. His first battle had been won. He wrote profusely in all the Tamil quarterlies, papers and journals, and was in great demand as a lecturer, building up a matchless reputation as a champion of Indian art, which is increasing to this day.

The Male Tradition

The *Kuchipudi* dance of Andhra Pradesh was revived in the nineteenth century by Tirtha Narayana Yati and Sidhendra Yogi who observed that the dance had fallen into decay and disrepute because of the seductive qualities practised by the dancing girls, and wished to re-establish it on a spiritual basis. Consequently, they banned the *devadasis* and sought out young Brahmin boys for training in the *Kuchipudi* art.

In nearby Orissa State, the Gotipuas, a class of young boys, attended, maintained and protected the temples in addition to dancing there. In the great temple of Jagannath at Puri, the Gotipuas made sure that the rituals were correctly performed and danced themselves at religious festivals.

In the same tradition, the *Krishnattem* and *Kathakali* dance dramas of Kerala came to be performed in their highest sense only by men and boys. This applies also to the temple dance dramas of the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu where, notably in the villages of Soolamangalam and Melatur, one sees the religious dance dramas known as the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* performed exclusively by males in the *Bharata Natya* dance style.

That *Bharata Natya* itself should only be danced by women is a complete misapprehension, and a legacy from 'Nautch-dance' days. In Tamil Nadu, whole *Bharata Natya* ballets are frequently danced by men.

The Technical Sketches in this book

These are to help the Indian dancer to understand and perform authentic dance styles and to help the dance-lover to recognise them. But the dancer should beware of trying to give a serious performance in any of these dances without having proper training with a genuine and authentic dance teacher, such as those named in this book, or their real disciples. The drawings were all made under such instruction, but nothing can replace a real *guru*, or master.

The sequences of dance sketches have sometimes been drawn moving to the left first instead of to the right, which is more usual; this is because it is easier to follow a sequence starting from the left side of a page than otherwise.

CHAPTER ONE

Gods, Mythology and History in Indian Dance

For thousands of years, Indian gods have been worshipped through the medium of fantastic and beautiful dances, which naturally made a strong appeal to the great contemporary sculptors throughout the ages. The swirling, leaping and undulating figures were frozen into a matchless record of rhythmic grace. Just as those unknown sculptors were inspired by the vital skill and supple beauty of the dancers of their day, so must the serious Indian dance student seek to recapture that inspiration and to revitalise his art by studying the sculptures.

One of the principal features of Indian history is that in its earlier days there are few 'dates', which makes things difficult for the document-loving mind. And Indian history is inextricably involved with mythology. Artistic history is a different matter. It is hard, looking at an historic boundary-line, to tell just when it was moved and how; but to look at a sculpture can be a matter of pedigree—North Indian lyrical symmetry, South Indian ecstatic religious devotion; indigenous arts mixed with Egyptian, Greek and Islamic arts—and not always in a conquering spirit either, but in a spirit of fraternal and tolerant artistry. In the West the dates of kings tell us when a cathedral was built; in India, it is often the artistic style of the architecture which tells us the date of the king.

It is certain that a very vital centre of art in dance, drama, sculpture, etc. flourished in the Indus Valley from prehistoric times, before the influx of the Aryan peoples from the north (about 1500 B.C.). The pre-Aryan peoples of the area were almost certainly related to the Dravidian peoples of southern India. The pre-Aryan cities were later shaken and buried by earthquakes, wars and invasions, and it was not until 1924 that archaeologists excavated Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, uncovering secrets of religion, art and way of life. The excavators unearthed, amongst many other discoveries from the third millennium B.C., the limestone head and shoulders of a bearded priest with an amulet on his right arm, a three-headed god (Brahma, Siva and Vishnu?) with a buffalo like the sacred bull, Nandi, and also several heads and other objects of clay apparently of daily household use and for religious ceremonies. The unearthed torso of a pre-Aryan dancing god of nature has both arms and legs missing. Nevertheless it is unmistakably in the posture of the well-known bronze dancing Siva of the Tanjore Temple in southern India. This dynamic and whirling torso in a frozen movement of the dance reveals Man as creator, preserver and destroyer moving in the endless cycle and rhythm of the seasons: spring (creation), autumn (preservation) and winter (destruction)—a cycle common to all life on earth, in the sea and in the air.

The Vedic period (about 1500–800 B.C.) is so called because the four Vedas (holy books) were composed during that time. They are the *Rig Veda*, the oldest, the *Yajurveda*, the *Samaveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. They

DANCING-GIRL FROM MOHENJODARO.



Indus Valley Civilization: circa 4000 B.C.–1500 B.C.



SCULPTURES TAKEN FROM CHIDAMBARAM TEMPLE, SOUTH INDIA, PART OF WHICH DATES FROM BEFORE 6th CENT. A.D.: FIGURES CARVED CIRCA 12th CENT. & REPRESENT CONTEMPORARY DANCE INTERPRETATION OF NATYA SHASTRA TEXTS, '108 KARANAS' BEING SHOWN IN AS MANY FIGURES.

are largely accounts of invading Aryan tribes who entered India about 1500 B.C. Besides their mythological content, they supply information that a far older culture than that of the Aryans already existed in India. Each *Veda* consists of two parts: hymns and ritualistic precepts. The *Upanishads* are attached to the latter and contain mystical doctrine.

The main bulk of Hindu sacred literature, compiled about a thousand years later, consists of the eighteen *Puranas*, the *Vishnu Purana* being the most comprehensive, which speak mainly of the mythical and legendary activities of the Celestials; the *Mahabharata* (sometimes known as the 'fifth *Veda*'), which contains the famous battle between the honest Pandavas and the sneering Kurus, symbolising the triumph of Good over Evil, and the *Ramayana*, an epic concerning the famous legends of Rama and Sita.

Certainly, history continued to be made very vigorously, with terrific battles, kings were murdered, deposed, thrones usurped, laws made and broken, empires came and went, but there were no historians to sit in a safe place and make records. We have to rely on chance diaries of stray monks and travellers for information of splendid lost cities, and on private letters and the like for battles which shook the sub-continent. As for the ordinary people—they just went on looking for *bhuts* (ghosts) round their huts every night, hoping for a good harvest and paying little attention to politics. They always had, and would always have, to pay taxes to someone: what did it matter to whom?

From the time that the document-conscious settlers from Europe and other lands started to arrive in India in greater number, as traders, stake-claimers and so forth, Indian history began to boast regular dates. The result was that bad mistakes were made about the antiquity of art forms and especially dancing. It was said that the *Kathak* dance of northern India and Pakistan only started with Maharaj Binda Din, simply because he was the first to write it down. The preface to a dance programme, supposed to instruct the world in *Kathakali* dancing, claimed that this dance 'came into existence in the sixteenth century in Malabar (Kerala)'. If that were so, *Kathakali* would be no older than the Western classical ballet technique. One has only to use one's eyes and wits and perceive that this dance style is far older than that.

Myth and legend

Indian gods and goddesses are idealised men and women. They are not identified in legend with the Supreme Being, but each deity is an aspect of the One. They have human qualities; they are sometimes jealous and vindictive, often petty and are not above telling a few lies when in a tight mythological corner; but the myths are always allegorical and as a whole may be understood to show humans how the gods and goddesses achieved Divine perfection—which is symbolised by physical perfection. This is depicted in many marvellous sculptures and bronzes. The carvings at Konarak in Orissa State depict men and women in every known act of carnal love, heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual—a profusion of physical love that is the uninhibited and natural rapture of the soul seeking mystical union with the Divine. (These sculptures are amongst the masterpieces of the world's art.)



GANESHA DANCING



KALI DANCING.
Goddess of death,
she wears
garlands of
human heads,
hands, etc..
(North India.)

Supernatural powers are symbolised by a superhuman number of arms, for example. Characteristics of gods and mythological figures are expressed in easily recognisable form. Sagacity and earthly wisdom are embodied in the elephant-headed god, Ganesha or Ganapathi, the scribe of the *Mahabharata* and the pet of the other gods, who rides on a rat which is known in India for its resourcefulness.

Indian gods, monstrous, intimidating or obscure as they may seem at first sight, gradually form characters as one studies them. In the end it is not difficult to see how they fulfil their function in the Indian home—they are almost treated as members of the family who are entitled to great veneration.

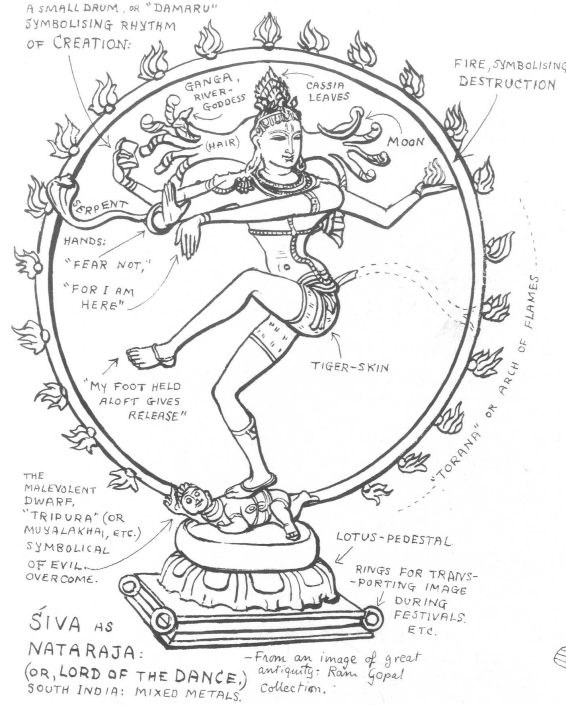
The sage meditates alone—he does not need a tangible reminder of the Infinite Wisdom and, partly on this account, he is deeply respected. The real yogi is also an object of great regard, but there are fake yogis, just as there are fake dancers. The alleged resemblance of yogism to great dancing is not nearly so complicated as is often suggested. The great dancer controls his muscles with the object of performing physical feats beyond the scope of the ordinary man, whilst the yogi controls his muscles with a Divine object, that of gaining complete control of his mind for a spiritual purpose.

The idea that Indian dancing is solely religious is substantially correct, but it has given rise to some doubts. People who have felt or sensed the tremendous hidden power of devotional dance ask if it is not wrong to perform such dances on the stage, and whether they should not be confined to temples. There is no general attempt to confine all religious works to places of worship. In the West, few people object to a painting of the Madonna being displayed in a picture gallery or in someone's home; but naturally everyone agrees that such works must on no account be put to base uses. With this reservation, the Indian devotional dance may surely be performed, seen and admired in any building, provided that it is present with dignity and restraint.

'Wherever I dance, it becomes a temple,' Ram Gopal.

The Hindu Gods

Brahma is and always was considered the Ultimate but unapproachable Divinity or Reality. He was later held to be the Creator, part of a trinity with Śiva, the Destroyer, and Vishnu, the Preserver. Whereas Śiva is worshipped alone, Vishnu is generally worshipped in his many avatars (incarnations), most frequently as Krishna, the Blue God, but also as Rama, hero of the *Ramayana*. Similarly, Sakti, the great Goddess who represents the creative principle that persists through the destruction of Śiva and the preservation of Vishnu, is worshipped in one aspect as Kali and in another as Parvati—both goddesses being consorts of Śiva. Almost every Hindu deity has two different aspects, the god or superman and a very human being, and sometimes he is difficult to identify. 'So-and-so walked with Agni', says a myth. Does it mean Agni, the god of fire, or does it mean that the person held a lighted torch? It is better not to be too pedantic.



ŚIVA AS
NATARAJA:
(OR, LORD OF THE DANCE.)
SOUTH INDIA: MIXED METALS.

-From an image of great
antiquity: Ram Gopal
Collection.

BELOW: AN UNUSUAL
VERSION OF ŚIVA'S DANCE
(South Indian Bronze.)



OR YOGI
BELOW: ŚIVA AS A (MENDICANT,
IN MEDITATION. (From an
original North
Indian painting,
19th century.
Ram Gopal
collection.)

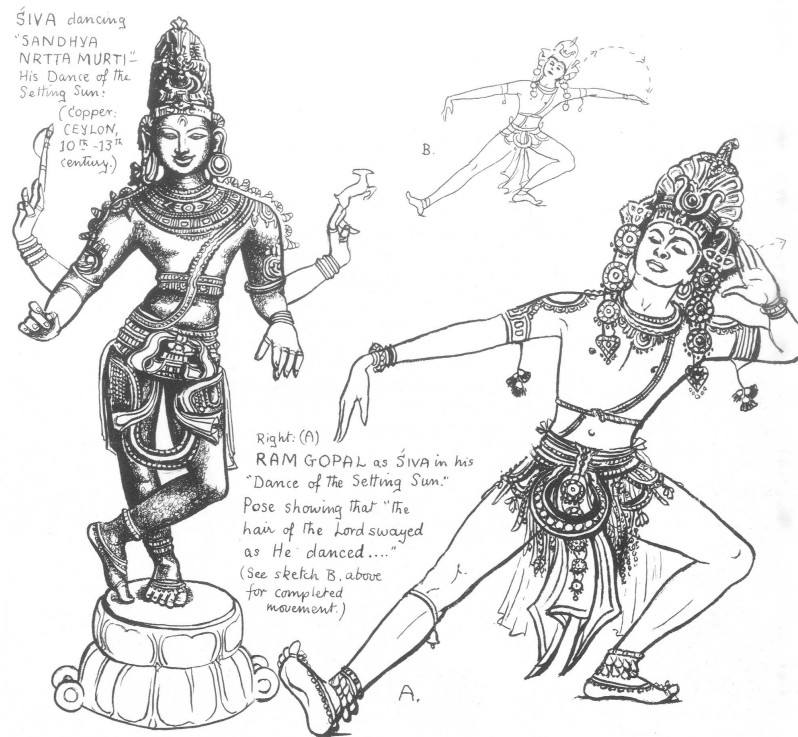


Śiva, Lord of the Dance

These two pages show Śiva, or Mahadeva (Great God) in just a few of the forms in which he is to be seen represented in Indian art. As part of the trinity, he represents Creation, Preservation and Destruction. These three processes are regarded as a cycle and are symbolised by a mythological dance. The most famous specimen of the Nataraja (lord of the dance) is the one from the great Śiva Temple in Tanjore, the figure alone being nearly four feet high and of an incomparable grace, dignity and beauty.



Ram Gopal as Śiva in the Dance of the Setting Sun, re-created for Ram Gopal on the basis of Kathakali technique.



As for Śiva's character as he is known and loved in India: he is hot tempered, susceptible to female charm, adores jewellery, loves smashing things and then celebrating with one of his wild dances; he is also shown distracted by grief at the death of his wife, after which he becomes a tormented wanderer, only being comforted when a further incarnation of his wife comes to him on Mount Kailasa; or he is a *rishi*, silent and imperturbable on that sacred mountain; or a yogi, or a beggar, living from a bowl that has become one of his symbols.

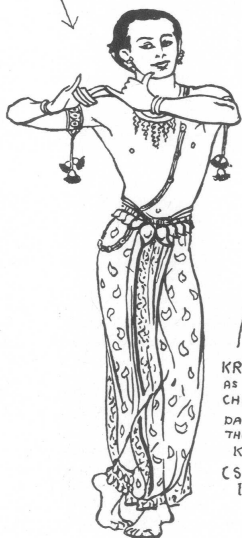
His *Dance of the Setting Sun* balances all his qualities. It is sometimes performed in a spirit of deep devotion, in the full glow of the sunset on a mountain top, by all manner of persons, ranging from wealthy maharajas to penniless sages. To have seen Ram Gopal's fine interpretation of this ancient dance is to have approached the essence of Śiva.

Krishna, the Blue God

Krishna is the eighth *avatar* (incarnation) of Vishnu; he was sent to the human world on this occasion to rescue it from the demon Kansa. (Vishnu is to have one more incarnation—as Maitreya, the saviour of Mankind.) As Krishna, Vishnu has a whole life-story and also figures in other epics, for example, as the warrior Arjuna's charioteer in the famous *Mahabharata* battle. On this occasion he delivers the whole *Bhagavad Gita* to Arjuna, whose spirits are flagging at the thought of killing his own relatives and friends. The *Bhagavad Gita* is known to the West in several translations. It is as dear to Hindus as the Psalms are to Christians.

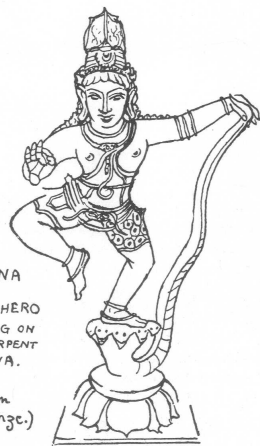
Krishna in his lifetime becomes a distinguished ruler, diplomat and soldier. But the Krishna who is loved by millions of Hindus is the mischievous, resourceful baby, then the youth who tends cows and plays with other cowherds in Vrindavan. With his yellow dhoti, blue skin and black eyes sparkling with fun, he gets up to every prank a fertile mind can devise, pinching butter and milk, teasing the life out of the *gopis* (milkmaids)—but he can extract himself from the consequences of any scrape with the aid of the celestial music he can conjure from his flute. He is wholly lovable, thoroughly spankable—and every tale of him has an allegorical meaning.

KRISHNA.
DANCE-POSE
BY
RAM GOPAL.



BALA-KRISHNA
(WITH STOLEN
BUTTER-BALLS)
Small brass
figure, South India

KRISHNA
AS THE
CHILD-HERO
DANCING ON
THE SERPENT
KALIYA.
(South
Indian
Bronze.)



SYMBOLS OF KRISHNA
(South Indian bronze)



CHAKRA
FLUTE
CONCH-SHELL



KRISHNA

RADHA

CYMBALS:

MRDANG

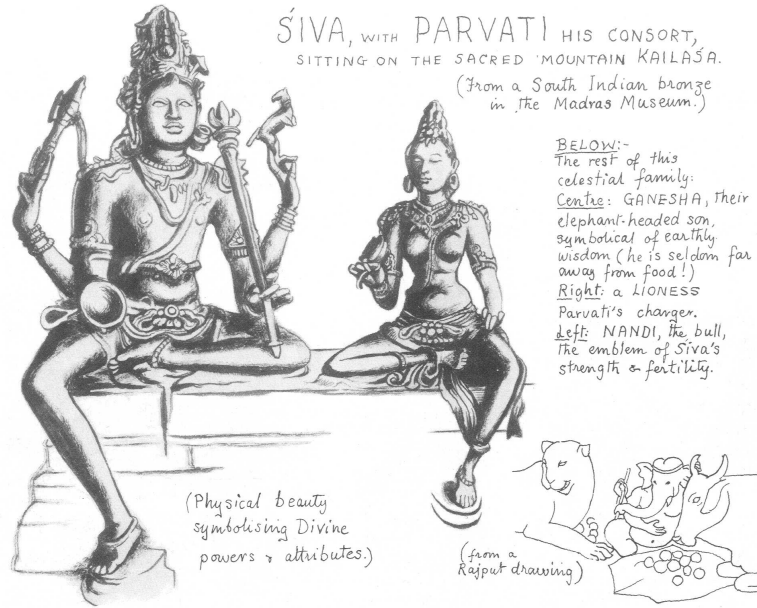
TAMBURA

Ras Leela

Hearing the love-call of Krishna's flute, the *gopis* (milkmaids) left their husbands and went in search of him. When the ladies came the lord of their hearts said, "I just wanted you to see the beauty of this moonlit night. Now you can go back to your husbands." Heartbroken, the *gopis* cried out "But we have left our husbands and children because you woke us, and now you leave us in mid-air! How can you treat us so cruelly?"

Then Krishna smiled and multiplied himself, danced with each one of the *gopis*, and every lady thought he loved her best.

But Krishna's favourite was Radha, Ayanogosha's wife, and although, reasonably enough, the latter felt jealous at first, in the end he became one of Lord Krishna's greatest devotees. The allegory concerns the response of the human soul to the call of the Divine. (The *Ras Leela* ballet is popular in many parts of India; it may contain any one of Krishna's classical pranks with the *gopis*.)



Indian Ideals of Physical Beauty

Behold all-powerful Śiva and his gentle consort Parvati sitting on sacred Mount Kailasa. They can be given a hundred and one interpretations, some celestial and some in relation to more material considerations, such as idealised matrimonial harmony. They are gracing this page because of their superb proportions and appearance, as a fair example of the Indian ideals of physical beauty.

Before enquiring into the separate stipulations governing these ideals, one thing at least must be made abundantly clear, and this is that the master-artist who fashioned these two majestic figures was certainly more concerned with what their beauty represented than with the creation of beauty in itself. It is obvious that the artist was a master of his medium, and it should be noted that he used his skill to express a spiritual ideal, not simply to create two beautiful figures; hence the unmistakable air of godliness evinced by those two personages. They are real deities—in other words, at first sight we are more strongly aware of their celestial import than of their actual proportions. The artist, having achieved complete mastery of his tools and technique, was free and able

to express in inanimate mental transcendental qualities which have nothing to do with mere anatomy and craftsmanship; in just the way that a dancer who has absolute mastery over a great technique should be able to evoke spiritual subtleties which have nothing to do with the muscular control of his arms and legs.

Therefore it will be understood that all Indian art is judged by its spiritual implications in the belief that beauty belongs to the human mind. Technical capability is disregarded unless used to express an ideal. It is in this respect that Indian ideas differ so entirely from those of the West as they are to-day.

Thus, to classify the various requisites of Indian physical beauty without first insisting on its Divine implications, would be as useless as making a catalogue of the colours in a sunset, with the belief that in so doing one has created a masterpiece.

The ideal male figure is generally described with the aid of various similes. His body, it is said, should taper to a waist like the leaf of a peepul-tree; he should be as supple as the stem of a lotus-bud. There is a great insistence that the figure of a man should resemble that of a lion. The superman is described in the *Mahabharata* as a type of mighty hunter who in desperate conflict with the King of Beasts has become invincible and acquired a lion-like body, a broad chest and shoulders, a sturdy neck and a very slim waist; long arms and legs being indicative of nobility. (It is to be noticed that the Minoan dandies of 3000 B.C. used tight lacing to appear slim-waisted, and that to-day highly ferocious hill-tribes on the borders of Tibet pull in their waists till they look like figures-of-eight.)

The exquisite torsos of the sculptured Buddhas, with their soft rounded shoulders and silken skins, are a less warlike interpretation of physical beauty as encasing and symbolising an enlightened mind. The physical ideals of Indian beauty are nowhere represented with such freedom and mastery as in the miraculous paintings which people the walls of the famous Ajanta Caves of Maharashtra state. The figure of Śiva seems to be a fusion of the best qualities of the various ideals of Indian masculine beauty.

Concerning female ideals of beauty; after examining the proportions and bearing of Parvati, and the other sketches from classical paintings, sculptures, etc., of beautiful Indian girls and women, there is no need to go any further. But the following 'disqualifications of a *danseuse*' from the ancient texts are worth quoting: 'The ten kinds of women unacceptable in drama are those whose eyes are speckled, whose hair is scanty, whose lips are thick, or breasts pendant, who are very stout or very thin, or very tall or very short, who are hump-backed, or have not a good voice.'

'Vulgar dancing' is described as that which does not begin with an invocation, etc., and awful calamities are predicted to fall upon those who witness such a dance. The treatise proceeds: 'What is said traditionally by our ancestors must be kept in view. Having made the invocation, etc., the dancing may begin. The song should be sustained in the throat; the mood (*bhava*) must be shown by the glances; time (*tal*) is marked by the feet. For wherever the hand moves, there the glances follow; where the glances go, the mind follows; where the mind goes, the mood follows; where the mood goes, there is the flavour (*rasa*).'



CHAPTER TWO

Indian Music

Musically, India and the West meet in some folk-dance tunes (people who sow corn and harvest the results naturally make the same movements and to the same rhythms all the world over). They meet in certain conventional rhythms for the drums; and they meet in certain respects over the flute. The Western nature-god, Pan, as he plays his mythological pipes by the river at evening and dawn, awakes echoes in our deepest souls which recall the flute of Krishna, the legendary Blue God who lives on to-day in the magic of the Indian flautist, whether 'natural' or sophisticated. The latter plays a concert-flute and has often tremendous technical mastery of his instrument in addition to a pleasing tone; and the simpler, shepherd's flute has a surpassing sweetness and sadness, a nostalgia evocative of the lush, dewy pastures of India, which can be appreciated by any and every one who hears it. A fine flautist, in India, can command the wildest salary and behave however he wishes, and anyone who has heard the unearthly beauty of the Indian flute as it drops notes one by one, like jewels, into the silent glory of the Indian dusk, will sympathise with me in my struggle to describe the indescribable; that magical melody which can take a girl from her lover or unite the soul with the Infinite.

The notes of the flute, then, will serve as a bridge across the gap between the music of the East and the West; and even if we cannot quite cross from one side to the other, at least we may stand in the middle and see elemental Pan piping away in the reeds on one side, and Krishna standing with crossed feet and his flute aslant, playing his celestial notes amongst the lotus-flowers on the other.

Most of the difficulties of the Westerner when he tries to listen intelligently to Indian music arise over the melodic side, and by now he is pretty used to being told that, in the West, much delicacy of hearing has been lost; and although this is very true, and although is largely due to the Western method of notation, to an Indian listener the pianoforte, with its limited intervals, may well sound like any other instrument of percussion, yet it is only fair to draw the reader's attention to the fact that in India itself the highly specialised Carnatic music of the South bores Northerners to extinction, whereas the classical songs of the North are not understood at all in the South.

There is a great deal of misunderstanding between Indian and Western musicians. In India, the same considerations apply to music as those which apply to other forms of art—technique is necessary but only secondary in importance to artistic expression. Therefore in India anyone who can play an instrument with expression is accounted a musician. In the West, the same thing does not apply. Then there is the question of *raga* or *rāg*, generally translated rather superficially as 'melody'. A *raga* is a given scale (all the classical *ragas* having different names and uses) using certain notes and leaving out others—perhaps with one set for climbing the scale and another for descending—on which the actual tune is based. The tune itself is often extemporary, only limited by the scale

indicated by the chosen *raga*. The key is referred to as *sruti*.

The usual function of music in Indian dancing is in many respects quite unlike that of Western accompaniment. The latter provides mood and a basic time for the dancer. But in Indian dancing, particularly in the *Kathak* style and also in *Bharata Natya*, the music is used to inform the audience and dancer of which *tal* (a set number of beats in a measure) is to be danced. The spectator can hear when the dancer has made a mistake, rather than see it, by his failure to finish on the *sum* (which is not, as might be expected in the West, the last beat of a measure, but the first of the next).

The emphasis on the *sum* is the reason for the apparent competition between an Indian instrumentalist and drummer (in the West when such a recital takes place, we can see that fun and excitement is going on but cannot fathom what it is all about). The drummer has to guess just which *tal* will be chosen by the instrumentalist for punctuation by *sum*; there they sit, nodding away and watching each other, and great applause and appreciation are won from an Indian audience when the two musicians reach a simultaneous climax.

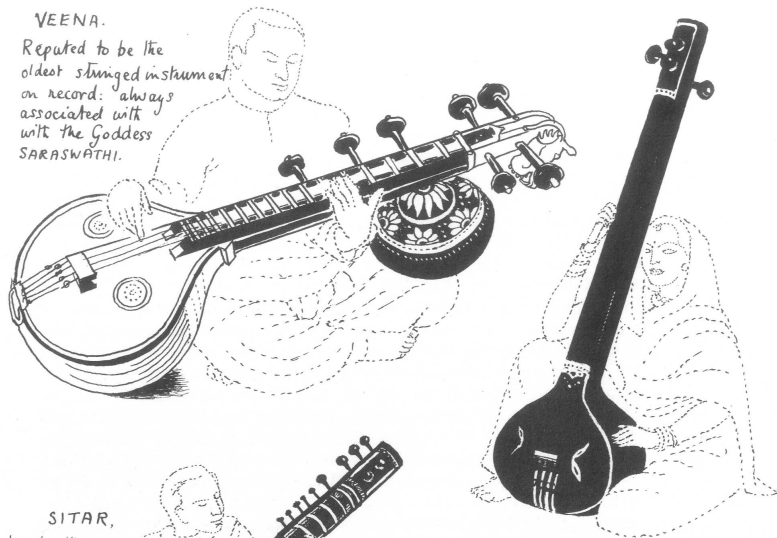
The highly specialised art of giving the verbal, almost onomatopoeic accompaniment to dancers such as those of *Bharata Natya*, *Kathak* and *Manipuri* makes Westerners ask: 'Is it a song, or is the man telling the dancer what to do?' It is a cross between the two, and in *Bharata Natya* the *nattuvan* who gives the words also marks the movements of the dancer with a pair of tiny gold cymbals called *talam*. His presence is so necessary to the dancer that he is in a position to practise a little tyranny, and his services are bargained for like a first-class footballer in the West. Some of the simplest of these word-sequences are marked at the foot of technical dance-sketches, as will be seen later on; they are called *bols*, which Ram Gopal descriptively translates as 'winged words'.

In conclusion, here is a description from *Pradosha Stotra* of the orchestra of Siva, as he prepares to dance: 'Saraswathi plays on the *vēna*, Indra on the flute, Brahma plays the time-marking cymbals, Lakshmi begins a song, Vishnu plays on a drum, and all the gods stand round about. . . . '—The music of the spheres, surely.



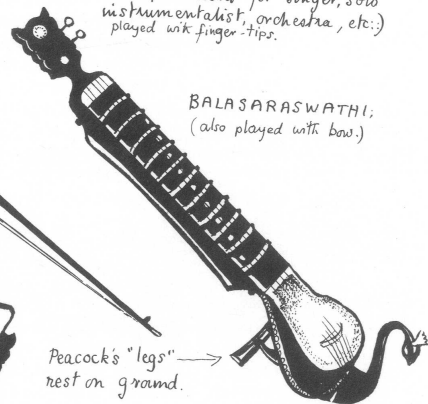
VEENA.

Reputed to be the oldest stringed instrument on record: always associated with the Goddess SARASWATHI.

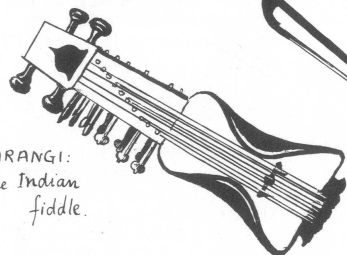


(BIG) TAMBURA.

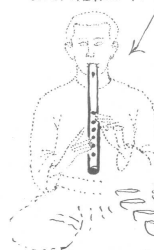
(Maintains key ("SRUTI") and drone accompaniment for singer, solo instrumentalist, orchestra, etc.; played with finger-tips.)

BALASARASWATHI;
(also played with bow.)

Peacock's "legs" rest on ground.

SITAR.
(played with plectrum.)SARANGI:
the Indian fiddle.

SHEPHERD'S FLUTE



CONCERT FLUTE



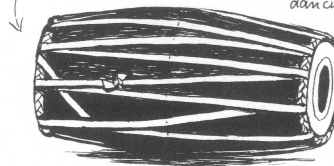
SANAI



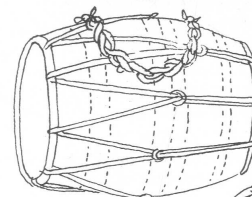
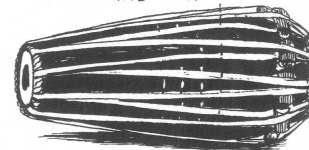
TABLA & BAYA: originally one drum, as the Mahamrdang shown below. Indispensable for KATHAK dancing. (North India.)

JALATARANG:
(bowls filled with water.)

MRDANGAM: Classical South Indian drum. (Indispensable for BHARATA NATYA dancing.)

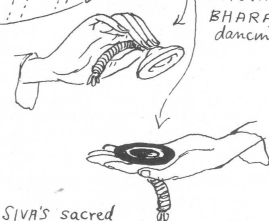
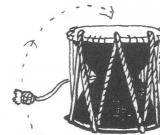


MAHAMRDANG.



DOLAK. (Small drum with a loud voice; played with a hand & a stick.)

TALAM: indispensable to the NATUVANAR of BHARATA NATYA dancing.



DAMARU: Lord SIVA's sacred drum. When the hand grasps the drum round its waist, the flaps tighten the vellums at each end. The knot at the end of the string rattles a merry rhythm.

Example of an S-SHAPED HORN: drawn during Mysore folk-dances; said to invoke Lord Siva.



CHAPTER THREE

The Geography of Indian Dance

It is helpful to look at a map of India in order to form a clear picture of the pattern of states where the classical dance styles have developed through the centuries. Their history is traceable to the Indus Valley Civilisation. It is possible that with further excavations archaeologists will uncover evidence of dance in other areas but of similar antiquity.

In March, May, June and July there are many festivals and fairs held in all parts of India. In fact, throughout the year such celebrations brighten the days and lives of the people. It is certainly true of all the religious cities. The harvesting of crops at the change of the seasons is when the worship of gods and goddesses and the commemoration of their age-old legends are witnessed by throngs of people who dance and sing and wear new colourful robes.

Looking at a map of India, you will see at the southernmost tip Cape Comorin where, on a promontory, is the colourful Kanniyakumari Temple which is a very sacred place to the Hindus. Three great oceans flow into each other, the Arabian Sea on the left, the Bay of Bengal on the right and the Indian Ocean.

Kerala

To the left from Cape Comorin is one of the world's most beautiful stretches of country, Kerala (whose coastal strip was long called Malabar). Dancing is part of the religious ritual and an expression of the soul of the people, whether performed in the temples, in village centres or on festive occasions. The beauty of the people, their hospitality, kindness and culture reveal a life akin to that of the ancient *Vedas*, holy texts which described man's life from birth to death and its high spiritual values.

Kerala is the home of many dances, usually (except for the solo *Mohini Attam* which is danced by a woman) performed by male dancers in the roles of both sexes. Supreme among the dances of Kerala is the exquisite temple dance known as the *Krishnattam* which is performed within the sacred precincts of the Guruvayur Temple. It consists of a sequence of eight dance dramas built round the life of Krishna. This is probably the oldest living group of dance dramas enacted within a temple where one may see the expressions, gestures, songs and rhythms as laid down in the ancient dance treatise, Bharata's *Natya Śāstra*. All the nine *rasas* (moods) reach a perfection not seen anywhere else in India, even in regions that possess their own great solo and group dance styles.

Stemming from *Krishnattam* comes the later *Kathakali* dance drama whose tremendous force and thunderous drumming are unequalled in any other dance style.

In addition there are the male solo dances known as *Chakiar Kuthu*, *Kudiattam* and the *Ottam Thulal*, and the female solo dance, *Mohini Attam*, which is a fusion of *Kathakali* and *Bharata Natya* styles.

More surprising is the Biblical *Chavitu Nataka*. Kerala's connections with Palestine certainly date back to the Phoenicians who visited the area. About 1000 B.C. the ships of King Solomon came to take spices,



silks and medicines near Trivandrum. Jews who came there in 587 B.C. were to remain. Greeks, Romans, the Arabs of Arabia and the Chinese crossed the seas to trade there. The Nestorian Church of Syria sent missionaries about A.D. 745, eight hundred years before the Portuguese adventurer, Vasco da Gama, set up a trading post on the coast. Hence, in this essentially Hindu land, the Christian spirit has been woven for centuries with that of the Jews and the Muslims. One form of dance drama in Kerala owes its origin to this intermingling, the *Chavitu Nataka*, which is often performed within the grounds of the old Christian

churches. The *Chavitu Nataka* consists of a number of plays, preceded by an invocation to the Holy Trinity. One of the plays depicts Charlemagne defeating the Turks and converting them to Christianity.

In Kerala, and northwards into the state of Karnataka, there is considerable traditional folk dance.

Karnataka

The modern state of Karnataka embraces the former Mysore. The coastal strip, Kanara, is the home of the *Yakshagana* dance drama, an offshoot of the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* of Andhra Pradesh and very much akin in style to the *Kathakali* and *Krishnattam* of Kerala.

From Cape Comorin again, but this time to the right on the map, the entire coastline as far as Calcutta and beyond rejoices in some superb scenery. History is written in the stone of the temples whose carvings and friezes relate episodes in the life of the gods. The whole of the east coast of India is more rich in fabulous dances than any other land in Asia. The dances of Burma, Thailand, Java, Bali, China, Japan and Hawaii have all been influenced, enriched and inspired over thousands of years by the dance styles of this area.

Tamil Nadu

The first state to the east of Cape Comorin is that of Tamil Nadu, with its ancient temple cities of Madurai, Tanjore (strictly Thanjavur), Kumbakonam and nearby Chidambaram. These are the home of the all-male dance dramas, the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka*, and the *Bharata Natya* dance style; also of the style of music known as Carnatic, a historical name of this part of India.

From the essence of *Bharata Natya*, highly gifted dance masters formed the present repertoire of the traditional *devadasis*, the female temple dancers.

Andhra Pradesh

North from Tamil Nadu is the state of Andhra Pradesh, a rich repository of the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* dance drama and the *Kuchipudi* dance style.

Orissa

Further north still lies the state of Orissa, whose own dance style, *Orissi*, may be witnessed particularly in the towns of Puri and Bhubaneswar. In the innumerable temples, large and small, incredible sculptures depict the legends and stories of gods and goddesses, demons, men and women, and animals.

Bengal and Bihar

The *Chhau* dance style of the Mayurbhanj area of northern Orissa is very much linked to the *Chhau* of Saraikeela in Bihar and the *Chhau* of Purulia in Bengal. This style is noted particularly for its amazing use of masks.

The North-east

Beyond Calcutta, the capital of Bengal, and beyond the now-separate nation of Bangladesh, lie the green hills, plantations and mountains of Manipur, Assam and Nagaland, where the folk and temple dances are mostly adherents of the Manipuri style.

The Northern Interior

Throughout northern India and Pakistan, but notably in Rajasthan, the predominant dance style is *Kathak*, danced by men and women and known for its whirling and brilliant footwork.



SRI
RAMA
—THE HERO OF THE "RĀMAYĀNA"
(South Indian bronze, 14th century.)

CHAPTER FOUR

Kuchipudi

The dance dramas of Andhra Pradesh, known as the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka*, are recorded in sculptures and manuscripts of the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. This was the period when the main goal of the great saints and gurus was to seek union with the Divine by meditation, incantation, mantras and retreats, both in the temples and in the countryside.

Near Warangal, the ancient capital of the Kakatiyas (now part of Andhra), are Hanamkonda, in whose Thousand Pillared Temple, built in about the twelfth century by Chalukya kings, there are superb carvings and sculptures that rival those of Belur and Halebid in Karnataka state, and Palampet, whose incredible Ramappa Temple has a glorious profusion of life-like sculptures. Ceilings and pillars depict elaborate scenes from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*: dancing girls in erotic poses appear side by side with gods and goddesses, the attendant musicians and acrobats performing a *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* type of dance drama not unlike the *Krishnattam* and *Kathakali* of Kerala.

Whereas the ancient dance dramas of Kerala were kept alive by its temple priests and the local people, those of Ramappa and Kazipet (also near Warangal), ancient sites of Dravidian culture*, disappeared. It seems likely that the later *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* of Karnataka which is known today as the *Yakshagana*† was influenced by the dance dramas and dance style depicted in the Ramappa sculptures. The *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* of Tamil Nadu‡, with its Telugu speech (the old language of Andhra) is an obvious continuation of the ancient tradition.

In the nineteenth century, two Telugu-speaking Brahmins of Andhra, Tirtha Narayana Yati and Sidhyendra Yogi, master and pupil respectively, were inspired by the *Geeta Govinda* stories of Jayadeva which are built round the legendary life and exploits of Krishna, the Blue God. From a study of these ancient texts and of the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* technique and style that had been handed down, Sidhyendra Yogi codified everything into his own dance drama technique. He is said to have had a vision of the Blue God, after which he composed the sacred dance drama, *Parijatapaharana* (The Sacred Flower Dance). It is also said that with the performing of this dance Sidhyendra Yogi was to attain spiritual liberation and salvation—as indeed would all those participating in or witnessing it.

In order to maintain the purity, chastity and the highest spiritual dedication for the performance of this particular drama—at a time when female dancers were in disrepute (see Introduction)—he chose to recruit a group of young Brahmin boys whom he considered to be fit physically and morally to perform. A vow was taken from them that, when they grew older, they would carry on the purest traditions of the art and would teach their sons, grandsons and thus to all future generations. This is how the *Parijatapaharana* and the many other dance dramas have survived to this day in the village of Kuchipudi, formerly known as Kuchelapuram, on the east coast of Andhra, north of Madras.

* See Chapter 1 (page 10)

† See Chapter 9

‡ See Chapter 5



Like the *Kathakali* dance dramas of Kerala, the *Kuchipudi* dance dramas are performed in the open air and only at night. The musicians, including drummers, play an overture. This is followed by an amusing dance performed by a youth wearing the mask of Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, 'who removes all obstacles'. Both these items precede the dance drama chosen for the night. All the dancers are male, female characters being danced by young men. At this point, there should be mention of Vedantan Satyam, the female impersonator in the *Kuchipudi* school of dancing. He gives a superb performance in terms of expression, gesture and rhythm, unsurpassed even by Balasaraswathi and other gifted dancers of the *Bharata Natya* school of Tamil Nadu.

Performances of *Kuchipudi* dance drama generally follow the same pattern. Here is a typical programme:

- 1 *Puja Nrtya* This dance invocation in *Kuchipudi* style is a salutation to the stage.
- 2 *Jatiswaram* A sequence of pure dance in which skilful timing, rhythm and great speed are characteristics of head, arm and foot movements.





- 3 *Tillana* A very seductive dance to a lilting melody. Expression, gesture and rhythm, combined with breathtaking speed, require great technical skill from the dancer. He covers the stage with a seeming ease and grace which belie the effort and discipline required.
- 4 *Kannakole* Musicians and dancers combine in fast-changing rhythms, with much exciting footwork.
- 5 *Krishna Sabdam* This is a delightful story of the loves of Krishna. A Nayika (one of Krishna's devotees) is sitting in a garden, making up her face, anointing herself with sandalwood paste and adorning herself with jewels. She is suddenly aware that the Blue God, Krishna, stands nearby. She seeks to entice him with seductive eyes and inviting lips. She weaves a garland for him and, rising, dances for him.
- 6 *Manduka Sabdam* This dance tells the story of a bewitched frog, confined to a pond. Ravana, the Demon King of Sri Lanka (Ceylon),



Three sections from the solo dance *Dasavatara*, which depicts the ten incarnations of Vishnu—the tenth being Maitreya, the future Saviour of Mankind.

- looks into the pond and realises that the frog which leaps from side to side is really a princess. He utters powerful magic spells and the ugly frog emerges from the pond as the beautiful Mandodari. She joins Ravana and is carried off to Sri Lanka to reign as his queen.
- 7 *Dasavatara Sabdam* This depicts the ten incarnations of Vishnu, right up to the coming of Maitreya, the future saviour of Mankind. So quick are the changes from one incarnation to another that the audience must follow the movements of the dance with great alertness.
(All the *sabdam*s tell a story, using expressions of the face, gestures of the hands and rhythmic patterns of the feet. Movements may be round the stage, or with face and hands only when the dancer is seated.)
- 8 *Bhama Kalapam* The story of the celestial Parijata tree, during which the Sacred Flower Dance is performed.

Bhagavata Mela Nataka of Tamil Nadu

The *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* of the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu came originally from what is now the state of Andhra Pradesh. These colourful, exciting and often humorous dance dramas are, like those in the *Kathakali* and *Krishnattam* styles and like some in the temples of Kerala, performed as full-length dramas, with female roles danced by men. The temples where they are performed are all dedicated particularly to the worship of Vishnu. The style of dancing much resembles the *Bharata Natya* of Tanjore in the same part of India. The music is pure Carnatic, the local style, but interestingly the language which also accompanies performances is Telugu from Andhra. Most of the Tamil-speaking audience for the dance dramas know little or nothing of the Telugu language of Andhra!

The performances take place in May and June in the villages of Soolamagalam, Melatur, Nallur, Oothakadu and in a few others. The dance dramas are not all old. One of them, *Prahlade Charitram*, is said to have been composed by Venkatarama Shastri for performance at Melatur; he has certainly created three others: *Usha Prainayam*, *Harishchandra* and *Markandeya*.

The great guru of *Bharata Natya*, Meenakshi S. Pillai, and the historian and critic, E. Krishna Iyer, both came from Tanjore to witness performances of these dance dramas. Because there is no formal *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* school, there is a dangerous lack of discipline and taste, both of which are required to improve style, costume and music to the standard that they must have held in ancient Andhra.



A typical performance photographed in the Tanjore district.

Bharata Natya

Bharata Natya originated as a dance performance during the ninth century in the temples of Tanjore, Tamil Nadu. It developed from the treatises of the great sage, Bharata, in his *Natya Śāstra*. Although the following brief study of *Bharata Natya* does no more than scratch the surface of the subject, yet the whole chapter is longer than any other one chapter in this book: this is because *Bharata Natya*, of all the Indian dance styles, gives the reader some indication of the tremendous scope of each of the different schools; each of which has its own history, its own separate influences, social, artistic and geographical. Although there is not room to treat each style at such length, the reader will be able to see for himself that to master any one style of classical Indian dancing, one must go further afield than to the nearest dance teacher. For example, ancient sculptures and paintings are a safer guide to correct costume than the muddled and gaudy confections often worn on the Indian dance stage today.

This survey looks at *Bharata Natya* from three different angles: its history, performances by two of its great exponents and an account of the contemporary programme of the ancient dance (this includes technical notes and sketches which give just a taste of *Bharata Natya* as it should, and should not, be seen at the present time).

History

Natya Śāstra

Bharata's *Natya Śāstra* is a monumental work which deals, amongst other things, with the arts of drama and the dance and which, according to Indian mythology, was compiled at the request of the gods, conceived by Brahma, and written by the sage Bharata during a period of Divine inspiration. The palm leaves inscribed with ancient Sanskrit text are preserved to this day in the great temple libraries of Tanjore and of the coast of Kerala, and are frequently studied by Sanskrit scholars in their researches in music, drama, dance, medicine and literature. With very few exceptions, present-day *nattuvans* (singers and instructors for *Bharata Natya*) in southern India are completely ignorant of the Sanskrit texts and may therefore confuse artistic values in the redevelopment of this rare dance form.

As to the age of the *Śāstra*, this can only be conjectured. The great antiquity of the work is undeniable but its actual conception lies buried in mythological times. The name *Bharata* is said to be composed of the first syllables of the following words:

bhava (inner spiritual feeling expressed outwardly or visibly)
raga (melody)
tala (rhythm)

It should be borne in mind that Bharata's *Natya Śāstra**, whilst governing

* Sometimes referred to as *Bharata Natya Śāstra*.



The tenth-century sculptures in the Brihadeshwara Temple of Tanjore include these figures depicting three aspects of Śiva, God of the Dance.



all the classical dances of India, should not be confused with *Bharata Natya*, which is the term used to describe the ancient dance of the Tanjore *devadasis*.

The Nineteenth Century

By the nineteenth century the ancient art of Tanjore had been much degraded though it could still be witnessed, in varying degrees of quality, in the courts of princes. The essential role of the *devadasis* (literally 'Servants of God', the temple dancing girls) and the degradation of *Bharata Natya* have already been described at some length. (See Introduction, page 6)

The *devadasis* could demand very high salaries and their services were expensive. They travelled long distances and were often retained at courts very far from their homes in southern India; as an example, one may take Gauribai of Baroda, who was employed for over fifty years by the late Maharajah of Baroda. But she was 'imported' from Tanjore. The sketch of the girl on page 7 shows the costume for a *devadasi* as was generally seen in the late nineteenth century:- the 'apron' front and the satin pyjamas are alien influences; the lines of the figure, which the dance displays to perfection, are almost completely obliterated—a silhouette which women taking to this dance art today would do well to avoid! The sketch of the figure of Dipa-Lakshmi to the right shows a version of the classical silhouette, forming the basis of Ram Gopal's own costume design for *Bharata Natya* (see page 42) which, with a little adjustment for the present demands of society, retains the flavour of the original sculptures and reveals the movements of the dancer.

The Renaissance

When, in the twentieth century, E. Krishna Iyer sought to revive *Bharata Natya*, he made an exhaustive study of the technique under traditional *nattuvans*, Bharata Narainswami of Merattur in particular. He showed *Bharata Natya* in its most incisive and powerful aspect, known as the Pandanallur* school, some of which is best performed by a man, and which was at that time completely unknown. After his début, he danced anywhere where enough people could be assembled to do any good: in films, on concert platforms, at political meetings. And slowly and surely, all he said, the grace and beauty of his dance, began to leave its mark. So he moved on to his next step, and started to assemble all the remaining traditional *Bharata Natya* dancers he could find or unearth, presenting them wherever possible with a preface of his own explanation.

One of the milestones in Iyer's early lone crusade for the revival of *Bharata Natya* was marked in 1934 when he presented his discovery, Balasaraswathi, at the All-India Music Conference in Benares, and gave his learned discourses on the art, which must have fallen on intelligent ears like rain on the desert.

Balasaraswathi was then a young girl, and her talent was to remain something which has to be seen to be believed. She is a direct descendant in blood and in tradition of the magical sculptures of dancing.

* A village near Tanjore

Bharata Natya



DIPA - LAKSHMI
(Beauty-lamp)
Madras,
Chola period
bronzes, 10-13th
century A.D.

A Performance by Balasaraswathi

The first impact of a *Bharata Natya* performance on an audience which has never seen it before is one of surprise at the diversity of delicate and rather extraordinary movements. To a Western audience which is unaccustomed to see facial expressions taking an active part in a classical dance curriculum, and to whom certain movements of the neck, shoulders, and arms are very strange, the whole thing seems at first peculiar, and indeed rather monotonous. After a short time, however, the compelling power of this dance technique starts to exert its ancient fascination on us, and we begin to feel the same sort of curiosity about it as we feel over the construction of our favourite pieces of classical music. It disturbs us delightfully, and we feel we would like some kind of key to open the door to that understanding which will increase our pleasure.

On this occasion, there was no stage as we know it: just a roof held up by bamboos, under which the Indian daylight filtered and did duty for illuminations. Balasaraswathi herself was in the simplest of costumes, and her figure statuesque, in marked contrast to the rather angular and energetic young antelopes, aspirants to *Bharata Natya*, whose performances are more familiar. The audience looked simple enough, but really represented a terrifying array of critics—people who were as experienced at watching *Bharata Natya* as Balasaraswathi was at performing it. With a nod of her head she indicated to the musicians that they should begin, and raised her hands in the first pose of *Alarippu*, the traditional opening dance.*

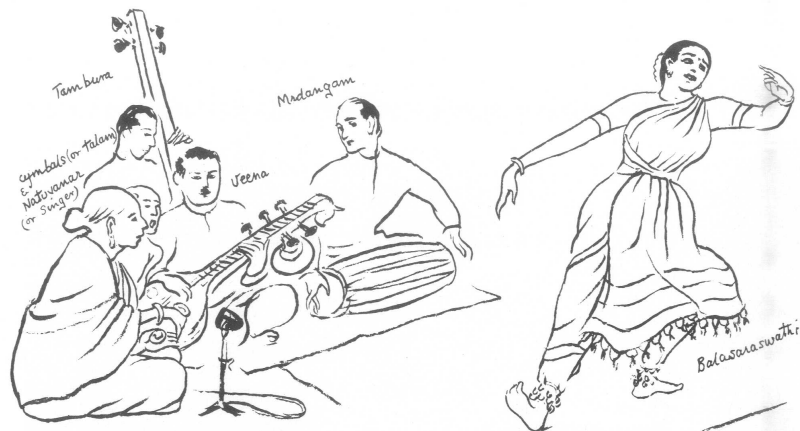
The impromptu stage disappeared: Balasaraswathi, a figure of Juno, disappeared also, and in her place one fresco after another followed without a break so that one could not be quite sure how many people were dancing, but knew that it was an art from another world. *Jatiswar-am*, *shabd-am*, *varnam*, succeeded one another in their prescribed order, until the performance reached the *padams*. A *padam* may be described as a poem, or hymn, enacted by the dancer and characterised by the power of the facial expressions.

Balasaraswathi addressed herself to Ram Gopal who was the guest of honour. The hymn sung and played by the musicians had the traditional theme of Divine love, and we sat spellbound whilst she played with our feelings in the way which marks out the stage genius of any land.

Perhaps her long black eyes would fix on ours unwaveringly, then it would seem as though we displeased her in some way and that she could not get away from us fast enough. When she had retired as far as possible, she seemed to debate with herself, with sidelong glances, whether after all love was not too strong a thing to be cast aside easily, and she would return to us, hesitating as if to ask forgiveness. Suddenly in the midst of the cajolings by which she seemed to try to regain our favour she would burst into a paroxysm of contemptuous laughter, survey us with disgust, and retreat once again; only to return once more as if she would ask us, once and for all, were we false or true? To which the answer she appeared to read in our faces might move her to an exaltation of joy, or to fly to her far retreat in fear, where she would stay and cast glances at us, now timid and now mischievous. Magic!

* See page 50

CONTEMPORARY DANCER & MUSICIANS: SRIMATI BALASARASWATHI, MADRAS, 20th CENT:



After the performance we went to deliver our thanks to Balasaraswathi, by now a rather heavy, tired, hot woman, who could transform herself at will through the dance. We left with her the little heap of gifts we had brought, and they seemed very poor after the beauty of the world she had shown us.

Ram Gopal

To return to E. Krishna Iyer. It had always been his hope that some dancer with an international reputation would appear who had sufficient skill, strength and dexterity to master the ancient classical technique of *Bharata Natya* and carry it to world-wide audiences; and when he met the young Ram Gopal in 1940—having already studied *Bharata Natya* in its gentler aspects from Elappa, Puttappa, Gouri and Muthukumaram—Iyer suggested that Ram Gopal should accompany him to Tanjore and study the ancient style in its more virile aspect, in short, the Pandanallur style with its broad, sweeping movements, powerful footwork and incredible leaps. Ram Gopal was eager, and eventually took an intensive and full training, and when he emerged and gave expositions of *Bharata Natya* in public, needless to say another uproar started at once. This time it was, 'A man dancing *Bharata Natya*? Impossible!' and so forth.

Let it be noted here that the ancient teachers of *Bharata Natya* are full of jealously guarded traditional secrets. They will sanction all manner of written testimonials for any pupil, for a respectable fee, but they will only tell their secrets and teach all they know to their favourites; i.e. those whom they consider spiritually capable of learning this ancient art. And to Ram Gopal they taught all they knew.



Ram Gopal as Śiva, in a classical *tandava* dance pose of the *Bharata Natya* style, photographed at Belur.

A Performance by Ram Gopal

The scene is set in Belur, Karnataka State, with the indescribable temple itself providing the *décor*; the lighting comes from burning oil in lamps made of shining brass; the time, evening; the scent, an intoxicating mixture of jasmine, stephanotis and incense; the orchestra sits around as only Indian musicians know how, calmly expectant. The audience is composed, not of city critics as before, but of villagers, intellectuals, *devadasis* and their teachers—people, in fact, who know their dancing inside out and will not miss a thing. Every detail of the performance they will watch out of their long, black eyes; young and old, there is no hoodwinking them; they cannot be dazzled into overlooking an alien movement, nor will you find them taking the trouble to turn out to watch some society beauty or subsidised amateur struggling, as a publicity stunt, with steps, gestures and expressions which are second nature to them, the members of the audience. They had come to watch the finer subtleties of performance, and if I had been the dancer I should have died with apprehension. As it was, the performer was Ram Gopal.

As we have seen, Indian dancing and particularly the ideal *Bharata Natya* school is devotional in character. The purely rhythmic items, such as *Alarippu*, are dedicated to the presiding deity of the temple—but they also serve to give the spectator a chance to sum up the dancer's technical ability and style. Later on, when the descriptive and invocational dances begin, the audience, in following the dancer with their senses and sympathy, contribute to the general atmosphere of devotion; any philistine present will have an unhappy evening, as he will not understand what is going on, but that is his affair. So the audience, the majority of which knows countless legends concerning each god, settles down first to watch the dancer prove himself technically; and then, as in this case, see how, in the course of a *padam*, he will tell a legend of the mischievous Blue God, Sri Krishna. And this is where the miracle happens again. The dancer can *become* Sri Krishna under one's very eyes.

It is true that the dancer is flesh and blood, for a short while ago he was dancing as a technical virtuoso and there he is, still in the same costume. He has not paused to take any stimulant or to rest, and the *mise en scène* is exactly as it was. He has certainly great physical charm—but where did he get this unearthly beauty? How does he flash about, sometimes gliding, sometimes covering immense distances with a single leap, pausing only in poses of indescribable dignity, and then as suddenly melting into the Divine mischievousness of the irrepressible god, teasing the villagers, upsetting the village maids, stealing milk and butter; to end in the favourite pose of Krishna, legs crossed, the flute at his lips, and lively, slanting black eyes still on the look-out for celestial fun.

The *devadasis* know that this transfiguration is a rare thing and they lie there never moving, their long eyes narrowed and never missing a single detail. The musicians play as if enchanted. The audience knows, and the old teachers know, that the Blue God is not only living, but before their eyes. Afterwards they will confer and nod gravely together, and the villagers will look at each other and smile. Ram Gopal may ask you 'How was it?' with perfect modesty, but the odds are you will be quite speechless.

A great stage personality and dancer must also have powers of *transfiguration*, which means that he must also be a great creative artist. And a Western audience which has seen the performance of Ram Gopal has a double shock to survive—first, that the man turns into a god, and back into a man; and second, the Indian scene, which he creates at will, turns back again into our own familiar stage. That is the magic of stage genius, in comparison with which the most polished conjuror can only appear a limited and clumsy illusionist.

Bharata Natya Today

In conclusion, it may be affirmed that the dance art of *Bharata Natya*, from the depths of violent social prejudice, has now ascended the wobbly step-ladder to social fame. Any programme of dances in India must include a little *Bharata Natya*. In consequence, the qualities of the present dancers of this ancient style range from a bombastic and self-assertive exaggeration of the original technique, through a dull, uninteresting over-academic style, to an undulating, sexy, softened and altogether repugnant commercial version or to bleached and spineless 'genteel' dances, all of which are artistically worse than the original eroticism which had until recently cost *Bharata Natya* its social prestige. For the genuine *devadasis*, even if they transgressed the laws of contemporary society, at least made seduction into a fine art which could transcend the merely erotic. In other words, *Bharata Natya* could easily be in danger again.

The Nature of *Bharata Natya*

It must be strongly emphasised that *Bharata Natya* in its true and proper form should be studied in the manner stipulated by the Hindus, as one of the *Sastras* which it is, and at the feet of a recognised *guru* or master, who performs the ceremony of his pupil's initiation and thereafter fulfils the function of spiritual as well as physical instructor. The reasons are too obvious to be enumerated here.

The programme below, and the sketches of steps which follow, give no indication of the immense and arduous training to be undergone by the serious student of *Bharata Natya* in connection with the control of expression, facial mobility, traditional gestures and so forth. A deep knowledge of mythology must also be learned—and felt—by the student. To dance invocations to gods of whom one has no real knowledge and sympathy is not only sacrilegious, but artistically useless, rather like studying meaningless gymnastics in order to become a poet; but I believe that to glance through the sequences of sketches will give some impression of the clean lines, virility, agility, and lightness, which, together with the powerful footwork, mark the genuine *Bharata Natya* dancer, and will give the lie to the suave under-statements of the 'softened-up' film or society dancer, and the heavy over-statements of the amateur.

The purely technical ingredients for a physical mastery of *Bharata Natya* are: swiftness, precision, suppleness, strength (for endurance!), an irreproachable instinct for time and rhythm, agility, and lightness. But what the South Indian experts look for, above all, is an expressive face, or



The 57ft high monolithic statue of the Jain Saint Gompteswara has stood on the hill of Indragiri at Sravana Belgola, Karnataka, for a thousand years. Pilgrims climb five hundred steps to reach it. Ram Gopal is photographed before the statue, which is traditionally related to the temples of Belur and Halebid.

inner emotion expressed in an outward and clearly visible form. This is an attribute which has marked all the great artist-dancers in history, but is regarded as a gift of nature in the West; in Southern India, however, this facial expressiveness is understood, sought for, cultivated and acclaimed to a degree unknown elsewhere.

In the traditional schools of South India, and for public performances today, *Bharata Natya* survives in the form of the programme outlined below. Amongst other survivals of this classic dance which have not been transported on to the public stage are the *Kuruvanji* ballets, in which a number of performers combine to invoke the gods and enact mythological events, on the scale of the *Kathakali* dance dramas of Kerala, but inside the temple instead of outside and, of course, using the traditional *Bharata Natya* technique, *mudras* and expressions. Performed in the month of April, these ballets are considered to be the nearest approach to the sacred ballets described in the *Natya Śastra* and enacted at the time of its composition and for long afterwards. There are also extremely esoteric dances performed on religious occasions by the priests themselves.

A Contemporary Programme of *Bharata Natya*

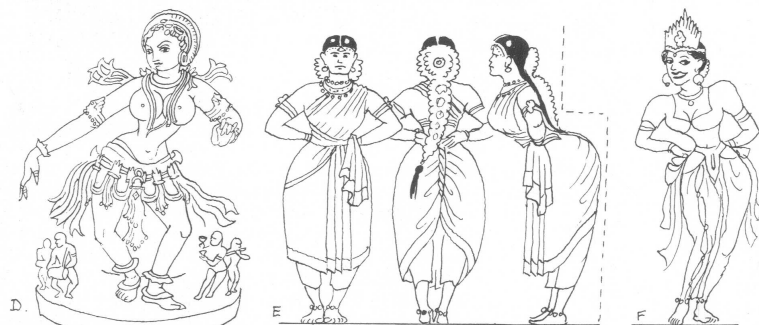
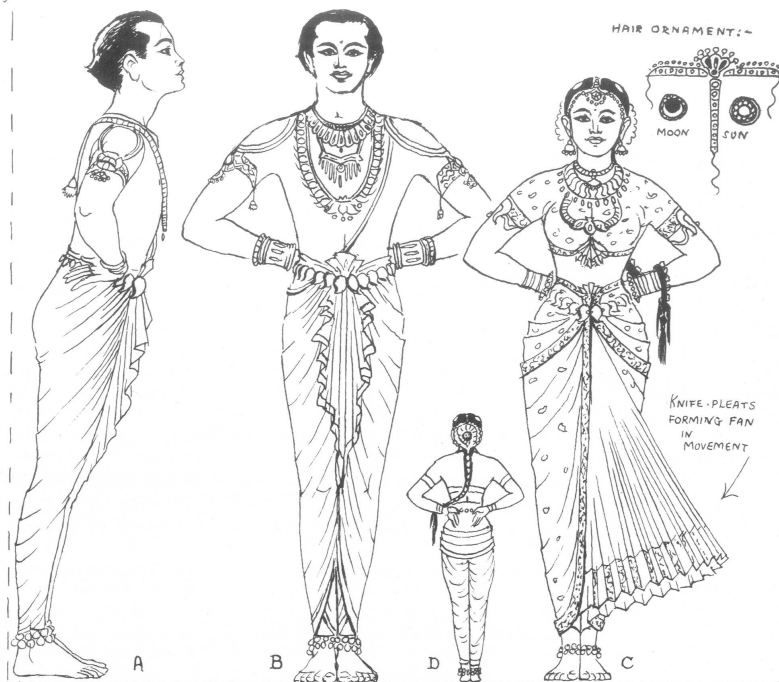
The following arrangement of a recital of *Bharata Natya*, it should be noted, is not claimed to be an exact reproduction of any ancient curriculum given in the *Natya Śastra*, any more than a contemporary performance of ballet as we know it in the West is supposed to deliver an exact reproduction of seventeenth-century ballet as danced in the French palaces.

It is, however, accepted by the foremost critics and intelligentsia in Southern India as the best arrangement for a contemporary solo performance, as it has been devised by masters each of whom is a recognised descendant of the direct line of the Tanjore classical *Bharata Natya* dance school.

An entire recital or solo performance of *Bharata Natya* is composed of the following items, given in order of their performance:

- 1 *Alarippu*
- 2 *Jatiswaram*
- 3 *Śabdam*
- 4 *Varnam*
- 5 *Padam(s)*
- 6 *T(h)illana*

It is reasonable to say that a full programme of *Bharata Natya* by a solo performer can take anything from an hour and a half to four hours.



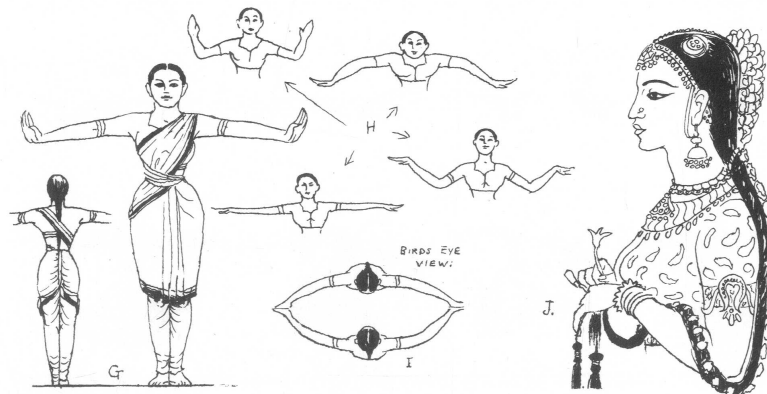
Costume and Deportment



FROM A
JAIN PAINTING, 15TH CENTURY (DRAWING
ON A NEEDLE). NOTE: COSTUME, PLAIT, ETC.

The question of the modern costume most suitable for *Bharata Natya* has been raised earlier in this chapter, and by the time the reader has studied the ancient sculptures and compared them with the bundled-up costume as now generally worn (as shown in the three views of the girl in sketch E opposite) he will have discovered that the costume, shown in A and B, as designed by Ram Gopal and worn here by himself and a partner, is far nearer the original, classical lines. As to the question of modesty—Marco Polo says of the temple dancers, 'those girls . . . dance and sing, all but naked, in front of the god and goddess . . .' and it may be noted that modesty is not always a matter of covering one's figure. The sketch of Mohini (sketch D) is more modest than the modern creation shown in sketch F, although it is more naked. A *choli*, or classical blouse, with some sort of draped trouser is the correct costume (see the Jain dancer). Incidentally, the beautiful classical jewellery and ornamentation come from Tanjore, the preserve of the ancient dance-style itself.

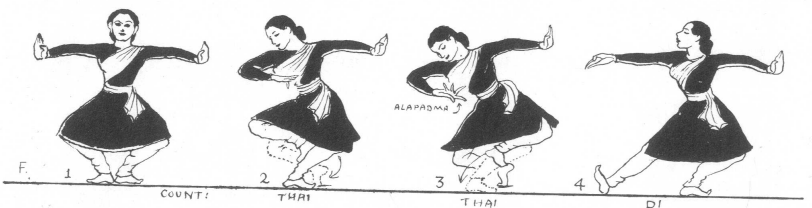
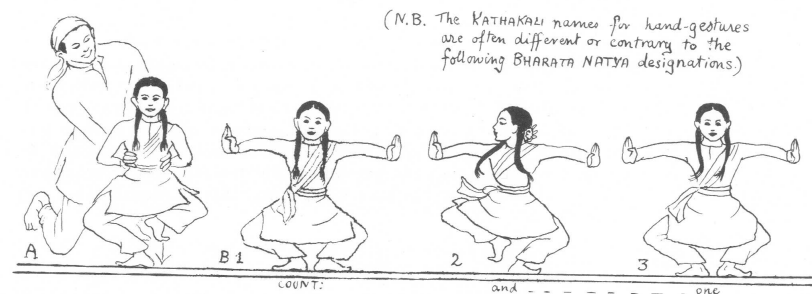
The basic stance for *Bharata Natya* as shown by Ram Gopal and the carriage of the arms as shown below in sketches G and I are in accordance with the best and most practical rules of all physical deportment, and will be found to correspond with the best academic style of posture prescribed by the Russian ballet, with the elbows always supported and the whole carriage of the body pitched slightly forward from heels to chin. The bundled-up young lady has it all wrong—that is *Kathakali* stance, not *Bharata Natya*.



Preliminary Exercises

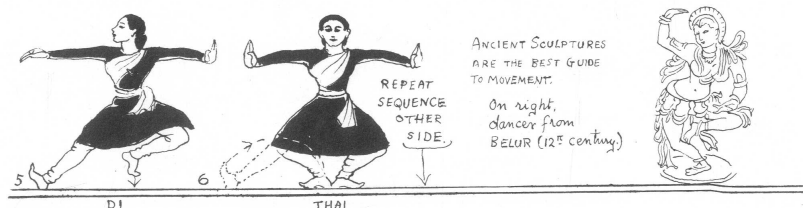
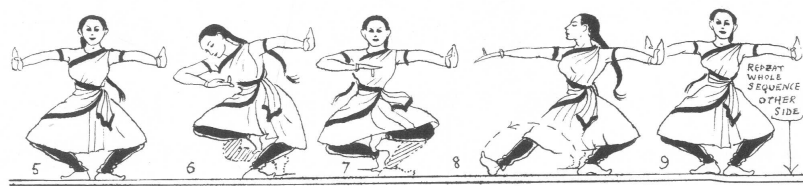
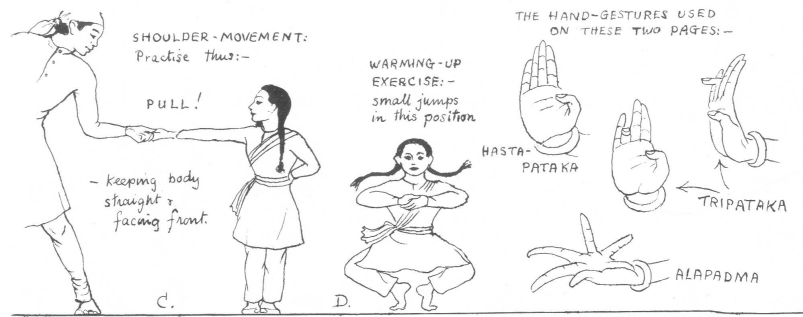
Adavus

An *adavu* is a simple step or basic movement, as shown here, and may be compared to a classroom exercise or step in a ballet class. An *adavu-jethi* is combination of *adavus* and may be compared to an *enchainement* in ballet. A *thirmanam* is a sequence of pure rhythmic dance composed of *adavu-jethis* and may be compared to a ballet *variation*. It is in the execution of *thirmanams* that the technical virtuosity, timing and rhythmic sense of Bharata Natya dancer shows itself.



The little girl in A and B is learning to use her feet and Ram Gopal is holding her at the waist to see that she develops power and does not use her foot-muscles only, but the weight of her own body. He teaches her the rhythmical 'shoulder movement', a knack which is tricky at first, as pupils tend to exaggerate it. The jumping exercise is to give elasticity and accustom the dancer to the low bend in which so many of the dances are performed.

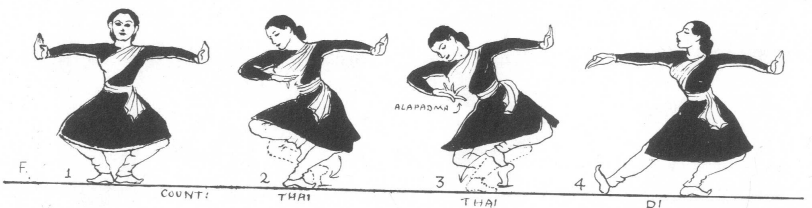
The simple sequences of steps, such as those shown in E and F, are usually performed as an exercise, first slowly and then double-time. Absolute precision is essential whether the time is slow or fast.



Preliminary Exercises

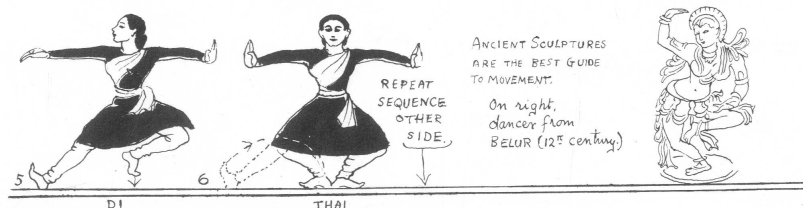
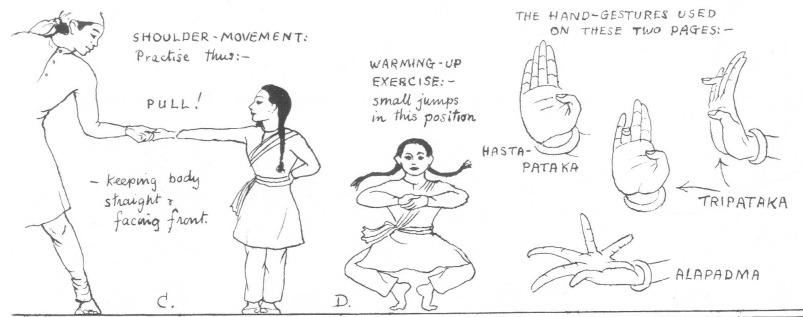
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The little girl in A and B is learning to use her feet and Ram Gopal is holding her at the waist to see that she develops power and does not use her foot-muscles only, but the weight of her own body. He teaches her the rhythmical 'shoulder movement', a knack which is tricky at first, as pupils tend to exaggerate it. The jumping exercise is to give elasticity and accustom the dancer to the low bend in which so many of the dances are performed.

The simple sequences of steps, such as those shown in E and F, are usually performed as an exercise, first slowly and then double-time. Absolute precision is essential whether the time is slow or fast.



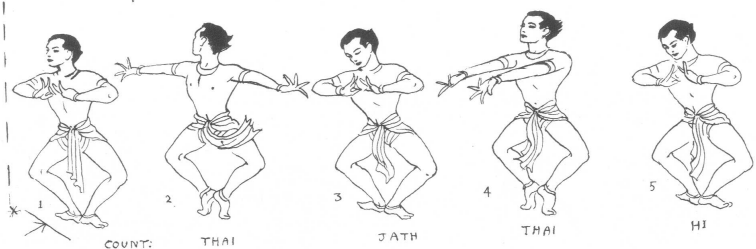
An *adavu-jethi*

Here we have two separate steps combined, as described on the previous page. Again the dancer would be judged on his precision. His foot-work must be neither blurred nor over-emphasised; and in the course of this sequence, which is performed at a considerable speed, his head, arms and hands must be as swift and clearly marked as the rhythm he beats with his feet. Incidentally, although the dancer must wear bells round his ankles for a stage performance, he must practise without them.

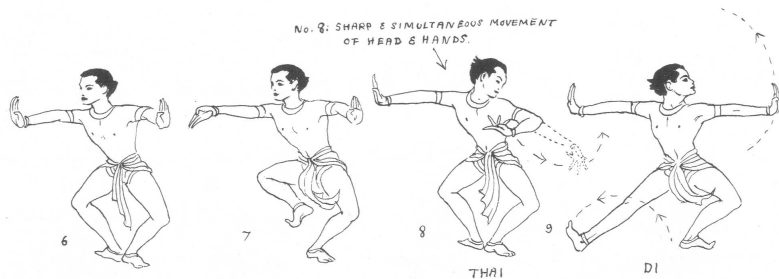


HAMSASYA
MUDRA

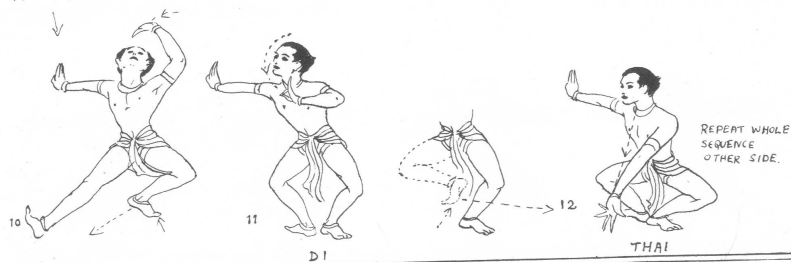
*DRAWN FROM $\frac{3}{4}$ ANGLE: PERFORMED FACING SPECTATOR.



No. 8: SHARP & SIMULTANEOUS MOVEMENT
OF HEAD & HANDS.



No. 10: ADVANCE FORWARD SLIGHTLY.

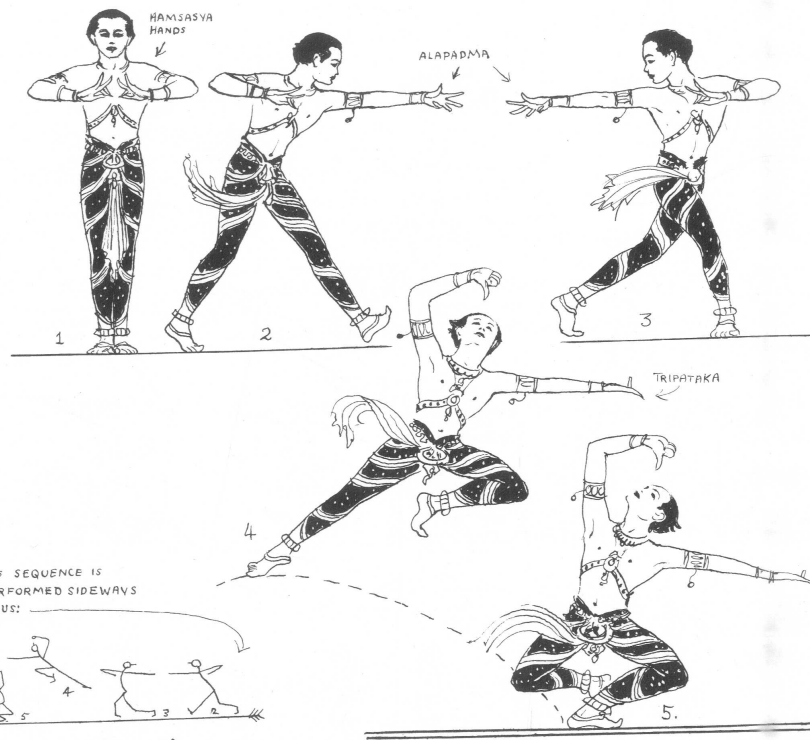


SIKHARA MUDRA

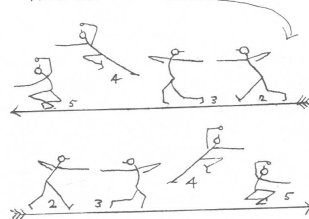


Another *adavu-jethi*: an example of elevation

Here is a specimen of one of those leaps which a teacher will say must be as effortless as an antelope, as light as a feather and as high as the sky. It is performed sideways, but is only one example of *Bharata Natya* elevation. Ram Gopal has covered the length of a full temple corridor in three such leaps, coming forward. To land with a crash is emphatically taboo. The words spoken by the *nattuvan* to accompany pure dance are indicated on some of the sketches (e.g., on the left, *thaijath thaihi thai di di thai*) and are an integral part of the performance. What we should call the basic beat is left to the instinct of the dancer. Ram Gopal calls the chant 'winged words'.



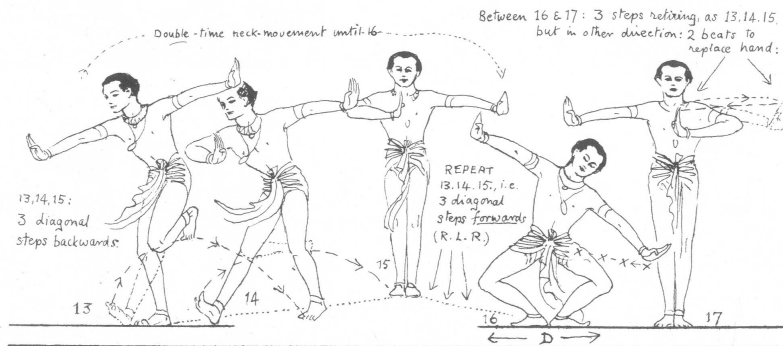
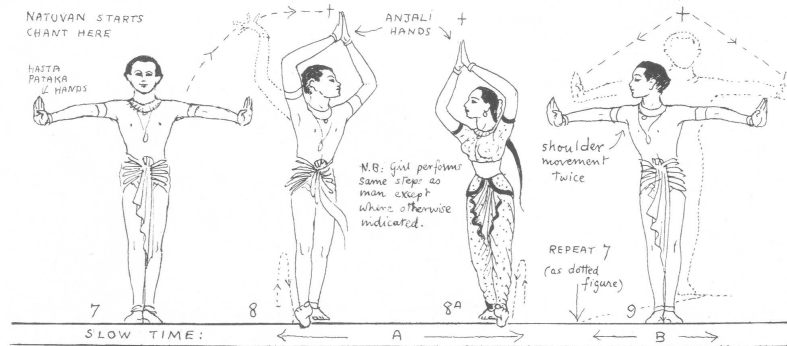
THIS SEQUENCE IS
PERFORMED SIDWAYS
THUS:



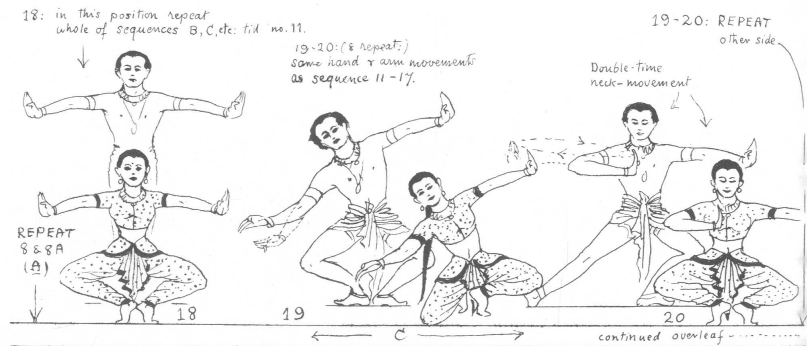
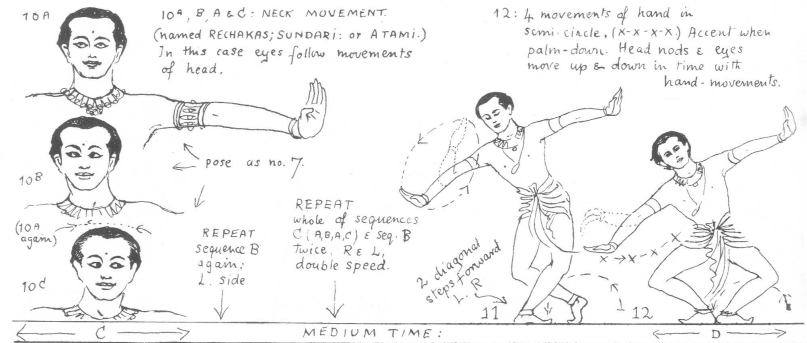
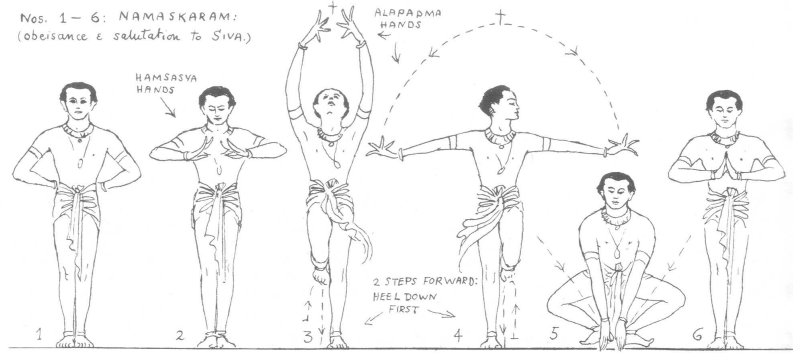
Alarippu, the traditional opening dance

Alarippu is always performed first at a recital of Bharata Natya and is danced in an invocational spirit. Compared with some of the items which succeed it, it is simple to perform; but the cunningly built-up climax and the wonderful balance of time, movement and speeds with the juxtaposition of body, feet, head and limbs make it a test of the dancer's elegance, dignity and taste.

There are two *alarippus*, *tisram* and *misram*. The following sketches show the entire arrangement of the *tisram alarippu*, as taught by Meenakshisundaram Pillai of the Pandanallur school, and arranged by Ram Gopal for two performers. The partner—a girl in this case—is only sketched when her movements differ from the man's. Each movement is sketched once only, but by a solo performer is usually executed first to the right. The rhythms and tempos can only be suggested. Figs. 1-6 are the obeisance to Siva, without which no performance may begin or no class take place.

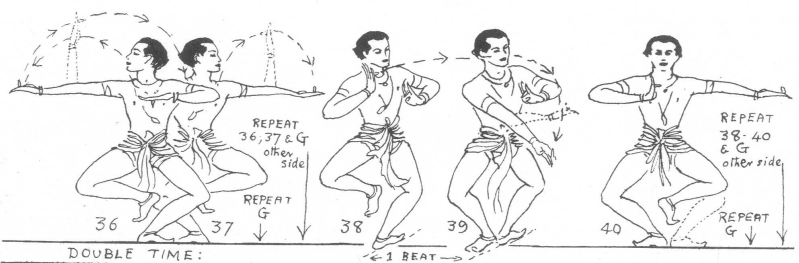
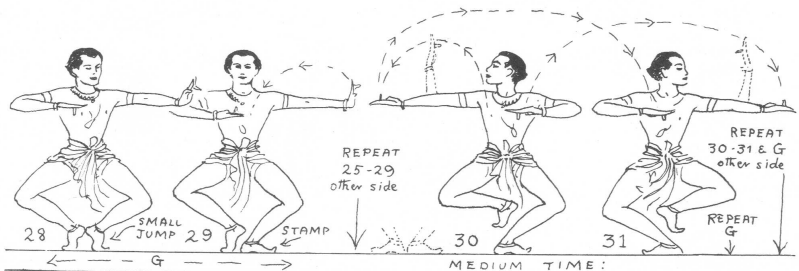
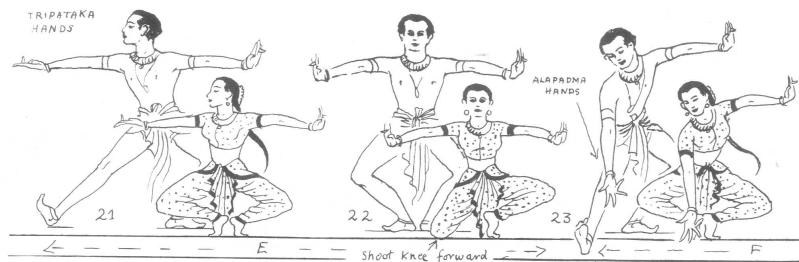


Nos. 1-6: NAMASKARAM:
(obeisance & salutation to SIVA.)

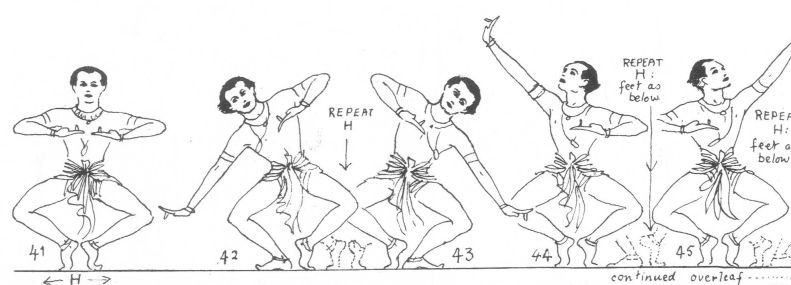
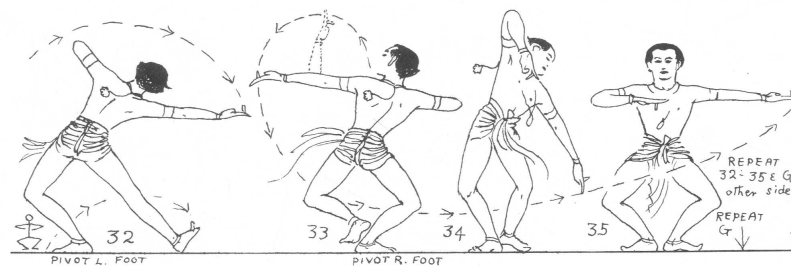
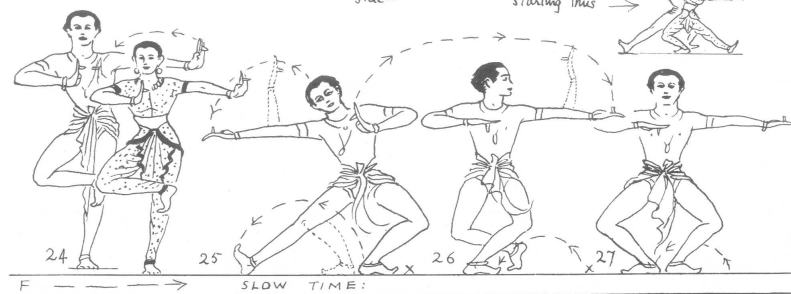


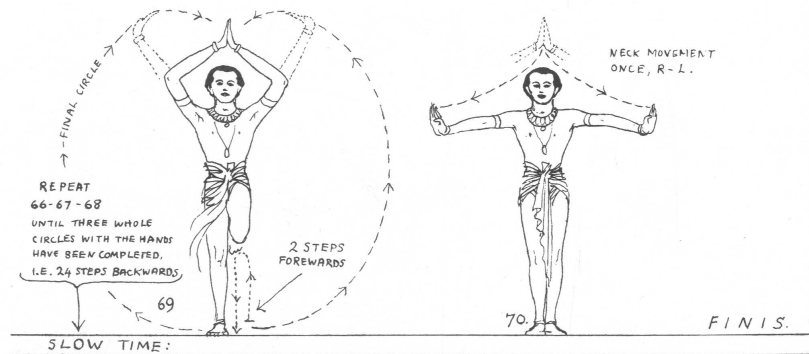
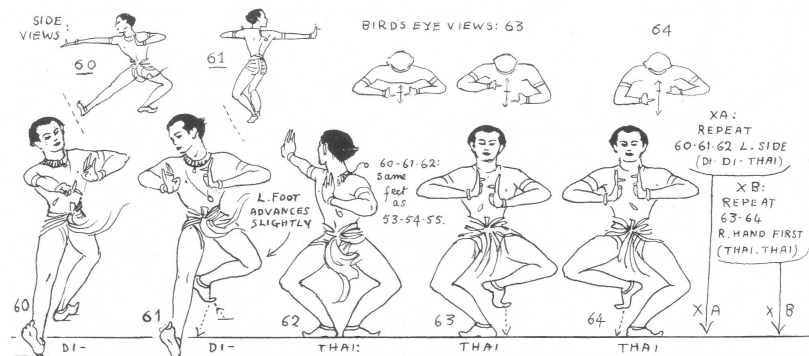
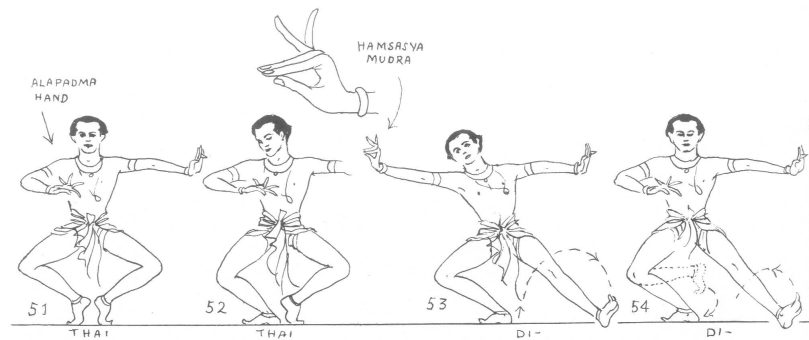
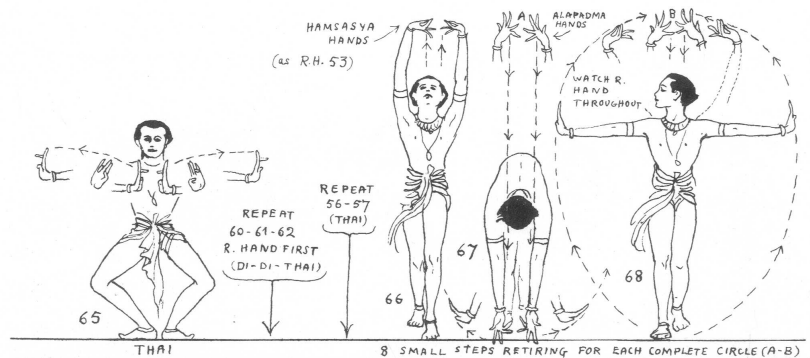
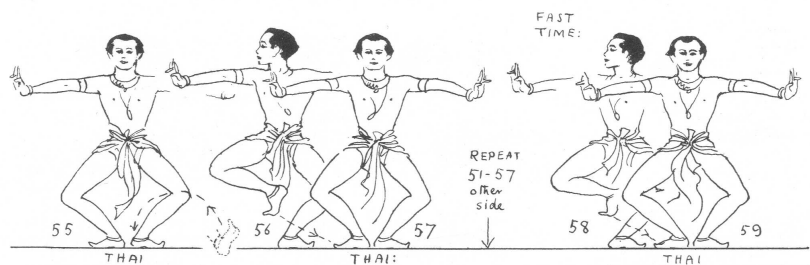
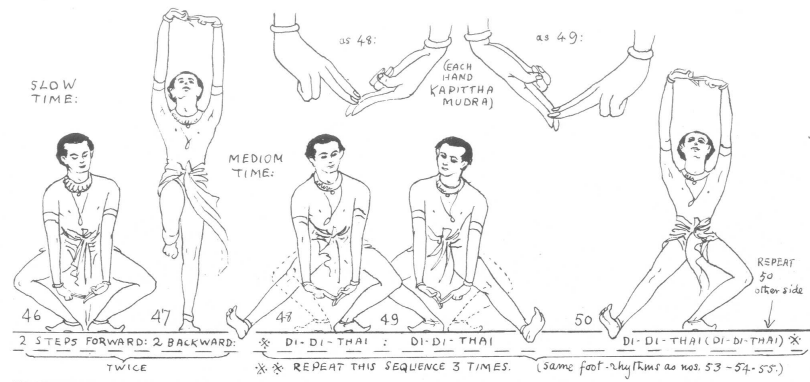
E: REPEAT
twice R. side
twice L. side.

Then: E once } R side, & E once } L. side.
F once }



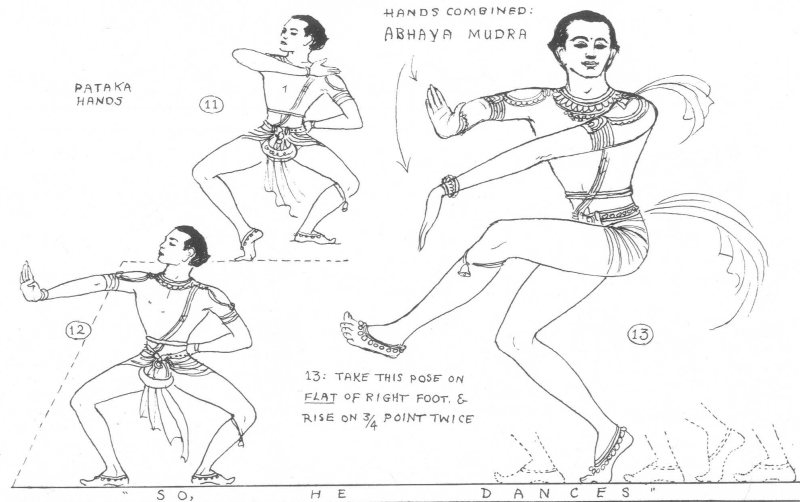
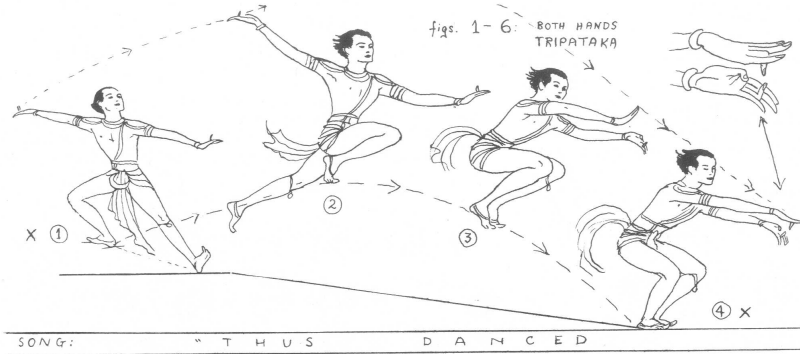
25 ONWARDS: girl performs same
steps as man but on opposite
side - starting thus



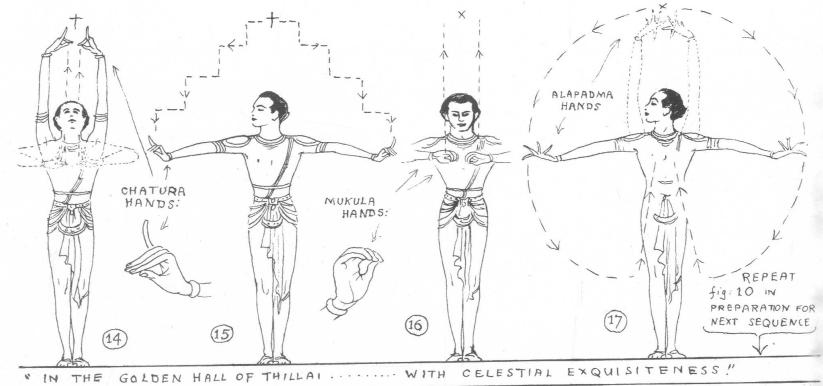
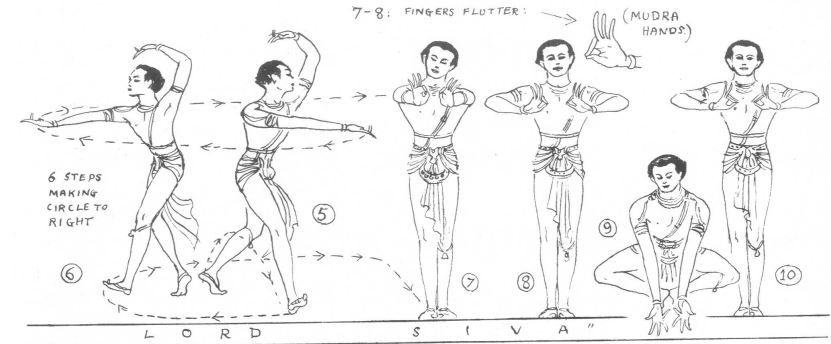
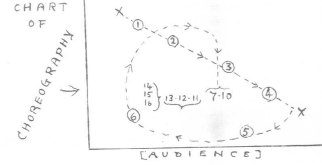


Padams

Padams may be described as hymns or poems to the gods in dance form. A version of the vigorous *Natanam Adinar*, which depicts Śiva creating the world, was devised for Ram Gopal. The subject is only suitable for a male dancer, whereas other *padams* that feature Divine love are matchless when interpreted by a woman.



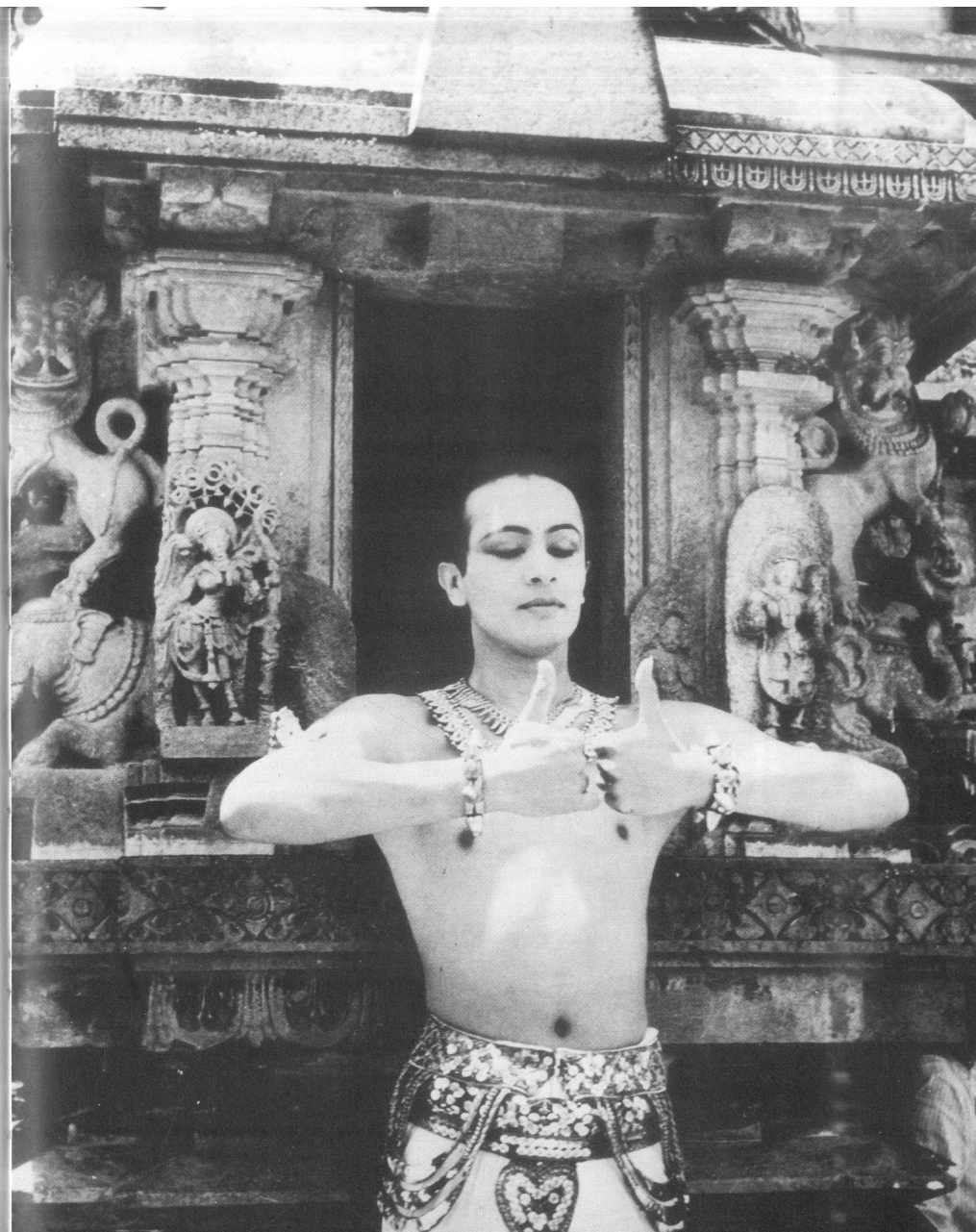
Because the scale of these sketches is small, only the first sequence from the *Natinam Adinar* is illustrated, the first sequence being more remarkable for action than for the delicacy of the facial expressions. This is in some ways a pity, as Ram Gopal has a face which is second to none for showing shades of feeling, a talent for which many *padams* give him full scope.



Opposite: *Natinam Adinar*, Śiva's Cosmic Dance of Creation, performed by Ram Gopal at the Belur Temple. This is one of the most virile and exhausting male solos imaginable. Time: six minutes.

Overleaf: Another moment in the *Natinam Adinar*, which is typified by speed, elevation, expression, line and style.

Page 61: Ram Gopal danced for Cecil Beaton on the shore of the Arabian Sea, near Bombay. The great photographer wrote: 'Crimson gold brocade, a bejewelled, gold-skinned dancer . . . green sea and blue sky . . . make an unforgettable poem.' (Photo: Cecil Beaton)





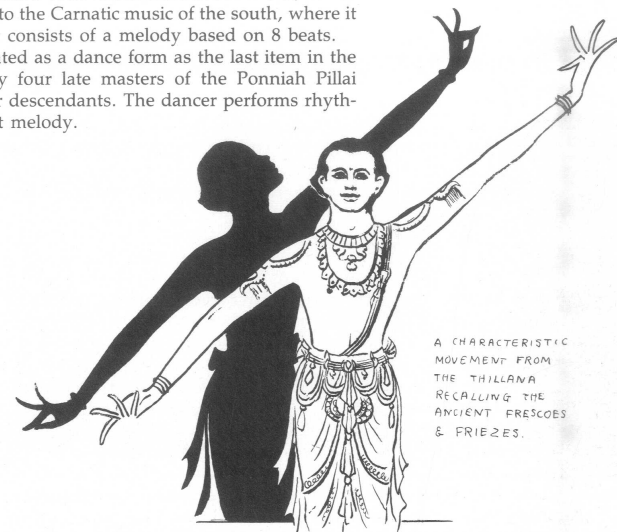


Krishna Tillana: Ram Gopal and Kumudini Lakhia.

T(h)illana

The *tarana*, a form of song, came to southern India from the Hindustani *ustads*, music teachers and masters of northern India about two centuries ago, and became absorbed into the Carnatic music of the south, where it is now known as a *tillana*. It consists of a melody based on 8 beats.

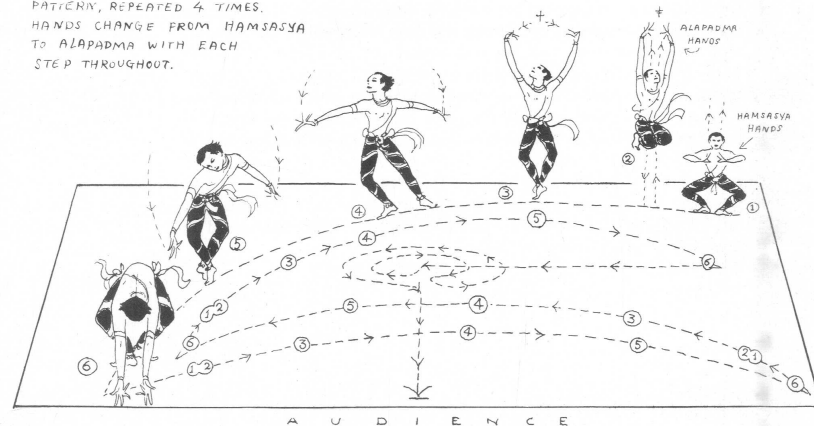
This pattern was incorporated as a dance form as the last item in the *Bharata Natya* programme by four late masters of the Ponniah Pillai family, who taught it to their descendants. The dancer performs rhythmic variations to the 8-beat melody.



A CHARACTERISTIC MOVEMENT FROM THE THILLANA RECALLING THE ANCIENT FRESCOS & FRIEZES.

AN INDICATION OF THE GENERAL CHOREOGRAPHY OF THE THILLANA:

Below, figs. 1-6: 8 GLIDING STEPS IN CRESCENT-PATTERN, REPEATED 4 TIMES. HANDS CHANGE FROM HAMSASYA TO ALAPADMA WITH EACH STEP THROUGHOUT.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Krishnattam

The little-known *Krishnattam* sacred dance dramas are similar to the *Kathakali* but are in fact older. They are exclusive to the temple of Guruvayur in Kerala where they are performed on auspicious occasions. Only recently has the *Krishnattam* dance been seen in the big cities of India and elsewhere.

The dance dramas relate the stories of the *Geeta Govinda* (see Chapter 4, page 28). All the dancers are men and masks are worn for certain characters. The make-up, head-dresses and billowing skirts are similar to those of *Kathakali* dance.

There is no word-for-word interpretation of the hand *mudras* and footwork, as there is with *Kathakali*, and there are fewer gestures and facial expressions. More emphasis is placed on powerful and lyrical dance sequences. A rich and rhythmic background is created by the musicians who sing and play on cymbals and two types of *maddalam* drum (a drum similar to the *mrdangam* but larger—played on both ends with the hands).

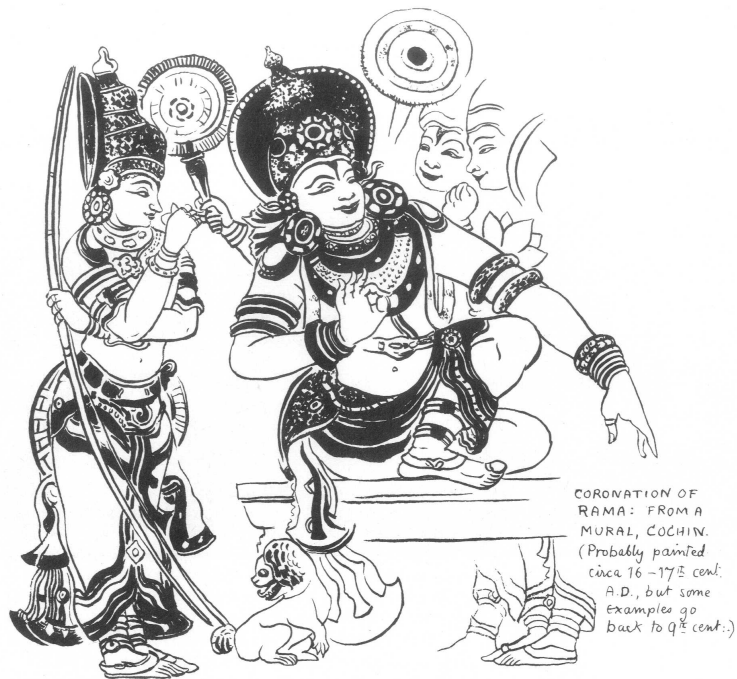
There are eight dance dramas performed on eight successive days within the pillared sanctuary of the temple itself. The dramas depict specific episodes in the life of Krishna: *Mahavishnu-Krishna*, *Kaliyamardanam*, *Rasakreeda*, *Kamsavadham*, *Swayamvaram*, *Banayudham*, *Vividavadham* and *Swargarohanam*.

Each one of these dramas is related to events in everyday life and is said to confer special blessings on the audience. In all parts of the world and throughout history people have danced to celebrate and also to supplicate. Havelock Ellis wrote in his *Dance of Life*:

For all the solemn occasions of life, for bridals and for funerals, for seed-time and for harvest, for war and for peace, for all these things there were fitting dances. Today we find religious people who in church pray for rain or for the restoration of their friends to health. Their forefathers also desired these things but, instead of praying for them, they danced for them the fitting dance which tradition had handed down, and which the chief or medicine-man solemnly conducted. The gods themselves danced, as the stars dance in the sky, so at least the Mexicans, and we may be sure many other peoples, have held; and to dance is therefore to imitate the gods, to work with them, perhaps to persuade them to work in the direction of our own desires. 'Work for us!' is the song-refrain, expressed or implied, of every religious dance.



Lord Krishna with his devotees.



CORONATION OF
RAMA: FROM A
MURAL, COCHIN.
(Probably painted
circa 16-17th cent.
A.D., but some
examples go
back to 9th cent.:)

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kathakali

History

For two thousand years there has been an almost unbroken tradition of theatrical arts in Kerala (old Malabar). The famous Cochin murals, depicting dance and drama, were painted over many centuries—some as far back as the ninth century. An artist 'caste' was created to ensure continuity; the members of the caste were maintained by gifts of land and rations at the expense of suitable authorities, giving their services in return, when required—the ideal arrangement of a subsidy, given in those days by rajah, king or art-loving nobleman, and supplied in modern times by the state, as in Russia, France, Finland, Denmark and England.

In common with ancient *Bharata Natya*, *Kathakali** was often distinguished by royalty on the cast of its performers, rajahs and monarchs being justly proud to take part in the dance dramas—just as, in seventeenth-century France, Louis XIV took part in the ballets performed at his court.

But already, probably in the sixteenth century, Punam Nambudiri, a dramatist in the Malayalam language of Kerala, gives the clue to his date when he tells of the arrival of people for the festival of Rama's coronation—wearing Portuguese hats. (Vasco da Gama first came to this coast at the end of the fifteenth century.)



* *Katha* meaning 'story', *kali* meaning 'play': thus 'story-play' or 'danced-drama'.

Costume

The mention of Rama, the gentle, perfect knight of Indian mythology, brings us back to the famous Cochin murals, an example of which appears at the head of this chapter. Compare it with the sketch of Ram Gopal as King Rugmangada opposite. The similarity is obvious and striking: what is the main difference? The mural shows King Rama in a *dhoti*, the classical Indian trouser, and with a bare torso. Ram Gopal, preparing for a contemporary sixteen-hour performance, wears the costume invariably used to-day, featuring a thick woollen or cotton jacket coloured red (or yellow or green) and a *crinoline-like billowing skirt*. In



A MALE DANCER, AS MOHINI, THE DANCING SEDUCTRESS. (KATHAKALI DANCE-DRAMA IS CONSIDERED TOO EXACTING & UNSUITABLE FOR WOMEN PERFORMERS.) NOTE THE ARTIFICIAL BOSOM, ALSO THE MARKED SIMILARITY OF THE HEAD ORNAMENTS & VEIL TO THOSE OF A MUSLIM LADY.

COSTUME & MAKE-UP FOR KRISHNA.

Below:

RAM GOPAL SLEEPS WITH HIS HEAD ON A WOODEN REST WHILE A KATHAKALI EXPERT APPLIES A MAKE-UP WHICH MAY TAKE AS MUCH AS 4 HOURS, THE ACTOR WAKING TRANSFORMED IN APPEARANCE & DISPOSITION TO THE CHARACTER HE IS TO PORTRAY.

Right: The finished make-up: King Rugmangada.



all other respects, head-dress, jewellery, etc., the costume is precisely the same. In the continuation of the mural, Sita is represented dressed similarly to her husband, with the upper part of her body bare. To-day, the female dancers must also wear the jacket.

One may logically assume that the twenty-four white layers of skirts were probably affected in accordance with the attire of the contemporary European ladies, along with the cumbersome, hot, long-sleeved jackets, as gestures of friendship and Western decency, as the kings and rajahs of Malabar (now Kerala) wisely made it their policy to try to avoid trouble with their visitors, to save their people from the horrors of militant instead of peaceful invasion.

The costumes shown in the frescoes are perfect for dancing: the subsequent addition of thick jackets covering torso and arms and billowing skirts is not only obviously unsuitable for that hot climate, but

encumbers the dancer. The facial expressions are purest *Kathakali* as cultivated to-day—but in the course of actual performances at the present time one notices the right hand of the actor-dancer hold his head-dress, which has grown enormous, in position as he performs a swift passage of the dance: in spite of which precaution the huge superstructure sometimes ruins the elaborate make-up of the performer, which it dislodges at the forehead and cheeks.

Make-up and Facial Masks

The *Kathakali* dancers use elaborate make-up to intensify the effect of their dance performance. The make-up takes hours to apply and each facial mask represents one of the different characters they wish to portray. Great care is taken to ensure that each colour is in its right place and the use of the paints and preparations is indeed a highly developed art. The basic make-up used is a blend of rice powder and certain paints. To give prominence to the expressions of the eyes a herbal seed is dropped in the eyes to make the whites red and glowing.

There are three types of *Tadi* or beards used by the dancers. The *Black Tadi*, generally worn by tribal huntsmen and forest dwellers has a black painted face, with white hair for the beard, white round the eyes and the lips painted red.

The *Red Tadi* is used to portray fierce characters and demons like Sargiva and Bali. The dancer often wears a furred coat and uses a red beard. The dancers' cheeks are painted white and the lips black with white bristles stretching from the eyebrows to the top of the lips.

The *White Tadi* portrays good characters such as Hanuman, friend of Rama. The dancer often wears a white coat and has the face painted half black and half red. A white moustache and woolly beard are used and the nose is painted green.

The *Kathi* make-up represents evil and ferocious characters such as enemies of the Gods and Ravana, the demon king of Sri Lanka. In *Kathi* the face is mostly painted green with red paint on either side of the nose and over the eyebrows. A large blob of white paint is applied on the forehead and tip of the nose.

The *Pachcha* make-up is used to portray all the heroes like Rama, Krishna, kings and noblemen. The face is painted green with red lips and blackened eyes. A white *chutti* which is a mixture of rice flour and lime is fixed to the lower part of the face and chin so that it stands out in fluted lines.

The *Minuku* make-up is mostly used by women characters and sages. The face is painted a pinkish-yellow and the lips are painted red. The eyes are enlarged by applying a black mixture to the eyebrows and eyelashes.

In the *Kari* make-up, used when the character is impersonating female demons, the face is painted black. A red crescent shape is drawn on the cheek bones and the eyes are elongated with black.

Great skill is needed in applying these masks and the dancer spends many hours lying down whilst the mask is applied before dressing in the elaborate costumes and magnificent head-dresses.

A Performance

If you lived in Kerala with its feathery palm-trees, graceful, composed inhabitants and brooding air of antiquity, you might suddenly hear a great deal of gong-sounding and drum-beating from the nearest temple—a bell-shaped building fantastically decorated inside and out. You could discover that this portentous clamour advertised to all within earshot (a considerable radius!) that there was to be a performance of a dance drama the following night, which would start at dusk and continue in all probability for sixteen hours.

A migration then starts towards the temple and, of course, you would join it. Your companions would include whole families, complete with beds for everyone and milk for the baby, making their dusky-eyed way on foot; families in bullock-carts, horse-carts, hand-carts and motor vehicles of suitable antiquity, all piled, bulging and overflowing with people. Everyone makes himself at home in the court outside the temple, the older ones bribing the younger ones to wake them at the moment their favourite actor or episode takes place. The discussions before, throughout and after the performance are exactly similar to those of dance enthusiasts all over the world, furious partisanship, comparing this dancer with that, with the elderly people complaining that the standard was far higher in their day.

The daylight starts to fade and the huge oil-lamp is lit—two men are specially engaged to feed it with oil and resin throughout the performance—and this will serve as stage-lighting, sometimes flanked by torches as well. Actors and dancers approach the light when they are to enact special passages, much as the limelight singles out details and personalities in the Western theatre.

The night eventually becomes peopled with strange and shadowy beings, gods, demons, half-man half-beast, hunters and veiled ladies. The performance will deal with events that shattered the three worlds, and, looking at the personnel, we are prepared to believe it. The basic moral is always that of the eternal warfare between Good and Evil.

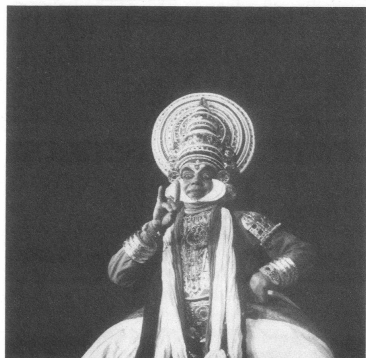
Just imagine the effect of the eventual appearance of Ravana, the Demon King, in such a setting. The flames leap in the brass burner with the brooding outlines of the temple dimly seen in the background. A brilliantly coloured cloth is held near the brass lamp by two attendants, as high as their arms can stretch, and violent drumming warns us that a terrific personality is about to appear. The sound of quick and heavy footsteps can be heard from behind the curtain, which is violently agitated from time to time as though some nucleus of fearful power was gathering its forces on the other side. A coloured canopy magically appears from nowhere over the curtain, from behind which a rumbling growl grows to a hair-raising shriek which rises above the thunder of the drums. Before our now starting eyes, two hands, one with beautiful long silver nails, now grip the top of the violently agitated curtain, and breathless we catch an occasional glimpse of the top of a golden head-dress which seems to be gyrating madly in some infernal whirlwind. What a height above the ground! We cannot help a sidelong glance at our companions for reassurance ... has something unforeseen occurred, have the performers gone too far in their invocations and



1



2



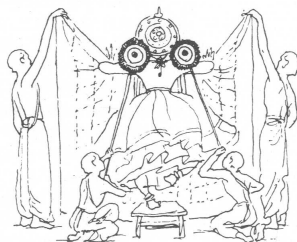
3



4

Four poses of Ravana, the Demon King.

RAVANA, BACK-STAGE VIEW, SHOWING THE FANS & BEARERS THAT MARK KINGLY BEINGS. EVENTUALLY HE THROWS HIS CURTAIN TO THE GROUND & LEAPS OVER IT. TREMENDOUS DRUMMING & PERCUSSION ACCOMPANIES HIS HEAVY FOOTWORK & ANKLE BELLS.



Above:
"TIRANOKKU" OR
"CURTAIN-LOOK" OF
RAVANA, WHOSE
DEMONISH MAKE-UP IS
CHARACTERISED BY A
WHITE CORK NOSE.

accidentally, horribly, produced the real thing—terrible Ravana, the ten-headed with twenty arms, the invincible, destructive and evil?

And so this hellish peep-show develops. The curtain is raised, lowered and raised again until excitement reaches fever-pitch. At last the whole figure of Ravana emerges, fighting with the curtain and then throwing it aside, accompanied by earth-shaking drumming, blood-curdling shrieks and the ominous sound of the conch. We know beyond doubt and against reason that this is Ravana incarnate in a human body (see p. 73). (This interlude with a curtain is known in Kathakali as *tiranokku* (literally 'curtain look') and has special versions to suit different characters and situations.)

Afterwards we discover the main reason for the metamorphosis. The dancer-actor in question has studied Kathakali for twenty years, and has studied the character of Ravana until he knows and feels it inside out. Whilst the expert applies his make-up (the latter having served an apprenticeship of at least four years), which takes four hours, the actor sleeps and meditates on all he knows of Ravana. When he awakes, he is Ravana. He looks like him and feels like him. On this example the whole system of Kathakali dance-drama is based.

Technique

The tremendous melodrama which is *Kathakali* is propelled by a basic training which is second to none in pure scope. On the physical side the dancer must have perfect control of his body and limbs, which is achieved after at least twelve years of study and regular, special massage given by the feet of the masseur to the dancer as he lies on the ground. In ancient times every boy from Malabar, and sometimes girls too, underwent massage and had a few lessons in dancing as a matter of course. A feature of the training is the deep bend of the knees, and the turned-in feet. Dexterous and powerful footwork and rhythm are indispensable.

On the expressive side, let us state at the outset that a blank face makes a career in *Kathakali* out of the question. The *Kathakali* technique of using the face is a pure marvel of accomplishment, and Kunju Kurup is the greatest and most respected master of all.

Some of the ancient masters have such control of their facial muscles and expressions that they can laugh with one side of their faces and (literally) cry with the other.

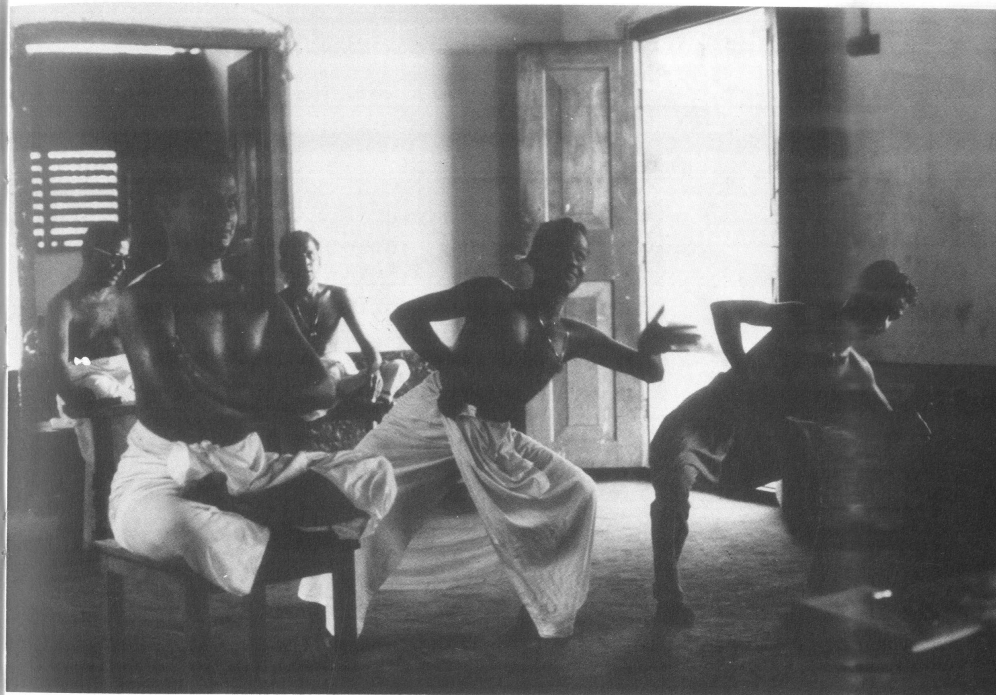
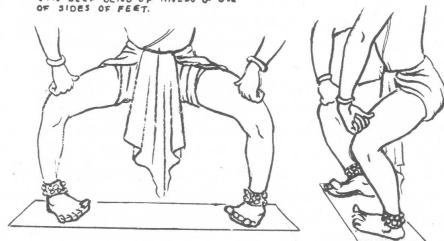
Every *Kathakali* dancer must be a master of both *tandava*—the vigorous masculine style demanded by duels and passages of pure dance, and *lasya*—the more lyrical style, and it is pure enchantment to see them change from one style to the other. *Lasya* is divided into two categories: one suitable for men (for presenting love-scenes, displays of sympathy, sentiment and so on) and the other suitable for women, and boys who take female roles. As mentioned elsewhere, women may study *Kathakali* but may not take part in pure dance-drama, which is too vigorous and difficult for them. (See *Sari Dance*, pages 76–77.)

Basic Posture

The highly conventional use of the sides of the feet has been developed by *Kathakali* dancers to save their soles from soreness after a sixteen-hour performance. It need not be adopted by more casual students of *Kathakali*, as it tends to affect natural stance (as it is intended to do) and looks unbecoming in other dance-styles. Imagine delicate *Bharata Natya* with these turned-in feet and the bandy legs which the *Kathakali* dancer must cultivate!

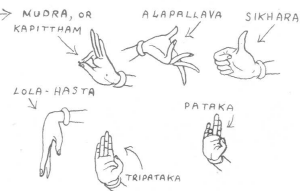
BASIC KATHAKALI

STANCE SHOWING CHARACTER-
ISTIC DEEP BEND OF KNEES & USE
OF SIDES OF FEET.



Kathakali students rehearsing in the Kottakal Dance School.

KATHAKALI MUDRAS USED
IN FOLLOWING SEQUENCES:
(note different designations to
BHARATA NATYA)

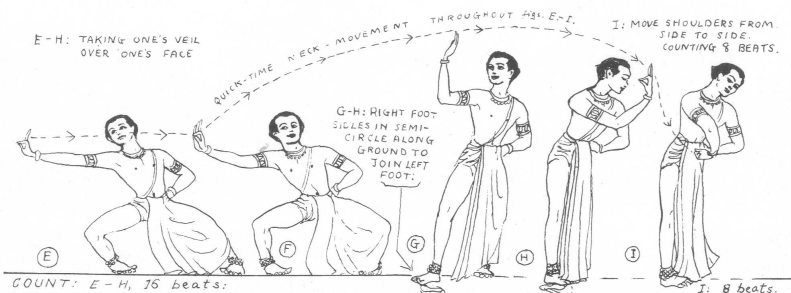


SOME MOVEMENTS
FROM THE
SARI-DANCE.

Right: FIRST POSE →



A1

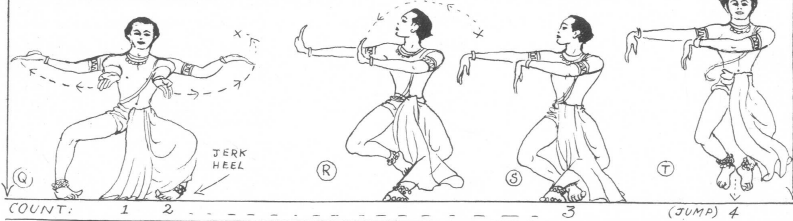


REPEAT J1-J2 RISING.

Q: QUICK NECK MOVEMENT;
TRIPATAKA HANDS.

S-T: HANDS LOLA-HASTA

REPEAT
OTHER
SIDE

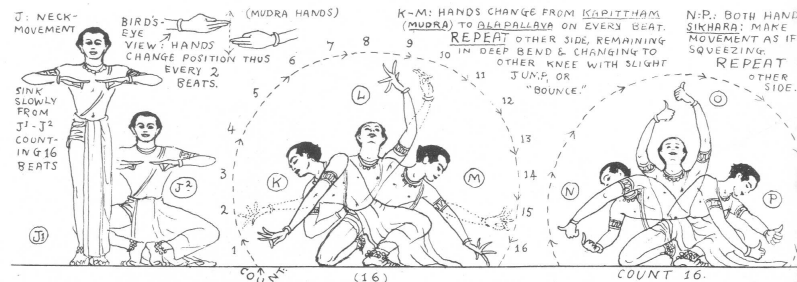
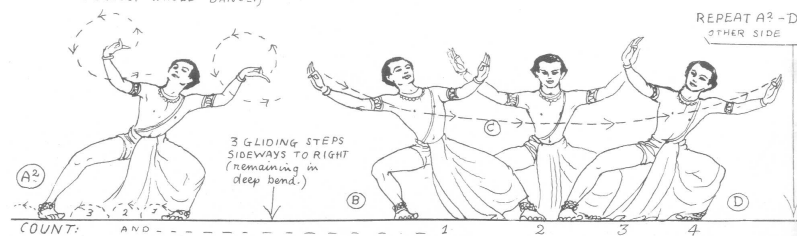


The Sari Dance

The Sari Dance has many diverse and beautiful movements, a few of which are sketched above, some of them based on an idea and some purely decorative. This dance is usually performed by women, and is studied by men who must have a complete command of the *lasya* aspect of Kathakali and by boys who dance female roles in all-night ballets.

A1: SLOW RECHAKAS OR NECK-MOVEMENT, (COUNTING 16).

HANDS: MUDRA; A2: 3 GLIDING STEPS
TO RIGHT. (NOTE: EYEBROWS MOVE EXPRESSIVELY
THROUGHOUT WHOLE DANCE.)

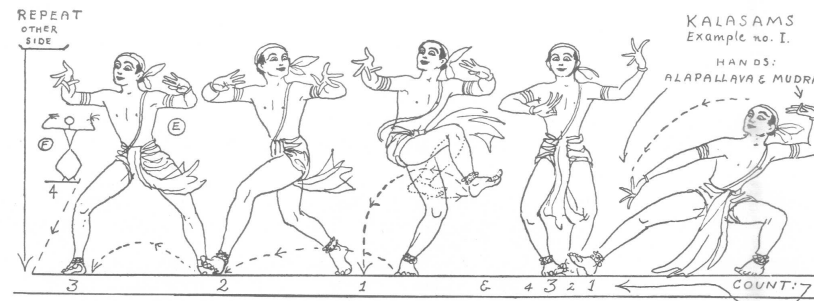




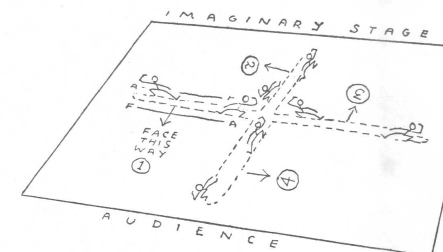
From one of the Kathakali dances: Dussasana leaps high in the air, challenging Bhima.



Bhima slaying Dussasana.



KALASAM
Example no. II.
(A HUNTER.)



ABOVE: CHOREOGRAPHY
OF KALASAM no. I.
(Sequence A-F repeated
twice facing 4 different
directions.)

Kalasams

The word *kalasam* is probably derived from the Arabic term *xalasa* which means a conclusion, especially in music. In Kathakali a *kalasam* indicates a passage of vigorous dance, pure *tandava*, performed at the end of sung verses. The sketches above can give but little idea of the speed, agility and masculine vigour with which the various *kalasams* can be performed. Such steps are an excellent illustration of *tandava* and only suitable for men. A suggestion of the choreography gives an impression of the virility of the dance performed in the flickering oil lamp at speed.



Krishna expressing his love for Rukmini, in a Kathakali dance.



The nine rasas or moods

The robust and penetrating expressions of the Kathakali dance with their surprising subtlety, the delicate, religious seductiveness of the Bharata Natya invocational style, and the highly elegant and refined art of the expressive dancer of Kathak, should all be performed in accordance with the nine rasas detailed in Bharata's *Natya Shastra* (see page 33). Allusions to these moods or sentiments are usually confined to photographs of the face. This gives rise to the impression that they only concern the features, but all situations in Indian dancing are, or should be, governed by the rasas, with the face as the principal indicator of the emotion involved. In the mood of fear, for example, the whole body and every movement should register terror, as well as the face.

1. ŚIVA (AS HIS WIFE PARVATI GOES OUT TO BATHE, LEAVING THEIR ELEPHANT-HEADED SON GANAPATHI IN HIS CARE): "SUSPICIOUS WOMAN, THAT!"



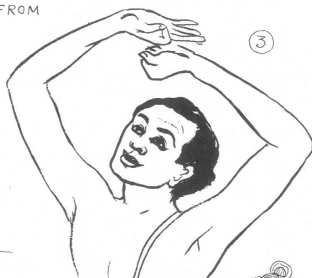
A legend of Śiva's family life

This legend is told with the hands and face by Ram Gopal, who was taught by Kunju Kurup, one of the greatest Kathakali dancers and mimes. It relates how Parvati, the beautiful wife of Śiva, goes to the river to bathe, warning her husband to take good care of Ganapathi (Ganesha), their elephant-headed son (see page 12). The moment she is out of sight, Śiva rudely dismisses Ganapathi and brings down Ganga, the goddess of the Ganges who lives concealed in his hair (see page 13), to sit on his knee. Parvati, suspicious of Śiva's sudden desire to have her go and bathe, makes a sudden return. Śiva just has time to whip Ganga back into his locks and to take up a pose of deep meditation before Parvati hurries in. He pretends to be outraged at this disturbance of his artful prayers and has forgotten all about Ganapathi who sulks quietly in a corner. When Śiva tries to play the kindly father, Ganapathi refuses to come. Parvati is jealous and furious. However, Śiva by great diplomacy wins them both over, and there is a happy family reunion.

2. "RUN AWAY AND PLAY, GANAPATHI: FATHER'S BUSY."



3. "COME OUT FROM UNDER MY LOCKS, O BEAUTEIOUS GANGA!"



(NOTE ON FIG. 3: ŚIVA'S HAIR WHEN COILED.)



4. "AH LOTUS-EYED BEAUTY, WHAT ECSTASY TO HOLD THEE IN MY ARMS, IN THE ABSENCE OF THAT TIRE SOME PARVATI!"



5. "HEAVENS! THAT'S PARVATI RETURNING FROM HER BATHE—SURPRISINGLY EARLY....."



(GANGA THE RIVER-GODDESS WHO HIDES IN ŚIVA'S HAIR)



6. PARVATI: "I SENSED HE'D BEEN UP TO TRICKS BEHIND MY BACK! JUST LIKE A MAN.... BUT HOW ICY COLD THE RIVER—WATER WAS....."



8. PARVATI: "SO THAT'S HOW YOU MEDITATE.... —AND WHERE IS OUR CHILD GANAPATHI?"



7. ŚIVA: "NONSENSE, I WAS MEDITATING IN PEACE, SUSPICIOUS WOMAN."



9. ŚIVA: "COME HERE GANAPATHI, MY SWEET LITTLE SON....."



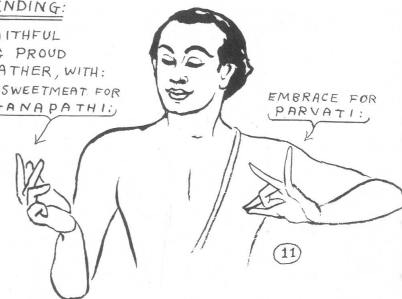
10. GANAPATHI: "FATHER TURNED ME AWAY AS SOON AS YOU WENT TO BATHE, SO NOW I SHAN'T GO TO HIM ANY MORE."



11. HAPPY ENDING:

ŚIVA AS FAITHFUL HUSBAND & PROUD FATHER, WITH: SWEETMEAT FOR GANAPATHI;

EMBRACE FOR PARVATI;



NOTE ON FIG. 10:



(KATHAKALI CONVENTIONAL MIME, DESCRIBING AN ELEPHANT, WAVING HANDS & ARMS SYMBOLISE THE MOVEMENTS OF EARS & TRUNK.)

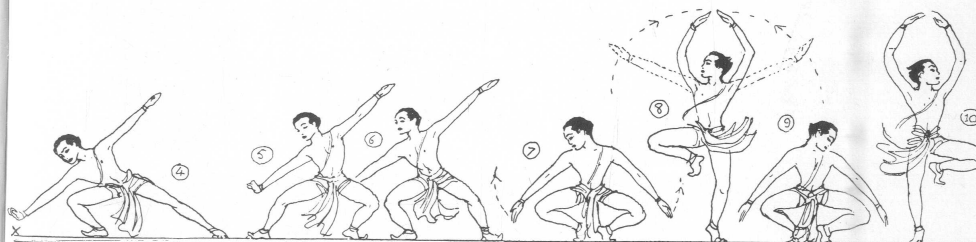
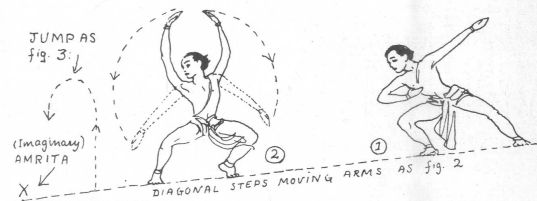


Ram Gopal as Garuda, the Golden Eagle, bearer of Vishnu.

Garuda, the Golden Eagle

A detail removed from a Kathakali dance drama concerns Garuda, the Golden Eagle, who is often the bearer of Vishnu; it has been arranged as a solo dance which has become one of Ram Gopal's most famous items. In this case, he has availed himself of the option not to dance on the sides of his feet.

This version of the dance is not only remarkable for dash and vigour but for the bird-like subtleties of the head, neck and eye movements with which Ram Gopal has invested it, and which result, as is too seldom the case, from a close study of birds. Of real gold, the costume is an 'eye-snatcher', but the dance is just as effective without it.



Kathakali



VISHNU RIDING ON GARUDA
Detail from
Nepalese
ornament
lapis lazuli,
gold &
gems

(Ram Gopal Collection)

CHAPTER NINE

Yakshagana

This style of dance drama is particular to Kanara, the coastal area of Karnataka State (formerly Mysore), but may be described as an off-shoot of the ancient *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* of Andhra Pradesh (see also chapters on the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* of Tamil Nadu and on the *Kuchipudi* dance of Andhra) or of the *Kathakali* dance dramas of neighbouring Kerala State. Men and boys, usually from the villages, receive a thorough grounding in the art before travelling from village to village in groups to perform at the local temples.

Yakshagana dramas are based on stories from the two great Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* (the saga of Rama and his family) and the *Mahabharata* (the struggle between good and evil spirits). The actor dancers speak and sing in the course of performances as well as dance. In North Kanara, the acting overshadows the dance, whereas in South Kanara the style is much closer to that of *Kathakali* and of the *Krishnattam* of Guruvayur in Kerala.

The tremendous leaps and powerful foot work are reminiscent of the whirling dervishes of Turkey. The picturesque and elaborate head-dresses, make-up and costumes are all closely related to those of *Kathakali* and *Krishnattam*. The golden 'jewels' are made of wood as for *Kathakali*, and adorn neck, arms and waist-belt.

A group of *Yakshagana* performers.



CHAPTER TEN

Orissi

Orissi dance of the state of Orissa is one of the most ancient of India's schools of classical dance and one which embraces aspects of the dances found to the north and the south. Like other schools of dance it has slept and only in the twentieth century has it been revived. South of Baripada, in the north-east of Orissa, lie some bleak hills which still bear relics of the Stone Age—curiously reminiscent of the images produced by the Indus Valley Civilisation at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa.

The Adivasis who inhabited Orissa before the Aryan conquerors came from the north three to four thousand years ago now inhabit the mountain valleys. They guard jealously their ancient customs and rituals which include cults of erotic dances performed until they fall into trance-like sleep.

In the same bleak hills south of Baripada have been found carvings of Brahma, Śiva and Vishnu—the eternal aspects of God in human form—always with dancing girls and showing the search through earthly ecstasies for oneness with the Divine. Later the influence of Buddha and his contemporary, Mahavira (founder of the Jain religion in the north-west of India), can be seen, with carvings depicting dances performed by Kharavela, the Jain king, and his court. They show the *tandava* (masculine) and *lasya* (feminine) aspects of dance together with many of the moods and expressions which are now categorised as *bhava*. And the post-Gupta period (after the seventh century) left some of the best carvings found in this area.

The kings of Orissa ruled over an Golden Age from about the fifth to the fifteenth century. Their Indo-Aryan style of architecture flourished in the temples of Orissa state in the area near Cuttack. Nearly all the ninth-century temples in Bhubaneswar, often called the 'cathedral city of India' have the sacred Gods enshrined. Outside, the erotic and exquisite sex images tell of earth's transitory ecstasies ending in death, rebirth and finally Nirvana. The sculptures of male and female dancers, singers and musicians at the Vishnu temple of Jaganath, Lord of the Universe, in the town of Puri and at the *Natya Mandappa*, a temple in the town of Konarak, are a living testimony to the Orissi dance as it must have been.

It would appear from these temple sculptures that there was a form of the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka*, dance dramas in which the *Geeta Govinda* stories (episodes from the life of Krishna—see Chapter 4 page 28) were performed with all their erotic and spiritual appeal. Some of the musicians hold large drums that must have demanded strength and skill to play, similar to the *maddalam* drum used with *Krishnattam* dance; also large cymbals that must have resounded with great force.

Most shrines had a special dance area, the *Natya Mandir*, facing the inner sanctum where lamps burned and flickered, fed by the oil of the High Priests. Here, dances of a more restricted type must have taken place, for there is little space between the pillars for many dancers to perform at the same time. The whole audience, kings, princes and courtiers, chanted and 'became one' in their litanies of love for the One

Divine. Then, after the drawing aside of a curtain, the sacred dances were performed by the temple dancers. These bejewelled, perfumed *maharis*, or *devadasis*, danced, acted and sang (accompanied by drums, flutes, cymbals and *shenai* music) to awaken the Gods at dawn and midday and to send them to sleep at dusk. These dances, and also certain full-moon festivities, must have been rituals of great mystical beauty, full of colour, music and spectacle.

In the twentieth century, the great dance style which is known today as the *Orissi* was unknown until the art critic, Charles Fabri, rediscovered and wrote about the almost forgotten art after he had witnessed the exquisite performance of Indrani Rehman. She was the daughter of the American dancer, Ragini Devi, one of the pioneers of the redevelopment of ancient dance in India. It was Indrani Rehman and the guru, Kalicharan Patnaik, (aided by Charles Fabri's articles in newspapers and books), who reawakened and redeveloped this dance style. Homage is also due to Prataprudra Dev, Ramananda Patnaik and Kelucharan Mohapatra who have prepared the present programme of *Orissi* dance.

Rich as it is today in Orissa, the dance is fragmentary compared with what it must have been centuries ago. The dance in its present form, which is performed in the main centres of Puri and Bhubaneswar or in the great temple of the Sun God at Konarak, has been recreated on the basis of the great treatise, Bharata's *Natya Sastra* (see page 33). Some of the *maharis* still remain who perform their ritualistic dances both within and without the temples. (As in other parts of India, the *maharis* (*devadasis*) have over many years sunk into disrepute.) In the present revival, as in *Kathakali* dance, boys generally take the part of female characters or dance roles concerned with the *lasya*, or feminine, aspects of dance, while the more virile men perform the *tandava* types of dance, appearing as gods, kings, princes, demons and mythical beasts and birds.

(Well inland, in the district of Sambalpur, there are performances of the *Śabda Svarapata*, a dance praising the Gods. This has a swift tempo and is performed exclusively as a *tandava* dance. The most important Gods depicted are Śiva and Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, son of Śiva and Parvati.)

When performed correctly, *Orissi* dance is sinuous and rhythmic, with great flexibility and grace in the curves of the body and spine and in the expressions of the eyes and face. The hands tell the story and the feet keep the rhythm. Story-telling episodes are separated by rhythmic sequences of pure dance.

Performances take place in or near a temple and today consist of a series of mostly solo dances, the programme having eight items:

- 1 *Patra Prabesh* A dancer enters to perform the invocation and votive offering.
- 2 *Bhumi Pranam* A dancer makes salutation to the earth and to the invisible deities of the stage for the removal of any obstacles.
- 3 *Vignaraja Puja* A dance in praise of Vignaraja (Ganesha), describing how he removes all difficulties and blesses both performer and audience.

- 4 *Batu Nrtya* This dance in praise of Śiva combines acting and dancing and depends to a great extent on the individual grace, rhythm and skill of the performer. When well performed, it can 'bring to life' some of the temple sculptures.
- 5 *Ishta Deva Bandana* A song in Sanskrit of the soul yearning for union with the Divine. Facial expressions and accompanying hand gestures interpret one of the *Geeta Govinda* stories.
- 6 *Swara Pallavi Nrtya* Here again, pure lyrical dance is mingled with expression and gesture.
- 7 *Abhinaya Nrtya* Another verse from the *Geeta Govinda* about man's love for the Divine expresses the devotional aspect of Orissi dance.
- 8 *Tari Jhamo* A slow tempo becomes faster and faster. Head, arms, hands, torso, hips and feet move gracefully but at great speed. The dancers appear like a series of friezes or frescoes come to life.

The *Orissi* classical dance has awakened after a long period of obscurity and enriches the classical dances of India today. A performance facing the sea at Konarak at dawn or dusk is unequalled in all India for sheer magic and splendour by its position, architecture and beauty.



Two poses from the *Batu Nrtya* dance in praise of Śiva, which forms part of the *Orissi* programme.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Chhau

The *Chhau* dance is noted for the masks which the dancers wear. These seem to take on the spirit of the character portrayed; so uncanny is the 'life' that possesses the dancer that actual expressions appear to pass across his mask.

Chhau dance is performed in three areas. The *Chhau* of Purulia, in West Bengal to the west of Calcutta, has strong tribal and folk elements; the dancers, all men, wear male and female masks with elaborate head-dresses and costumes. The style ranges from a semi-static posture to great speed when the dancer whirls, turns and leaps into the air, sometimes landing on his feet and sometimes on his knees. The dancers need agility, strength and speed. One of the most striking ballets (if one may use the term) in this style is the exciting tale of the battle between the goddess, Durga, and the demon, Mahisha-Sura, in which good triumphs over evil. Mahisha-Sura threatens to conquer the earth with his army of evil spirits, but at the point when he is about to succeed, Durga enters to defend the world from the powers of darkness. In the battle that ensues, Durga triumphs.

Slightly to the south, the *Chhau* dance of the town of Saraikela in Bihar and that of the Mayurbhanj area of Orissa state are two schools that are very close in style, both traditionally danced by men only. In Saraikela in mid-April the Chaitra Parva festival is dedicated to Ardhanari, the bi-sexual aspects of Siva and Parvati.



In *Chhau*, the masks worn by the dancers seem uncannily alive because of the use of hands, body and feet. These dancers are at Saraikela, Bihar.

A WATER-FÊTE AT NIGHT, WITH ILLUMINATED BARGE & KATHAK DANCING.
(From part of an unfinished miniature Rajput drawing, early 18th century.)



CHAPTER TWELVE

Kathak

During their rule, which lasted from about the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the Moghuls introduced into India their own style of court dance, an extremely elegant and refined art which had, however, no religious or spiritual significance. Most Moghul emperors encouraged the arts at their courts and Hindu artists adopted (or rather adapted) the Moghul style, mingling it with their own art and producing masterpieces of decorative art and painting.

The *Kathak* dance developed in very much the same way. Starting as an elegant and highly cultivated, but purely decorative, art, it became intermingled with Hindu thought and mythology. *Kathak* dances may now be said, with certain exception, to be practically the sole preserve of Radha, the shy sloe-eyed milkmaid and Krishna, her mischievous boy-god suitor. Their amorous exchanges symbolise love of the Divine through the medium of music, dancing and singing (see *Ras Leela*, page 17) in just the same way as ancient *Bharata Natya*.

In *Bharata Natya* the traditional postures, movements, ballets and orchestras are mostly recorded by the sculptures, bronzes and reliefs of Southern India, with an occasional fading fresco here and there. But the records of *Kathak* dancing and its development are almost entirely represented by miniature paintings which supply with that microscopic detail, which seldom if ever seems to destroy the effectiveness of the painting as a whole, the minutest information regarding costumes, jewellery, movement, environment, chapter and verse.

Radha and Krishna steal away together, lovers against the velvet dark blue of the night. Krishna, finding that an insulted King of the Gods, Indra, is sousing the earth with torrential rain, balances a mountain on the little finger of his left hand and invites the milkmaids and cows to take shelter underneath. He catches those same milkmaids swimming in the river and climbs a tree with all their clothes, causing much consternation in the water. On the festival of *Holi*, he squirts Radha with coloured

water as she leans from her balcony: she replies by emptying coloured powder on the head of her lord, mourning her ruined sari. Śiva, Parvati and Ganesha picnic, misunderstand one another and make amends again. Gentle-eyed cows adorned with bells and necklaces listen enthralled to the melodies played on his flute by Krishna, the divine cowherd; delicately painted birds listen in blossoming trees, and Radha sets down her pot of whey, being careful not to step on the assembly of squirrels and mice who are also attending this celestial *obligato*.

A world of mixed and colourful enchantment; but to-day the *Kathak* dancer is rare who can make us smell those flowers, sense the soft fur of the fauns and evoke the gentle mystery of those starlit romances, where the miniaturist has painted with such sympathy two lovers planning an elopement.

The *Kathak* dance of northern India suffered until recently the same degradation as *Bharata Natya*, the ancient temple dance of southern Tanjore. It deteriorated into an erotic and vulgar dance and came under attack; like all the other dance styles, no quarter was given to the genuine



Kathak performed as a Nautch Dance. (From a lithograph dated 1858.)
Ram Gopal collection.



Ram Gopal as Shah Jahan in the *Legend of the Taj Mahal*, performed at the Edinburgh Festival and in London.

classical performers, for the Voice of Morality invariably tips out the baby with the bath-water, artistically speaking. Had it not been for a certain art-loving Maharajah who maintained the best teachers and dancers at a regular salary at his own palace throughout the recent 'dark ages' of Indian dancing, and so conserved the traditions of the art, it is hard to tell what would have happened to the present much-respected genuine *Kathak* school of dancing, which has preserved the original dynamic style, without which *Kathak* dancing is little more than a sort of voluptuous solo-perambulation punctuated by aimless spinning.

The *Kathak* dance-style as it may be learned to-day was founded by the master Maharaj Binda Din, whose portrait is to be found in the leading dance academies, an object of much respect. He codified and wrote down all that was best in the dance of his day; before he did this, the dance lived only in the heads of performers and teachers, a precarious condition for an art form of such transience.

Binda Din must have been a fabulously gifted performer of *Kathak* dancing in all its aspects, and a man of great patience and learning to record what he knew in such detail. In *Kathak* dancing, *tandava* describes this fiery technique as it is performed by a dancer who stands and moves

about; and *lasya* is the aspect in which the dancer kneels, or remains immobile the whole time except for the *gât* as described later on, and tells stories with his expressive powers only, with his face and hands, and it is astonishing what enchantment such a 'dancer' can weave. To-day I believe the dancer who excels in both these aspects, the *tandava* and the *lasya*, is unknown; performers invariably specialise in either *tandava* or *lasya*, and one who can act cannot perform brilliant dance-sequences, and the other way about. Binda Din left behind him a complete account of suitable instructions for the gesture-stories, and a wonderful school of pure dance technique covering the *tandava* aspect of the art, a vigorous, brilliant and powerful style which can be performed with relative ease to a recurrent beat of 8, known as *trital*, or developed until one sequence can embrace over 100 beats at a stretch of crossed, interwoven rhythms which need a brain which combines a memory like an elephant, a capacity for working out algebraic problems with sharp slaps of the feet, and a clock-like sense of basic time. (An appreciative audience needs the same qualities!)

One of the most celebrated proponents of the recent *Kathak* school was Jailal, who taught the pure technique in both its aspects. (He was held by his students in the same esteem as Enrico Cecchetti was held by pupils of ballet in the West.) His was the *classe de perfection*, the pupils few and chosen with care. Like Western ballet, and most other dance forms, *Kathak* falls into two main divisions: the pure and classical style, which takes much study, and the softened-up, popular, fashionable and easier-to-master version.

This voluptuous style is marked by a number of publicity tricks, and specialises in stunts to impress the credulous. For example, red sand is sprinkled on the floor and dancers draw outlines of simple objects with their feet in the course of a gliding step closely resembling the *pas de bourrée* of the ballet dancer, the resulting design being afterwards displayed with great bravura. Dancers claim they can perform this gliding step on gauze without wrinkling it, and a large reward is offered to anyone who can espy a crease, and so forth. (Publicity-loving *yogis* do tricks in the same spirit, to attract attention, and are much despised on this account by genuine *yogis*.) The consequence of all this is a large and prosperous school of gracefully ineffectual *Kathak* dancers who can only perform to a time of 8 beats to a bar. And anyway, a modern *Kathak* dancer can really do whatever he likes in a display of dancing, and, if anyone questions his or her authenticity, the over-worked reply is invariably, 'But that is the style I learned'.

The serious student of classical *Kathak* dancing will not have nearly so much fun and very hard work indeed, but his rewards are of course infinitely greater. In *his* school, the teacher is apt to put bricks round the dancer's feet and if he moves off the spot in the *chukras* (or whipping brilliant turns) bruised toes will teach a memorable lesson.

Those *chukras* are the trade-mark of *Kathak* dancing, the most sensational and easily remembered feature. Some remarkable girl-dancers turn so fast that you cannot see them but can clearly hear their black plait of hair whistling through the air like a whip. Others have been known to crack concrete floors with their foot-work: and these are not publicity stunts, but the result of their powerful dance style.



Kumudini Lakhia spinning in a typical *Kathak* dance.

The footwork or *tatkar* of *Kathak* dancing should be specially noticed, as it could be studied with benefit by students of any one of the Indian classical dance-styles, and often is. Even the basic step, starting slowly and gaining speed like a number of gears, is an exercise in itself, as however fast the feet fly, the separate beats must be clearly discernible and no blurring can be countenanced.

Music

Here, there is no place to go into the highly specialised question of *Kathak* rhythms, but it will give the reader an idea of the general set-up to know that as far as the ordinary dance-company is concerned, a much simplified and usually slightly corrupt version of *Kathak* is employed as a vehicle for unimportant ballet-themes, using the easy *trital*, composed of 4 groups of 4 beats, or two of 8 beats, adding up to 16 and corresponding to the simplest Western basic time. The *Kathak* dance specialist in *tandavu* may develop dances based on any basic time, great or small, odd or even, up to over a hundred beats at a time, carrying the basic beat in his or her head, dancing cross-times and counterpoint and always ending on *sum*, or one beat after the prescribed number has been finished. The drummer maintains staccato descriptive chant and rhythm on the double-drums, *tabla* and *baya*, or on the more classical *mahamrdang*, and the melody is played on an instrument such as the *sarangi* (see instruments on pages 22–23). A local audience knows the number of beats because of the melody, and they applaud when dancer, drummer and instrumentalist all reach a climax simultaneously on the beat, *sum*.

So a finished *Kathak* technician can choose an awkward time, such as groups of 9, 10 or 11 beats, and perform a whole dance in accordance with it, including *thât*, *gât*, and all the rest of it, but it is certainly not worth while taking all that trouble unless the audience can appreciate such efforts; and the only audience capable of understanding such a complicated affair would have to be composed of *Kathak* teachers, pupils, professors, etc. Nevertheless, in comparatively simple *tal*, or timing, there is plenty of scope for the accomplished *Kathak* dancer to delight the eye and capture the senses in a way that is more easily understood, and—let us admit—nearer to that universality which should be the goal of the real artist.

Costume

A study of the innumerable and magnificent records provided by the Moghul, Rajput, Kangra and other styles of miniature paintings which cover the last 3–4 centuries of North Indian dance and costume development, will reveal that the artists appreciated to the full that the *Kathak* dance, with its whirling and spinning, should be accentuated by a *ghagara*,* or immensely full skirt, such as many North Indian women wear to this day; they refrained from painting dancers attired in saris—a dancer spinning in a sari is a clumsy sight. The ill-informed believe the sari to be the traditional dress for *Kathak* dancing. As to the men: look at the traditional Rajput court dress on page 113, and then at the same person dancing in white leggings, waistcoat and *topi*-cap across the foot of pages 100–101. This latter costume is accounted the best and most traditional to-day, although miniatures invariably show the full, pleated skirts for dancers, male and female, if one excepts Krishna's yellow *dhoti* or trousers; but even the *dhoti* has more movement than those white, tight leggings.

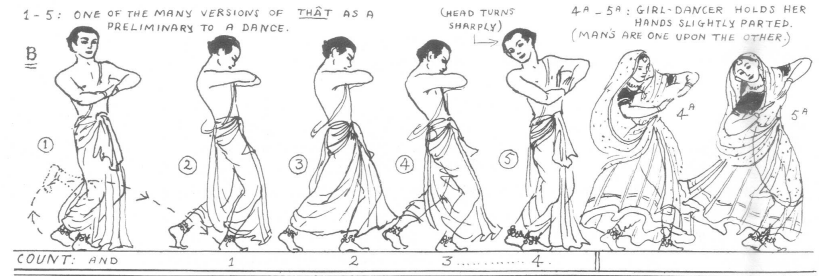
* See page 113.

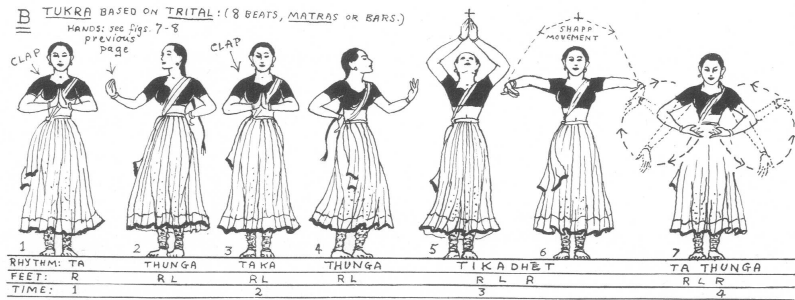
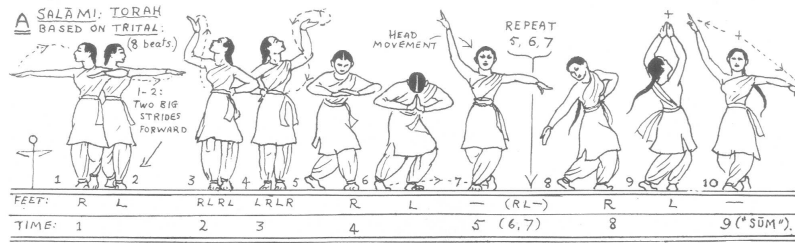


Kathak terms

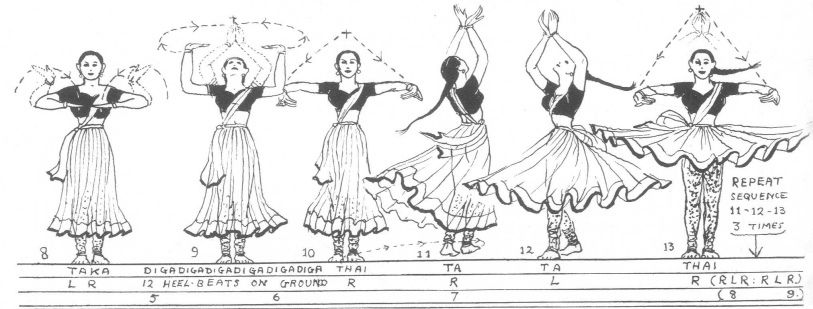
Here is a summary of the main terms in *Kathak* dancing, and their meanings and functions in the classroom:

- 1 *Tatkar* As described above, this term embraces the powerful footwork in the form of an exercise, including the complicated cross-rhythms.
- 2 *Thāt* A kind of opening gambit, an example of which can be found in sequence B opposite, featuring the characteristic use of the head with slight, crisp changes of direction. This is usually followed by a stylised 'walk', an example of which can be seen in sequence C.
- 3 *Gāt* A short decorative or descriptive passage performed in rather a lyrical manner to a gentle rhythm. Classified as *lasya*.
- 4 *Torah* The first *torah* to be performed in a *Kathak* class should be the *salami* (see top of page 100), which is a greeting to the audience or master and takes the place of the *Bharata Natya namaskaram* (see page 51), and is also comparable to the traditional bow or curtsy addressed to the teacher at the end of a Western ballet class. Substantially, a *torah* is a fast and brilliant dance sequence which includes *sangit* (dramatic content) in addition to dance technique, e.g. *salami* contains a salute.
- 5 *Tukra* A dance sequence, pure brilliant and fast, showing technique alone.





The genuine *Kathak* dance, on which the sketches in this book are based and which retains all the latent brilliance of the original style, is a matchless technique; but it needs rejuvenation for stage-presentation and a return to classical principles of costume and presentation, as do almost all the other traditional Indian dance-styles. It is necessary to restore to these dances the charm some of them have undoubtedly lost through antiquity; the technical vitality is there, the records of costumes and ornaments, the requisite mythological data, but the majority of the dancers seem unable to put everything together and therefore much of the original splendour is lacking. Of course, *Kathak* dancing on an illuminated barge (see page 91) is one thing: the dry and uninspiring atmosphere of the modern concert-hall, where the same steps and movements are apt to look dreadfully dull, is quite another. Without losing this wonderful and and vital dance-technique, a way must be found between modernisation, which is always dangerous, and over-academicism, which is dull; but revitalisation is imperative.



Dances of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam

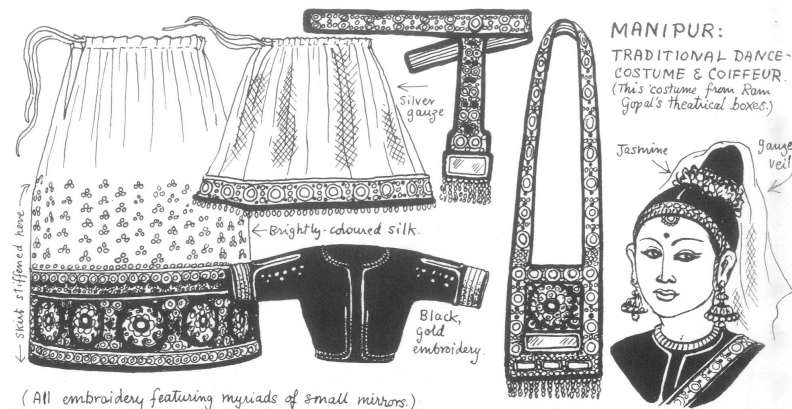
In the states of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam, that lie between Bhutan (in the foothills of the Himalayas), Bangladesh and Burma, the lush green forest, heavy rainfall and ancient temples make one of the most beautiful and fascinating areas of India. The art and culture are rich and varied and almost everybody dances. It is no wonder that the exciting Naga and folk dances exist side by side with the lyrical and exquisite temple dances.

The people of these states celebrate three major festivals (*bihus*) in the year, of which the most important celebrates the arrival of the New Year, in mid-April. It is an occasion for folk dancing and singing to the accompaniment of many musical instruments. Community feasting also plays an important part. Other festivals include the *Kharai Puja* of the Bodos, the *Nongkrem Puja* of the Khasis, the *Wangala* of the Garos and the *Sekreni Genna* of the Nagas.

Manipuri

In Manipur, on the Burmese border, the faces of the people reflect their diverse origins: some appear Burmese, some Mongolian, some pure Aryan. The village temples—many of which are dedicated to Krishna—are known for dances in which all the people take part. They celebrate several festivals with great pomp: in October and November the *Ras Leela* in which is enacted in dance an episode from the life of Krishna (see also page 17). Imphal, the capital of Manipur, can boast of some of the most beautiful and exquisite ritual dancers of the *Ras Leela*, in which the women dance with and round the man who dances the role of the Blue God, Krishna.

The Manipuri dance style has much in common with both *Kathak* and *Bharata Natya* techniques, as it is danced mostly in rhythmical phrases which are accompanied by a version of the *bols* or 'winged words' (see page 47). Manipuri dance has its own gesture language, almost obliterated from view by the soft grace with which it is expressed. Like some of the world's rarest orchids, from the surrounding forests, the dancers move with an unearthly and sinuous grace. The face is supposed to remain immobile as the lyrical and rhythmical movements of the dance itself, with its hand gestures, are believed to convey all that is necessary. Beautiful and leisurely ballets are performed, invariably woven round the gentle legends of Krishna and the *gopis* (milkmaids) and accompanied by songs, often sung by the dancers themselves.

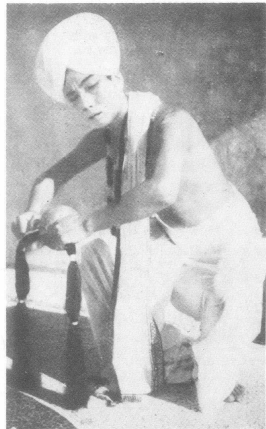


(All embroidery featuring myriads of small mirrors.)



The following items represent the present-day repertoire of the Manipuri dance:

- 1 *Chali* The *Chali* is composed of gentle swaying rhythms like the tendrils of a creeper. As the dancer moves with slightly bent knees beneath the costume, the spiralling, fluid movements of head, arms and body unfold like the petals of a lotus flower.
- 2 *Bhangi Parengs* (Feminine) Here the female soloist or group 'flowers', the face impassive but the flowing, serpentine use of arms, hands and torso expressing, in mounting rhythms, the *lasya* (or feminine) graces.
- 3 *Bhangi Parengs* (Masculine) The movements are similar to those of the feminine, but are performed with an emphasis on strength, power and speed. They express the *tandava* (or masculine) aspects of the dance.
- 4 *Telana* The sung syllables keep perfect time with the rhythms of the musicians' drums.
- 5 *Swarmala* In this dance the tempo changes and in a variety of speeds and postures the dancers whirl and move ever faster to the drummers' intricate rhythms.
- 6 *Chaturanga Bhava* (mood), *raga* (melody) and *tal* (timing) receive full expression in the variety of steps and rhythms.
- 7 *Kirtiprabandha* The highlights of this dance, in many ways similar to those already described, are in the combination of song, dance and drumming.
- 8 *Maha Ras* This dance tells the story from the *Bhagawat Purana* of Krishna, the Blue God, who, intoxicated by the full October moon, performs his *Ras Leela* ballet (see above) with his beloved Radha and accompanying *gopis*. At the end of the performance there is an offering of jasmine, lotus, marigold and rose petals by the *gopis*.
- 9 *Vasanta Ras* Always the full moon, but this time in March! Krishna and Radha quarrel, are reconciled and dance together—again with offerings of flowers at the end of the dance.
- 10 *Kunja Ras* The August moon this time, on which occasion the *kunja* (floral bower) is built by the loving hands of devotees, with Krishna in the centre and the *gopis*, joined by Radha, dancing round him.
- 11 *Nitya Ras* Another variation of the same theme: a circle of devotees dances round Krishna and Radha.
- 12 *The Gopa Rasa* This dance is noted for its swift leaps and turns, and is full of vigour and joy. Krishna, provoked by the demon Bakasur, engages the demon in battle and overcomes him.
- 13 *Ulukhal Ras* Krishna appears in one of his childhood escapades, stealing butter and drinking buttermilk with his companions. The drumming, cymbals and singing enhance the appeal of the boy god and remind the onlookers of the pranks of childhood.
- 14 *Kartal Cholom* The dancer leaps and swirls as he clashes large brass cymbals, decorated with green or red tassels. He is accompanied by leaping and gyrating drummers, and they all dance together. This is one of the most exciting items of Manipuri dance, requiring exceptional strength, acrobatic skill, balance and rhythm—the dancers perform it to perfection.



Kartal Cholom: the outsize cymbals.



The *Pung Cholom* drum dance.

- 15 *Manjira Cholom* Dancers play small cymbals and accompany Krishna and Radha as they swing to and fro on their flowered hammock.
- 16 *Khubakishei* The sacred temple chariot, the Rath Yatra, moves round, accompanied by dancing and the clapping of hands.
- 17 *Pung Cholom* Again the drummers dance, clad in white turbans, white scarves and white *dhotis*. They pirouette and fly high into the air. Their turning and leaping reach an unbelievable speed and rhythm in which their golden bodies gleam. The whole performance gives the onlookers a joyous and exciting pleasure.

Manipur also produces vigorous dance solos of great virility for male dancers, such as the drum dance sketched here and some wild but in fact well organised warrior dances.





Above: Naga warriors at the beginning of a group dance.



Right: feathered, painted and brandishing their war arms, Naga warriors leap, twirl and hurl themselves in this battle dance.



A NAGA CHIEF
from the Naga Hills,
Assam.
(Astroushing
Tribal dances.)

Naga

In the north of Manipur and in Nagaland itself, Naga warrior dancers perform less organised and even wilder dances. The warriors with their necklaces, bejewelled arms and befeathered head-dresses make one of the world's most exciting spectacles as they brandish and hurl their spears or—like the *Kathakali* dancers of Kerala—imitate animals, birds and snakes. *Manipuri* dancing, lyrical and beautiful as it is to watch, can become monotonous with its veiled female dancers and the mask-like faces. There is more vigour, colour and excitement in the folk dances of Kohima, the capital of Nagaland.

Satriya

Satriya is the name of the classical dance of Assam, as developed by Sankara Deva in the fifteenth century.

The origins of *Manipuri* dance lay with the Śiva temples of Manipur and their female dancers, the *nati*, who took part in the Linga worship of Śiva. In the early days the dancers used to perform dance dramas—a tradition which almost died out. These may have been influenced by the exquisite and acrobatic Burmese *Pwe* dance for there was a definite acrobatic element even when danced by women. In an area where the people were deeply religious, the cult of Śiva and Parvati was to mingle with that of Krishna and Sakti.

The *Ankai Nat* dramas performed today in Darrang and Kamrup, areas of Assam at the foot of the Himalayas derive from a drama created by Sankara Deva who, with Madhava Deva, is revered in Assam as a pioneer of the dance. Sankara Deva was a great follower of Vishnu and journeyed to all the great north Indian shrines, rivers, temples and cities. He returned with new-found faith and was to channel the innate sense of wonder and the devotional spirit of the people of Assam into dance.

The *Ankai Nat* dramas are centred on Krishna, the Blue God, with Radha and the *gopis*. There is also a version of the more elaborate *Ras Leela* dance of Krishna (see above and page 17). The female dancers, the *nati*, like those of Orissa, Andhra and Tamil Nadu, were, in their original role, dancers dedicated to the Gods and they, too, were to suffer degradation. Today the performers are all men and boys whose costumes and technique, both male and female, derive from the *Manipuri* style which they much resemble.

Ojapali

The Burmese *Pwe* dance also gave rise to the still-existing *Ojapali* dances in the Darrang and Kamrup areas of Assam, based on themes taken from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics. These themes mainly concern Manasa, the snake goddess from within the earth. The dances tell of her exploits on land and even of her flights to all corners of its with her attendant serpents.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A Patchwork of Indian Folk Dances

These dance sketches show villagers at play. The stick-dance, the staff-dance and many others crop up all over the world. Sowing and reaping corn are international occupations and tend to be expressed in similar ways, but some folk dances based on mythology are India's own. Here, the costumes of cotton shorts and shirts are Western, but it is their capacity to absorb and digest alien influences which make folk dances what they are. Viewed with classical solemnity, their gaiety and spontaneity leave them.

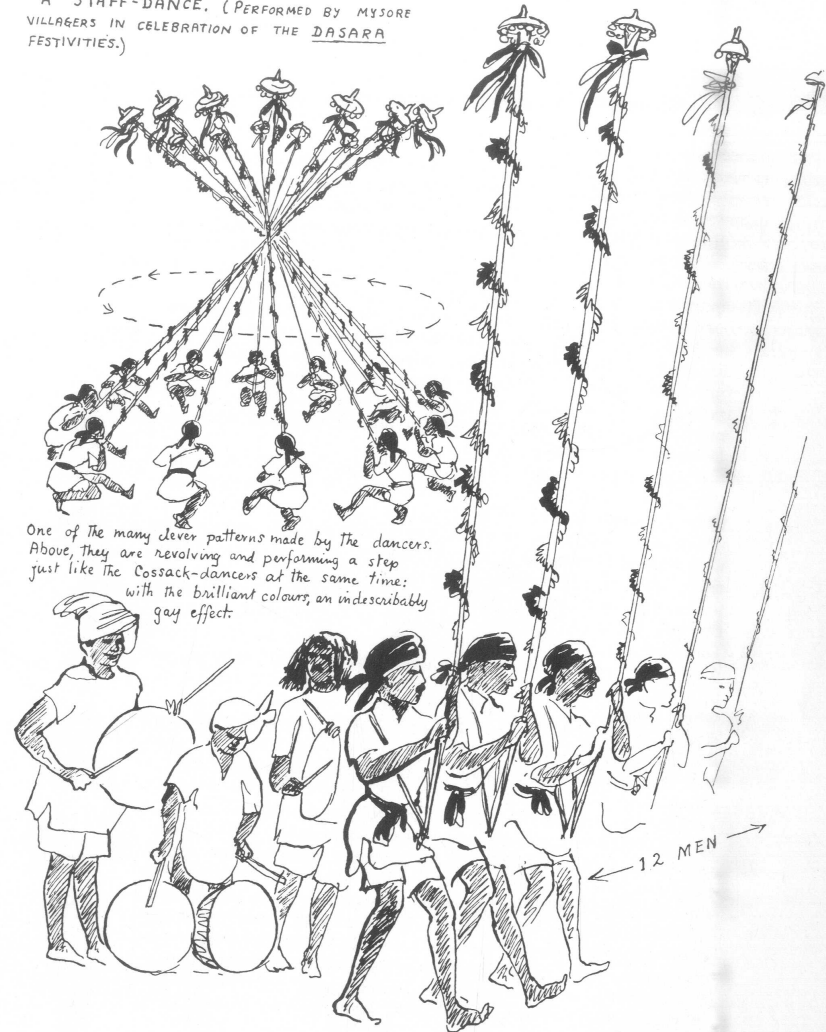


Below: STICK DANCE: present day South Indian Villagers. ("DANDA RASA")



Indian Folk Dances

A STAFF-DANCE. (PERFORMED BY MYSORE VILLAGERS IN CELEBRATION OF THE DASARA FESTIVITIES.)



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Costumes of India

The sketches of dance sequences in different parts of India show something of the full-dress costumes but also the local costumes worn by dancers and students, although Indian dancers, like Western ones, tend to wear anything they fancy for dance practice. Sketches in this chapter serve to underline the main characteristics of certain styles of dress, examples being taken from the north, the south and Sri Lanka.

In this short account of Indian dress, Western readers will be particularly concerned with discovering some means whereby they can tell whether an Indian dancer's costumes are 'fake', 'Westernised' or correct. There are three common misconceptions:

- 1 People in the West are unaware of the endless variety and comprehensiveness of Indian dress. It should be borne in mind that there is no costume in the world which cannot be found in some sort in India, from frank, bare skin to the fur-clad Eskimo. For instance, in southern India the ancient traditional sari still worn by peasants is often a many-coloured check material. Worn on the stage, it would be denounced as of Scottish origin.

When an Indian costume really is Westernised, it can be felt instinctively—Westernisation is more a matter of the way things are worn than what is worn. In the West one too often sees high heels which cause the gliding Indian walk to become a slouch, and the *choli* with built-up shoulders and puffed sleeves. A sari can look like a cheap evening gown when worn with a profusion of brooches, whereas a length of beautiful French silk in a clear and lovely colour can look like a first-class sari if worn by an Indian lady of taste.

- 2 There are a certain number of preconceived ideas in the West about the costume of Indian dancers—ideas which are occasionally played up to by dancers themselves. There is a tendency for India and the whole orient to be lumped together where 'oriental dance' is concerned, the costume for which can be best described as two saucepan lids, a postage stamp and a tiara. On the other hand, it can be thought that if the costumes are dowdy, then they must be authentic!
- 3 Many dancers of *Bharata Natya* will still suggest that the *devadasi's* costume on page 7 is the authentic one for this ancient dance, and it can still be seen. The heavily overdressed appearance, bulky 'apron' and pantaloons which conceal the dancer's figure do not appear before the late nineteenth century and are diametrically opposed to the other sketch on the same page, the lines of which are classical.

Westernisation is not a taint which arrived with the first shipment of films from Hollywood, but long before. In *Bharata Natya* and many other dance styles a return to the main principles of classical outline is imperative, not in a pedantic, archaeological spirit but in one of rejuvenation, in keeping with the contemporary Indian dance renaissance.

The drawing on this page speaks for itself. Rajputs have that love of ornaments, gold brocades and diaphanous swinging skirts which is almost feminine but is so often characteristic of the genuine warrior. They love to glitter like the Sun, from whom they are supposed to be descended. The northern Indian paintings of Krishna, the Blue God, show him fairly bristling with ornaments, and portraits of the northern Indian sharp-eyed, whiskered warrior-monarchs invariably show the august sitters dripping with pearls and all manner of priceless jewellery. Their ladies are dreams of modest delicate beauty. Their dancers also dress in full court regalia and to set them whirling in saris and other uncharacteristic costumes is to show total incomprehension.

Also in Rajputana (Rajasthan), the village women of Jaipur kick waves in the hems of huge skirts with every step and long and lustrous eyes regard the stranger with composure. The perpetual water shortage makes white an impracticable colour, and the result is costumes of flaring yellows and reds and patterned, emerald green. Marwari women of the same state wear skirts and veils, and a jewel suspended like a miner's lamp on their foreheads.

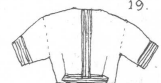
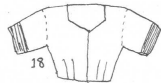
THE CLASSICAL & TRADITIONAL COURT DRESS
OF RAJPUTANA, NORTH INDIA:

(Ram Gopal wears his ancestral costume.)



Costumes

1-9: CLASSICAL SOUTH INDIAN SARI. 10-15: Different ways of draping the same. (Length: $5\frac{1}{2}$ -6 yds. width: 42 inches.)



16-17: COORG! SARI. 18-19: VERSION OF THE CLASSICAL CHOLI.

The southern Indian sari is a masterpiece in every way—when it is properly worn. There are literally hundreds of ways of tying a sari. The sketches overleaf show the simplest method of tying a classical example. Today one looks mostly to the peasants if one wants to see the real thing: taste in colour, artistry in draperies and a deportment which a queen might envy. The streets of a southern Indian village or small town is a kaleidoscope of floating colours, figures as supple and upright as

Costumes

SARI FROM CEYLON: (4 yards long; 42 inches wide.)



lily-stems. A dark-skinned beauty in an orange sari with a poison-pink choli (classical blouse). Another beauty in black with a blood-red border, gold earrings, silver tinkling anklets and a basket of pale green limes. A village in Karnataka with a décor of mauve earth, grey-leaved trees, and a file of women clad in wine-coloured saris, each with a shining brass water-pot, drifting like goddesses against the blinding green of the rice-fields, with the dusty, horned roofs of a temple in the distance.

Index

Numbers in italics refer to illustrations

- abhinaya* (facial expressions) 3, 48
adavu-jethi 44, 46–9
adavus 44–5
alarippu 36, 39, 41, 50–5
Ankai Nat dramas 107
Ardhanari 90, 90
- Bajinath 7–8
 Balasaraswathi, *Srimati* xi, 8, 29, 35, 36–7, 37
balasaraswathi (stringed instrument) 22
Batu Nrtya dance 89, 89
 beards (*Tadi*) 70
Bhagavad Gita 16
Bhagavata Mela Nataka 1, 9, 26, 28, 32, 86, 87
Bhama Kalapam 31
Bharata Natya(m) x, x, 1, 2, 6–9, 21, 21, 24, 26, 29, 32, 33–63, 91, 92, 102
adavu-jethi 44, 46–9
adavus 44–5
alarippu (opening dance) 36, 39, 41, 50–5
 contemporary programme 41
 costume and deportment 43, 112
 hand gestures 4, 4–5, 45–6
 history 33–5
namaskaram 51, 98
 nature of 40–1
 nine moods 3, 81
padams 56–60
 performance by Balasaraswathi 36–7
 preliminary exercises 44
 Ram Gopal's exposition of 37–40
tillana 63
bhava (mood) 3, 19, 33, 87
Binda Din, Maharaj 11, 93–4
bols ('winged words') 21, 102
Brahma 10, 12, 21, 87
Buddha 19, 19, 87
- Carnatic music 20, 26, 32, 63
Chaitra Parva festival 90
Chakiri Kuthu dance 24
Chavitu Nataka 24, 25–6
Chhau dance 26, 90, 90
 costumes 43, 68–70, 85, 86, 90, 96, 103, 112–15
 cymbals 21, 23, 64, 87, 88, 104, 104, 105
- Dasara festivities 111
Dasavatara Sabdam 31
Dev, Prataprudra 88
Deva, Madhava 107
Deva, Sankara 107
devadasis (temple dancing girls) 6–9, 26, 33, 35, 39, 40, 88, 112
Devi Ragini, 88
dhotti, South Indian 115
Dipa-Lakshmi 35, 35
drums 23, 64, 87, 88, 96, 105, 105
Durga, goddess 90
 facial expressions 48, 74, 81
- feet, footwork 6, 64, 74, 86, 88, 95, 98, 98
 flavour (*rasa*) 19
 flutes 20, 21, 23, 88
- Ganesha (elephant-headed god) 12, 12, 18, 29, 82, 83, 88, 92
Garuda, the Golden Eagle 84, 85
git 94, 96, 98
Geeta Govinda, 28, 64, 87, 89
ghagara (full skirt) 96, 113
 gods 10, 11–19
Gotipuas 9
Gunaya 108
- hair ornaments 42
 hand gestures (*mudras*) 4–5, 4–5, 41, 44–57 *passim*, 64, 76, 77, 88, 102
Hanuman, monkey-king 68
Harishchandra 32
- Iyer, K. Baratha xii
 Iyer, E. Krishna x, 8–9, 21, 32, 35, 37
- Jailal, guru xii, 94
Jatiswaram 29, 36, 41
- kalasams* 79, 79
 Kali, goddess 12, 12
 Kalyani sisters 8, 8
Kannakole 30
Kathak dance xi, xii, 1, 7–8, 11, 27, 81, 91–101, 102
chukras 94
 costume 96
 music 21, 96
tatkar (footwork) 95, 98, 98
 terms 98
- Kathakali* dance xi, xii, 1, 2, 8, 9, 11, 14, 24, 26, 28, 29, 40, 43, 64, 67–85, 86, 109
 costume 68–70
Garuda, the Golden Eagle 84, 85
 history 67
 hand gestures 4, 5, 5, 44, 76, 77
kalasam 79, 79
 legend of *Siva's* family life 82, 82–3
 make-up and facial masks 70
 the nine moods 3, 81, 81
 a performance 71–3
 posture 74
Sari Dance 76, 76
 technique 74
'tiranokku' 73, 73
- Kerala Kalamandalam Centre 8
Kharai Puja festival 102
Khomka Kankaria 108, 108, 109
Kottakal Dance School 75
Krishna, the Blue God xii, 12, 16, 16–17, 20, 24, 28, 30, 39, 64, 65, 68, 70, 80, 87, 91–2, 102, 104, 107, 113
Krishna Sabdam 30
Krishnattam dance dramas 3, 9, 24, 26, 28, 64, 86, 87
Kuchipudi dance dramas xi, xii, 1, 9, 26, 28–31, 86
Kudiatham dance 24
Kurup, Kunju xii, 74, 82
Kuravanni ballets 41
- Lakhia, Kumudini 62, 95
lasya dance style 3, 74, 76, 87, 88, 93–4, 98
- Mahabharata* 11, 12, 16, 19, 28, 86, 107
Mahisha-Sura, demon 90
 make-up 68, 69, 70, 73, 86
Manduka Sabdam 30–1
Manipuri dance style xi, xii, 1, 21, 27, 102–5, 103, 107
Markandeya 32
 masks 26, 29, 64, 70, 90, 90
Minuku make-up 70
Mohini Attam 3, 24
 moods 3, 19, 24, 81, 81, 87
mudras, see hand gestures
 music, Indian 20–3
 Carnatic, 20, 26, 32, 63
 Kathak 96
 shenai 88
 music instruments 20, 21, 22–3, 64, 87, 88, 96, 104, 104, 105, 105
- Nagaland, Nagas 27, 102, 106, 107, 107
Nambudiri, Punam 67
Nandi, sacred bull 18
Narainswami, Bharata 35
Natinam Adinar 56, 57, 59, 60
nattuvans 21, 33, 35, 47, 50
Natya Sastra 2, 3, 6, 24, 33, 41, 81, 88
 neck movements (*rechakas*) 3, 50, 51, 55, 76, 77
Nongkrem Puja festival 102
nrtya (pure dance) 48
- Ojapali* dances 107
Orissi dance xii, 1, 26, 87–9
Ottam Thulal dance 24
- padams* 36, 39, 41, 56–60
Pandanallur school 35, 37
Pantera dance 109
Parijatapaharana (Sacred Flower Dance) 28, 31
Parvati 12, 18, 18, 19, 82, 92, 107
Peacock dance 4, 5
Pera-hera, religious procession 108, 109
Pillai, Meenakshi Sundaram x, x, xii, xii, 8, 32
Pillai, Ponniah x, 63
Prahlade Charitram 32
Puja Nrtya 29
Pung Cholom drum dance 105, 105
- Puranas* 11
Puve dance, Burmese 107
- Radha* 91–2, 104, 107
ragas 20–1, 33
Rajasthan (Rajputana, Rajputs) 27, 113, 113
Ram Gopal ix–xii, 21, 35, 36, 37–40, 42, 47, 48, 56, 57, 103, 113
Bharata Natya performed by 39–40
Cecil Beaton's photo of 61
 in *Dance of the Setting Sun* 14, 15, 15, 81
 as *Garuda, Golden Eagle* 84, 85
 as *King Rugmangada* 68, 69
Krishna dance pose by 16
Krishna Tillana danced by 62
 legend of *Siva's* family life told by 82
- Natanam Adinar* danced by 56, 57, 59
 as *Shah Jahan* 93
 as *Siva* in *tandava* dance pose 38
Rama 11, 12, 27, 66, 67, 68, 70
Ramayana 11, 12, 27, 28, 86, 107
Ras Leela dance 17, 91, 102, 104, 107
rasas (moods) 3, 24, 81, 81
Ravana, demon king 30–1, 70, 71, 72, 73
rechakas, see neck movements
Rehman, Indrani 88
Rugmangada, King 68, 69
- Sabda Svarapata* 88
Sabdam 36, 41
Sakti, goddess 12, 107
Sanskrit 2, 33, 89
sarangi Indian fiddle, 22, 96
Saraswathi, goddess 21, 22
sari, southern Indian 114–15
Sari Dance 76, 76–7
Satriya 107
Sekreni Geuna festival 102
Shastri, Venkatarama 32
shenai music 88
 shoulder-movements 45, 76
Sidhyendra Yogi 9, 28
sitar stringed instrument, 22
Siva ii, xii, 10, 12, 13, 13–15, 19, 21, 34, 87, 88, 89, 92, 107
Dance of the Setting Sun 14, 15, 15, 81
Kathakali legend of family life 82, 82–3
 with consort *Parvati*, 18, 18
Sri Lanka dances 108–9
srutti (musical key) 21, 22
 staff-dance 110
 stick-dance 110, 110, 111
sum (beat) 21, 96
- tal* (time/beat) 19, 21
talam (cymbals) 21, 23
tambura (musical instrument) 2
tandava dance style 3, 38, 74, 79, 87, 88, 93–4, 96
Tanjore temple dancing xi, 1, 9, 10, 13, 21, 26, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 92
 technical dance sketches 9, 21
thidi 96, 98, 98–9
Thirmanams 44
Tillana 30, 41, 62, 63, 63
tiranokku 73, 73
Tirtha Narayana Yati 9, 28
Torah 98, 100
trital (8 beats) 94, 96, 100
Tukra dance sequence 98, 100
- Ukkuwa, Nittawela Mulyaddes* salagadera 108, 109
Usha Prainayam 32
- Varalakshmi, dancer* 8
varnam 36, 41
Vedantan Satyam 29
Vedas 10–11
veena (stringed instrument) 21, 22
Vishnu xi, 10, 12, 16, 21, 87, 10
Vishnu Purana 11
Wangala festival 102
Yakshagana dance drama 26, 21, 86, 86