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WOMEN AND DANCE – A HISTORICAL STUDY



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ABSTRACT

Dance is a universal culture. Although everyone cannot dance, each of us likes dance. Some have the natural talent of dancing and creating their own movements and expressions. Some learn to dance and some take special effort to become professional dancers. Dance is performed by an individual or a group. It contributes positively to those dancers as well as to the audience in terms of physical exercise, expression of feelings and inner emotions and devotion to deities. It brings social awareness and promotes peace, solidarity and fellowship in the communities. Women play an important role in dances which can be noticed in different parts of the

world. This essay gives some ideas about dances and the status and role of women in dances.¹

KEYWORDS : *Social marketing, Sustainable marketing, CSR, Cause marketing.*

DEFINITION OF DANCE

Dance is the combination of rhythmic physical movements and facial expressions prompted by feelings and emotions. It is expected to evoke the same feelings and emotions in the spectators as experienced by the dancer. In other words dance is the spontaneous outburst of human beings strong inner feelings through a well-defined rhythmic movement. Not only the; human beings, but also the animals are seen dancing with a purpose.

HISTORY OF DANCES

Indian dance in various forms is an outward expression of appreciating and acknowledging the Omnipotent, thereby seeking spiritual exhalation. The Indian dances are believed to have had a divine origin. This is due to the interpretations of Aryans who came to this sub-continent around 2000B.C. They subjugated the native Dravidians, who practiced folk and tribal dances, and established themselves as the intellectuals called Brahmins. The Aryans worshipped Lord Shiva. He, being the God of the conquerors (Aryans) naturally became the God of the conquered (Dravidians). The concept of the divine origin of the Indian dances could be attributed to the Brahminical Society. Hence, the origin the definition of dance and dramaturgy are the patent of Brahminism.²

The Brahminical idea says that dance was composed by Lord Brahma, the creator God, as an entertainment for gods. It is said that He took the exquisite lyrical matter of Rig Veda, the expression of gestures of Yajur Veda, the music from Sama Veda and the aesthetic flavour (Rasa) from the Atharvana Veda and compounded the art of natya (dance) called Natyaveda. Natyaveda which was acknowledged as the fifth veda formed the basis of the (Science of Dramaturgy) 'Natya Shastra' written by Bharatamuni. He propounded the various techniques, its architecture and stage dimensions in his book on dance.³

DIFFERENT TYPES OF DANCES

A broad classification of dances in the Indian context:

1. Classical dance and ballets
2. Folk dance
3. Tribal dance

Under the classical dance category there are as many as 13 types ranging from the Bharatanatyam, Kurvanji, Bhagavata Mela Dance Dramas of Tamilnadu to the Kuchipudi dance of Andhra, Kathakali, Mohini attam, Krishnattam of Kerala and Yakshagana of Karnataka.

We find that the prototype of what is Yakshagana in Karnataka, Andhra and Tamilnadu, is known as Lalitha in Maharashtra, Bhavai in Gujarat, Yatra in Bengal and Gandharva Gana in Nepal. Also we have Kathak, Odissi, Manipur and Bihar respectively. Though the types of dances are varied, all these dances are bound to have their own well-defined rhythmic movements expressing the inner feelings of the dancer in a very effective way.

To acquire an all-encompassing idea about dance and -women, one should start pooling the ideologies of the status of women in dance, tracing its roots from the dances of gods and goddesses, the celestial nymphs and the mortals of different eras right down to the present. The status of women in arts is based on the principles of the various religious cults practised in India from time to time. The origin, growth, deterioration, rebirth and development of dance and the status of women in it are so much intertwined and interdependent that it would be irrelevant to discuss them separately.⁴

DANCE OF SHIVA

Lord Shiva is the first dancer according to the Hindu conception. It has been mentioned in the legends that Nataraja (Shiva) gave expositions of one hundred and eight modes of dances covering the Aangika (limbs), Vachika (of Speech), Aharya (of Costumes) and Satwika (of psychic conditions). He, Nataraja, is the king of actors and dancers. His dance is Tandava, energetic and virile, and represents "(1) the creation and evolution (shrishti); (2) Maintenance and preservation (sthithi); (3) destruction and involution (samhara); drawing again into his own self; (4) embodiment of souls (Tirobava); (5) their release from the cycle (Anugraha). From this we understand that initially the art of dancing was compounded by men.⁵

DANCE OF KALI

The dual aspect of Shiva has a profound theological and mystic importance. He is then known as Ardhanareeshwara, where his consort Parvati, who possesses many names such as Kali, Uma, Aparna is his other half. Parvati is said to accompany Shiva in their cosmic dancing but many times she is only an onlooker. Parvati may be considered as the first woman dancer. Kalf dances the Tandav type of dance, meant for men, in the cremation ground. This is a mode of aggressive expression of the Divine power

claiming supremacy over the mortals. From the crematory dance of Goddess Kali, it is explicit that woman is the ultimate power, she possesses an in-built potential to put an end to the wrongs (injustice) and wrong-doers. In the Kali cult, she is the supreme dancer and is that aspect of the Great power, who withdraws all things unto herself by the dissolution of the universe. The Bibhatsa (hideous) aspect of Kali's dance is well described in the Dhumawati stotram. In the Vedic period, women took part in ritualistic dances at the time of Mahavrata Ceremony and Ashwamedha Yagna. It was considered a symbol of spiritual involvement.

DANCE OF APSARAS

According to a legend mentioned in the Bharatanatyasastra, Apsaras, the celestial nymphs, were created by God Brahma when the need was felt for the execution of certain types of dances which could only be performed by women and not by men. These Apsaras were to perform the tender and soft aspects of dance called the Lasya with feminine grace. The forceful or Tandava type was meant for men. The dance of Kali is an exception. She has the credit of confronting the King of dances, Lord Nataraja, at Chidambaram.⁶

DANCE OF RADHA - KRISHNA

The Krishna cult which evolved and spread widely in the late 14th century brought the Rasalila into the limelight. 'Rasa Lila' is nothing but the spiritual love dance of the cowherd incarnation of Vishnu, in which He dances with the Gopikas or Radha. The Rasa Krida of Radha and Gopikas represents the eternal longing of the individual's soul (Jeevathma) to mingle with the divine soul (Paramathma) represented by Krishna. But Radha-Krishna's erotic dance was claimed to have no dignity or divinity because of the misinterpretation of the original spiritual motive and it became a cause of immoral behaviour of the people. Men, particularly the god-men, priests, claiming themselves to be the incarnation of Lord Krishna, started exploiting the women folk. The status of women in dance and thereby in the society started deteriorating from here and women were treated as mere sex symbols. In general, the status of women in the Pre-Aryan and Vedic period was respectable. There are, of course, certain obscene descriptions of the celestial nymphs as cited in some legends. The Shaktha, Sahivite and Krishna cult of dancing possessed spiritual sanctity which attracted people in large numbers.

DANCE IN THE ROYAL COURTS

In the Buddhist and epic period dance became a normal court function to pay homage to the kings or to the honoured guests, which drew its inspiration from the dances of Apsaras in the heaven. The troupes of dancers in the royal courts were patronised by the kings. In fact, there was a time when the art of dancing was considered as a part of education and accomplishment for the girls of royal and other aristocratic families. We come across many examples from history which reinforce this statement. In the Mahavamsa, (ch.LXIII, V.82,83), Queen Rupavati, an embodiment of all traditional virtues of a Hindu wife, is described as "skilled in dancing and richly endowed with a mind as keen as the point of a blade of grass."⁷

But later in the Chola period the Devadasi system came into existence. The Devadasis danced not only before the gods but also before the kings. During the Moghul period, around 15th or 16th century A.D, emphasis was laid on greater use of love songs. These songs could be interpreted both in human and divine terms. The period of kings was a period of restlessness and war. These wars were fought by the kings either to exhibit their valour or to claim the hand of a beautiful woman. The pastime for these Moghul warriors was art and architecture. Since women were involved in the performing arts

the kings started admiring the artists more than the art. The kings and the courtesans exploited women physically and mentally. The women were made to indulge themselves in sex business. Once these dancing women lost their beauty they were literally thrown out in the streets. Their inability to give sexual pleasure any longer made them beggars for the rest of their life. The system of polygamy and innumerable concubines became the way of life. A Sanskrit saying goes like this, 'Yatha Raja thatha Praja', "As is the king, so are the people". The immoral lives of kings proved to be a bad example to the people. Great social barriers in the name of security for women were designed and built by the society. Women started wearing purdah to escape from the evil eyes of men. The systems and customs adopted to save women endangered the recognition and importance of women as a social being. She lost her reputation in society.⁸

DANCE OF DEVADASIS : DASIATTAM

Reference is made in the inscriptions of Rajaraja and other chola kings in the Tanjore district, in the 11th century, of theatres and dancers dedicated to temples. Dance was then used to please the gods in temples and shrines. These dances invariably performed by women in temples had a religious sentiment to them and were a way to express devotion to God. We come to know these dancers by the name of Devadasis (Maid-servants of God) who from generation to generation were compelled to stick to the same profession. So the dance (Bharatanatyam) which was performed by the Devadasis came to be known as Dasi Attam.

"In India dance is a religion. Dancers are connected with the temples in India and are known as the servants of God because they sing and dance before the idols. Dasi Attam is a balanced combination of varnam and padams, in which padams precede and constitute the major part of the performance. "Padams are love lyrics which cover every conceivable aspect of love from mystic and divine to the earthly and profane, but as is usual with such poetry even the most sacred can be and sometimes is given a superficial and entirely secular interpretation." The women dancers performed nritya, which involved flavour (Rasa) and mood (Bhava) more than the pure form of dance called nritta which went without a theme or sentiment.⁹

In due course, the Devadasis became the maid-servants of men. Since the only source of meagre income for these devadasis was from the local temple funds administered by men, their livelihood was threatened unless they yielded to the lustful desires of these men. They faced unlimited sufferings at the hands of men. Their psychological condition would have been no better than any other women who were suffering at the hands of cruel, sadistic, male chauvinists. They were considered as the forbidden fruit, yet tasted by many men in mat society. Dance, a symbol of spiritual expression and sanctity, lost its age-old reputation. To escape from these cruel men who tried to overpower them sexually, the Devadasis started performing dances outside the temples. They tried to improve their monetary status through these dance programmes.

It was in the late nineteenth century that the Devadasis turned out to be real harlots and they prostituted themselves. Both dance and woman were misused and sexually exploited. As a result, any virtuous girl from a good family was discouraged from learning Bharatanatyam, which was then called Dasi attam. This shows that the women were exploited and suppressed by men in the male-chauvinistic society, for which the art of dancing was used as an instrument.¹⁰

DANCE IN THE 20th CENTURY

By the beginning of the twentieth century, dance survived in only a few places because of its fallen image. Rabindranath Tagore, Uday Shankar, Menaka, E. Krishna Iyer are noted personalities who

persevered to revive the art of dancing. After many trials, the early 30's of this century saw the art of dancing sprouting again. Rukmini Devi, the first great dancer of South India (who was from a respectable Brahmin family and not a Devadasi) opened the way for the future, followed by a group of zealous women like Shantha, Kamala, Ransalya and many others. The mushroom growth of dance schools, institutes, academies stand a witness to the endurance of these great lovers of art. We understand that the classical dances of India were propounded, sustained, destroyed and also revived by men. Women contributed equally in all of these. Nowhere do we find any gender-biased obscenity in the books in the science of dramaturgy.

BALLETS

The word 'Ballette' was first introduced into the English language by Dryden in 1667. It underwent a great renaissance in the beginning of the 20th century brought about by Isadora Duncan. "India unconsciously developed this form of dance and in development it was somewhat different to the Western type in system and fashion. We have original ballets in the original Kathakali, Manipuri and Chau dance. These indigenous types from time immemorial had been practising ballet dancing in the depiction of themes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Scriptures. The different schools have their own techniques, rules and conventions. A few noted ballet dancers are Ruth St. Denis, Anna Pavlova, Uday Shankar, Sadhana Bose, etc., One marked distinction between the oriental and occidental types of ballet is that the former imbibes themes from mythology, whereas the latter one does not generally employ biblical events. Both men and women had an equal role to play in ballets.

FOLK DANCES OF INDIA

Contrary to the classical dance, the folk dances are quite spontaneous and are the creation of the people's imagination and desire for aesthetic and emotional expression. The depiction of folk art is related more to the subject of the songs. Folk dance basically is a pastime for the rural folk. It was performed as a relief from hard work and to express their joy at harvest time. It is used as a mode of outward expression for the removal of enmity among themselves in the village community and also to bring about unity among themselves. Folk dances are usually performed by a big group comprising both men and women. Aggressive expressions like challenging the enemies could be seen in dances like Puliattam. The people glorified nature, traditional occupations or offered devotion to the deities through folk dances. There are as many as 67 types of folk dances in India. Kolattam Karagattam, Thapattam, Dummy-horse dance of Tamil Nadu, Bhangra of Punjab, Dhandya Ras, Garba of Gujarat are some of them.¹¹

TRIBAL DANCES OF INDIA

Tribal dances are seasonal dances exhibiting movements which are vivid, temperamental, strong often primeval in colourful apparels. The dances are rich in which creative expressions of the people are akin to the land they live in. The tribes danced to express their fear of natural calamities like lightning and thunder and fear of spirits, when sacrifices were made to please the gods and to strengthen the tribal seclusion and unity. The tribes danced together in large groups. There are around 53 tribal dances existing in India.

DANCE FOR SOCIETAL NEEDS

In recent times, there is a remarkable transition from 'Art for art's sake' to 'Art for life's sake'. It has the potential of a valued profession. It may be criticised as a materialistic approach but it still has

the revived glamour and dignity. The purpose of 'Art for life's sake' is to meet the needs of the society. The needs of the harmonious life are upliftment of the poor and downtrodden, eradication of illiteracy, creation of social awareness among the people, awakening the spirit of patriotism and national integration. Dance is used as an effective medium for all these purposes.

Classical dances are criticised as performing arts. But dance has undergone applaudable changes in the recent past. The dance has its own traditional limitations and techniques. Learning and mastering classical dance in a short period is almost impossible because of its complex dancing techniques. It needs long years of consistent and hard practice. To make this art easily accessible to all irrespective of caste or creed, some dance schools like Nrityodhaya offer 10 years of free dance training. This training is given to the deserving and economically backward candidates.

DANCE FOR STUDENTS

Students of both the sexes especially women should be given training in dance. Even the complex ideas, theories, concepts and social awareness can be conveyed and evoked through dances like Kolattam, Thullalattam and dance dramas. It enhances the easy and better understating of the message conveyed, which is the real purpose of education. Following the footsteps of Mahatma we can liberate our country from social evils and religious prejudices in a very effective way.¹²

CONCLUSION

Above all, dance is a means for women to liberate themselves from the iron-fetters of the age-old traditional set-up. It helps them to break the social, cultural, economic, political and religious barriers of the society, to swoop high up in the blue sky independently. The good-willed women of great capacities who sacrificed their lives for this noble cause deserve our thanks.

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