

EXPERIMENTS IN MUSIC AND DANCE

My years with Uday Shankar

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My close association with Uday Shankar extended for 18 years. Broadly speaking, I would divide Shankar's active participation with a group of Indian musicians and dancers and his contribution to creative Indian dance into three stages—though these are often intermingled. First, the formative stage, roughly from 1928 to 1938; second, the fully matured stage from 1939 to 1944; and the third, the diversified creative stage from 1945 to 1970.

I may, at the outset, take the liberty to explain briefly the background of my first meeting with Uday Shankar. I had met him for the first time on December 29, 1929 in Paris. Prior to this I had gone to London, on my own, with a few musical instruments with the idea of opening a school or classes of Indian music there. The instruments I carried with me were *sitar*, *tabla-tarang* (a set of 10 *tablas*) and *jalatarang* (a set of porcelain bowls). Through a common acquaintance — an Indian business man from Bombay then residing in London—I was told that Uday Shankar was in search for an Indian musician for his dance group to be formed later in Paris.

Acting on this information, I wrote to Uday Shankar giving him details of my professional qualifications, etc. In return, he invited me to meet him in Paris, and that's how I had met Shankar. As he was proceeding to India to bring back with him a few dancers and musicians, he wanted me to join his group on his return to Paris from India. After a few days in Paris, I returned to London in pursuit of my ambition.

Uday Shankar and Alice Boner, who had sponsored the former's tour of India in 1930, and also was the partner and financier of Uday Shankar Company of Hindu Dancers and Musicians, had come to India and travelled all over the country for about six months. Shankar witnessed and studied classical, folk and tribal dances of various regions and collected materials for

costumes. He enlisted a batch of ten persons which included his three brothers, a cousin, maternal and paternal uncles, a family friend and a very fine *sarod* player, Timir Baran, who had training under Ustad Allauddin Khan. Shankar's mother also accompanied the group to Paris sometime in the autumn of 1930. He had also collected a large assortment of Indian musical instruments, including a variety of folk drums.

All this time I had stayed in London and was asked by Shankar to join him in Paris. Timir Baran and I were the only two professionally trained musicians and Simkie the only one trained in Indian dance by Shankar but the other members were amateur musicians and none were dancers. They all, however, showed unbounded zeal and interest.

The Paris set-up was a sort of a 'Workshop' of Indian dance and music. The first three months, prior to the inaugural performance fixed for March 3, 1931 at the Theatre des Champs Élysées, Shankar had a tremendous task and a great responsibility of preparing a full-fledged professional stage performance. Such programmes given in Paris attracted the attention of theatrical agents or their representatives from Europe and America in order to book the most successful box-office concerts or ballets and sign up for their respective countries.

Shankar's first creative dance was *Tandava Nritya*, in which there were four dancers, namely, Shankar, Simkie, Kanaklata, his cousin and Debendra, his brother. First he composed the dance sequences, then a rigorous training was given to Kanaklata and Debendra with the necessary movements to fit the dance sequence. Of course, Simkie also had to rehearse to co-ordinate with the newcomers, although she was trained in Shankar's dance technique as his dance partner earlier when he was giving solo and duet items in the music halls in Europe.

But *Tandava Nritya* called for a fresh training for all. It was amazing how he conceived the idea and was able to create the dance of *Tandava Nritya* without having any training in classical Indian dancing. By merely seeing, observing and imagining a static pose of *Tandava*, he created a cycle of reasonably imaginative movements and brought out the concept of Shiva's dance. He had another important advantage to his credit: his seven or eight years' experience in show business out of his ten-year continuous stay in Europe and America and the grim struggle he had to pass through in his dancing career prior to 1930. That greatly helped him to launch this new venture to present Indian dance and music and to the world including India itself.

Paris rehearsals were continued for three months. All the dance items were receiving final touches. Discipline during rehearsals and during the stage performances on tours was strictly observed. Designing of costumes with

authenticity was done with the active help of Alice Boner, herself an artist and a sculptress. She had observed, studied and photographed authentic Indian costumes during her tour of India with Shankar. Being away from India for a long period, Shankar had a strong feeling for the motherland. He was proud of being an Indian and he maintained the Indian character in his dance performances representing Indian art and culture.

Uday Shankar hit upon an excellent idea to have a plain and dark back-curtain on the stage in order to bring out prominently the beautiful colour patterns of the costume. Another innovation was that all the musicians with their instruments were seated on the stage along the back-curtain as if it was an exhibition, with practical demonstration, of a variety of musical instruments. All this created a congenial setting and atmosphere for the audience, unlike in any other dance ballet performances in the West or, for that matter, even in India.

Shankar's showmanship was unique. He created a sensation in Paris with his first stage performance which introduced the Shankar *genre* of creative Indian dance. It also generated a significant awakening throughout India on his first tour later in 1933. It was also the same awakening throughout America in 1932.

Shankar's introduction of classical and folk drums and "effect" instruments into his ballet music was indeed unique. He foresaw the need of such music for his creative dances. He was not a classical nor professional musician, but he, perhaps, had the vision of sound, not necessarily a musical sound, but a totality of sound-effects of an entirely new dimension. For all of us, specially for me, it was a new venue or a novel opening, as yet unexplored, although I had a sort of similar training from Pandit Vishnu Digambar during my studentship with him. I had taken the full benefit of this opportunity of being in Shankar's company to be of help to him in the formative stage of his creative activity.

I can still recall his discussions with me on different occasions during our tours abroad on how he was inspired in his innovations of a variety of sound effects for his *Tandava Nritya*. The idea had come to him from a number of sources. During his childhood at Jhalawar, Nasratpur, Ghazipur and Varanasi, he had occasions to witness *Nautanki* and other folk dances with their drums, *dholak*, *duff* and *chang*. He was also familiar with the general effect created by the sounds of *nagada*, bells, *jhaanj*, *manjira* and singing at the morning and evening *aratis* at the Kashi Vishwanath Shrine and other temples and on different ghats on the Ganga in Varanasi; the music of *shehnai* accompanied by *chowghada* and other drums,

Then during his stay in Bombay (prior to his departure for London to join the Royal College of Arts), he had attended the music classes and Pandit

Vishnu Digambar's concerts at the Gandharva Maha Vidyalaya. He also saw a great variety of musical instruments at the Vidyalaya played by the students. Finally the effect created in his mind by the *Kathakali* drummers, the terrific consequent result created by *chenda* and *maddalam* players accompanied by other drums and cymbals, on his Kerala tour of 1930. All this had made a deep and lasting impression on his creative mind, which in turn was developed during his work in Paris, and on which he experimented.

Shankar's tour of India in 1930 had inspired him with ideas for themes for dance compositions on his return to Paris with his group of untrained artists. He had, or must have foreseen what would be the final results with the dance and music rehearsals or had a concrete mental picture before his rehearsals had started. He was absolutely sure of the final results. His decade long stay in Europe and America in the twenties and the varied experiences he had in the entertainment world gave him a complete assurance and confidence of what the ultimate results were going to be.

As for the training in dance, only Simkie was partly trained earlier by him but the others had to be trained from the beginning, a really hard task. But he found innate talent in them, and prepared them with severe training and moulded them to his requirements.

Shankar's creative urge and his imaginative power for conjuring dance movements by observing a static figure of Shiva from the temples, caves, museums or from the old paintings, and giving life and movement to it, was simply astounding. He had an inherent artistic sensitivity and creative faculty that helped dancing come to him, as a natural phenomenon without having a formal traditional training.

My association with Shankar and his method of working greatly benefited my future career. When I joined Shankar, I had just completed nine years of musical training under Pandit Vishnu Digambar, and I did require such opportunities to experiment with music and musical instruments for purposes other than the solo music concerts. The *sitar*, *tabla-tarang* and *jalatarang* which I had carried to London earlier were added to Shankar's collection of instruments. For me this was a sort of laboratory to experiment in, with a variety of instruments, as though I was preparing for a doctorate in applied music.

The Shankar Company's inaugural performance in Paris was a great success. Further tours on the continent were signed up. Tours of USA and Canada for successive four years were also confirmed. Shankar's dancing thus created a sensation all over Europe. In between, he made two tours all over India before returning to USA for the final round. Shankar, perhaps, wanted to establish a name, fame and success and he had them in full measure all over the world.

What next? Shankar started to think and plan for an institution somewhere in India, where he would impart his knowledge and experience in creative dance to others as well as provide opportunities to teach classical Indian dances to the students.

In the meantime, while performing in London, we were invited by Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst and Beatrice to visit their institute at the Dartington Hall, in Devon. Shankar discussed with them his future plan of opening a dance centre in India. They welcomed his plan and promised substantial financial help.

At Dartington Hall, Shankar met the well-known Russian stage actor-director Michael Chekhov, who belonged to the Moscow Art Theatre and had started a drama school at Dartington Hall in 1936. Shankar was influenced by his teaching method and technique.

Earlier, Shankar had occasion to see Guru Sankaran Namboodri's *Kathakali* dance performance in Kerala in 1934 and subsequently Shankar took him to Calcutta as his Guru. Guru Namboodri's influence on Shankar was tremendous and he deeply revered him. Shankar's famous dance *Kartikeyya* was influenced and was blessed by the Guru. In 1938, Shankar went to the Bali Islands, stayed there for quite some time, observed Balinese dances and their orchestra consisting of gongs and gamelons. He bought a few sets of gongs and gamelons to augment his rich collection of musical instruments. At the end of 1938 Shankar plunged into work at the Almora Centre which was opened in 1939.

The Almora Centre was entirely financed on five years' experimental basis by Beatrice and the Elmhirsts. Great masters like Guru Sankaran Namboodri, Guru Kandappan Pillai, Guru Amobi Singh and Ustad Allaiddin Khan were on the staff. An all-round education was imparted to the students. Shankar's own creative dance, too, had achieved full maturity during this period. Here he formulated a system of basic dance exercises for the students to enable them to know his style of creative dance, besides the pure classical styles of dance were being taught by the respective Gurus. The students were taught eight sets of hand movements, then the permutation and combination of these movements with arms, shoulders, head, torso, hips, feet, etc. thereby aligning the entire body, with the primary hand movements. His general classes and improvisation classes were of great importance to the students for coordinating their mind and body, to develop their own talent and imagination and their capacity to improvise on their own.

The experience gained from the experiments in music compositions for the creative dances from the formative years of Europe and American tours was fully utilised at the Almora Centre. The novel themes composed by Shankar for his ballets at Almora were the political ballets *Rhythm of Life*

and *Labour and Machinery*. In *Kiratarjuna*, vocal music, drums and “effect” music were fully harnessed. These novel experiments in unconventional themes showed Shankar’s maturity in his creative dance in which I had full scope to work on music compositions. Ustad Allaiddin Khan’s presence at the Almora Centre was of great importance to all of us, and particularly for me to learn classical music further. Shankar was inspired for his dance creations whenever he heard Ustad play his sarod.

Co-relation between dance and music was developed and tried out simultaneously. For instance, in the *Rhythm of Life* ballet while Shankar tried his dance movements, I would go on trying various patterns on the *duggi-tarang* with syncopated beats and improvisations. This process of working together gave him complete freedom for his dance expressions and movements according to the theme of the ballet. And we both were convinced of the effectiveness of the innovations.

Similarly we had composed dance movements and musical patterns for the ballet *Labour and Machinery*. There is a sequence in this ballet in which the labourers are exploited by the capitalist factory-owner. There is a revolt and, Shankar, as the labour leader, does a movement with both his arms stretched horizontally to express disgust and revolt. This movement has a dynamic quality of the sea waves in a storm. Here the music was played on *nagada*, a bass drum, along with *alap* taken by a group of voices, gradually building up to a crescendo. The dance and music composition progressed simultaneously in order to get the maximum coordinated impact of the theme.

So was the case with his solo dance of *Kartikeya* and ballet *Nritya Dwandva* composed under the guidance of his mentor and Guru, Sankaran Namboodri. All such experiments were conducted in Calcutta in 1935 and also at the Almora Centre during the period from 1939 to 1944. These ballets were subsequently taken on our tours all over India and abroad. Similar dance and musical compositions were experimented with at the Almora Centre, like the ballet *Eternal Melody* and others, and used later in Shankar’s film *Kalpana* which was launched in Madras in 1945.

Yet another piece of his imagination and creative work was the *Ramayan Shadow Play* held in open air for the first time in 1941 at the Almora Centre during Dusserah. The stage was made on a raised and levelled ground, the slopes going down the valley on the West side. On the East side, there was a gradual elevation of 20 feet — joining the narrow road above, beyond which lies Almora town. In the North was a small hillock, at an elevation of about 50 feet, and a deep valley of pine forests with snow peaks beyond, and in the South a gradual elevation of about 60 feet leading to the forest of pine trees.

On the stage a white screen measuring 12 feet X 14 feet was erected,

one spot light was placed behind the screen and the dancers. As the dancers moved back and forward, the shadows became smaller and larger, from three feet to 12 feet in height. It looked fantastic and created a terrific impact of the sequences like the sleeping Kumbhakarna or Hanuman flying to Lanka, the fight with the headless Rakshas Kabandh and his army or the fight between the armies of monkies and the demons. Along with the singing of *chaupais* from the Tulsi *Ramayana* accompanied with drums and cymbals, the total impact was still greater. The students and staff members took part in the shadow play, witnessed by over 10,000 people from the Almora town and nearby villages, sitting on the slopes, the hillock and all over the place.

The closure of the Centre in 1944 was very unfortunate. Thereafter, Shankar's contribution to creative art was a film fantasy *Kalpana*, the only visual document of his creative dances, in which he himself has danced — his bequest to posterity. *Kalpana* represented his unconventional approach to the theme, dance shooting, cubical sets, imaginative sequences, socio-political aspects. That was my last assignment of my association and active participation in Shankar's creative work.

Between 1949 and 1970, Shankar continued with his creative work as well as his professional tours all over the world. His outstanding and unique creations were *Buddha*, *Prakriti Ananda*, *Samayana Kshati* and other ballets in which he introduced novel innovation and unique stage-craft of using colour slides through the projectors from the stage, creating fantastic three-dimensional effect. And, finally, his stupendous stage production of *Shankar-scope* where he combined stage and screen on one platform. All these were Shankar's creative achievements and a great contribution to the nation in the field of creative art representing Indian Art and Culture.

The experience gained from all these years of association with Shankar positively widened and matured my musical thoughts and provided me wider scope and opportunities to compose music for the stage and the films through the use of a variety of instruments *i.e.*, strings, drums, wind, "effect" instruments and voices. All this was achieved through my own efforts, through experience and active participation in Shankar's creative work and experiments made during the professional tours in India and abroad, from the experiments carried out at the Almora Centre and from his *Kalpana* film venture. My ambition to go abroad, on my own, in 1929 was fulfilled, in gradual stages, and I could gain an all-round maturity in my own musical development.

When Uday Shankar visited the Gandharva Maha Vidyalaya in Bombay in 1919-20, I was already pursuing my music studies under Pandit Vishnu Digambar, but we had not become acquainted with each other. Who, indeed, knew then that we were destined to meet in Paris and work together in close association for the next 18 years?