

Dance Traditions Through the Ages

By Piu Lahiri

Mrignaynee carefully placed the bowl of sandalwood paste on her platter, beside the *bilvapatra* leaves and jasmine flowers, lit the *diya* and walked into the inner chamber of her Lord. As she walked, the *ghunghroo* bells on her anklets chimed and her long plaited hair swished from side to side. Anticipation lit her kohl-lined eyes as they fell on the golden face of Lord Nataraja. His powerful form, surrounded by a fierce ring of fire, was caught up in the ecstasy of dance and today she would dance for him – with him. As she started to draw intricate *kolam* designs with rice flour on the floor, she remembered the time when she was consecrated in her Lord's service as a young child. The priest of the great temple had specially selected her. She remembered the pride on her parents' faces – it was indeed an honour to be chosen to be married to the handsome Lord.

Waking up at the crack of dawn used to be difficult when she was a child, but *Guruma* (her teacher) expected her to be on time for the dance practice. She remembered how her feet ached after hours of practice; she had to repeat the steps again and again until she got them right. Sometimes she would sneak a smile at her friend Lata as they practised together, but to be worthy of the honour of being the Lord's *devadasi* she had to be focused. She looked forward to the next class where she learned to read and write on dried palm leaves. Now she was sixteen and she poured her love for her Lord into couplets and put them to song. Even as these memories flitted through her mind, she had finished decorating the sanctum sanctorum with flowers. She bent low before her Lord to do a *pranam* and with her eyes fixed on his face she started to sing and dance for him. She would stay celibate and dance only for her Lord, unwatched, to satisfy her own soul as she surrendered her very self to the Lord that day and till the very end of her life.

Mrignaynee probably lived and danced in the 9th century when Raja Chola built the Brihadesvara temple in Tanjore. Perhaps she was one of the 400 *devadasis* (girls dedicated to a deity) he had presented to the temple. This ancient dance tradition has been preserved in all its purity and richness to the present day, because of the single-minded devotion and meticulous and rigorous training these women receive from their teachers. In that earlier age they were amongst the few women who were literate and thus reached high levels of sophistication. They were paid from the temple coffers. This was a period when the temples' wealth and prestige were at their zenith and, as the human consorts of the deity they held a position of respect, second only to that of the priests.

The devadasis danced primarily in the *Dassi Attam* and the *Sadr* dance traditions. These styles were preserved and



Devadasi, polychrome painted wood, 19th century, Karnataka, photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

nurtured in their pristine form for centuries, but over time these dances evolved and, as various cultural influences were absorbed, differing dance styles developed throughout India. The most popular is the *Bharatnatyam* dance from Tamil Nadu. All the traditional elements such as the *mudras* (hand positions) and *abhinaya* (facial expressions) are an integral part of *Bharatnatyam* too and form the basis for their performances. *Odissi* in Orissa, *Kuchipudi* in Andhra Pradesh and *Mohiniyattam* in Kerala also took shape in the tradition of the *devadasi* dances. All these dance forms portray the nine emotions (called *rasas*) – joy and happiness (*hasya*), anger (*krodha*), disgust (*bibhatsa*), fear (*bhaya*), courage (*vira*), compassion (*karuna*), wonder (*adbhuta*) and serenity (*shanta*). As they dance, several musicians provide a musical accompaniment and one or more vocalists recite the dance syllables. In the present day these dance



Malvika Nair performing the Naga Vandanam



Niharika Nair performing classic chakars



Malvika depicting Vrindavan

forms have reclaimed their classical status.

The rich tradition of Indian classical dance dates back to pre-historic times. Thousand-year-old cave paintings depicting dances have been found. The purpose of dance then was probably ritual – to appease a nature spirit or to accompany a rite of passage. Archaeologists have unearthed a bronze ‘dancing girl’ statuette, 10.8 centimetres tall, sculpted in 2,500 BCE from the ancient city of Mohenjo-Daro. Inscriptions on temple walls, historical chronicles of royal families, sculptures and paintings provide further evidence of the rich history of Indian dance. Myths and legends also reveal the significant place that dance had in the religious and social lives of the Indian people.



Malvika Nair striking the Mahadeva pose

Ancient history reveals that several centuries before Christ, Indian dance, music and theatre were very advanced. *Natya Shastra*, the magnum opus of the performing arts on which all these dances are based, was written more than two thousand years ago. It mentions that temple dancing was imbued with the idea of taking art to the people and conveying a message to the masses. For years, dance was not just

a performance, but a means of worship (*bhakti*) to realise the Divine inside oneself. These arts reached their height during the Chola Dynasty (9th to 13th centuries) in southern India. Unfortunately over time, as the fortunes of the temples dwindled, decay set in. By the 17th century some *devadasis* were forced to step outside the temples and became *rajadasis*, dancing for royal patrons. With the invasion of the Muslims,

who considered dance for divine worship was sacrilegious, dance moved to pure entertainment status. With the later influx of Europeans, for whom dance had only a social purpose, the degradation of classical dance continued.

With Indian independence there was a revival of the lost dignity and spiritual sanctity of this divine art form. Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Manipuri and Kathakali were brought under the ‘classic’ umbrella and were central to the formation of the national gender identity.

With the impact of television, public dance festivals and also the patronage of private companies and government, these esoteric dances have moved into the public domain. It is with great pride that girls such as Malvika and Niharika Nair, learn the same intricate steps that Mrignaynee did ages ago – both girls are students of Bharatnatyam dance. Malvika performed these dances during her *Arangetram* (dance examinations) at the completion of her training. Today, for girls like her the temple has been replaced by the stage.



Malvika Nair striking the Ambal pose

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