

## BOOK REVIEW

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### Ang Kavya

Birju Maharaj

Har-Anand Publications, 2002

85 pages; Rs.250

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This is unquestionably a pioneering attempt, and I say so after a close reading of the book. Till before its appearance, we had regarded Birju Maharaj only as a spellbinding Kathak dancer, a very effective teacher, and as one who has not only won worldwide recognition and almost every award open to a dancer, but also the respect and admiration of consummate exponents of other classical dance-forms. But now, with the appearance of this small but very basic and significant book, this phenomenal artist has established himself as an analytic interpreter of Kathak dance from the view point of beautiful bodily configuration, duly justifying the title of the work: *Ang Kavya*. In my view, however, what has really enabled him to produce such a basic and innovative work is not merely his analytic acumen but also his remarkable ability to involve himself intensely in whatever he does, that is, not merely dancing, but singing and drumming, or even recounting a funny happening! Idioms of figural beauty in dance can of course be picked—readymade, so to say—from our representational sculpture; but how exactly they evolve and come into being, instead of appearing as mere finished postures, can be brought to light only by one who dances with his whole being. Before, however, I focus and comment on the work's positive features at some length, let me point out some of its obvious defects, just because I would be happy to see them removed before the book appears in its second edition, which it surely deserves.

Now, to begin this fault-finding (not without regret), the title of the fourth chapter, *Finishing Positions*, is not quite appropriate. No properly danced pattern merely ends at the *sama*. This is specially true of the dancing of Birju Maharaj himself. In his recitals, as also in principle, the *sama* (as a rule) is the climatic point, the moment where the pattern not merely ends, but flowers or blooms. Where a collocation of bols merely finishes tamely, if correctly, the ending look insipid. Unfortunately, even in the 'glossary of commonly used terms' with which the book ends, *sama* has been explained inadequately. There is a reason why I say so. Our rhythm is essential cyclic in character. As we follow it, we not only begin from the first beat but come back to it, completing an *avrti* or cycle, whereupon the (so-called) first beat becomes the aesthetic centre. A geometrical centre is simply a point of equal distances from all points on the circumference. Itself it is inert, and the way it relates to circumference is only spatial. Our *sama*, on the other hand, is not only the focus but the determinant of a run because all the preceding bols appear (in principle) to be heading for it. This, I repeat, is pre-eminently true of the way the author himself dances. A careful look at his manner of dancing will reveal that he increases—adroitly by degrees, but at times quite perceptibly—the intenseness of the few footfalls (पदचक्र) that precede the *sama* immediately, making it appear what it should, that is, the culmination of impact, rather than as a mere terminus. So, I conclude, to speak of the *sama* as merely 'the first beat of a tala which is usually most accented' is not quite true to what it (the *sama*) does, and how it actually appears in good Kathak dance of which the author himself, I repeat, is a living paradigm. The moderating usually is, however, welcome; for the beat in question is not always clearly (or audibly) accented. At times, indeed, the emphasis here

may be deftly withheld, delighting an authentic rasika with the occasion provided to register the sama merely in idea.

Turn, now to naghma in the book's glossary (p. 83). It has been translated (very casually) as 'a melodic phrase... any tala'. This, again, is wrong. In the region of music, a phrase is regarded as a run of notes making up an individually distinct part of a melody. *Lehra* is not the part of any whole. Immediately after its opening run-up to the focal beat, (sama) *lehra* flows recurringly from sama to sama; is therefore rhythmically complete; and therefore not a mere phrase.

Some other errors may be quickly indicated as follows:

1. *Anjuri* (p. 33).

*Comment:* Looking at the author's own picture which aims at illustrating *anjuri*, I think the word should be *anjali*; for it is *anjali* which shows 'the open hand placed side by side and slightly hollowed' (Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Corrected Edition 2002, p. 754).

2. *Bhajan*: 'Offering obeisance through a devotional composition' (p. 72).

3. *Parhant*: To recite (p. 84).

*Comment:* Both 2 and 3 commit the mistake of translating nouns as verbs. *Bhajan* is simply a devotional composition; and *parhant*, just recitation of collection of pure dance syllables, punctuated at times with some words as well.

4. *Natya*: Theatrical, dramatic (p. 84).

*Comment:* Here the error lies in equating a noun with an adjective. *Natya* simply means mimetic representation; dramatic art (Monier-Williams, p 534).

5. *Bhava*: To express or become (p. 85).

*Comment:* Again, a noun is mistranslated as a verb. In the context of dance, *bhava* simply means 'sentiment, way of feeling, emotion' (Monier-Williams, p. 754) though *be-*

*coming* (not *to become*) is also an admitted meaning of the word.

6. *Saatwika*: 'through contemplation, which thereby appears on face' (p. 85).

*Comment:* Here the translation explains *how* 'satvika abhinaya' occurs, not what the word *satvika* means. It simply means: genuine, truthful. *Satvika abhinaya* is the (involuntary) expression of an emotion which comes to be actually experienced through intense visualization.

7. *Meend*: 'A circular movement overhead connecting the spaces around' (p. 85).

*Comment:* The word rather means a *seamless passage of musical sound* across some *swaras* which, in its aspect of continuity—not in that of melody, it is obvious—is *represented in dance through a rotative movement of the head* (neck).

Apart from the above, some howlers are as follows:

जाती (p. 84) should be जाति

गती (p. 83) should be गति

But now let us see what yet makes the book in question highly significant and deserving of wide notice. As its very opening page points out, it makes a meticulous attempt to give names to every abstract (that is, non-representational) hand movement (*nritta hastaka*) and foot placement (*pada* not *pda* which relates to poetry—*bhangima*). What is more, and here again I cite from the opening page, to further help the work of identification reference, and understanding, 'these movements have been codified into a *dance shorthand* which could greatly facilitate documentation...[What is more,] in addition to the major lines representing the upper arm, forearm and wrist, a tiny dot has...been used. To...[indicate] the direction of the palm...[and] the main [dance-] syllables corresponding to the movements have also been mentioned.

The author's analytic approach, I repeat, is

commendable. The four chapters which the work comprises—namely, hand movements, feet position(ing), stances and finishing positions—surely all speak of what is in fact distinguishable, so that the analysis I refer to is no hair-splitting. Nor can we question the propriety of separating the basic from decorative hand movements, or the different kinds of spins. But, be it noted, the act of *naming what is distinguished* calls for a very careful use of language, of which the book under review is not a very good example. The maestro's pictures, illustrating what is sought to be

distinguished and named, are all excellent. The pages relating to notation symbols provide fascinating material for thought. The whole book, indeed, is as much a potential stimulant for all serious lovers of Kathak dance as an index of the author's own untiring creativity.

Birju Maharaj has surely opened up a new way to think about Kathak. The book calls for a National Seminar on what it says or rather reveals. Our Kathak Kendra should be able to organize one.

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