# ENCOUNTER WITH INDIAN DANCE

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I should emphasise first that this is to be a rather personal evaluation of Indian dance. As a performer I am familiar with only two of the several Indian dance styles, these being *Odissi* and *Bharatanatyam*. My background in Western dance embraces Ballet and the Martha Graham technique of modern dance. Therefore my comparisons will be limited to these.

Even at the first encounter the Western dancer is struck by the totally different structure and effect of Indian dance. In almost every aspect the two traditions seem completely dissimilar; the neck movements, eye movements, pronounced facial expressions, intricate ways of using the hands, slapping the feet, costumes and music. Also in the pure dance portions of *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi* it is essential that the knees remain turned out and apart. One rarely stands upright except when walking back after a rhythm section is completed or during the *abhinaya* or expressive portions. Because of this bent-knee position Indian dance is rarely relaxing and particularly for a Westerner many of the movements seem designed to punish the body.

Another peculiarity is that the elbows are nearly always at right angles; the forearms either outstretched to the side as in the *ardhmandali* position of *Bharatanatyam* or outstretched in front as in the *chowk* position of *Odissi;* in either case, parallel to the floor. Despite all these alien components, at the first encounter one is struck by a tension and excitement.

Ballet was a court dance of Europe and the Martha Graham technique is only one of many systems that were developed in this century in an effort to free classical western dance of the artificialities of ballet. So, just as *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi* are varations on a theme of bent-knees, neck, eye movements, and facial expressions so the Graham technique and ballet can be identified as having the same basis of stretches, leaps and turns.

**First Exercise**

Once you begin to take classes in Indian dance you no longer have to think about differences in movements. Muscles trained for Ballet inform you immediately of where these differences lie. In Ballet, the first position

at the "barre" is the plie or going down by raising the heels and opening the knees, the free arm swings gracefully from the side, down, and returns to the side. This is often finished off by raising up on the toes and dropping the support given by the "barre" and raising both arms over the head and balancing.

In contrast, the first exercise in *Bharatanatyam* consists of firmly establishing the *ardhamandali* position of bent knees and then alternately raising one foot and slapping it down and then repeating this with the other side. There must be a constant tension to hold the body firmly in this position and the tension must be felt to the tips of the fingers. In *Bharatanatyam* the hands are held in *pataka* or all the fingers close together. In Ballet the fingers are open, loose and left to fall naturally.

In *Odissi*, the first exercise is also done with bent knees but the foot position is not in the Ballet first position as in *Bharatanatyam*, but in the third position. The body is in *tribhanga*—three bends to achieve this the hip is deflected to one side and the head to the other. The variation here is that the heel remains on the ground when the foot is raised, the foot rotates on the heel before it is slapped; the head moves in half-an-arc, first one side and then the other; the hands rest in *musti* or a fist position on the thighs.

The Martha Graham Technique has borrowed many of its exercises from yoga. Its use of the breath and contracting and relaxing the torso provides yet another contrast to Indian dance. The first exercise is done sitting on the floor, crosslegged, arms outstretched, hands loose and relaxed. The initial movement comes from the centre of the body and is started by a backwards contraction from the centre of the torso and breathing out heavily. The heel of the hand is turned out and pushes hard as the tension spreads to it. In effect, the dancer's body produces maximum resistance against the air. In *Bharatanatyam*, the tension in the hands and body is already there, while in the Graham technique the tension flows out through the body and escapes through the heel of the hand. The contracted torso is then relaxed and the body stretches up. This relaxation phase is absent in the first step of both *Odissi* and *Bharatanatyam*. In fact the torso in *Bharatanatyam* is held rigid while in *Odissi*, the sinuous, undulating quality is achieved by contracting one side of the torso and moving the head to the concave side of the rib cage. Ballet too is devoid of the torso movement.

The differences increase so that a dancer trained in one system finds very little transfer of movement and must build up new muscles and train different reflexes and in the end co-ordinate eyes, neck, hands, head and feet. In fact even the differences between the dance styles in India make it difficult to achieve mastery in the several styles, that utilize the body in a different manner. *Odissi* and *Bharatanatyam* are two such styles. The differences are subtle: the undulating torso of *Odissi*, its *tribhanga* and the slightly different *mudras* (hand-gestures) that are often executed at the side on the diagonal, contrasted to the straight torso of *Bharatanatyam* and the execution of the *mudras* either directly in the centre or directly to the side. This gives *Bharatanatyam* its angular quality in contrast to *Odissi's* roundness. Thus even within Indian dance itself the dancer must form a different concept for each.

**Sculpture**

The two examples of western and eastern sculpture that illustrate the ideal that the dancer is trying to create are the Greek God, Mercury, and the Hindu God, Shiva in his form as the cosmic dancer, Nataraja. In the statue of Mercury the God is caught in movement whose completion lies beyond the formal organisation. In contrast, the Nataraja specialises time in a simultaneous enduring present. Simultaneity extends to the possibility of doing many things at once, portrayed by the many arms and different implements in each. For Nataraja there is the drum of creation in his left hand and the fire of destruction in his right, thus indicating the cyclical nature of existence. Indian dance shares this concept of containment, the audience does not look beyond the furthest tips of the extremities. On the other hand Ballet, like Mercury, reaches out as far as is possible, restricted only by the physical limitations of the body. To achieve this, western dance exploits leaps, turning either on point (on tip-toe using toe shoes) or on the balls of the feet, stretching, kicking the legs high, moving while the body is on the floor, lifting the female partner and pointing or flexing the toe. Leaps in *Bharatanatyam* are generally contained, not pushed to the maximum and in *Odissi* they are non-existant. Connected turns to cover a large area of the stage are not found in *Odissi* and *Bharatanatyam*, although *Odissi* does employ *bramharis* (turns) on one spot. Stretching and kicking are limited only to cases where the *karanas* — poses — are imitated and the floor is used for sitting naturally during the descriptive portions; having a partner is rare; and lifting one partner is unknown and the flexed or loose foot is the rule rather than the nearly constantly pointed foot of Ballet.

**Music**

The music used for ballet can be music composed strictly for dancing or simply lyrical music or electronic music or sounds such as whistling or breathing; in fact recent dance compositions often have no music and mark the high points with either a slap or the dancer's own vocal accompaniment of a sudden cry or hiss. However, regardless what instruments are used vocal accompaniment in the form of song to be enacted is virtually unknown in Western dance. Whereas in the West, music and dance are compartmentalised, in the Indian performance they are closely interwoven. Rhythm plays a dominant role in both Indian dance and music. In the dance this is emphasised by the use of ankle bells. In certain schools of *Kathak* rhythm has developed almost to the exclusion of the other aspects of the dance. The addition of the spoken *bols* to the rhythm of the feet and the drum creates a further dimension to the dominance of rhythm. The *tala* system dictates that it will be more complex and intricate and the whole concept of same is unknown in the West.

Maurice Bejart, the Belgian composer, in a portion of his Ballet, *Radha* and *Krishna* presented *Allaripu*, the traditional invocatory piece of *Bharatanatyam* a dance solo "on point". He used the traditional South Indian music (on tape) yet his medium was Ballet with the additon of a few *mudras*. This invocation did not make the dance less classical Ballet, because the movements conformed to tradition and it is not imperative that the music also strictly adhere.

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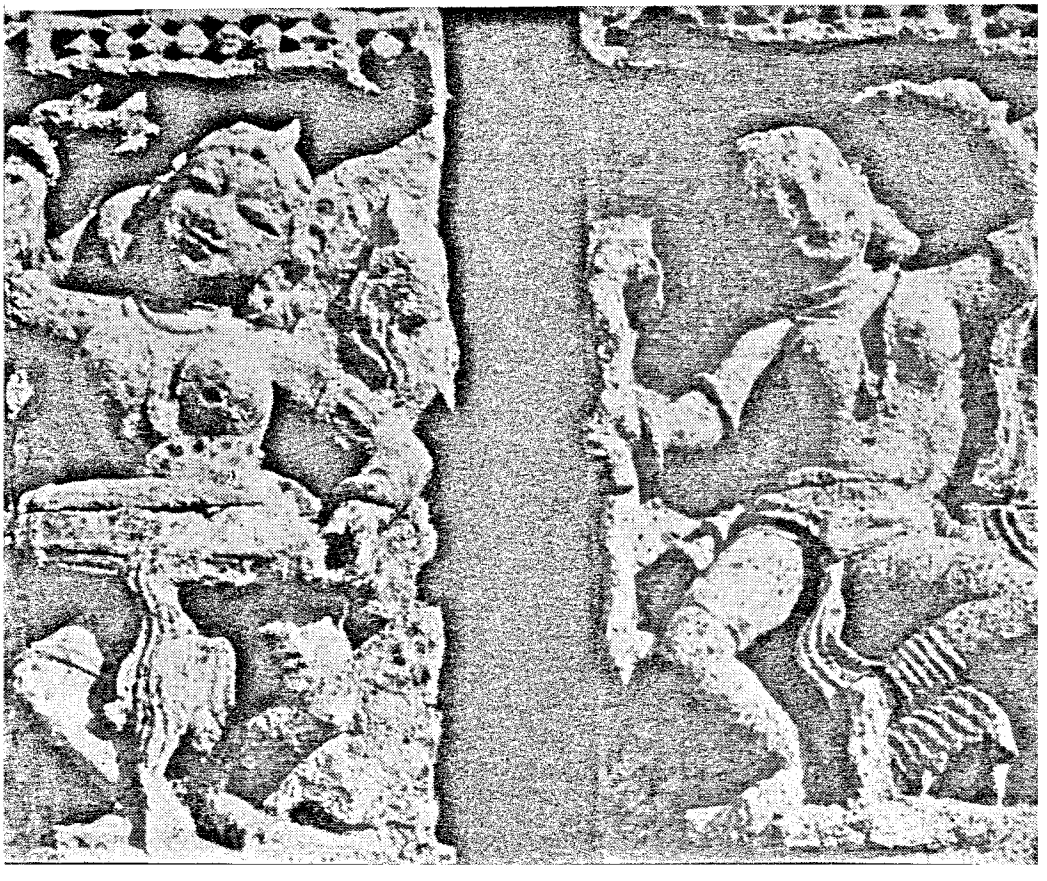
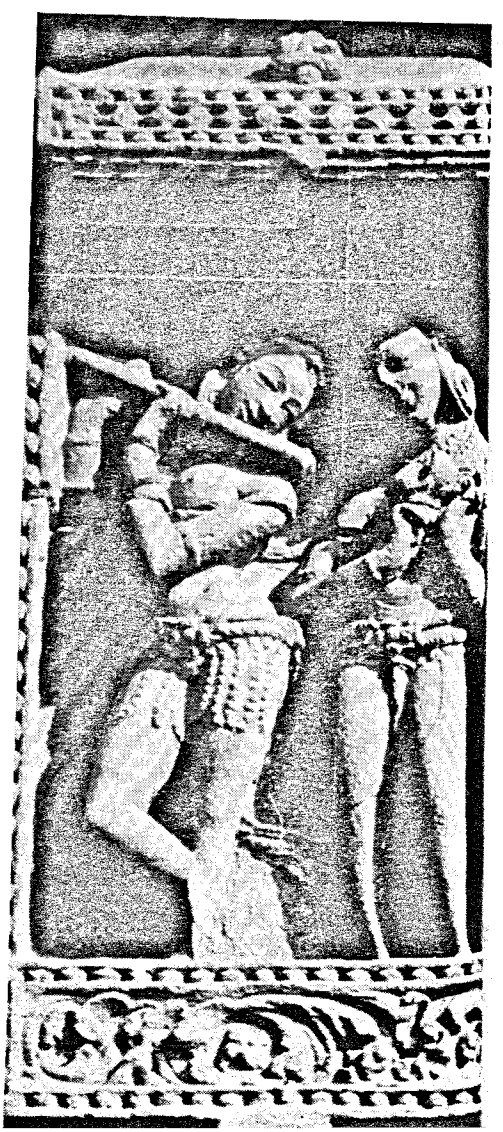
*ILLUSTRATIONS:*

*Page 27. Above: A Dancing figure. Below: Drummer and Dancer, Konarak. Page 28. Above: From Halebid, Mysore. Below: Panel from Brameswara Temple, Bhubaneshwar.*





In contrast, *Odissi* and *Bharatanatyam* have definite music composed for dance and it must be played in a certain way and with certain prescribed instruments. Vocal and instrumental accompaniment is extremely important and when lyrics are sung they are enacted. Only occasionally as in the case of a prayer in *Odissi* are the words used in the *alap* and the singer allowed to stretch out the words according to his or her own mood, otherwise they are always within the *tala* structure.

Classical *Bharatanatyam* includes in its orchestra a *natuvanar* to call the *bols* for the rhythmic passages, a singer that could also be the *natuvanar* to give vocal direction to the dance, a *tanpura* or *shruti*-box to assist in maintaining the pitch, a *mridangam* (drum) and a flute, veena or violin to provide some melody.

In *Odissi* the same accompaniments are needed, however the vocalist and *natuvanar* must be separate as the items such a *pallavi* call for a *sthayi* or the repitition of the *raga* set to certain words while the underlying *bols* or rhythmic passages are spoken. The *pakhawaj* (drum) replaces the *mridangam* and flute, veena, violin or sitar may be used. The very classical nature of the dances dictates the type of instruments that are to be used, also the style in which they are to be played. For *Bharatanatyam* the style is Karnatic and the music for *Odissi* like the geograpical position of Orissa, lies between the two traditions of Hindustani and Karnatak. Even the smallest change, such as one type of drum replacing the other would be criticised and the classical nature of the dance decried.

## Story

There is much more to Indian dance than mere movement. Western ballet may tell a story but this is usually no more than a vehicle for creating a kinesthetic effect; the story itself is never very profound and is ussually based on some kind of folk myth. It is perhaps one of the short coming of Ballet that it has never developed as a serious medium for elaborating significant situations. However, in Indian dance, the story which is told is of paramount importance and the reason for this lies in the religious nature of the dance. Indian dance is theatre and the only comparable art form in the West is the Passion Play. The story involved in an Indian dance item is portrayed in much greater detail than is possible in Ballet, despite the fact that the dancer usually performs alone. This is possible because of the evolution of a very detailed vocabulary of expression and gesture which forms a definite language, often mimetic, but also strongly symbolised and economical. An example of symbolism is Hanuman, the monkey God: two *kapitha* hands held one in front and the other over the head to indicate holding the tail quite unlike the jumping and scratching that must be employed when the use of *mudras* is not at one's disposal. Spring is another example of the economy of *mudras;* the opening of new leaves is indicated with the hands over head and alternating between *allapadma* and *hamsaya.* However, while some things can only be shown in one way this is more the exception than the rule. The poetic nature of the *mudras* gives a richness to this form of expression and to refer once again to spring, the alternative *mudras* of buzzing bees, blooming flowers and soft breezes blowing may be selected by the dancer. The fact that the same word or same line of a song may be performed over and over again with varying methods of expression is a measure of the very wide vocabulary contained in the *mudras.*

At the same time this very detailed exposition makes considerable demands on the audience if they are to appreciate the performance fully While the *mudras* are complete in themselves the sophistication of their presentation makes previous knowledge a necessity to appreciate their subtlety. The dance student encounters this problem once the initial exercises are completed and study is begun on individual dance items. It is at this point that the Western student of Indian dance realises the importance of having some general understanding of Hindu religious mythology. This is particularly important when, as is often the case, the Western student and her *guru* often have no common language. It is one thing to imitate a particular gesture or series of movements, but if the story is not comprehensible then it is difficult to introduce true feeling into the dance. Also, if the movements themselves are highly symbolic then the story will not necessarily be apparent through them. Even relatively small portions of the dance have complex meanings; a single pose used once in an item may have a whole story of its own attached, one which is known and appreciated by the informed audience. Some limited examples of this are the different *avatars* — reincarnations—of Vishnu poses of Krishna. The audience will be given a brief glimpse of Narasima, the man-lion disembowelling a demon; but why? of Krishna holding up a mountain with his baby finger; again why? In the items extolling the greatness of God there is no time to stop and paint a clearer, more complete picture. Thus, by alluding to several attributes the items taken in themselves often seem like a lot of unconnected events, when in fact they are built on previous knowledge. The same intricate background of knowledge is not required to appreciate Western dance.

**Facial Expression**

*Abhinaya* (facial expression) plays a large part in Indian dance and is probably the most difficult aspect of Indian dance. Expression has, like gesture become codified in a precise manner and at first sight often appears exaggerated even caricatured to Western eyes. The male look of desire on seeing a beautiful woman: looking sideways and breathing heavily, all the time moving the eye brows continually is one such example. Charles Darwin in his book on the expression of emotions in man considered that certain characteristic expressions were common to the whole of the human race, so that the language of expression was universally understood. This is true to a certain degree but the expression of some moods is very difficult because these have largely fallen into disuse in the West. In India they seem to be kept alive in a corrupted form on the cinema screen and familiarity with these expressions must make it easier for Indian girls to learn *abhinaya*. However the problem then becomes a matter of refinement. This difficulty will probably continue to increase as girls are no longer dedicated to this art at an early age to growing up in a hereditary family of dancers and thus able to observe and study continually this art during most of their waking hours. Now as was inevitable, the object to delve deeply into dance is to perform on the stage and become a professional dancer. The serenity of allowing a long period of time for the dance to mature and to learn the art at leisure has taken its toll. The *padams* of *Bharatanatyam* and the *ashtapadis* of *Odissi* are not always performed in their simplicity. Whereas once familiarity with the songs demanded the dancer to conform, so as to establish a rapport with the learned audience, the demand for variety is altering the old classics. *Abhinaya* portrays emotion and primarily uses the face, secondarily the hands, the body while some time used is not necessary

only added in *Kathakali* to give more *rasa* or taste. In complete contrast the body in Western dance is an autonomous unit for the emotions and such emotions as joy are portrayed through physical activity such as leaps and spins and sorrow with drooping shoulders and or a slow dejected walk. But emotions through the body are seen every day—theatre demands complexity and refinement if unspoken drama is to stir our imagination. Indian dance provides such a possibility. Even in the *abhinaya* the two styles of *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi* differ: the stories in *Bharatanatyam* are more direct, the girl longing for her lover, she can't eat, can't sleep, while in *Odissi* some time is spent painting a tableau to set the scene, usually by the river Jumuna. In *Odissi* particularly in the *Gita Govinda*, the dancer is the third person (or *sakhi*) trying to bring the lovers Krishna and Radha together. In contrast, in most *Bharatanatyam* themes the dancer herself is the lover and is able to portray her emotions of longing more forcefully since she is directly involved.

**Costume**

Costume and ornaments play a striking part in Indian dance but this aspect cannot be considered fully historical since early representations of dance in sculpture and painting show the dancers almost naked except for heavy jewels. For public display a more modest costume has evolved. One should note that the styles seen to-day are by no means identical to those seen ten years ago. The same can be said of Ballet but the basic concept for the body in both forms has not altered.

The fact that the body is naked in the sculpture and nearly completely covered in todays performance does not alter the effect and it appears that the actual shape of the body is less important in Indian dance than in Western dance where it is of fundamental importance to see the muscles and body form. Thus Ballet adopts the dress of tights and leotards another skin so to speak.

**Religious Significance**

Dance seems to have formed part of Hindu religious ritual form the earliest times. The oldest treatise, the *Natyashastra* of Bharata Muni, dates from about the 4th century. Before it was written down ,it was strictly codified by convention therefore its history predates the actual book.

Though almost extinct now as a form of temple worship, the religious significance of the dance is always acknowledged before and during performances and at the beginning of classes when the student asks forgiveness of Mother Earth for stepping on her. One problem that is debated by critics of Indian dance but rarely by dancers themselves is the importance of *bhakti* or devotion that should be directed towards the godhead. Since Indian dance has only recently moved from the temples to the stage and from restricted families teaching and performing to the availability for all to study, the devotional aspect of the dance seems to be at a critical stage. Has the spiritual aspect of Indian dancing continued to be paramount in their present form or is it slowly evolving into a secular art form in which little more than lip service is paid to the traditinal origins'? The question

that will soon come to the fore may well be: is Indian dance less classical because a more secular approach is used, despite the fact that a high standard of dance and purity of expression are maintained?

As a spectacle Indian dance lends itself to a more intimate setting than Ballet. Originally designed as a communion between the dancer and God it was meant to please the audience only inasmuch as the God is identified with having a wholly human appreciation. At the same time, religion exercises a conservative influence on the dance in that if human taste alters it is not permissible to assume that the Lord's taste has also changed. In the East, time sanctifies and innovation is frowned upon. Whereas in the West the creation of new forms is looked on as the highest art, in Indian dance most recent choreography has concentrated on the re-creation of historical dance styles. Certain of these have been truly creative in the Western sense but often there is a strange reluctance to admit this and justification is sought instead in ancient texts and temple carvings. The temple carvings are numerous and found scattered all over India. However for *Odissi* the main temple is Konarak, and for *Bharatanatyam*, Chidambaram. The carvings provide a pictorial documentation of poses that were probably used when the temples were built and it is recorded that a sculptor must first learn dance before he could sculpt the human figure. Temple sculpture has borrowed heavily from dance for its poses and the structure of Indian temples has itself influenced the form of the dance.

Dances were performed in medieval temples in a special hall known as the *Natya Mandapam*. In developed Orissan temples this was the second of three halls attached to the sanctuary. At the Nataraj temple in Chidambaram it faces the main sanctum on its north side. In other South Indian temples it is variously placed. It was a limitation of Indian architecture — until the introduction of Islamic techniques — that it was unable to create large unsupportable spans and consequently all large halls are cluttered with numerous pillars. Even in the Sun temple at Konarak, the dance hall though comparatively large, is broken by enormous pillars which must have restricted dancing to an area of about twelve feet squere. At Chidambaram the available space for unrestricted movement is even less. This factor must have contributed to the very contained appearance of *Odissi* and *Bhratanatyam*. There are none of the exuberant leaps found in ballet. The feet are generally close together all the time and nearly all the movement is confined to a very small area. This may be another reason why dancing is invariably solo.

Certainly the historical origins of Indian dance are obtrusive and it is difficult not to become interested in the origins of the dance in different regions, comparing this with what is found-today, and surmising on the future. Because of recent evidence it is highly conceivable that Indian dance can have a great effect on Western dance, incorporating *mudras* and other stylistic features into the still basic Western form of composition. However, the opposite effect will probably not be accepted as even mixing of styles is not tolerated. From the temple carvings one can see that dance played a significant part in the Buddhist, Jain and Hindu religious worship. However, if we are to accept the temple sculpture as authentic representations of what was done previously, the dance certainly has evolved and changed somewhat in its execution over the past few hundred years. Even

in cursory inspection it is notable that the temples contain several dance poses that have fallen into disuse. Since the styles we see to-day have evolved from the records in stone, the question to-day seems to be, will Indian dance be allowed to evolve further and if so, would this evolution be a further perfection or the beginning of decay?

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*Anne-Marie Gaston, is the Canada Council Arts Bursary holder for two years to study Indian dance. This article was the text of a speech delivered at the Sangeet Natak Akademi and Max Mueller Bhavan* Encounter with Indian Dance and Music *held in New Delhi in February this year. She is presently studying Odissi with Guru Mayadhar Raut.*