

Forum

IS THERE AN INDIAN MODERN DANCE?

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Uday Shankar's advent on the stage three decades ago was hailed as the beginning of a new era in Indian dance. The form he presented was termed "Modern Dance" as opposed to the several classical and folk styles which could be found in India. Since then others, both practising dancers and critics, have often talked about the Modern Indian dance. But what is "Modern Indian Dance"? How can it be defined? How does one distinguish it from the old traditional forms on the one hand and the practice of the contemporary classical styles on the other? How and in what manner did or does the "Modern Dance" share the concepts of Modernity so evident in the other forms in India, for example, sculpture, painting, poetry? In what manner was a new vocabulary of movement evolved so that it could express the needs and desires of the modern man and how was this movement directly related to contemporary experience and environment of the modern Indian?

These and many more questions arise in one's mind in the context of modern Indian dance. In modern literature, in painting and in sculpture, definitions can be found, even if with some difficulty. Modern literature did break away from the traditional culture pattern both in content and form if we analyse it with reference to social system, the value system and the accepted world view. Generally speaking, the discarding of the principle of 'negation of conflict' in literature led to the evolution of modern fiction, drama and poetry. The use of the social environment as a theme and the emphasis on the individual in relation to inner and outer milieu gave birth to many new forms and styles which can be

clearly distinguished from both classical and traditional forms. In painting the breakaway was even more self-conscious, although more recent in point of time. The discarding of the principle of illustrating the word and the rejection of a definite theme gave rise to new expressions. The revivalist's schools were also consciously rejected by the modern painter; in technique he no longer would adhere to the classical principles of the six limbs of painting (*Chitrakala*) and could no longer use paint symbolically to evoke a cohesive *rasa*. His attitude to line, plane, texture changed and there is today a distinct modern movement. In sculpture, the breakaway is once again discernible in the rejection of the principle of the *sutra* and *bhanga*. The modern sculptor experimented with mass in relation to space: the sculptor like the painter moved away from the portrayal of types, to the creations of form with an intrinsic significance, *i.e.* significance not based on literary allusion or symbolism. In music the little that can be called modern Indian music as distinct from contemporary classical music, explored the possibilities of departures from the principle of *raga* and *tala*.

What happened in dance? How did it or does it break away from the traditional styles and how can it be distinguished?

In order to understand this, one must even at the risk of making some generalisations state the fundamental common hypothesis of the classical styles. The primacy of literature is recognised, the word is illustrated through a known pose — a known gesture; traditional mythology forms the content: the objective is to evoke a cohesive harmonious state of being — a mood. In technique each of the styles stresses the significant pose: these are strung together in a metrical cycle to emphasise and re-inforce a point of timelessness in space. The human form achieves geometrical shapes in time rather than space, for the intricacy of the portions of dance (*nrtta*) lies in the very fine and deliberate manipulation of rhythm to achieve a series of poses. In the mime portions the meaning of the gesture is all important. The human body as an instrument is used to establish the relationship between the pull of gravity and the space around. Thus there is no emphasis on covering space through releases from the ground. Since the dancer is not an individual expressing personal feelings or reactions, movement is stylised in a given frame-

work where geometrical design with a repeated motif is important. As in the modal system of music, classical styles of India forbid the use of certain muscles and articulation at certain points in each of the styles. The dancer deliberately imposes a limitation both in terms of motor movements of the body and in terms of floor space on the stage. Choreo-graphical design is limited; its richness lies in the symbolically significant use of all permutations and combinations in that self-imposed limitation both of body movement and its relation to space and the metrical cycle (time).

Did Uday Shankar break away from these principles known as *nrtta* and *abhinaya*? Did his followers do so? And, did they achieve an individual style?

Shankar's Achievement

It is a known fact that when Uday Shankar came into contact with Pavlova he was unaware of the vast hidden treasures of the classical styles in India. On account of his association with a different concept of movement, of space-time relationship he had learnt to look with different eyes at his own tradition. He was not as conscious as Isadora Duncan or other modern dancers of Europe, of having liberated movement from classical form, but he had learnt to look at movement analytically, critically, outside the prescribed walls of the word-movement relationship and the metrical cycle-movement relationship. In a word, the place of movement in dance had changed. With his association with artists of the West and his undoubted creativitiy he began to compose dances based on different assumptions. This also gave him even after his first loud experience of the classical styles the courage to "mix styles" as it is said. He was looking at movement without mimetic significance only: he was looking at dance as a form capable of expression without aid of 'gesture language'. The whole body could be used and all manner of complex relationships between different geometrical motifs, such as the rectangular of Kathakali, the figure of eight, Manipuri, and the triangle of Bharatanatyam could be established.

On another plane, since he was working at a time when India was acutely nationalistic and acutely conscious of the inroads of technology

into traditional patterns of thought and behaviour, he created dances with contemporary themes. Creations like "Labour and Machinery", "Rhythm of Life" are outstanding examples.

It has to be noted that the change was not limited to dance movement, but was extended to a new relationship between music and dance. The dance movement was created first, and then music was provided as support or accompaniment. This was a reversal of the traditional pattern, where the dancer was interpreting or improvising on the musical word or note.

Thus, Uday Shankar's association with Pavlova led to two results: on the one hand he had made it possible to look at movement in Indian dance analytically and to use music to a dancer's purpose; on the other hand he had been made aware of an existing body of dance tradition which presented a challenge to the artist and the innovator.

This was the point at which Uday Shankar and his troupe stood when the Almora culture centre was founded. The Centre exposed the dancers to the overpowering technique of the classical styles; they realised that each of the techniques would require a life-time to master; they were given the use of precise and intricate vocabulary of movement, of gesture, of choreographical pattern. This had its advantages and its disadvantages. The technique in most cases became too deeply embedded in the person of the dancer. Left to himself he could not resist the temptation of leaning easily and heavily on one or the other of the classical styles; creations of dance dramas by classical performers also proved an immediate challenge. The dance dramas were in any one classical style or sometimes a blend of two styles; the content was traditional and classical. The principles of *nrtta* and *abhinaya* of pure abstract dancing interspersed with mimetic acting to take the narrative forward were strictly followed. If there was a departure in composition it lay only in presenting a variety to stage groupings through allied movements which were executed by different groups of dancers or different dancers. It was the known story through the known word and note and metrical cycle which was being interpreted. The dancer lived in a world insulated from contemporaneity; modern tension and conflicts

were not his direct experience. There was no desire, no need to break away from these norms; the few dancers who attempted to be 'modern' by discarding traditional theme and content and the rich known music and metrical cycle were failures; they too succumbed to the neo-classical, the pseudo-classical but did not give birth to the 'modern idiom' in dance.

Creative Attempts

But what about creations like the "Ramayana" and the "Panchatantra" by the late Shanti Bardhan? Did they or did they not break fresh ground and pave new paths? Yes, in the whole gamut of the modern dance creations in India one could single out these two ballets. They had the unmistakable mark of an individual style. In the one the choreographer had taken a well known traditional theme but his break-away from the traditional treatment was both self-conscious and bold. In the "Ramayana" he moved from the traditional vocabulary of the gesture language to the extreme. Neither the face nor the hands, so important in the classical styles, were used. He used the mask and covered the hands. He made it therefore impossible for himself to do anything which had been done in the classical styles. Movement had to be expressive through the use of the entire body. By restricting himself to the movements of the puppets executed by the human beings he gave the ballet a distinct style. Thus while this was an Indian creation with a definite Indian background it was new and very nearly modern.

In the "Panchatantra" he did something different. He explored here the possibilities of movements of the body which may or may not be intrinsically aesthetic or beautiful. Many such movements can be identified in this ballet specially those of the crow and the mouse. In themselves they could not be called dance movement but within the ballet they had been most successfully and usefully employed. This was the logical culmination of an analytical approach to dance movement. In the first portion of this ballet there was also evident an individual style not based on mimetic gesticulation. Some others have succeeded partially. But Shanti Bardhan was an exception and continues to remain so. These too cannot be called "Modern" in the Western sense of the term.

Dearth of Ideas

Few dancers in India have been moved to react to the immediate environment, to be aware of the changing relationships between him and space and between him and time. Most dancers have been content with the creation of an individual style within a classical form rather than the creation of an individual style in order to express their unique personality. Fewer still have exhibited a capacity to analyse human movement for its expressive quality. They have been perhaps afraid to experiment with movements other than those which emerged from the key points of articulation such as the neck, the shoulder joint and the knees and those which have already been chiselled through usage in the classical styles.

Contractions and releases, flexions and tensions, use of the human muscles specially the abdominal muscles, the relationship of the human body in relation directly to the floor, has not excited the dancer's imagination. No attempt at the release from gravity has been made; dancing remains for the most part vertical and is seen along the usual patterns of up and down, back and front and a few diagonal stage designs. The principles of symmetry and assymetry of opposites and apposites, of succession and dynamics, have not been consciously and analytically used or exploited in what are termed as modern creations.

In content, the dancer has continued to be content with taking traditional themes or adhering to a known piece of literature or poetry; emotions, subjective concerns of an individual, have not yet manifested themselves in dance creation. A few sociological themes were attempted by groups in the 1930s and 1940s, but these attempts have not been pursued. Except for the use of the "*Discovery of India*" as a frame within which historical tableau can be presented, no new themes have attracted dancers.

Although in what is known as modern dance, the dance is composed first and then the music is composed, the relationship is not "modern". The counts and beats have replaced mnemonics in abstract dancing and the melodic line has replaced sung poetry, but there is no major departure from the earlier relationship.

All in all, one may say that although the hypothesis had changed, "modern dance" as a movement is yet to flower in India.

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