

CHOREOGRAPHY

Mrinalini Sarabhai

From earliest times, man has danced. We have instances of man's projection of himself in his ritual dances, his war dances, his belief and awe of Nature, his movements to demonstrate how the rice sown, the crops tilled, the elements functioned. These were dances that realised instinctive and spontaneous patterns. Slowly man became a part of a group and no longer stood out as a separate entity. He was reinforced by participation in activities which involved other human beings. The security of the group was part of his maturity and where he leapt and shouted before by himself, he now subdued this expression to an experience in which others participated. Thus began the folk dances which are rhythmic patterns shared by every one. That is why even today, the folk dances are sources of material that cannot be ignored. Their rhythmic intricacies, the simplicity of their formation, the verve and vigour, the religious fervour, the remarkable fusing of separate entities into a wholeness, unfold an amazing range of forms and lines. In folk dancing, the roots of our cultural forms are clearly visible. Created at a time when natural emotions were expressed freely, they give an invaluable indication of the past, the deliberate planning of a social pastime, the economy of movement to show just what is intended, all experiences, based on common human symbols. For instance most folk dancing is done in a circle. There is a complete unity about the circle. Each person is connected to the other which makes for identification of the individual with the whole. Each one faces the centre, the locus which gives the dancer the feeling of relation or self-identification with the core. Thus unplanned, the group activity became circular as the world itself, the sun, the moon, a symbol of comfort and continuity. We read that "the earliest symbols to emerge are the simplest, which we usually designate as abstract, e.g. the circle and the cross"¹

1. *The Great Mother*—Erich Newmann

The establishment of the earliest houses in Mesopotamia began with the marking of a circle, the conjuring of the Great Round which reveals its female nature equally well as containing periphery or as womb and centre. "The circle has always been synonomous with a feeling of fullness and numerous folk dances in a circle, show harmony and interdependence, though perhaps were completely spontaneous.² Primitive man, had a communion with cosmic creation that is completely lacking today. He rejoiced in the rising of the sun, the enchanting flight of the birds in the evening, the starry magical nights. Life was religion and there was a complete contact with nature, with existence itself. So, when folk dances are studied, as they must be by every student of dance who wishes to create new form, it would be well to go back to the elemental nature of the form and recapture its true spirit. We talk of the centre of our being, the central vision, the centre of a universe. The centre is a unifying power that gives purpose to activity. In many of the folk dances, a lamp is placed in the centre depicting the light of illumination around which all life dances. The symbolism of form already becomes apparent in the folk dancing. In later paintings, the light becomes Krishna, the *gopikas* the human souls moving around the central vision of God. Krishna "shines like the full moon surrounded by the stars. By the power of *Yoga*, Krishna assumes a multiplicity of forms in the circular *Rasa* dance with the sixteen thousand *Gopis*, each one finding him by her side".

✓ Dance in India, with its continued history of more than three thousand years grew and was nurtured within the precincts of the temple. This has given the dance its distinctive quality and till this century, has been a satisfying concept. True, there were variations. Each region had its own attitude, but the fluctuations were not deep rooted. For instance, in the major forms of Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, Manipuri and Kathak, the basic religious structure remains the same. The dancers tell the same legends. The *Puranas*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavatam* were and still are the textbooks, upon which composers based their compositions. The vision is the same whether in the North, South, East or West. So, throughout the country, there is a significant common form. The world of perception is still the original world of dance, as the one seen by the guru Bharata. Nandikeswara still teaches *mudras* in the same order as at the beginning of time. Dancers still go to temple walls to copy sculptured images for costumes, still pose lyrically before temple walls in an attempt to recreate traditional environments.

Through the centuries many men shaped the destiny of the dance. From a group design it become a solo activity, the religious motive became social, and then was brought back again to the concept of God. As in ancient Greece, the dance played a significant role and was a deliberate communication of a social order with its strict moral code. It was meant to evoke in the spectator, a certain direction and spiritual order in life. Like the *Vedanta*, there was an authority about its principles. "This art is not merely for your pleasure, but exhibits *bhava*

2. *The Lord of the Autumn Moons*—Radhakamal Mukherjee.

(emotion), for all the three worlds. I made this art as following the movement of the world whether in work or play, profit, peace, laughter, battle or slaughter, yielding the fruit of righteousness to those who follow the moral law, a restraint for the unruly, a discipline for the followers of a rule, to create wisdom in the ignorant, learning in scholars, affording sport to kings and endurance to the sorrow-stricken, replete with the diverse moods, informed with varying passions of the soul, linked to the deeds of all mankind, the best, the middling and the low, affording excellent counsel, pastime and all else." But ours is essentially a century of the intellect. Science with its involvements with the problems of the universe, its emphasis on man and his reaching out into space through visual phenomena, his articulate evaluation of conquered worlds, is a tremendous challenge to the artist, whose reliance is on an inner vision and whose message is of man's soul.

Knowledge at our finger tips, mechanical inventions, better living, fast travelling, all these have contributed to man's progress and also to man's confusion. It is perhaps fortunate that in India the vestiges of our cultural inheritance still remain partly intact. Our civilisation, though fairly rigid, has a basic philosophy that is the most tolerant in the world. It gave man the freedom of worship, the right to be himself. Though this freedom may be abused, it is still better than having to be a cog in a purely mechanical world. Yet, none of us artists can escape our century and its implications.

Today, the times are more challenging than ever. A dancer is primarily a performer with a need for communication. Most dancers are content with an acceptance of traditional patterns, and do not wish to do more than perfect them, and dance them with all the beauty and virtuosity at their command. But there are others who desire intensely to discover the meaning of movement, the world of perception, the deep experience of composition. I am one of them, born with a desperate consuming desire to create and the need to question. All creative artists wish to give a vaster meaning to enrich the language with which they communicate. For this, a complete comprehension of the work is essential. To begin with the past, and its meaning. Not only the technique, but the motivation behind the form. In India, we have through the ages tried to communicate through our body (*angika*) and our language (*vachika*) costume and make-up (*aharya*) and natural emotions (*sattwika*). Dancing was exalted to the highest realms of eternal values. The immeasurable qualities of God's omniscience, were depicted through dance. Man's freedom and bondage become a tangible vision in the image of the dancing Shiva.

As the sculptor gave the unseen world of the Infinite, a comprehensive wholeness in the figure of the dancing Nataraja, so the dancer through her own medium, tries to extend the vision of the spectator into further reaches of time and space to give life itself, a wholeness. Creative activity is a presentation in understandable terms of what we are, a picture of man's inner aspirations, joys and sorrows. Artists register not only the world outside in their work, but the deep unknown world inside which is farther perhaps than those outer spaces, which have already been reached. That

is why much of the art today, especially in the Western world is so frightening, that the human being is scared to look. Why is he so scared? Because he sees in it the whole threatening universe around him, the chaos, the cruelty, the desolation that he himself has induced. He is afraid to look at himself. He is the ostrich par excellence. It is the artist who is the courageous one, who paints what he sees and feels and yet, if a truly creative artist, he is able to transcend that terrible chaos. Artists have to face challenges with integrity, using every vestige of knowledge of technique to translate what they perceive into a meaningful entity. They have to see the chaos not only in the context of our time but in eternal values.

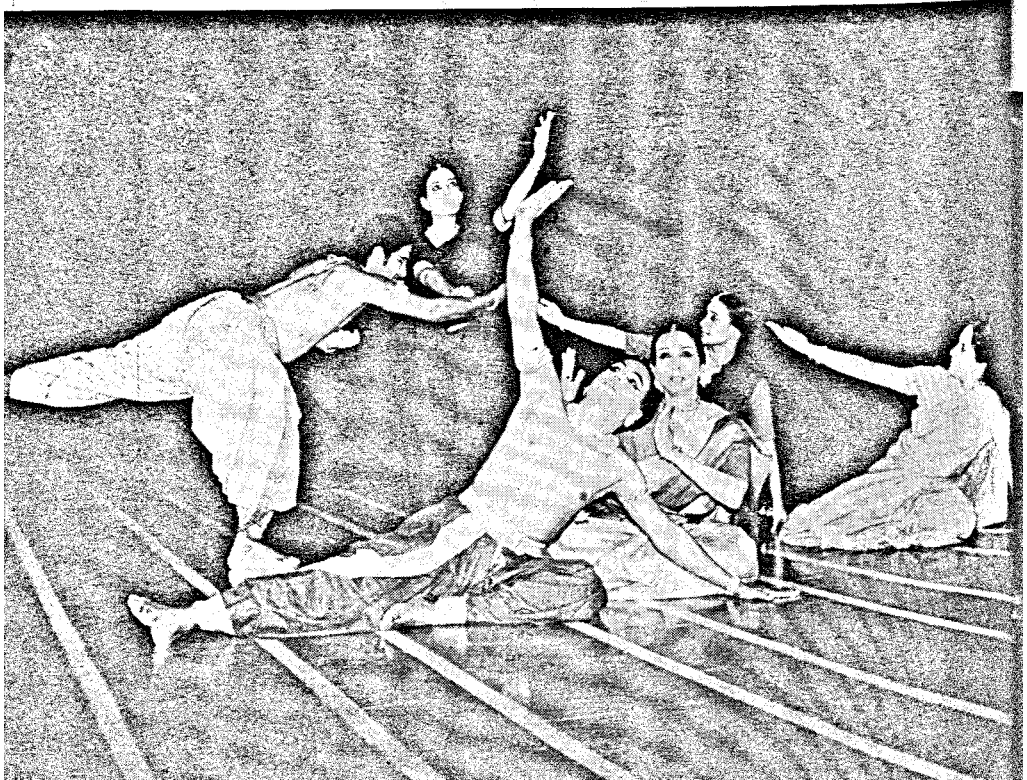
This I can best explain through my own dance drama 'Man'. It was a child playing with his own reflection, discovering the power of his limbs, that struck a deep chord within me. It made me ponder upon life and death, the meaning of existence. But life and art are two very different things. They do not use the same vocabulary. So, the choreographer has to know the emotions, yet present them in the language of art. So, one begins with basic technique. Each component of a movement has to be analysed in relation to the whole and made purposeful in its particular situation. Then the movement has to be studied in relation to space. For example, the first scene in 'Man' is the birth of the child. It is not enough to think of birth in itself, but the meaning of birth in its eternal totality. Man springs from the womb, the centre of the mother, the comfort, the security, the enclosed space. Then, there is the detachment when the child is born and the cry of the newly born babe resenting the separation from its home. Here, there is a positive and negative aspect. All these thoughts must communicate not merely the content but the experience in movement. While preserving an external unity, there has to be an internal comprehension.

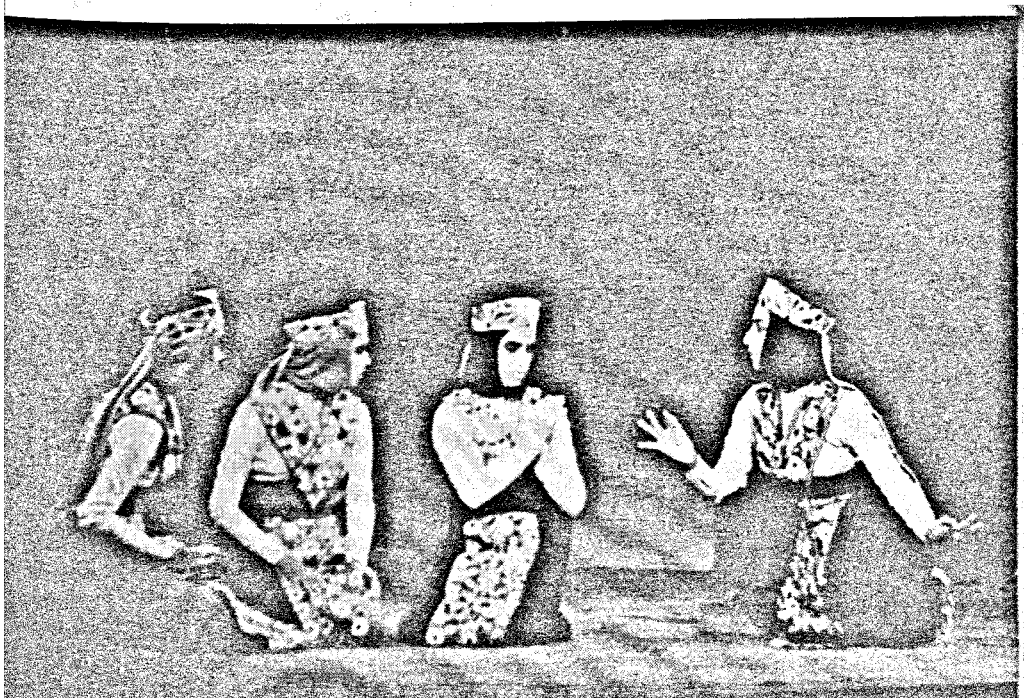
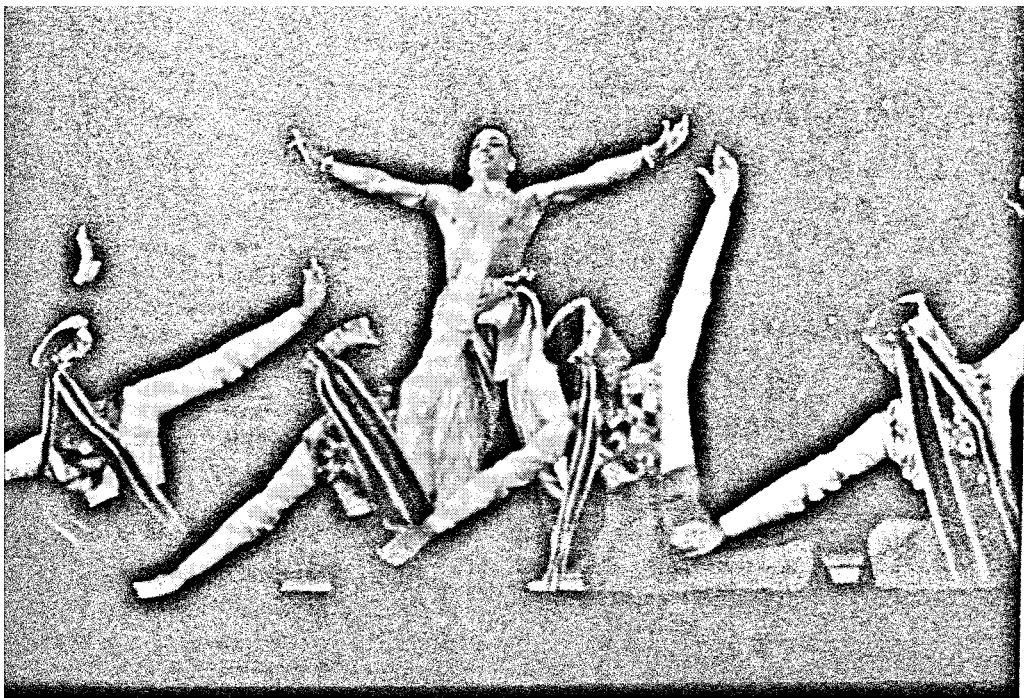
What are the tools the dancer works with? Primarily, the body. The intellect constructs the idea, the body expresses. So, the body has to be perfectly trained so that the mind uses it whichever way it will. The choreographer evaluates each movement and finds its unique quality. Apart from the design, the movement has to integrate an intellectual, physical, emotional response and have a definite motivation. We are familiar with old movements, and most of us unquestioningly accept them. The choreographer does not merely accept a movement, but tries to understand it. It is because teachers have not understood their techniques, but merely imitated their teachers, mistakes and all, that much of the dance form has lost its purity.

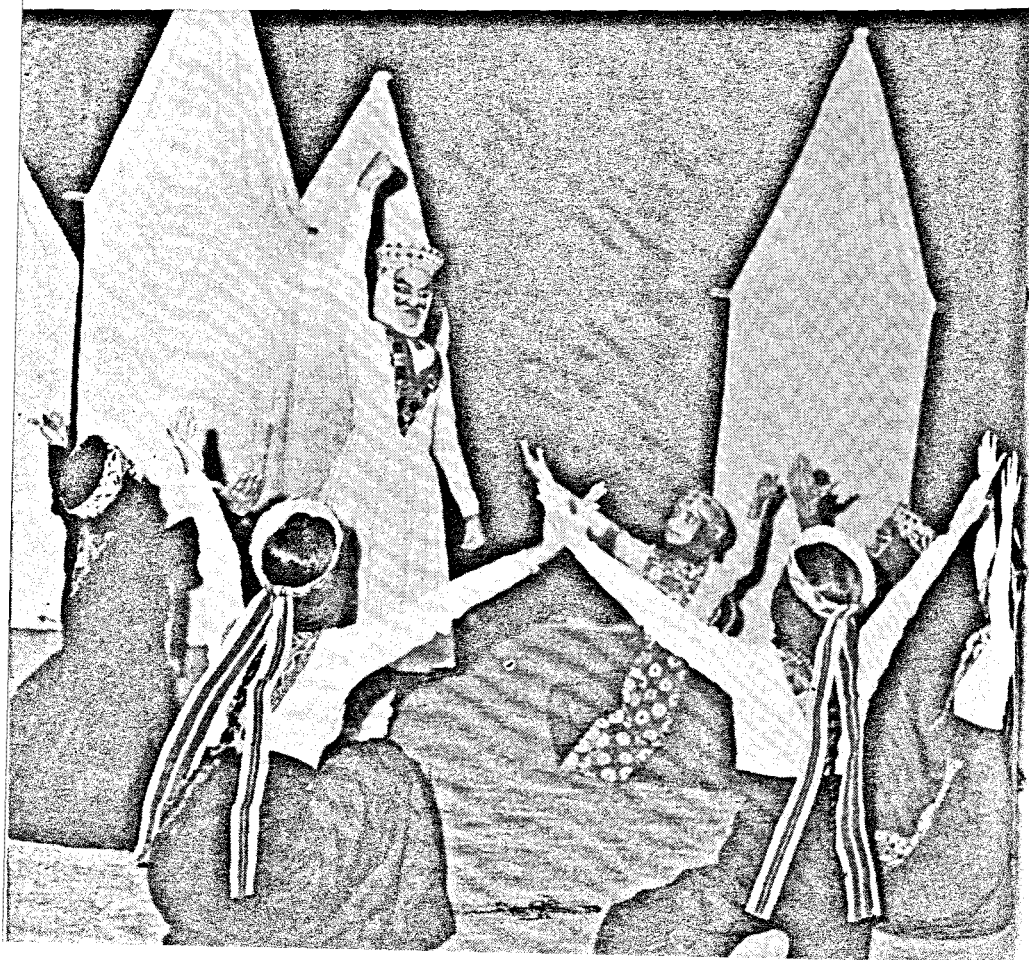
Today, students are beginning to enquire into the meaning of each stance and we who teach must be willing to explain. This questioning should be constantly encouraged, because then progress is based on understanding, not on copying. For instance, the basic stance in Kathakali and Bharata Natyam is often taught wrong, and students spend a laborious

Illustrations: P. 9. Mrinalini Sarabhai and Chathuni Pannickar in "Matsya Kanya". P. 10. Above: Darpana's production of "Bhanusinghar Padavali." Below: A notable experiment was "Rig Veda". (Photographs from Darpana and Sangeet Natak Akademi).









time unlearning it, whereas if it had been taught properly with just an explanation of the 'feel' of the movement and the relation of the limbs to each other it would have been simple to learn. Then the dancer identifies his own body with his own movement experience and can never go wrong. Then from that stability built up in all the years of training, he can control his body, and put only that much flow of energy into each movement as is required.

Once he is a completely disciplined technician, with the control of his body, understanding its structural and meaningful positions, he realises that every action has a conscious motivation. Our great scholars of dance had given this motivation deep thought as is seen in Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, and many later texts. Today, we are in a different century and though basically the movement may be the same, the design is not. We analyse movement in choreography in relation to the spirit that permeates the world around us, what we humans are today. The *Raudra Rasa* is the same as that of Bharata's world and the *vibhavas* are also similar. But our expression of them is vastly different. For instance, in Indian dancing, great emphasis is laid upon the *abhinayam* of the face. In a huge theatre, the face is hardly discernible, so *abhinayam* of the whole body is utilised more. Yesterday's anger was against elements of society. Today, it is against elements of destructive values in the entire world. The shift of emphasis may be slight, but to the sensitive artist it is symbolic.

Dance was meant to inspire, to excite, to teach man a way of life. It cannot continue to do that with old forms. Today, the dancer's message must change, though with full artistic integrity and complete knowledge and reverence of tradition. It must continue to reflect the cultural values and conflicts of our age. In India today art has become a sedative, an indulgence, which is the surest way to kill all creative work.

When the *Rig-Vedic* poem, an abstract composition was presented in Bombay and in Delhi, it (I heard later) created quite a good deal of controversy. I was glad that it had made people think. When '*Manushya*', my first composition, was danced in Delhi, very few understood what it was all about. Today, after more than two thousand performances, it is "popular" and in great demand. This means that audiences are slowly reacting and understanding.

In a new creation, the choreographer may pick up a small incident, but he expresses it in the immeasurable qualities of the soul. It has to be given a shape and form that is communicable. If a group of dancers are utilised, then again the design in space has to be symmetrical. If there is a demand for positive thought to be brought home, repetition may be used, sometimes an asymmetry may express meaningfully the ugliness of life. In the last scene of *Manushya* (man), man dies and is taken to the burial ground. The lifting, the pacing, the deliberate slowness of movement, the even steps with minute pauses, accentuated the feelings of the death and the peacefulness of it. The soul goes back to where it came

Illustrations: P. 11. Two Scenes from "*Tasher Desh*". P. 12. A dramatic scene from "*Tasher Desh*", a ballet based on Tagore's work.

from, this time not the leap and cry of the newborn child, but the solemn almost peaceful return of the soul to its own home. It tries to bring out the peacefulness of normal death, the return of the inner man to Divine Consciousness. Recently, listening to Swami Chinmayananda, explaining the *Gita*, I was struck by his verbal imagery when he said, "when the *Atma* goes out of the body, what is left? Only that to be carried out on two bamboo sticks." It was the same emphasis that I had tried to give in the last scene of *Manushya*. That it is the body that dies, not the Self.

Music, plays a most important role in composition, and in India these two sister arts have grown together. But for new choreographic pieces, music is sadly lacking, and dancers have to be musicians as well. With each dance drama, I have tried to work around some new perception that has taken hold of me. In *Matsya Kanya*, the lyricism of the dance was brought out. The music was composed with no words, *mudras* were completely minimised and the entire pattern was of pure *nritta*, yet telling a story. In *Maya and the Disciple*, the theme was of illusion and reality and the soul's search for identity. In this composition, the music began as though from the very beginning of time, before creation and developed with the soul's evolution. In Percussion the theme was in my mind, but it was given to the audience as a visual impression to evolve their own experience. The reactions in various countries of the world were most exciting. My art has been with each composition exploring not only form but a synthesis of color, costume, sound, music, lights and silences. In the *Rig Veda*, I used only chanting, drumming and long silences. It was composed in patterns of my involvement on listening to the verses. For a year, I had no idea how to begin. I needed a bleakness, a desolation, yet filled with expectancy—the moment of expectation before creation. Then last summer, at Peermade in Travancore, we were getting into the boat to go into the forests. The water had sunk to a low level, and the bare stumps of black trees stuck out in fantastic shapes, mysterious, forbidding and spectacular. In the grey-black dusk of the evening, the image was completely identifiable with my thought. It was the opening scene of the *Rig-Veda*. The mind is continually drawing impressions from the outside world and storing them in some secret recess of the unconscious. Then this image seems to crystallise and from within is born the need to give it visual expression.

There are many other forms of choreography which are simpler. A classical story is rearranged and presented artistically as in Bharata Natyam and in Kathakali. Or a composition like Gurudev's *Tasher Desh* for which we created new dances and gave a new interpretation which seemed more appropriate to the times we live in. Even motion in our century does not have the same pace. Rhythm in dance is a powerful factor. But today the cosmic rhythm of our lives constantly interfered with by the mechanical rhythms of our times. Any one can understand this when going by a train how images flash by in rapid succession. And by plane when one is transported in a matter of hours to a different continent, yet the images outside seem still and immobile. Both are a far cry from the bullock cart. This creates a new tension in rhythm. This factor is utilised beautifully in modern films and also in other art forms. The

time factor has given all art a new dimension. Calder, the great artist of mobiles explained this very well when he said, "the mobile has actual movements in itself while the stabile is back at the old painting idea of implied movement. You have to walk around a stabile or through it; a mobile dances in front of you".

Today, there is a tremendous upsurge of interest in the arts, but we must be all the more careful that our values be true to our great inheritance, that when we dance, the form be true to its aesthetic quality, and that any change or creativity be made with deep knowledge of what has gone before, and deep understanding and awareness of that which is going to be born.

Let the dance continue as man's search for his identity, man's response to the forces around him, man's integration with the conflicting patterns of existence. Let dance speak in the language of old, but let dancers speak in a contemporary language, but with complete artistic integrity.

MRINALINI SARABHAI, is one of India's eminent classical dancers. Her work is distinguished by its contribution in the field of choreography. As Director of a leading dance institution, Darpana, Ahmedabad, Smt. Sarabhai has written books on Classical dancing and contributes to leading journals. She is well-known in Europe, U.S.A. and the East due to her extensive tours with Darpana. She has been honoured by several bodies including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1970) and the civilian distinction of Padma Shri by the Govt. of India.