

# THE MYSTIQUE OF CLASSICAL DANCE

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Beauty of form, grace in movement and response to rhythm are comparatively direct in appeal, often 'eye-filling'. Precision, bodily skill and dynamism are aspects, which, again, have a certain universality—whatever be the style. All this is denoted by the word *nritta* (often rendered as 'pure dance') which is pleasing to all.

Yet, there is in classical dance something that transcends the eye and the ear, something which reaches for the mind and the cultural consciousness in the viewer. This pertains to the interpretative aspect the relish of which consists in the rich blend of music, poetry, mythology, fetish and a host of those elements that go to make the cultural ethos of India. The essence, however, is poetry set to music; for, the poet is the aesthetician *par excellence* in the Indian tradition. The linkage between poetry and dance, as a fundamental tenet, dates back to the *Natyasastra* wherein Bharata declares: 'to reflect the inner sense of what the poet has in mind is *bhāva* in dance.' (*Kavērantar-gatam bhāvam bhāvayan bhāva ucyatē*).

The votary is thus led from the dance stage to the door of the poet and that is where the mystique begins. The poet that Bharata has in mind is not the kind of celebrity whom we might recall in the Sanskrit tradition, but the bardic poet who sings of love in 'full throated ease'. To look for him and to discover his universe, we must take the road to the country-side; that is where his poetry takes its origin. He sings as he sees.

'He for whom I shed my shyness,  
changing thus my nature true,  
earning nought but disrepute,  
my dear friend,  
he is now like anyone else'.

To recognise this as the plaint of a girl who talks of her broken love is the first step towards becoming an initiate in the esoterica. That she shares

her sentiment with her bosom companion (*sakhi*) is the next; that this poetry, —impersonal, without names—has the *dramatis personae* in the heroine (*nayika*), hero (*nayaka*) and companion (*sakhi*) is the third, and so on. It is the dramatic style of such poetry that lends itself readily and richly to representation on the stage; the skill and sensitivity of the dancer lies in exploring every nuance of the sentiment by probing into every meaning of a phrase, even a word. That is *ahhinaya*.

The song cited above is from an ancient compilation in Prakrit, *Gatha-saptasati*, ascribed to the 1st century A.D. It could, however, be placed anywhere; *Amarusatakam* in Sanskrit (7th cent. A.D.) has a song identical in style and purport (*gatē prēmavēśē...*), Khetrajna, the 17th cent. Telugu bard, has a *padam* in the same strain (*paiyyada...*) and so on. The initiate has to know but one; the rest can be seen to belong to a tradition in which stylised poetry woven on conventional situations and moods of romantic love is the eternal lure, for those who would invoke the Muse. If creativity within convention is the hall-mark of a classical musician, so it is with such poets of romance, celebrating love among humans joyously and lustfully.

The situations that lend themselves to poetic expression are conventional and it is important to recognise where they are rooted. Fancy youthful love among pastoral people—clandestine in nature but free in manifestation. Local gossip, parental check and rival attractions lend sharpness to the appetite; emotions rise, as trepidation mounts in the anxious mind. Fancy such exciting romance being endowed with a precariousness that is almost ever present, thanks to the frequent journeys that the lover is obliged to undertake. His absence—even the imminent possibility of it—is what causes pangs of separation, known as *viraha*, in the heroine. And, there are shades of intensity, depending not only on the girl's level of sensitivity but also on the situation itself; the journey (*pravāsa*) can cause a variety of situations depending upon whether (i) he is likely to go, (ii) he has mentioned the possibility, (iii) he is about to go (with or without announcement), (iv) he is actually leaving, (v) he has gone. What is remarkable is that all this is part of convention—defined and codified.

The moods in which the girl finds herself, in the course of her exciting romance, are also conventional and in each mood—situationally conditioned—she has a defined personality, mien and manner. In the situation when the man is away on travel the girl is known as *prōshitapatikā* (literally, one whose husband is away). When the man fixes a tryst but fails to turn up, she is the disappointed one (*vipralabdhā*), but when he does turn up after a late night escapade with tell-tale marks on him, she becomes indignant; yet, she must rather instruct and admonish than reject or condemn. In this mood she is known as *Khanditā* whose dignity rests on her ability to deplore his action without denouncing the man. For, she does love him still and her pique is but proof of her yearning and attachment. Proud, she is, (*mānini*)

but she is fond, as well (*anuraktā*). Subtleties such as this are integral to aesthetic appreciation; significantly, they have their origin in poetry—initially bardic and eventually elite.

Symbolism is another element that imparts richness to love poetry. Amaru, for instance, sings of a lonely woman (whose husband is away) as holding the mango-blossom, which the hungry bees hover upon; she stands in the court yard, sighs so often and as her bosom heaves tears seem to choke her throat. In this, the latter half acquires meaning only when the first half is meaningfully perceived. The mango-blossom indicates the season of love and, more subtly, the unspoken thought in the woman's mind, viz. that he promised to return before the mango blooms. The hovering, hungry bees symbolise the greedy and profligate nature of men. We can now see why she sighs, why her voice is choked.

If the bee and the blossom are symbolic, Nature itself in its entirety seems to partake in the joys and sorrows of those in love. In a Tamil song in *Kuruntohai*, the dark cloud seems to laugh at the heroine who waits in vain.

'He values not your youth,  
he went in search of wealth  
Where is he? asks the cloud.  
And the jasmine buds in rows of white  
seem like shining line of teeth  
for the cloud that laughs'.  
Look there, my friend.

(*ilamai paaraar...*)

The thought is shared with her friend, *tōli* otherwise known as *sakhi*. Constant companion and confidante, the *sakhi* is party to all that befalls the heroine in the turbulent course of her love. She resorts to bluff, in order to console her friend in distress, even after the monsoon breaks out. (He had said he would return by then). She tells the heroine;

'The foolish peacocks seek to dance,  
thinking this is season's rain.  
Flowers may show their bloom as well,  
but, silly girl, can't you see  
this is no rain? What is left  
of yester year is sprinkling now.'

(*madova vaazhi...*)

The *sakhi* is indeed the alter ego of the *nayika*; nothing is secret, between them. Their empathy is such that the *sakhi* has the right to tick off the man when he is at fault, in relation to the heroine. Expressions such as 'heartless',

or 'merciless' are mild; in moments of indignation, hoping to sting him into good sense, the *sakhi* calls him 'crook' or 'scoundrel'. All this is part of the ethos.

The heroine herself would often speak of him in such terms, if the occasion warrants: negligence or infidelity is the provocation; the heroine's anguish is the justification. This psyche and the frankness of expression might well extend to the divine lover, Krishna, for instance. An *ashtapadi* from the *Gita Govinda* runs:

If the heartless knave will not come,  
my *sakhi*, why do you grieve?  
You were but a messenger.  
He is dear to many; he sports  
with all openly. Who is to blame?  
But look, my heart leaps to be with him,  
drawn by romantic charm of his.  
Breaking away from pain of solitude,  
it runs towards him—untold.

(*nāyātah sakhi...*)

The concept of a personal god—Krishna, Murugan, or Siva—as Lover is yet another mystique of dance which traces its origin to literature. It is the devotional singers of the Tamil region who, between the sixth and tenth century A.D. fashioned the style of poetry wherein the earthly love among mortals was sublimated into devotional love between humans and god. But the format and the conventions of love lyrics remained. The manifestation of this phenomenon can be seen in the *Varnam* of the *Bharata Natyam* mode, the *ashtapadis* of Jayadeva, or the *padavali* of Vidyapati. What is of importance for the viewer, in classical dance today, is to be alive in some measure to the conventions of love poetry which yielded the *conventional* types of classical heroines, in *conventional* moods, while responding to those conventional situations. The stylised portrayal thereof must also be recognised as built on conventions.

It is the degree of such aliveness that determines the grade of the connoisseur known as *rasika*, in the Indian tradition. It is pertinent to note that *Abhinaya Darpana*, the treatise on interpretative dance, places men of learning, poets, elders and those well-versed in mythology among the important 'limbs of the audience'.

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