

COMMON ERRORS IN DANCE

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In 1972 when all styles of Indian classical dances are well known, established, popular and highly appreciated, it would be audacity on any one's part to talk about errors and much less common errors. However, it is only when a language begins to be used by a large number of people at different levels that there is a danger of abuse of the language. Further when a language moves to different cultural milieu, it acquires a regional flavour and occasionally the regional flavour results from frequent liberties which are taken with the grammar of the language, not by creative artists but by poetasters and imitators. If the analogy of language which is used creatively and abused is extended to the field of dance, particularly classical dances, it will become clear that with the dissemination of these forms to a large number of performers and with these highly academic disciplines becoming fashionable and "in", there has been an unfortunate decline in training standards, leading to an absence of the essential ethos of these dance forms. In a word, this ethos may be described as austerity.

Our concern today is not with the socio-cultural reasons for the decline of standards and the frequent display of techniques which would have been unacceptable two decades ago, but with certain specific movements and aspects of the *Nrtta* technique in some of the forms of classical dances, particularly Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Manipuri and Kathak.

There was a time when a Bharatanatyam dancer went through at least two years of rigorous training in the *adavus*; this was of prime importance. Posture meant first and foremost the manner in which the dancer could stand on her two feet. This standing position so characteristic of Bharatanatyam and Chola sculpture results from the particular treatment of the lumbar and lower vertebrae. The spinal concave curve emerges in the *Samapada* position by pushing the torso

just a little in front from the pelvis. It is observed that the correct initial position is foresaken by many dancers today, including some very well-known professional dancers. A common error in this standing position (which is the first position in the *Alarippu*) is the raising of the shoulders tensely instead of a natural position of the clavicle. The raising of the shoulders gives an effect of tenseness, but does not give the effect of a composed control resulting from the correct treatment of the lower vertebra and pushing forwards of dorsal vertebrae. Perhaps this error is not so easily noticeable, as the other one which is responsible for the impression of lightness, of easiness and sometimes even of flippancy in *Bharatanatyam*. This relates again to a fundamental position, viz., the *Ardhamandali* or what is known as the *Ukkaramandali*. The entire movement pattern of the feet turned sideways and the knees in an outward bent position analogous to the *demi-plie* in 'ballet' is the test of a good or a bad dancer. In geometrical design the dancer is trying to achieve a series of triangles; the shoulder line may be conceived as the base of one triangle with the waist as an imaginary apex of an inverted triangle. From this apex a second triangle is conceived with the thighs as the two sides and the line joining the two knees as the base of this triangle (Fig. a). The third triangle is formed by the space covered by the two calves conceived as two lines joining at the heels of the two outward turned feet. The arms reinforce this by forming other triangles on either side. The extended arm forms one side of the triangle and the imaginary line joining the palm and knee suggests the second side, the side of the torso and pelvis serves as the third side. Since the training in the *adavus* is incomplete and hurried, the dancer often errs in the execution of the entire *Nrutta* pattern, because she is unable to sustain a whole programme of keeping the *Ardhamandali* position, which demands an ability to control the centre of weight. Many other *adavus* emerge from this position when the dancer must necessarily keep the weight of the body on one static foot, specially in open positions. This is true of the sequences of *Tai Yum Datta*, as also *Tat Tai Tam*. Often, the dancer acquires her full height in the course of executing these *adavus* which call for the maintenance of the bent position of one knee and the extension or straightening of the other leg. All the *adavus* in the *Tattu* and *Nattu* variety suffer from an impression of lack of balance on account of this major elementary error of not holding one part of the body static while executing movements by the other. It was not without purpose that the traditional masters made dancers rigorously practice the first variety of *Tattu adavus* for a year before passing on to any leg extensions.

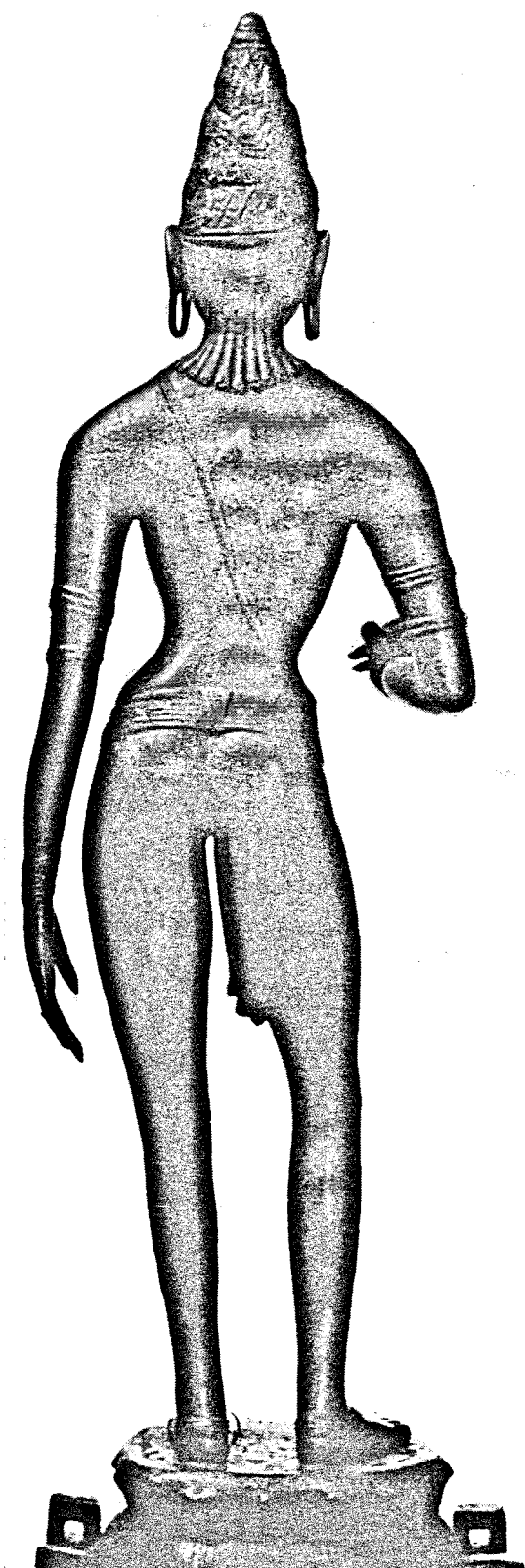
What is true of the *adavus* requiring leg extensions is almost truer of the *adavus* which use toe-heel movement in the *Ardhamandali* position. Here, also a common error relates to the change of level and height which frequently occurs in the execution of the *adavus* of the *Tattu Mittu* variety. Many dancers have begun to do the toe-heel movement without maintaining the lower level of the essential *Ardhamandali* position with knees outward bent and legs flexed. Another error in the varieties of *Tat Tai Tam* is a bend in the knee during leg extensions.

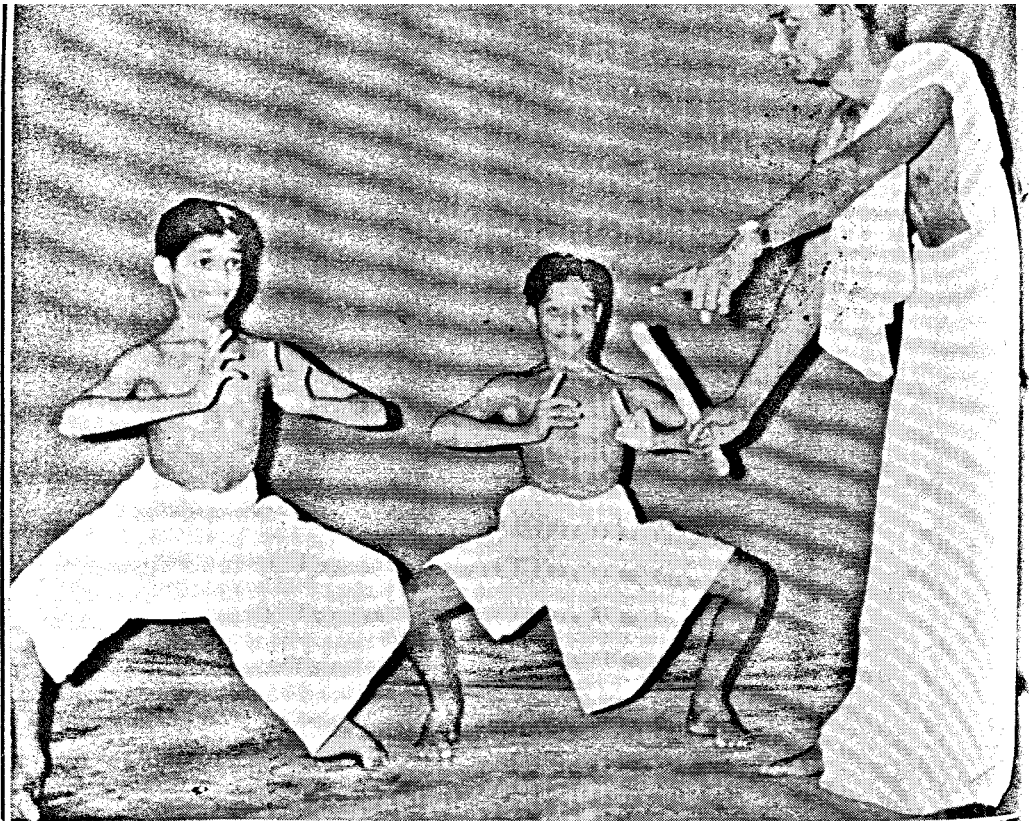
These bends in knee would not occur if dancers are made to go through rigorous exercises, some preferably at the bar. These errors of the lower limbs are reinforced by exaggerated movements of the shoulders, of the torso and above all by the use of the hip in sequences where the dancer is expected to move backwards. Except in some rare portions of *abhinaya*, in Bharatanatyam the use of the hip is forbidden. This dance style today has acquired a glamourous character by an erroneous use of the hip in acquiring what is commonly identified as a sculpturesque pose. Often these poses are wrong following neither the principles of movement enunciated in *Natyasastra* or *Silpsastra*. The *Sundari* neck, i.e., the lateral movement of the neck which is a movement of the atlas is also often marked by an undue overstatement. To this exaggerated movement of the neck, if there is the addition of the fluttering of the eye-lids and other uses of the eye-balls, the picture of a vivacious Bharatanatyam dancer without serious austerity is complete.

The feet contact, the knee position, the manipulation of the ball and socket joint of the pelvis and the deflection of the pelvis from the waist line or the *Katisutra*, the use of the torso either in two sections, the lower and upper trunk or as a single unit, the total use of the shoulder or a limited use of the clavicle or the manipulation of the scapula and the articulation of shoulder joint, the use of the elbows and the neck are vital in any style of classical dance of India. Alas, little or no need is paid to fundamental postures, basic position, the manipulation of joints and control over muscles. It is often believed that if a dancer completes the *Tala* cycle and synchronizes a 'pose' with *Sama*, her work is commendable. This is far from the truth. The test of a dancer lies in her control over anatomical or muscular structure of how much stress, accent, unaccent, briskness, abruptness or continuity she can bring to each sub-division of the *Tala* pattern which she executes with her feet and upper and lower limbs. A careful watching of the manner of execution of any of the *Jatis*, the *Tiramanas* of Bharatanatyam, the *Tukras* and the *Paranas* of Kathak, the various *Parangs* of Manipuri and the *Arasa* of Odissi and the *Kalasama* of Kathakali will convince an observer of the great power of expression of the feet by controlling weight and mass and the quality of the foot-contact, its calculated lightness or emphasis. These aspects were imbibed in a traditional method of training through continuous repetition and correction: today a self-conscious awareness of the function of each part of the human body and its exact role in an unit of movement should be an essential pre-requisite of a good dancer.

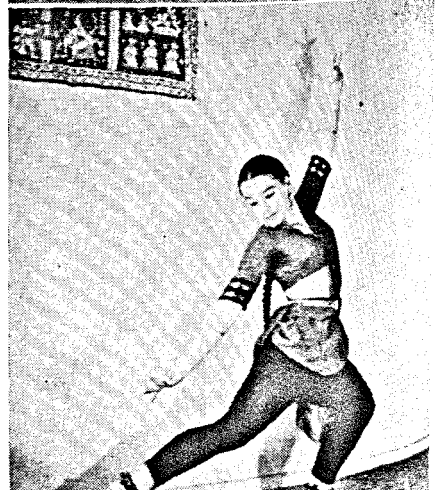
In Manipuri also, the feet position and the knee position are of fundamental importance. The ball of the foot is used delicately and

Illustrations. P. 27. Left: Bronze Parvati; note treatment of spine. Right: drawing of bronze Parvati; note treatment of torso. P. 28. Above: Training in Kathakali; teaching of mudras. Below: Typical leg extension of Kathakali. P. 29. Fundamental position of Kathakali, Chathunni Pannickar. P. 30. Basic movements of Bharatanatyam. Left Column: (a) triangular effect — *Tai-ha-tai*; (b) crossed leg position; (c) *kum-chitta*. Right Column: (d) Shooting the arrow; (e) *tat-tai-taam*; (f) *tai-yum-datta*.

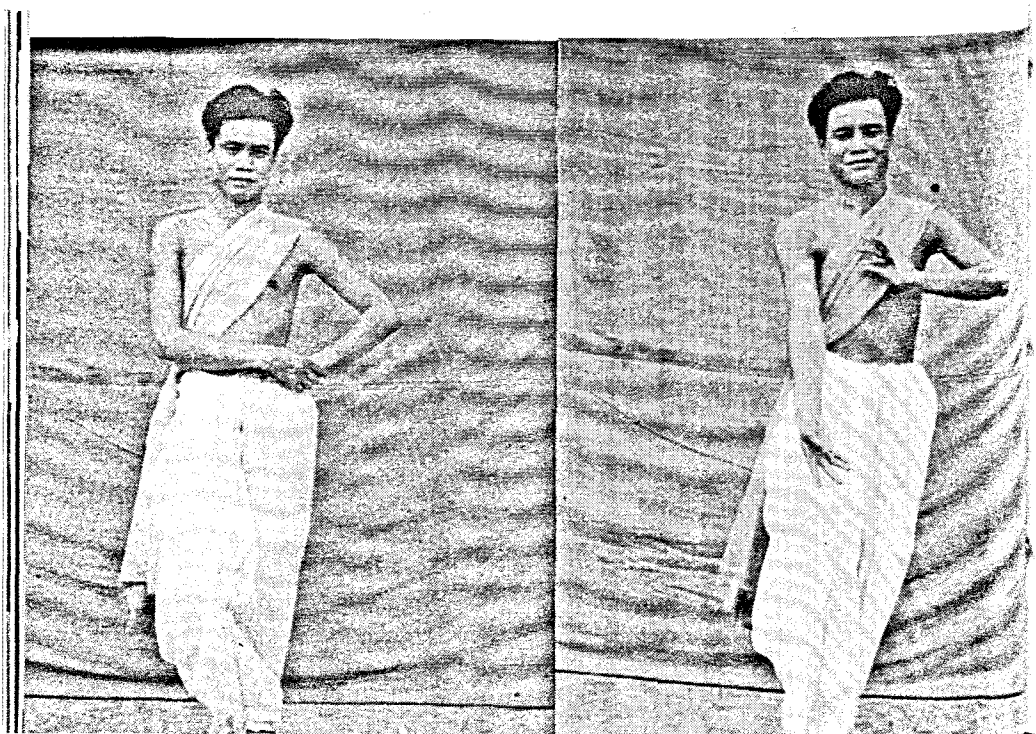
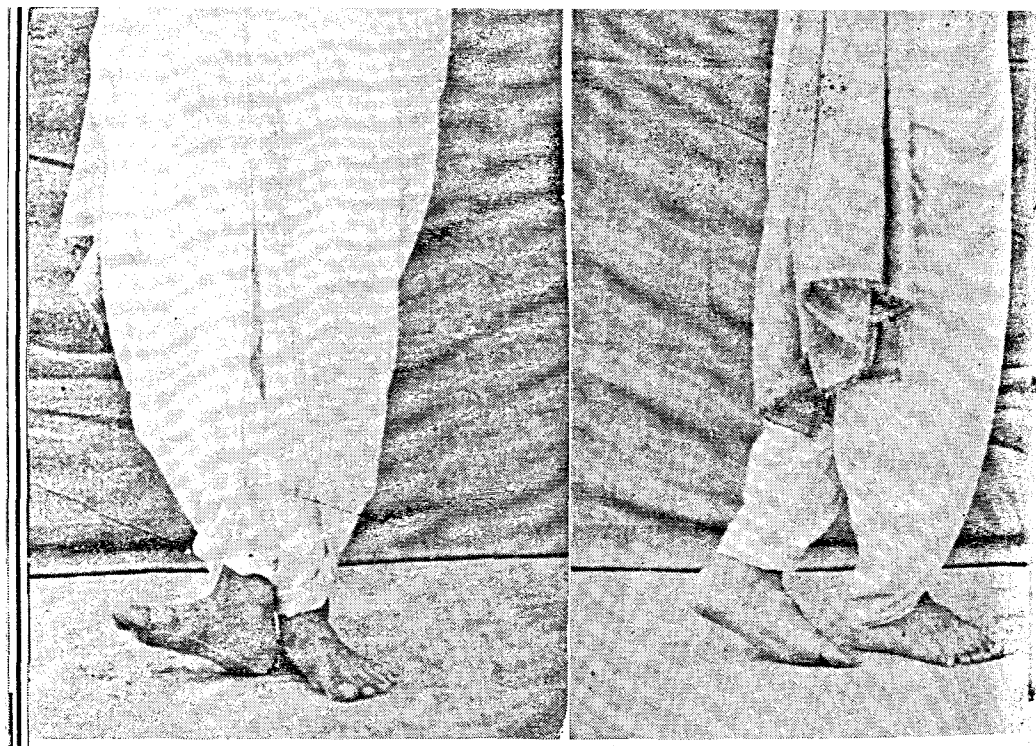


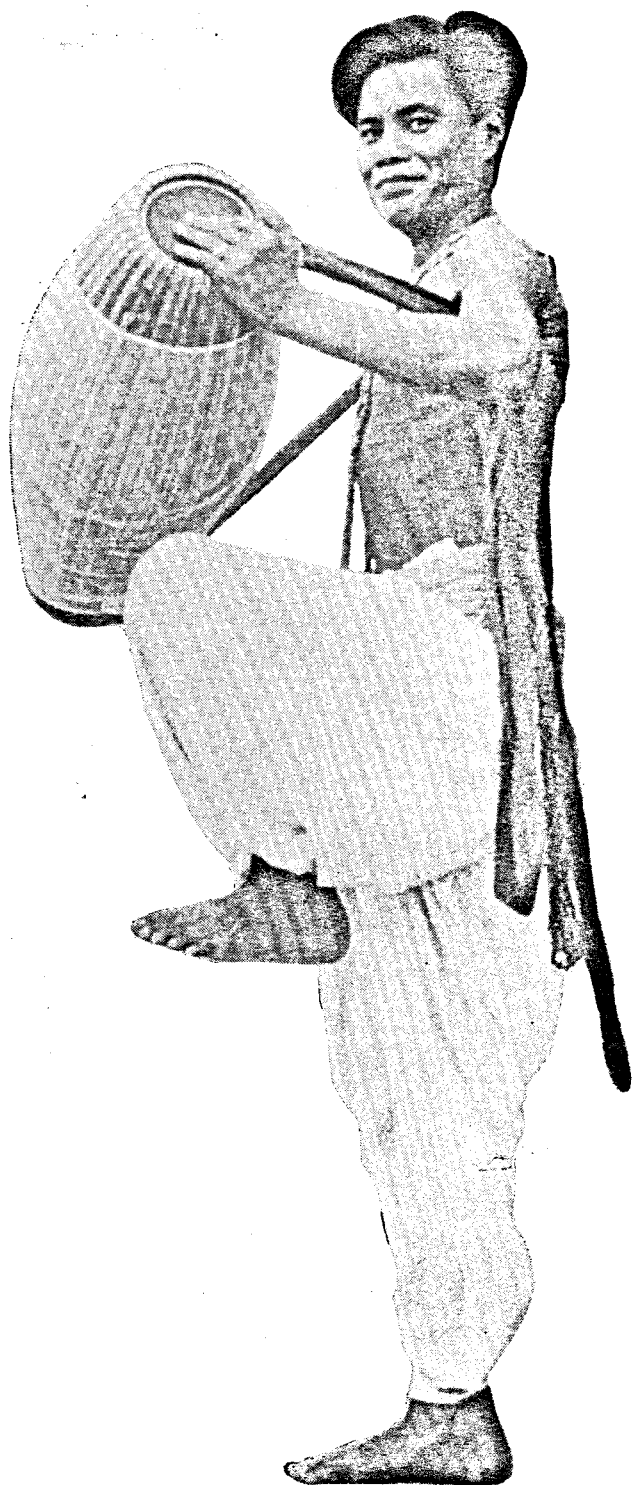














lightly and the knees are just a little bent in front. The breaking of the lower limbs into two sections is so slight that it only gives the impression of a vague curve and not of two sections moving on a hinge. This manipulation of the knees in conjunction with the manner in which the weight shifts from the ball of the foot to the entire foot in closed positions is responsible for the particular character of Manipuri. Any dancer who has not been able to control an unbroken movement of the shift of weight from the ball of the foot to the full foot or the heel gives an impression of jerks (in Manipuri Dance) as opposed to waves. When a dancer is unable to get control over the exact placement of the foot and its subsequent shift of weight, she or he finds an easy way out by using 'dips' of knees. Manipuri dancing becomes vague and messy only when this fundamental control is lost and when the torso is used in any odd manner without reference to the vertical median of the body and without reference to the maintenance of an erect position of the pelvis, a relaxed position of the torso and a slightly flexed position of the legs, with knees which are slightly bent forward. The upper part of the body in this style is broken up into two portions, the upper chest and the lower waist. The movement emerges from the lower waist and is followed by the upper torso or vice versa, but it is an unbroken continuous curve in space resembling a figure of eight. Very few dancers today are executing this movement as it should be, with the result that either Manipuri dancing becomes stiff or it ceases to have form because it is so vague, sugary and circular. A clear motif of the figure of 8 is repeated whether it is in the hand movements or in the finger movement or torso or while covering in air or executing floor patterns. A common error with regard to the hand movement of the Manipuri dancing is the taking of the entire palms inwards, whereas the correct Manipuri movement is a semicircular movement with its primary motivation from the wrist of supination and pronation rather than a gradual opening and closing of the fingers of the *ala padma* hands. The elbow levels are often incorrect. In the training of dancers, specially outside Manipur, one frequently notices an excessive use of facial muscles and unnecessary movements of the head. The head merely follows a very slight semicircular or figure of 8 movement of the neck, but has no initial movement; it is only a follow-up of neck movement beginning with the cervicles. With a seeming placidity of the face and with the combination of the movement of the neck, the lower and upper torso and erect pelvis and the slight frontal flexed position of the knees with weight slightly placed on the ball of the foot, Manipuri gives the impression of a continuous curve with a beginning and end. In *Upali* and *Longali*, as also in the portion relating to the *Bhangi Pareng*, this continuity of movement is essential.

Except for a few traditional masters, one does not see today any good Manipuri dancer execute the movement in air or in space (in

Illustrations. P. 31. Smt. Balasaraswati in fundamental position of Bharatanatyam. P. 32 Above: Basic positions of the feet in Manipuri. Below: Body stance and balance in Manipuri. P. 33 the late Guru, Amubi Singh in Manipuri. P. 34 the late Guru, Shambhu Maharaj in Kathak. (Photographs from the author's collection and Sangeet Natak Akademi).

male dancing) which used to be so characteristic of this dance style. In order to acquire an ability to execute either with one foot or with both the feet or knees these patterns in the air, the dancer was required to go through a rigorous training of executing these patterns with hands or feet on the floor. The traditional masters, such as Guru Amobi Singh, made the pupils execute these patterns on mud before they were done in space. This aspect of Manipuri dancing, has practically disappeared from the technical vocabulary and the style is the poorer for it.

A common error in Odissi emerges from a misunderstanding of the *Tribhanga* and the role played by the *Kati*. Dancers have begun to feel that the charm of Odissi lies in the use of the hip and the *Kati*. In fact the *Tribhanga* position so characteristic of Odissi and of Orissan sculpture is a basic position and not a movement. The posture emerges as a result of the shift of weight from one foot to the other in a closed demi-plie position, but during the course of the movement the hip is not used. The foot and hip that holds the weight remains static as in Bharatanatyam. In fact, a movement of the lower torso and the waist (*Parsva*) is essential for sequences, such as *Ta Jham Tari Jham* and sequences of the *Parsva Mardala* and the *Kari Hasta* positions rather than a hip movement. Also a common error in regard to Odissi is an inability of the dancer to hold a strong taut lower limb position and a relaxed upper torso position. When the whole body is taut, the dance style begins to resemble Bharatanatyam: if the dancer is too relaxed or the knees are not sufficiently bent outwards it becomes bad Kathak. If the torso is used with excessive fluidity it is bad Manipuri. An even more common error in Odissi today is the incorrect use of the neck. Often only the Bharatanatyam *Sundari* neck is being used by dancers. While the *Sundari* neck is used in Odissi occasionally, the normal movement in most of these sequences and the *Arsas* is a movement which is motivated by the face and where the chin takes the lead with the head following. If the dancers were to think in terms of the chin leading, then simple neck bends would be ruled out. However, many a time one sees dancers bending their neck or shifting their head side to side, but seldom does one see the execution of a perfect semi-circular or quarter-circle pattern of the chin and neck. Another movement in Odissi which is frequently incorrectly done is the movement of a brisk back walk on the heels (*goithi*). This movement beautifully executed can capture a whole audience and badly executed it seems ridiculous. One of the secrets of the Odissi dancing is the capacity of the dancer to change levels gradually unobtrusively and yet definitely. This is a totally different principle from the Bharatanatyam principle of maintaining the level at the *Ardhamandali* position. This change of levels is characteristic of the *nritta* technique, except in sequences which emerge from the *Chauk* where the dancer covers space as if drawing a circumference with a compass at the same level. Dancers often make a mistake of changing levels when executing a pirouette in *Chauk* and of not shifting levels when coming to the end of an *Arasa* or of another

Nrtta sequence where a *Bhangi* or a *Tribhangi* has to be used specially in the slow tempo movement.

No one ever discusses positions or postures in Kathak. Kathak is supposed to be a quick execution of the rhythmical and meterical patterns, the faster the tempo, the quicker and more numerous the pirouettes the more impressive is the dancer. However, even in this style there is a subtle shift of weight, correct posture and the ability to manipulate accent, acceleration and retardation which distinguished a good dancer from a bad one. The importance of maintaining one uniform height and level is gradually being lost also in this style. In the *Thata* portion one often sees dancers rotating shoulders, changing clavicle lines, bending knees unnecessarily and using eyes, lids and eyebrows, when all that is required is to shift the *Drishti* from the front to a little sideways (*Sachi*). Another common error in Kathak dancers is in regard to pirouettes or *Chakkars* which are executed by a quick stamp of one foot and then lifting of this foot high. While such *Chakkars* are now unknown in the repertoire of Kathak dancing, it would be of interest for people to know that Achhan Maharaj used to hit at the ankles of pupils, specially girl pupils, if they were to lift their foot higher than six inches. Today feet are lifted to any height at any angle and the finale is left hanging in the air. While this may have a very dramatic effect it once again takes away from the austerity of the style. The same is true of the movements of the upper limbs, wherein instead of the simple opening and closing (i.e. flexion and extension of biceps triceps) at the shoulder level there is a great deal of flourish of the hands and fingers above the head and below the waist level. Many unnecessary movements are also introduced while executing the *Chakkars*. An unpardonable mistake on the part of any Kathak dancer would be to use the hip while executing the *Tata kara*. This unpardonable act is today seen frequently on the stage and many gimmicks are used in order to draw the attention of the audience, through the feat of *javab* and *savala*.

Perhaps it is not relevant to talk of the expression on the face of the Kathak dancer while executing all these movements; nonetheless the expression of the dancer is of prime importance in all styles (more particularly Odissi, Kathak, i.e., those that primarily deal with what may be termed as the *Sringara Rasa*). The expression determines the nature of communication which is established with the audience. A too severe face, an over coquettish expression can ruin a concert. Other parts of the body play an equally important role in establishing the dancer as austere, or flippant, classical, or popular. While it is not possible to verbalise on subtle aspects effectively, it is hoped that even these pointers will convince performers and teachers of the great need for analysing movement bit by bit in order to understand the emotive quality of each of the anatomical units of the body and the purposes which the muscular system can serve.

In Dance, the human body becomes an abstract impersonal instrument, through which feelings can be expressed. The instrument cannot

communicate it, if it is not well maintained and one which is usually out of tune either because it is unshapely or unwieldy or it does not have the correct proportions at the right places. The instrument can prove faulty by a habitual misuse of it through wrong practice or lack of vigilance. As in the case of a musical instrument, although a composition can certainly be played through an instrument which has not been properly tuned, the particular *raga* will become meaningless. So also in Dance the most wonderful of compositions can become mushy without the proverbial *angasuddham*. An understanding of the use of each of the limbs and their motive capacity is essential in a teaching process where time is being cut short. Unless this self-conscious awareness of break down and analysis is inculcated in the dancer and the audience is trained or initiated into having a set of perceiving eyes, one fears that soon, all too soon, the dance styles of India would perhaps once again become Nauch dances which had to be retrieved to their pristine beauty by some pioneers 30 years ago.

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