

IMPRESSIONS OF THE FOLK DANCE FESTIVAL

by

MOHAN KHOKAR



Mathuri Dance of Andhra

LIKE the kaleidoscope, which shows an ever-changing variety of beautiful and concordant designs, the Folk Dance Festivals at Delhi continue to present, year after year, motley arrangements of colour and form, diversified patterns of rhythm and movement. Like the Festivals of the past years, this year's Festival also presented about 20 varieties of folk dances, most of which had been brought to Delhi for the first time. And, as before, these renderings helped to add to one's conviction that India has a fund of folk dance which is apparently inexhaustible.

The dance troupes this year were drawn from all corners of India, but one wishes there had also been parties from some of the regions which had sent none, and this could have perhaps been arranged and adjusted conveniently if no single region had been allowed to send more than one troupe. Bombay and Mysore, for instance, sent two parties each, while from the East—Assam and its contiguous areas, came seven dance troupes. It would no doubt have added to the variety of the Festival if some of these additional dance groups had been replaced by ones from the unrepresented regions, such

as Kashmir, Bengal, Saurashtra, Maharashtra and Tamil Nad.

Sangla Dance From H. P.

North India contributed three dances: *Sangla* from Himachal Pradesh, *Trinjan* from the Punjab, and *Sakhia* from Uttar Pradesh. The *Sangla* dance from Himachal Pradesh, like other dances from the same region, which were exhibited at Delhi in the previous years, was simple, graceful and impressive, and the belles and beaux who executed this number were all pictures of health and beauty—a quality which certainly augmented the spirit of the dance and added much to its appeal.

The dancers, both men and women, were clad in homespun tweeds of white and brown, but whatever sombreness these colours could have produced was cleverly offset by the use, as if casually, of streaks of colour which were woven into the borders of the shawls of the womenfolk and the tights of the men dancers. The women were also adorned with heavy silver ornaments, and these, with their weight and design, made

the wearers look like real daughters of the mountains. The dance was accompanied by singing, the song being in the form of question and answers, and the men and women dancers adjusted their pitches splendidly to occasionally create the effect of voices echoed from the hills.

"Trinjan" from Punjab

The *Trinjan* dance of the Punjab was extremely insipid and unconvincing. Indeed, this number came as an amusing revelation to many, including this writer, for till now the information was that the *Trinjan* is only a 'singing bout' of sorts which is sometimes indulged in by Punjabi women as they ply their *Charkhas*. The choreographed *Trinjan* dance presented at the Festival consisted of loosely-linked sequences of the *Giddha* and *Kikli* dances of the Punjab with an occasional spirited jerk, bend or leap *a la Bhangra* thrown in for flavouring.

The dance was performed by girls,

apparently recruited from schools, who had no uniformity in age, height or weight, nor even in the costume they wore. The only exciting moments in this dance were when certain lines of the song were sung; and these, it may be added, were not exciting in themselves but were made so by the spontaneous response they evoked in the spectators the bulk of whom, the Festival being in Delhi, was of Punjabis.

Sakhia from U. P.

The *Sakhia* dance of Uttar Pradesh was a simple, homely affair, with nothing special to say for it, or even against it. The men played drums as they danced and the women dancers punctuated the accented beats of the drums by striking small cymbals which they held in their hands.

South India's contribution to this year's Festival consisted of dances from Andhra, Kerala, Mysore and Pondicherry.

Sangla Dance of Himachal



Mathuri from Andhra

Andhra provided the *Mathuri* dance—a number executed by men and women, the men striking sticks as they danced and the women following them by clapping their hands. An unusual feature of the costume of the women was the use of heavy tassels of coloured cotton for adorning the arms and neck. The men wore dhotis and frockcoats and jackets and turbans—rather an incongruous combination if one may say so, and one which suggested that there had been some effort on the part of the performers to make themselves more presentable at the Festival.

The movements and steps of the dance were routine and the rhythm was provided by playing big as well as small drums and cymbals.

Poorakkali from Kerala

Kerala, which probably has more dances—classical, folk, tribal and ritual—than any other region of India, this year sent another *Kali*—the *Poorakkali*. In form and content this was patterned after the general structure of the *Kali* variety of folk dances of Kerala, such as the *Kolkali* and *Pulayarkali*, and it was also marked by the gaiety, abandon and verve which characterise such dances. The dancers, all men, seemed to possess immense vitality, and some of the leaps and bends which they performed, when the tempo of the dance mounted, were truly remarkable. The dancers also sang as they danced, even if their voice was not always pleasing, and the rhythm was provided by the virtually indispensable *chenda* and cymbals of Kerala.

Suggi Kunitha & Yakshagana from Mysore

There were two dances from Mysore: the *Suggi Kunitha* and *Yakshagana*. The first one, a harvest dance performed by men, had some element of the acrobatic in it as well. The dancers all carried festooned and tasselled poles—poles which were taller than the dancers themselves, and considering the various movements and bends they made while dancing it is creditable how they always managed to keep themselves, and the poles in perfect formation.

The other dance from Mysore, the *Yakshagana*, was absolutely out of place at the Festival. *Yakshagana* is not a folk dance;



Silambu dance of Pondicherry

nor is it even simply a dance: it is a dance-drama, albeit one which belongs to the folk, and its technique includes dancing as well as singing, and also acting, dialogues and declamation. The item presented at the Festival consisted of an excerpt from a traditional *Yakshagana* play. Though everything about the rendering was authentic and though there was considerable glamour and novelty in the attire and adornment of the performers, it simply failed to click as it was quite out of tempo relative to the other genuinely folk dance items presented at the Festival. Besides, the item was too short to create any interest and, what is more, a large segment of the audience was obliged all the while to stare only at the backs of the performers.

Silambu from Pondicherry

The remaining dance from South India was from Pondicherry, and this was the *Silambu* dance. In this, there were two groups

of men, one of whom had sticks in their hands which they struck as they danced and the other who held hollow metal rings containing metal pellets—*Silambus*, in other words, and these they kept resounding by shaking and jerking them in unison with the rhythm of the dance.

Some of the men wore palm leaves around the waist and this made them appear as if they had come from some tribal area. The movements of the dancers were generally quite interesting, and some of them even improvised antics which proved extremely amusing. The dance group also included some women, and one wonders why, for there was hardly anything they did by way of dance. Their faces painted with turmeric, their bodies draped in check sarees, they didn't look too well on the stage, and whatever iota of glamour they

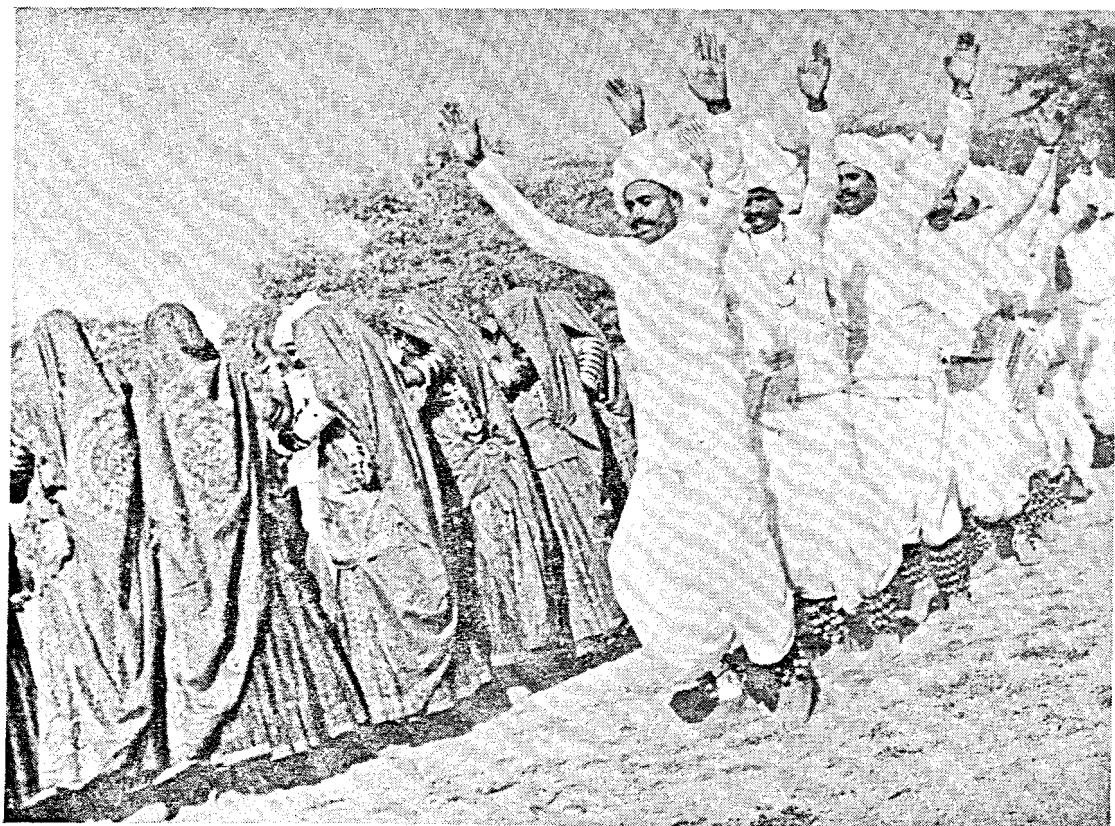
could have provided was obviated by all of them feeling utterly self-conscious of their purposeless presence on the stage.

Pai Payana from Bombay

There were three dances from the western part of India: the *Pai Payana* and *Adivasi* from Bombay and the *Ghor Ghumar* from Rajasthan.

The first number was performed by a group of men all of whom carried *mridanga* like drums which they kept playing all the while. The rhythmic patterns they weaved out of their drums were sometimes simple, sometimes staccato, but the beats were always sure and the alternation perfect.

Ghor Ghumar Dance of Rajasthan



Adivasi from Bombay

The other dance from Bombay, the *Adivasi*, was more interesting, but one wonders why another name could not have been given to it, for surely this is not the only *Adivasi* dance we have.

The dance was performed by men as well as women, the men wore mottled jackets and spotless dhotis and sported peacock feathers while the women were comparatively unimpressive and appeared very slender, even emaciated. The dance was for the most part executed in a circle, the performers sometimes sitting, sometimes standing, but almost throughout the dance, the performers linked their hands, sometimes there being a man and a woman alternately, sometimes two men and a woman or the other way about, and sometimes all the men on one side and all the women on the other.

The dance was throughout accompanied by the playing of a crude bugle, which too was adorned with peacock feathers, and the redundant melody it provided somewhat resembled the native snake-charmer's pipe: only, it was in a much lower scale.

Gher Ghumar from Rajasthan

The remaining dance from the western part of the country was the *Gher Ghumar* of Rajasthan. This had no surprises. It was more or less routine work, with an occasional raising and waving of hands or of joining hands and bending forwards. The men in the dance were all good—tall, erect, active, but the women were all quite old and also without the characteristic Rajasthan charm. Could it be that the organisers of the troupe had combed the countrysides of Rajasthan and selected only the veterans among the women for appearance at Delhi?

Saila Rina from M. P.

From the central part of India there was only one dance, the *Saila Rina* of Madhya Pradesh. This was performed by men and women of the Gond tribe.

The Gonds are a sturdy people, very much fond of colour and adornment, and passion-

ately devoted to dancing—characteristic which were fully in evidence in the group which came to Delhi. Being a martial dance, the movements were for the most part vigorous and the tempo exciting. There was also some singing, but apparently, this was unimportant. The music and rhythm were provided by a number of interesting instruments. There were drums of three types, wooden castanets, flutes, and a peculiar percussion instrument, the *chatkola*, which was played by a number of dancers and which was in the form of an arched wooden frame to the lower ends of which were attached wooden discs which were continuously clapped in accordance with the rhythm of the dance.

Shikar Dance from Bihar

Proceeding from the central part of India towards the East, there were two dances, one from Bihar and the other from Orissa.

Bihar's contribution was the *Shikar* dance, while Orissa presented the *War* dance.

The *Shikar* was performed by a group of Santhals, men as well as women. An extremely lively dance, it incorporated many interesting and unusual steps and movements. There were, for example, many ways in which the dancers formed rows and linked their hands, many ways in which they skipped or hopped or jumped. But the most remarkable feature of the dance was the absolute unison of movement and action between the dancers. It was evident throughout that the troupe had taken special pains to rehearse and prepare itself well for its appearance at Delhi. **And not in vain, for it won the day!**

The costume of the dancers and the accompanying music also had much to contribute to the overall impression of the dance. The men came like *Shikaris*, armed with bows and arrows and sporting full-length peacock feathers on their heads. The women were less glamorous, but they formed a perfect team with the men. The music was provided by drums and pipes and cymbals, and towards the end of the dance, when the tempo reached giddy heights, the musicians too entered the spirit of the rhythm which, in turn, entered them, and in this way they joined the dance and contributed much towards spurring it to a really spirited climax.

War Dance from Orissa

The *War* dance from Orissa was that of the Paik warriors. Dressed in soft shades of pink and blue—rather unusual for a folk dance, for the folk generally prefer loud colours, the warriors came armed with their traditional swords and shields and executed a very well composed dance. The dance involved many interesting floor patterns, placings, groupings, movements and postures. The music, too, was very well composed and seemed to add to the effect of each dance movement, each phase of action. And it is precisely because the dance was so well composed that the judges eliminated it from the award list.

To qualify for a prize at the Festival the dance has to be genuinely folk; any dance which smacks of stylisation or of having been touched up, as it were, no matter how impressive it may be, cannot win the judges' favour. And it is a good thing that the judges think so, for the Festivals at Delhi are staged not only to let the people see their glorious heritage of dance but also to ensure that these dances are

preserved for the generations to come and what is more important, to see that they are preserved in their genuine and unadulterated form.

Hurai Rangili

From the extreme east and north-east of India came seven dances. These were the *Hurai Rangili*, *Pheiphit Lam*, *Pheichak*, *Rang Lam*, *Zeliang*, *Tripuri*, and the *Sada Topo Tsen* dance.

The *Hurai Rangili* was performed by boys and girls, both of whom wore full-sleeve jackets and knee-length dhotis or sarongs. All the boys had small whistles, and throughout the dance they used the whistles to keep up a steady refrain of just three musical notes. The movements and steps of the dance were quite commonplace.

Pheiphit Lam

The *Pheiphit Lam* dance, from the same region, was even more simple and ordinary than the *Hurai Rangili*.

Sada Topo Tsen dance of NEFA



Pheichak

The *Pheichak*, also described as the Conqueror's Dance, attempted to re-create the joy of victory after fighting. It presented men and women who sometimes danced very briskly and sometimes with slow, calculated movements. The costumes of the dancers were colourful and impressive and the men wore tall triangular headgears which, strangely, were very similar to the ones worn by a caste of devil-dancers in South Kanara.

Rang Lam

The *Rang Lam* which, like the *Pheichak*, was also from Manipur, presented dancers, both men and women, who pretended to be birds—hornbills, to be precise. They wore feathers of this bird and simulated some of its movements. Their actions were not always convincing, but they were invariably beautiful.

Zeliang

The *Zeliang*, a dance of the Nagas, was more lively compared to the other dances of Assam referred to above. This dance had men as well as women and a peculiar feature of their costume was that all the garments they wore had bold horizontal stripes. The dancers also sang as they danced, and the music appeared strangely familiar; it was, in fact, like church music, and this shows how far the missionaries in the past succeeded in influencing the culture of these people.

Tripuri

The *Tripuri* dance from Tripura was

performed by boys and girls. The girls were very graceful and some of their attitudes seemed to be like those of Cambodian dancers. They also had rather accentuated movements of the hips, like Hawaiian belles, and one suspects that they had deliberately incorporated such movements in their rendering.

Sada Topo Tsen

And, finally, there was a dance from North-East Frontier—the *Sada Topo Tsen*, a dance as strange and colourful as its name. In this number, the dancers all wore extremely gorgeous costumes which were prepared from the choicest of silks and brocades. The dancers, all men, attired themselves in silk pyjamas and long coats with ample sleeves. They wore extremely flexible slippers on their feet and covered their faces and heads with colourful masks which were intended to represent spirits of the underworld. The music was provided by beating cymbals and by sounding long trumpets which gave low, drone notes. There was not much variety of movement or steppings in the dance but the distracting richness of the costumes made much of whatever little the dancers did.

Exactly similar dancers are known to exist in Tibet and in Sikkim, and if it had not been specifically announced that the performing party at Delhi was from NEFA one could have sworn that it was from either of the other regions. And this again proves how little we yet know of the immense wealth of dance that is ours.