

EDITORIAL

Much has been written about the art of dance in the past half a century, a period which has witnessed a tremendous effort in the cause of rescue, revival and rejuvenation of almost all the traditional arts and crafts of India. This period is also marked by the emergence of an intense nationalism which now expresses itself in everything that can be termed 'traditional'. Most importantly, the period is witness to a newly emergent social order in an otherwise hidebound society.

These trends have, inevitably, created some startling paradoxes. The nationalism is often just a veneer which hides colonial hangovers which still plague the Indian psyche. The new social order has chipped away at the numerous levels and sub-levels marking Indian society; the old roles seem to be interchanged and a new awareness based on the Gandhian ideology of social quality appears to be taking root. But appearances are just that; they can also be deceptive.

One looks in vain for the rational, earthy and robust values which a truly Indian society would surely exhibit. In this process all the traditional arts, particularly dance, have witnessed changes which can best be described as upheavals.

And yet, as our social philosophers would say, change is inevitable. One does not know where this change would take us, and what it would do to our artistic traditions. Fortunately we have a good record of what the art of dance really means and how it was preserved and presented by certain members of our society. These members are those traditional and/or hereditary performers—dancers, gurus and those connected with dance performances—who perpetuated the tradition in its purest form and added lustre to it through their erudition, sincerity and dedication.

Among all traditional performers, it is the *nartakī* (which term would include the earlier *ganikā* and the later *devadāsī*) who was most wronged against and maligned. Thrust by a quirk of fate into lifelong servitude, they nevertheless were great dancers and musicians. Other members of their families and social segment have also played a very significant role in the preservation of classical dance.

I would like to refer to these artistes as 'traditional dancers': those whose rightful task—sanctioned by Indian social hierarchy—was to dance. They

may be *devadāsīs* or courtesans or those hapless women who were pushed into selling their art as a form of prostitution. I refer to a class of women maligned, exploited and ridiculed by society.

This issue of *Sangeet Natak* is meant to be a chronicle of their dauntless spirit and their knowledge and erudition. By putting forth their contribution the intention is not to minimize the contribution of the male dancer/guru who was also maligned. But such a man was not pushed into his profession or vocation by the society.

A woman's femininity is a heavy burden to bear. In our male-dominated society, it has been the man who has exploited the woman. In the hierarchical, caste-ridden Indian society one man may be lower than another, but he always has a woman of his ilk lower than him.

It goes to the credit of the Indian male in general that when he pushed a woman into a position for life without her consent, ostensibly for spiritual ends but in effect for his sensual and even sexual pleasure, he also elevated her to a lofty status. It is only when the Indian man lost his Indianness that the rot started.

Given this particular thrust, the articles in this issue do not deal with specific dance styles as we know them today. The approach naturally precludes areas which have an overdose of Muslim court culture which resulted in the emergence of the *tawaifs* who were, in any case, singers rather than dancers. The Kathak dancers who were performing in courts in north India were almost all male dancers.

Similarly, in north-eastern India, the most well defined dance system is Manipuri which is almost entirely temple and religion oriented. Dance is a way of life for the people of Manipur. There is no question of exploitation since there is no stigma attached to dance.

All the contributors to the issue are erudite research scholars. Their articles are intended to be factual chronicles which would be informative to a lay reader.

I am grateful to Sangeet Natak Akademi for devoting a special issue of *Sangeet Natak* to the *nartakī*. My only regret is that we could not accommodate all the material that was submitted due to the limited space available for publication.

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