

## Classical Dance Technique in Dance-drama\*

---

Kumudini Lakhia

EVEN THOUGH dance is an ancient and highly sophisticated form of art in India the concept of dance-drama has not yet fully developed. In almost all States in this country we have a dance-drama tradition but each has remained confined to its cultural and religious sphere and has not yet contributed to a dance-drama movement on a national scale. There should now be an effort to review the existing forms and to incorporate the styles in contemporary choreography. With the variety of dance techniques, both classical and folk, at our disposal we can employ a broad dance vocabulary Indian in style, rather than imitate dance ideas which have evolved in other countries. If a few of us committed to dance agreed to work in this direction we could in the years ahead bring about a dance revolution. Western ballet began in France and modern dance in America; with our dance heritage it should not be difficult to make a distinct contribution to dance as an applied form of art.

As my own training has been in Kathak I can speak only of the application of Kathak technique in choreography. There is a tendency to regard a classical style as something sacred and inviolable. Any innovation or deviation from the prescribed form is sacrilege. One has had to fight this attitude and face the consequences because neither our audiences nor the critics are yet ready for any kind of change. It has been easy for dancers and critics to fall back on a formula. In my long association with Kathak I have seen this dance style as a means of expressing any kind of human experience or emotion which is the basic purpose of dance.

Very few dancers can make a distinction between dance and dance technique. And they often fail to realize that technique is a means to achieve expression. Our solo recitals therefore are an exhibition of the technique and virtuosity of the dancer. The Kathak style lends itself admirably for innovation on any given theme. The vocabulary of Kathak is rich in possibilities for new dance expression and

\* This paper was presented in a seminar on 'Dance-drama: Traditional Usage and Contemporary Challenge' held 17-18 November 1985 in Delhi. The seminar was organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi on the occasion of *Nritya-Natika*, an all-India dance-drama festival presented by the Akademi 14-19 November.

choreography. There is a wide range of arm and hand movements which are both flowing and incisive, the feet are very well trained for quick movement, and the body moves with ease unrestricted by bending of the knees. In *abhinaya* stylized gestures of the hands are little used, the facial expressions correspond to normal human behaviour without any special accent on head or eye movements. Because of these attributes Kathak provides wide scope and freedom for new patterns in dance.

I have recently made an experiment using only the feet for narration. Classical dance is seen as a kind of dance where the face tells the story with the help of hand gestures. The feet just hold up the body and move it when necessary. In Kathak the feet have the stronger role of creating a range of rhythmic patterns and are therefore very well trained. My experiment was in using the feet to express a mood and a range of emotions. The result was very interesting. Even without prior suggestion of the story the spectators were able to follow the mood and development of a relationship. Here the possibilities offered by the technique of footwork were used in a creative manner; technique not as an end in itself—projection of the skill of a dancer—but a means to an end. Again I have experimented with hands alone. The single hand and the two hands move, but without reference to the prescribed *hasta-bheda* of the *sāstras*. Here the hands are used naturally as we use them offstage to convey an idea or emotion, as an extension of speech through movement unaided by facial expression.

This was an experiment highlighting the fact that the technique of classical dance was not sacrosanct but could and should be innovatively used. There is a lot of work still to be done on these lines. The mastery of a particular style of dance should not be restrictive. I sense no restriction working freely in Kathak; in fact it is a challenge.

Limitations in dance are often of our own creation. I think the responsibility lies on the dance community in India—we the dancers, the critics, the institutions promoting dance, the dance purists and of course the society. However it is also for us all to usher in a new era; a difficult task, indeed, but we have to make a beginning somewhere so why not now?

I have put down here some suggestions one could give a thought to if one were to create an appropriate environment for the development of better dance-drama.

1. A systematic documentation of each style of dance should be carried out using the audio-visual media. This could serve as source

material and valuable reference for choreographers. Choreographers are restricted to the style they are trained in. This often leads to repetitious movement, the same movements in different compositions demanding totally different treatment.

There is a mistaken notion that a dance-drama must have a story, with the result that the narrative aspect of dance almost always dominates and restricts pure movement. Often the only difference in a dance-drama is that it is a group dance in classical style; instead of the soloist doing *bhāva* we get a group of dancers performing together. In abstract dance compositions we again get a group performing a traditional *tukrā* or *tihāi* in place of the solo dancer. This kind of composition cannot lead to the development of choreography where the basic element of a dance style can be used to varied creative effect.

I can speak from my own experience. Trying to get away from thematic dance I composed *Dhabkar* (Pulses) in 1973, an abstract composition without a story. It begins with a slow and swaying movement which travels from the feet to the torso, limbs and head. From one dancer the movement gradually spreads to the other four, each movement of the leader echoed by the four dancers one by one. The movement spreads like a ripple and grows into a wave. Here the whole group is involved. If we are working with groups we should see what we can do to create new patterns and images in dance.

In narrative compositions I have tried to work on contemporary themes rather than mythology. One such composition is *Duvidha* (Conflict), the tale of a middle-aged middle-class housewife—the reality of her life and her dreams. I expressed this dichotomy using two different styles of Kathak, the music alternating between classical Hindustani and electronic. Since this was the first time electronic music was used in classical dance the *Times of India* critic gave me a lot of space in his column, saying I was taking Indian dance “from the sublime to the ridiculous”. We are so used to the sublime! I chose to read this criticism as “If you move an inch from what I have decided is classical Indian dance I shall write you off.” The challenge was accepted. To what extent can we be slaves of accepted forms and norms? Can we not dance without sticking the label of a guru or *gharānā* on our foreheads? It took 20 long years and a lot of determination to prove that change can be for the better, even within a given framework. The same critic paid me a compliment recently saying that the only worth-while contribution to Kathak choreography came from me. It is not enough only for dancers, choreographers and teachers to work towards the development of a style; critics and audiences also have to contribute in equal

measure.

2. In the *guru-sisya* tradition as also the method followed by most schools teaching classical dance, the accent is on training a student to be a solo performer. The long years spent in mastering a technique, in acquiring virtuosity and skill, are hard and taxing; one can only emerge from such training as an individual. It is psychologically impossible to share the fruits with anyone else. This is one of the reasons why trained dancers do not easily agree to participate in group dances. Some even say it is beneath their dignity to do so. Where then do we find the dancers for group dance?

One way to deal with the problem would be to introduce parallel training programmes in schools—a general course for dancers who would be absorbed in dance groups later and a specialized one for solo performers, both courses planned on the same basis. Our present courses do not incorporate exercises from other disciplines of body culture such as yoga, eurhythmics, etc. If these were introduced students would gain flexibility and adjust better to the demands of contemporary choreography.

It is my personal experience that no matter how well an individual is trained it requires a total change of attitude, both of the body and mind, to meet the demands of working with a group. I have seen dancers who are extremely good in classrooms unable to project themselves onstage in relation to space and purpose. What they lack is stageworthiness. This lack can be made good if we modify the existing courses to prepare dancers to meet the demands of group productions.

3. Our classical arts call for a highly refined sensibility. Our dancers and dance teachers are lacking in this respect because most of them have no access to a broad general education or exposure to a range of ideas which develop all the faculties. At the training stage we provide them with lengthy accounts of the glory of the past but do not encourage them to look around themselves, see present-day society and its preoccupations, and relate these to their discipline. There is need to develop in dancers an awareness of the environment in which they work and grow. Knowledge of the past is an essential basis for understanding the present but should not be an obstacle. Placing classical dance on a pedestal does not conduce to creativity and makes it difficult for the common student to learn dance in its totality. This is a problem which calls for urgent attention.

For years I have seen Kathak dancers behaving in a manner which

lowers the prestige of the dance and at the end not even dancing well. Perhaps not much can be done about it but at least government agencies in charge of culture should not condone such behaviour by arguing that all this is part of the Kathak milieu. Unfortunately for Kathak and for dance in general these dancers are presented with prestigious honours. If this is the milieu let us change it quickly because it never belonged to us.

We have a responsibility to the generations to come. Duty demands that we set down norms of conduct which will bring pride and dignity to Indian dance. Only if we agree on what is aesthetically Indian can we begin to make a collective effort to create an awareness of what is fit and proper.

4. In the past dance was patronized by the upper classes, the learned and the privileged. It was practised in religious places and was often an expression of devotion. As against this at present dance is exploited on the stage, television and films to satisfy the lowest instincts of man. This degradation has occurred gradually. We will not go into why it happened. It has happened in every sphere and at every level of Indian life. But collectively we could make an effort at least to curb the vulgarity with which the human body is exposed and exploited in the name of dance. The commercial cinema is the worst offender. Film-makers claim that the masses demand vulgarity and cinema only answers the demand. I have heard dance directors in films say that even if they wanted to they could not improve the standards of dance in films given the themes and pressures from financiers, the stars and the box-office. They may be right, but only up to a point. There is always room for improvement. For the sake of first-hand experience I agreed to direct dance in a film and felt there was room for improvement. People are not as rigid as they are made out to be. There can be better choreography in films. Unfortunately the entire film industry is ruled by a handful of people who feel threatened if any reforms are sought to be introduced. As cinema is the most powerful of the mass media we could all work towards generating in filmdom a better attitude to dance. The help of the Censor Board could also be sought.

I have suggested to some television producers that they make special dance films for TV. The existing films are poor. When the camera focuses on the face or feet or hands and shows them in close-up it is invariably at the wrong moment for the producers have little knowledge of dance. The only alternative is to have films made specially for television screening by producers who are knowledgeable on dance. At present Doordarshan does not even take any advice on

dance productions. One of the many producers is put in charge of a dance programme, whether or not he has any interest in dance. The resulting poorly shot TV film which shows truncated parts of the body in motion without any relation to the movement or rhythm of the dance is all that we get to see.

5. Dancers today have to fend for themselves if they want to become professionals. We have no agencies or impresarios whose help is available. How can an individual who has for years been occupied in training be expected simultaneously to make the proper contacts for his future career? Performances are offered either by government departments or clubs most of which are controlled by bureaucrats with little knowledge of dance. The criterion therefore is personal contact rather than talent. Unless there is professional management of dance this situation will continue. Young dancers now do not know how to go about getting work or to plan a career in dance.

There are few dance groups which can offer employment to professionals on reasonable salaries as their own survival is uncertain. A few institutions get financial assistance from the Government of India to run professional dance groups. In addition to this every State in India should also fund a dance group. A great deal of money is spent by the State Akademis on programmes which are outdated; these funds could be diverted to create jobs for artistes.

If dance is seen as an integral part of our society it should be part of our educational system too. It should be taught in schools and colleges, and more universities than now should have faculties of dance. This would not only employ a number of dancers but raise the level of understanding of dance and make it accessible to all.

6. If one were to take a look at brochures of dance programmes from as early as the 1930s one would find the name of the dance director appearing at least thrice in various capacities. They wrote the musical score, did the costumes and the décor too. Either they really believed they were capable of doing everything themselves or they did not trust anyone else. The situation is not very different today. It is not necessary or possible for one person to be a master of all aspects of production. In Western ballet we have a choreographer, music composer, costume designer, set designer—each a master of his craft. They come together to produce a ballet with each artist making separate contributions to a single work of art.

This is something we have never tried to understand. There are peculiar complexes at work here. If a good musician were to help a dancer his rating would go down, or why should a painter be wasting

his time designing sets and costumes for a dance-drama? Our critics too are to be blamed for this. They will go into raptures over the choreography and single out every dancer for praise yet completely ignore the music or the costumes and lighting which are an integral part of the production. This creates the feeling that everything other than dance in a dance-drama has a secondary place. If we want good dance-drama we will have to collaborate with artists of high calibre from different disciplines.

The interdisciplinary approach has to begin not on the stage but in social life where dancers meet writers, poets, painters, architects, playwrights, actors, etc. This exposure to other art forms and the experiences of other artists widens one's horizons and creates a better understanding of one's own potential.

7. To be able to appreciate an art one must have a basic knowledge of it. Dance is not understood by the larger section of audiences unless they follow the story. One has seen large audiences totally absorbed in dance-dramas based on mythological themes. The same dance-dramas in a different part of the country would not draw the same response. If dance were introduced at school level those who get the opportunity to learn it may not all become dancers but they will eventually be able to understand and appreciate dance. By dance education I do not mean a rigorously inculcated classical system but a new system concentrating on body culture. One has only to stand at a roadside and watch people walk past to realize that at least 98 per cent of them do not carry themselves well and often have a faulty walk. We are not brought up to be aware or proud of our bodies. Most Indian children, especially girls, are shy of their bodies. Dance education in schools should aim at body culture through dance movement.

The Government of Gujarat has introduced dance as a discipline at school level from the academic year 1986. This is a positive step towards the acceptance of dance as an important part of our social and cultural life. If all the States in India did likewise it would generate better understanding of dance in the long run. But where shall we find the teachers? We shall have to train teachers, we shall also have to evolve a whole new technique for children. Group dance in schools is usually on particular occasions and for the benefit of a chief guest. We can reverse the priorities and let the children enjoy dancing for themselves. There is some amount of dance in schools but none in the colleges or universities. Young people today do not know the use of their bodies as a vehicle of expression. There is a great deal to be done in this direction. It needs however prior



research on the kind of curriculum to be introduced as also trained and motivated teachers. The curriculum has to be simple and interesting so that young people do not try to escape it.

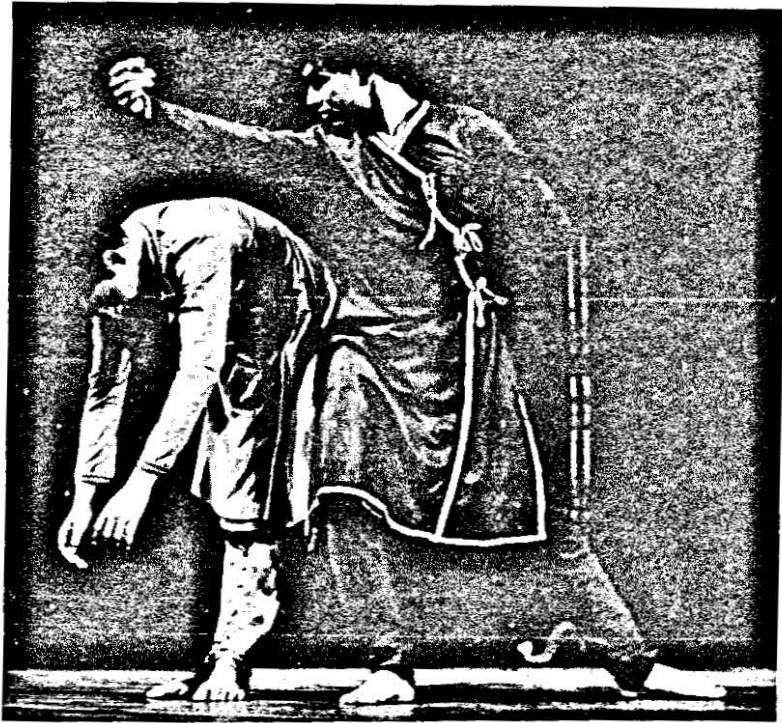
8. There has been a long-standing complaint that dancers are not interested in reading. It would be more accurate to say that traditionally dancers have not been oriented towards reading. But today the situation is changing as many educated young people are taking to dance; all they need is proper direction and guidance. There is however very little published material which can be prescribed for a dance student, reading which would enhance his knowledge and understanding of dance. Institutions of dance could be encouraged to sponsor research and publication of books on dance as well as newsletters with dance news since there is very little information on what is happening in dance in other parts of the country, leave alone the world. It is necessary to foster in young dancers a sense of enquiry so that they come to know more about happenings in their field of work. Teachers, critics and choreographers must write for dancers in a language and style initiates can follow.

There are critics who write more with the idea of airing their knowledge than talking constructively about dance. They fail to look at dance without being biased by dancers and styles. We must have constructive criticism from knowledgeable people to ensure the healthy growth and future of dance. Some of our dance styles are becoming decadent and need a thorough spring cleaning with the wire-brush treatment. This is not a task that can be left to the dancers themselves, because they perform only in a manner accepted by audiences and critics, but a specialized job for those who are really interested in dance and its survival. Universities could provide the facilities for basic research and encourage scholars to write on dance. There is a dearth of writers, so special efforts must be made to encourage people to write. In the initial stages we may not get very good results but consistent research and collection of material will yield fruit in the long run.

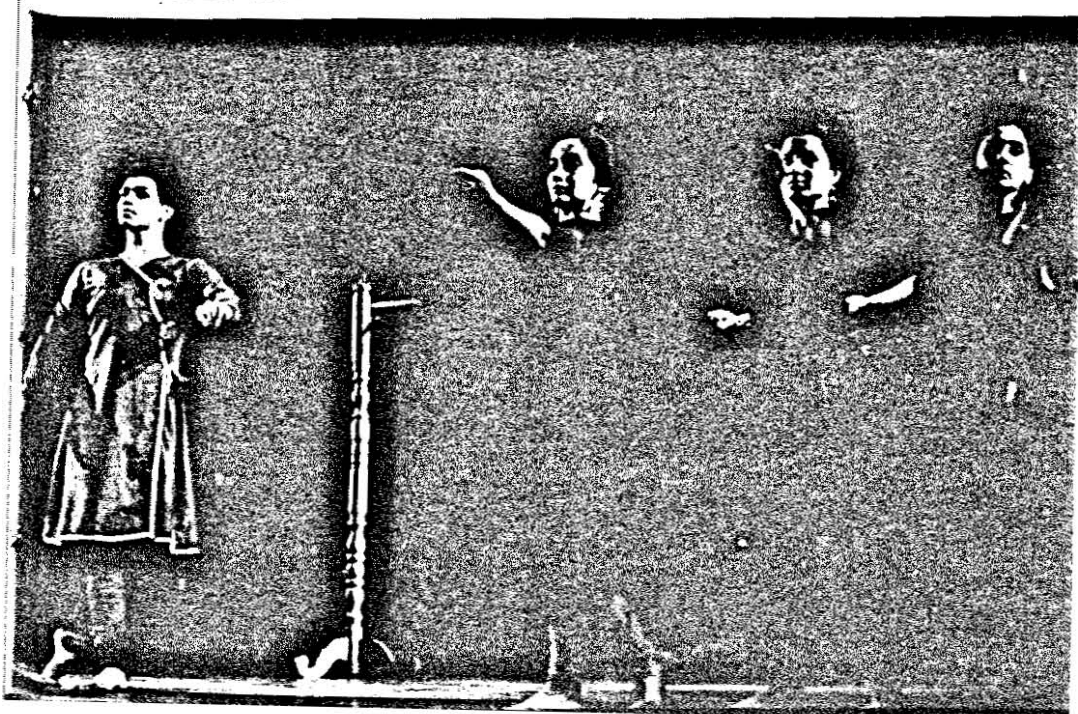
Grants should be given to every institution for a library which may be helped with lists of important books and journals. In fact Sangeet Natak Akademi could encourage publication of books on dance by making bulk purchases\*; the books purchased could then be distributed to the libraries. Institutions should be encouraged to

\* The Akademi has been doing this from its inception; books on music and drama are also purchased by way of publication subsidy—Ed.





From *The Peg*, a dance-drama choreographed by Kumudini Lakhia, presented in Nritya-Natika—an Akademi-sponsored all-India dance-drama festival 14–19 November 1985.





From *Keibul Lamjao* choreographed by Chaotombi Singh: Nritya-Natika.





From *Nayika Vilas* choreographed  
by Birju Maharaj: Nritya-Natika.







*Ganga* choreographed by Mrinalini Sarabhai: Nritya-Natika.

publish newsletters, perhaps modest in the beginning, tied to a scheme for sharing both practical and theoretical knowledge. We have a wrong notion that funds spent on a project must yield immediate returns. Experience has shown that a change of attitude or a whole new movement takes years of continuous work to get off the ground.

9. We have now reached a stage where it is essential to set up a national school of dance. Such a school would be a signal service to Indian choreography. It need not teach classical dance for solo performance. Teachers of all classical styles could instead train students for given periods to enrich their knowledge and vocabulary of dance. Some of our folk dances and lesser known dance forms could also be taught in the school. This would increase in students the flexibility of body so essential for the varied demands of choreography. The school would produce group-dance numbers or dance-dramas on various themes, abstract and narrative, traditional and modern, of short duration and long. This would encourage other institutions in the field and generate employment for young dancers.

One of the reasons why we are not producing enough dance-dramas is that choreographers do not find versatile dancers. For this we need a training institution at the national level. It is impossible for private schools to cope with more than one technique mainly because of the expenses involved.

10. Classical dance should have no complaint of not getting its due. In the past 20 years it has been promoted by both government and private agencies which have provided large-scale sponsorship at major festivals and seminars. Dance-drama on the other hand has been totally neglected. The reason really is that we have not produced much work of any great merit.

The problems often relate to funding. Institutions doing creative work today suffer from lack of funds whereas those with known names attached to them, whether or not they produce new work of any value, continue to receive government aid. This is misuse of money, investment which will bring no returns even in the distant future. Then there are commercial organizations arranging programmes for young dancers and cheating them. Schools also deceive students by selling package programmes for instant stage appearance. All this will lead to degeneration unless every person connected with dance takes his responsibility seriously.

Fifteen years ago Kathak was in bad shape. Dance pundits had

predicted total ruination of the style. But the Kathak Kendra with Pandit Shambhu Maharaj on staff did some pioneering work and the situation was saved. Later Pandit Birju Maharaj joined the faculty. With careful planning on the part of its former Director Keshav Kothari the Kendra launched in 1980 the annual Kalka-Bindadin Kathak Mahotsava—a platform for all who practised Kathak. This brought to view the best and the worst, set standards and stimulated discussion. If just one festival can produce such results can we not, given commitment on the part of all involved, look forward to the growth of Indian dance? This would be the base of a dance-drama movement in the country. □