

Avinash C. Pandeya



THE ART OF

# *Kathakali*

## THE ART OF DANCING

LIFE in itself is a composition of arts, peculiar to its own measures.

There is in every living creature an instinct to make one or the other movement of the body which a dancer calls "gesture". Gesticulating, he recalls to memory the sacred life of the great Hindu *avatārs* (incarnations) and the people. To him, dancing lies at the root of all processes towards *bhakti* (worship and devotion) and attainment of salvation. He visualises creation of the universe as a result of the ecstatic dance of Brahma, the Creator. He ascribes every *kṛiya* (action) of God to a creative dance in which man forms the minutest dancing atom. Every human action, as that of an animal, has a direct command of the soul and that action is termed *dainik nṛtya* (every-day dance). The existence of the supreme power of the abstract life, or, of God, in every *kṛiya* of the living being in a latent form helps in developing the various dynamic forces of the human nature, and the awakening of these forces leads man to "dance".

*Nṛtya* is the outcome of five *kriyas* of God, viz., *sṛṣṭi*, or, *Āvirbhāva* (Universe or creation), *Isthiti* (Preservation or Protection), *Samhāra* (Destruction), *Tirōbhava* (Veiling, Embodiment, Illusion or Giving Rest) and *Anūgraha* (Release or Salvation). These subjective and objective actions, in turn, are the different forms of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Rūdra, Mahēśvara and Sadāsiva. "In the night of Brahmā, Nature is inert, and cannot dance till Śiva wills it; He rises from His rapture and dancing sends through matter pulsing waves of awakening sound, and lo! matter also dances appearing as a glory round about Him."<sup>1</sup>

Śiva, the greatest of all our deities, is depicted in the cosmic pose of a dancer who perpetually stands for an image of reality

and truth, the keys to the complex and complicated tissues of human life and lives in general, which form an independent theory of Nature, not simply satisfactory and adaptable to a single clique, race, or nation, nor acceptable or worthy of consideration to the philosopher, thinker, and worshipper of one century only, but universal in its appeal to the votary, the worshipper, the mediator, the philosopher, the thinker, the lover, the gametic and the artist of all ages and all countries.

The four significant actions of Lord Śiva connote that the universe is created, protection is granted, release is offered and destruction is undertaken, all at the will of God : The drum stands for creation, fire for destruction, protection proceeds from the hand of hope, the foot held aloft gives release.

Of all the arts, the art of dancing first expresses itself in human person. Music, acting, poetry form a single compartment of human personification, while sculpture, painting and all other arts of design proceed in another stream. There is no primary art beyond these two arts, and their origin is much earlier than man himself—and dancing came first. It may be that earlier to human existence, dancing and architecture were the result of the same impulse. Edmund Selous suggests that the nest of birds is the chief early form of building and the creation of nest may have first arisen out of their ecstatic sexual dance.<sup>2</sup>

All forms of dances have their histrionic background of evolution. Topographic conditions, climate, language, deportment and *mise en scène* of folk dances indigenous to a nation and the physical built of the people are the main guiding conditions for the suggestion of a particular type of dancing. The striking example is of the dance-forms prevalent in the plains of the Indus, the Ganges, and the Brahmaputra rivers, Rajasthan, Tanjore and Kēraḷa. There is considerable difference between the artistic representation of one form of *Bhārat Nṛitya* (miscalled "Kathak") dancing in the Gangetic and the Indus plains and the other in Rajputana; between *Manipurī* dance of Bengal and of Assam; between *Sadīr* dance of Tanjore and *Dāssiāttam* of Tamilnad; between *Bhārat Nātyam* and *Kathakali*; between *Garbā*, the folk-

dance of Gujerat and *Rāsa Līlā*, the folk-dance of Uttar Pradesh, etc.

*Nṛtya*, *Gīta* and *Vādhyā* are the three essential factors of our *Sangīta*. Dancing (*Nartana*) has three off-shoots, viz., *Nāṭya*, which essentially represents a theatrical performance; *Nṛtt*, which conveys rhythmic movement of the body without alluding *abhinaya* or *bhāva* and, therefore, largely drawing its art from the footwork; and, *Nṛtya*, meaning rhythmic movement of the body anent some *bhāva* stipulated in a piece of *abhinaya*, thus alluding some story.

The joyous strokes of the feet of children or the rise and fall or the philosophers' thoughts, all are governed by the same law of rhythm. If this law of rhythm, lying at the root of all Indian dancing, is overlooked, one would fail to understand the supreme manifestation of physical life—life not only in the external space of human action, but also in the internal space of self-realisation.

The significance of dancing lies, in its truest form, in a single and an intimate, concrete appeal of a general rhythm—that general rhythm which does not merely mark life, but the universe in its wide sense; and if one is still persistent to consider it a narrow suggestion, it is the sum total of all cosmic influences which reach and affect human life. It need surprise none that rhythm, ever tending to be moulded into a time, should mark all the physical and spiritual manifestations of life.<sup>3</sup>

Dancing is the supreme expression of religion and love alike—of religion from the earliest time of human existence and of love from the age much anterior to the birth of man! Tracing the history of the origins of dancing in the human person, it is seen intimately entwined with the human behaviour in respect of the tradition of war, labour, entertainment, education, whereas some of the wisest philosophers and the ancient civilisations have considered the dance as “the pattern in accordance with which the moral life of men must be woven.”<sup>4</sup>

Hindus believe that to dance is to take part in the cosmic control of the world. Every sacred dionysian dance is regarded as an imitation of the divine action. Lucian remarks in his essay on dancing that “you cannot find a single ancient mystery in which

there is no dancing, in fact, most people say of the development of the Mysteries that they dance them out."<sup>5</sup>

The auto-intoxication of rapturous movement brings the devotee for a while at least into that self-forgetful union with the not-self which the mystic ever seeks. The ecstatic Hindu dance in honour of Śiva has come to be a great symbol of "the clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of." Pantomimic dances, however, in their effort to heighten natural expression and to imitate natural process, bring the dancers into the divine sphere of creation and enable them to assist vicariously in the energy of the gods. The dance, thus, becomes the presentation of a divine drama, the vital re-enactment of sacred history in which the worshipper is enabled to play a real part.<sup>6</sup>

The art of Kathakali is the art of expressing a story by mere gesticulation which connotes a group of ideas, like a dumb person who uses a gestural code to speak his feelings. The gestures are a combination of actions under different rasās (aesthetic moods) and bhāvas (the accessory moods of rasas).

Bharata's Nāṭya Sāstra deals with four kinds of actions (abhinayas), viz., first, Sāttvika (emotional attributes); second, Āṅgika (body gestures); third, Vācika (vocal as in singing); and fourth, Āhārya (dress and mise en scène). He attaches great importance to Sāttvika abhinaya. (emotion)

Of all the various schools of dancing in India, Kathakali embodies the richest gestural code and makes a free use of it in alluding a story. It has 24 single hand poses called mudrās, formed by the various permutations of the fingers. Presented in different ways they connote about 500 words. "The gesture may be imitative in its origin or allusive or mantric and in the little flurries of pure dance which punctuate the padams a sort of synthesis of gesture is used : the hands are used in mudrās but form no gesture with precise meaning. These passages known as Kalasams using only a vague stylised gesture are less remote from European notions of dancing."

Kathakali performances may be divided into "community" and "spectacular". The former is performed by a whole group

of actors for their own psycho-physical satisfaction, or, in aid of a good crop, or, as a prayer for bringing rains. "Spectacular" dancing is to be watched and appreciated by the educated audience, although behind it there is the basic notion of "pleasing the gods."

This dance-drama comprises varied movements of the hands and the body. The suppleness and agility of the actor's body magnify each action. The movements of the eyes, eyebrows, lips, cheeks, teeth and such other movable parts help in the formation of a meaningful expression.

Nature has endowed Malabar with an environment which may help develop the art of dancing. It enjoys the *deva danam* (god's gift) to present the highest form of artistic skill in the dance. Young lads of 11 years join a *kalari* (a kind of gymnasium) where their body is massaged and each muscle is relaxed to the extent that it readily responds to a slight bent in the posture. When their body attains agility, suppleness and charm, they are trained in the art of acting and dancing. It takes about six years for a lad to master this dance-drama. Namboodri Pandits are the backbones of this histrionic art.

Kathakali's origin and development owe gratitude to the royal family of Travancore. The Raja of Kottarakkara (17th century) is the earliest exponent of this art. During his time, Kathakali plays were staged continuously for twenty-four hours without any break. Even today, one would be enthralled to witness this dance-drama during some festival in Travancore. This dance is still being developed under the patronage of His Highness the Maharaja of Travancore who is a great art connoisseur.

Kathakali has contributed a memorable, superb art of dancing and acting in the *Nāṭya* literature of India. So long as this art of dancing is living, its high technique would go unchallenged. It draws much authority from Bharata's *Nāṭya Śāstra*, though some consider the *Hastalakṣaṇa Dipikā* as the earliest treatise on the subject. Whereas the *mudrās* are the same, to a great extent, in both these works, description about their formation differs. The latter work, however, is believed by many to be confusing and unauthoritative.

hand  
gestures/  
poses