

# DANCE AND EDUCATION

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Balan waylaid me shyly as I was going to class. "Ma'am", he said, "I hope you won't mind if I do not come to your class today—you see . . . .we are rehearsing for a dance for our Sports Club meet".

I was surprised, a dance for the Sports Club meet and Balan in it! Both seemed incongruous. "What dance"? I asked curiously.

"Well, Ma'am", he fumbled, "we thought we would do a *Bhangra*. It will sort of liven things up". He had been shifting from one fat foot to another but seeing the sympathetic smile on my face, he straightened up and flashed me a brilliant smile. Even before I nodded yes, he was off, madly rushing down the corridor his thick set rather fat frame contorting fantastically.

I stood watching him till he was out of sight with a strange stirring in my heart. A host of half-submerged images rose to my mind—my surprise at an exquisitely done Bamboo Dance by some teen-age girls of one of the municipal schools on one such unexpected occasion—the thrill of boys and girls practising lezhiam for the Republic Day with something like ecstasy in their faces, the electric swing of their arms, the beat of blood in the rhythm—a little seven-year old girl improvising exquisite movements and steps to a record of Timir Baran's in a dusk-lit room.

Later I was to see Balan make brilliant use of the handicap of his build in an amusing mime bit for which the freedom of *Bhangra* gave an opportunity—Balan, the rather stodgy South Indian so thoroughly at home in a Punjab dance! I had not thought he had it in him. Often in class when his attention wandered and I wondered how much he could take in, I had longed for a bridge to establish rapport. And

I found it, my admiration for his performance became that mysterious link and I used it cunningly to draw him out. Movement fascinated him. Observing it in normal and heightened forms, discussing it, admiring it—quite an intellectual friendship grew up between us.

Enlightened educational practice has always given an important place to Dance. The Greeks knew well the value of Eurythmics in the growth of an integrated personality; many progressive education systems in the West have in this century woken up to the value of dance both as self-expression and social communication. Modern ideas with regard to the importance of Child Art and even music have begun to percolate into our consciousness. Why is it that there is a total lack of a positive attitude to dance in education in the country which boasts of a rich tradition in the field?

This is a line of thinking which bears serious investigation and analysis but it is not my purpose to go into it at this moment. My main concern is to plead for the importance of dance as an integral part of education, as a language of social communication and a basis for mental health at a time when our whole educational philosophy and practice is under fire and conflicting aims and objects are pulling it in different directions.

This point was brought home to me sharply a few years ago when a group of boys from a Kulu tribal school came to Delhi during the Republic Day Celebrations and were invited to one of the important Public Schools of the Capital. The ease and charm with which these boys uninhibitedly danced and sang their way into the hearts of all present contrasted sadly with the awkwardness, stiffness and inability of the city boys to reciprocate.

If we observe carefully, the child's natural reaction to the repressive force of stratified society and an excessively verbal culture is escape into movement—explosive violent, seemingly irrational and irrelevant. Indeed, any heightened state of emotion—joy or its opposite—externalises itself into movement which is the first language of the child and which he deliberately remembers and develops in order to convey to others something of his own intuitive reactions which are too deep for words.

Historically, this is the common root of what John Martin calls the 'basic dance', common to all cultures. This is the origin of all frenzied religious dance—the holy jumpers, the 'Shakers', the 'Whirling-dervishes' and if one may stretch the point, to the excessively muscular dance of the pop-culture of the young today. This is also the basis of all ritualistic dancing connected with birth and death, hunting and harvesting, conquest over enemies or propitiating evil spirits—in fact every important event of tribal life, for they are all mystical experiences with which we must come to terms.

The logical premise underlying this is one that we in our highly intellectualised and sophisticated society are all too prone to ignore and that is the inherent contagion that exists in bodily movement—we yawn when others yawn, weep when they weep, feel sympathetic muscular

strain when we watch others strain under a load and are stimulated to dance when others dance. This is the basis of that marvellous feeling of togetherness, of oneness with our fellows which characterises collective dancing and is the basis of all folk dance.

The educationist ignores this at his peril because there is no other media as intense, as natural and invigorating as the intuitive social communication between people dancing together. I saw it in those Kulu boys and saw its total absence in the Delhi school boys.

Our intensely competitive and job-oriented society demands a school culture to cater to its specialised needs. There is no doubt that those needs have to be met but not at the cost of the total human being. And there need not be contradiction between the two educational aims of self-expression and social efficiency in an imaginatively designed system. Sports and physical culture are already harnessed to the competitive spirit—the academic programme can be further honed towards job placement but what will cater to the heart? Obviously the arts—dance, drama, music, painting. Among these a very important place must be given to dance because of its special propensity for social communication and promoting a sense of well-being.

Let the child learn to love his body and use it as a tool for expression; let him experiment with rhythm individually and collectively, freely or in accordance with a technique and you have laid the basis for physical and mental health and an outgoing personality. I am not for one moment suggesting that is a magic key to all problems of the human psyche but it is a matter of common observation that a child in tune with his body, of which he is neither ashamed nor afraid, is a poised person who is likely to face challenges with considerable confidence conversely, the physically inhibited child compounds his problems. I remember in this regard what a sensitive girl once told me. "When I was small", she said, "I thought nothing of jumping from a wall. As I grew up and my limbs lengthened fear gripped my heart. I was no more light but heavy with a nameless fear of my body in space. I was no more free with it". A whole world of indictment of our repressive education and social systems lay behind these artless words. How shall we rid the child of his fears and liberate his body? are sport and physical culture alone able to do it? No. But dance with its purgation and its intimations of harmony will be able to do it. We Indians should understand this well. Have we not projected the idea of Cosmic Dance as the focal point of order in the Universe? Did we not when we dance, become a part of this natural order?

Metaphysics apart (and it is important that metaphysics be kept out of this) the time has come to seriously think of dancing as a very important activity of every developing child to make him a balanced person. But a warning is necessary here. None of our classical dances (apart perhaps from *Manipuri*) is built upon these premises. They are designed for the talented individual's quest. We shall have to go to the notion of 'basic-dance' and folk and group dancing for our ideas.

Experience in many countries has shown that it is at the primary stage of education that dancing comes most easily and can be made a regular part of the School curriculum. The desire to move is most strong in a young child and this decreases unless fostered. Music is an integral part of this activity and has to be carefully chosen to stimulate movement. In fact improvisation, group dancing and a technique carefully planned and graded to promote body awareness and its increasing use as an instrument of expression are the three directions I can visualise on which to design an approach to dancing in schools for everybody. Those especially gifted can take the highroads of dancing in the post-primary stage into any one of the classical disciplines they desire or are fit for either individually or in schools, if schools can provide for this.

It is time that all those who believe in the importance of dance in education should meet and impress on the powers that be the urgency of creating a whole movement for dancing in schools and hammer out a flexible design to meet the purpose. It should no more be the prerogative of a few wealthy schools to provide dance as a luxury item. A whole new folk-culture has to be evolved to meet the onslaught of the big, buzzing, blooming confusion of the technological world which threatens to engulf and fragment us. The human being has to meet its challenge with more and potent ways of social communication, togetherness and inner poise. A big movement for free, creative dancing is indispensable for this purpose. If we read the warning signs from the west correctly, we shall have to think big and act big for sheer self preservation.

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