

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Indian Classical Dance** by Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, English, published by Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, December 1974, Rs. 25

*Indian Classical Dance* by Kapila Vatsyayan for the first time treats the main classical dance forms of India under one cover in a compact and efficient manner.

It apportions short chapters to 'History of Dance' and 'Theory and Technique' and then devotes separate chapters to the Indian classical dance forms: *Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Orissi, Manipuri, Kathak* and, surprisingly, Modern Dance, while explaining why *Chhau, Kuchipudi and Yakshagana* could not be included.

The author sets out to treat 'the particular styles in relation to literary, sculptural, epigraphical evidence of the region and analysis of technique mainly from the point of view of articulation and methodology of movement.'

The author has succeeded in this and gone ahead in tracing modern developments from the grass roots. In this case the depth of erudition has not been infected by the virus of orthodoxy. The author tries to steer clear of legends and myths and a blind adherence to the law that old is gold. Thus the book, while pointing out the impressive continuity of the basic principles enunciated by the *sastras* in the growth of the various forms also takes note of the significant and continuous changes and modifications. Affirming that the 'principles governing the technique of Indian dance are the same as those which govern the technique of classical drama in India', the author brings out the different aspects of dramaturgy, as pertinent to dance, and its gradual evolution as an enriched and distinct form, developing 'from its smallest part to a complete whole by a series of laws applied systematically.'

The book is expected to help a dance lover to understand and appreciate better while watching a particular dance style. Perhaps bibliographic reference after each chapter dealing with each dance style would have been helpful to serious students and dance lovers.

The inclusion of modern dance in a volume dealing with classical

Indian dances speaks of the searching and unbiased attitude of the author. At first sight, specially after discarding some forms knocking at the door for inclusion, it does look surprising to include modern Indian dance to the list of five classical forms treated. This has been justified on the ground that the modern Indian dance, despite seeking new expressive forms to cope with the demands of the modern stage presentations, has not eschewed the 'two cardinal principles of classical Indian dance: the relationship to the music and *tala* movements in the abstract portions (*nritta*) and the relationship of the word to the movement in the mimetic portions (*abhinaya*).... The significant fact was their strict adherence to the classical pattern of relating movement to the metrical cycle (*tala*) and to the literary word (*sahitya*).'

Several creative artistes like Menaka, Rukmini Devi and Ragini Devi felt the need to enhance the scope for stage expressions and developed novel presentations based on *Kathak*, *Bharatnatyam* and *Kathakali*. Mrinalini with her experience of the stage abroad and study, used *Bharatnatyam* and *Kathakali* as base. Tagore had the help of a Manipuri guru at Shantiniketan. Uday Shankar was the only one who had terrific fascination for movement and colour but no moorings. Coming back via knowledge of stage presentations and ballets in the West with personal experiments based on an avid study of miniature paintings and Hindu Iconography, he felt stirred by the various folk and classical dances then existing in their isolated corners, and which subsequently gave a distinctive shape to his eclectic school of modern Indian dance. He exploited the vast potentialities of the human body and created movements for the arms, shoulders, waist, torso, and other limbs, untrammelled by what existed, but certainly influenced and inspired by them.

He also felt the need to create special orchestral compositions to suit the mood, movements and character of his various dance creations. He had exploited new sounds from the rich and abundant varieties of string, wind and percussion instruments found in different corners of India, and used folk or classical songs, chantings or choral effects wherever needed to communicate the colour and sentiment of the piece.

At the Almora Centre were brought great teachers of *Manipuri*, *Bharatnatyam* and *Kathakali* and all the students who joined to learn the modern dance had to attend classes in the various classical forms to give them a solid background and base. They had also to learn Indian music and the intricate rhythmic *bols* used in various dance forms. The group members and students from the Centre, and others interested in the style, have carried on creating novelty in themes and presentations. They meet fresh challenges and have tackled themes from mythology and history right down to socio-economic conditions of today. Stage effects, decor, music and movements have been integrated to provide a slick and polished stage presentation, trimming the time to two and a half hours for professional shows. All the classical varieties have had to adjust to the change and demands of the

modern stage and show timings. Even *Kathakali* has had to submit to episodic delineations.

The modern Indian dance has been reviewed at greater length to support the author's granting classical status to modern Indian dance. Many do not regard it in the same light!

Coming to the copious interesting photographs one feels that in colour they would have expressed more truly the richness and design of the costume and would have more truly brought out the colour significant in the make-up of the various character types in *Kathakali*. Then again, explanations and nomenclature of the *hastas* and perhaps a comparative chart of the various hand gestures used in different styles would have proved interesting and informative. And perhaps line drawings of the categories of prescribed positions of the body and limbs would have provided better visual picture than mere verbal descriptions. These would certainly have enhanced the value of the book to dance students. But then again it might have tossed the price of the book above the means of the dance lovers!

However, one wishes that the importance of *Rasa* and *Bhava* had been stressed. All the technical instructions and elaborate injunctions on the subtleties of movements of the different parts of the body, and the minute and varied uses of eyes, eyebrows, nose, cheeks, jaw, lips and even the teeth, are meant ultimately to communicate with grace and beauty the spirit of the theme and its required emotional impact. Otherwise all hard work falls flat, and it becomes *sadhana* without *bhakti*!

The book is an important and valuable addition to the few authentic works in English on the subject, and hence it is a must for all students and lovers of Indian classical dance.

*Rajendra Shankar*