

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

INDIAN CULTURE- Performing Arts

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Overview

Dance, drama and music, both singly and in various combinations, dominate the performing arts of India. Dance and drama (or theatre) are especially intertwined, as both come under the indigenous genre of *natya*, as described in the canonical text of the *Natyasastra* ('*Treatise on Dance-Drama*'). Indian music also has its roots in ancient Sanskrit chanting and later devotional singing in regional languages. Drama has a long recorded history in Indian culture (from the 5th c. CE), primarily because of its textual nature, while the history of various dance and musical traditions are documented mostly from the pre-modern period. The close relation between Indian dance, drama and music is demonstrated by the country's film industry, in which all three performing arts are balanced.

Drama

Early texts Two Sanskrit texts dated to the first or second century CE (*Mahabhasya* or 'The Great Commentary' and *Nāṭyaśāstra* or 'Treatise on Dance-Drama') provide evidence of a developed drama form. The *Natyasastra* contains a full description of 15 different types of dance-drama, a language of hand-gestures and a sophisticated exposition of aesthetics. Two key terms are *bhava*, the mood or emotion of the dancer, and *rasa*, the distillation of that mood that is evoked in a (discerning) audience.

Classical Although a drama survives in fragments of a play by Asvaghosa (c. 100 CE), the earliest extant complete plays are those by Bhasa, Sudraka and Kalidasa, all of whom probably lived in the 5th c. CE. Sudraka's 'The Little Clay Cart', a realistic story of political intrigue, and Kalidasa's 'Shakuntala,' a dramatic love story, are among the masterpieces of all Sanskrit literature and are still performed today.

Kathakali Perhaps the best-known current dance-drama tradition is Kathakali, whose very name ('story-play') indicates its combination of movement and narrative. This tradition, which began in 17th c. CE Kerala, enacts stories from the myths and epics in an elaborate spectacle of colour, with elaborate face paint and costumes.

Yakshagana Like Kathakali, Yakshagana is a south Indian drama tradition whose performances involve a fine balance between visual effect, movement and storytelling. Yakshagana, however, is more village-based than the more sophisticated Kathakali.

Ram Lila Storytelling, movement and spectacle also feature in Ram Lila ('Play of Rama'), a north Indian tradition adapted from a 16th c. CE Hindi text. This hugely popular tradition embraces various types of performance, from a day-long procession to a month-long series of overnight events. Here, too, as with many dance-dramas, masks are worn to indicate specific characters, and the memorised verses are spoken by non-professional actors. In contrast with most of the southern traditions, Ram Lila has been recently elevated to something like a court tradition by the patronage of hereditary rajas in Varanasi.

Nautanki Nautanki is a north Indian secular form of theatrical entertainment. In this respect it typifies a large number of rural traditions that combine singing and instrumental music with erotic dancing by female actors and transvestites. However, Nautanki is a syncretic blend of Indo-Muslim culture (especially in its Urdu songs) that contrasts sharply with the Hindu religious content of Kathakali and Ram Lila.

Modern Theatre Modern theatre, on the western model with a proscenium arch, was introduced during the 19th century. *Othello* was staged in Calcutta in the 1840s and that city has been a centre for modern theatre ever since. However, modern theatre has never been a major art form in India, perhaps because entertainment in a combination of speech, story, song, music and movement is supplied by the cinema.

Dance

Origins Although Indian dance traditions trace their history back to the *Natyasastra* (1st or 2nd c. CE), that text does not mention any dance form that is recognisable today. Rather, as an ancient Sanskrit text, it provides a cultural authority for dance traditions that aspire to achieve the status of a 'classical' art form. Scholars and practitioners seek to link contemporary dance forms with ancient texts, inscriptions and art (such as bas reliefs showing dancers in temple walls), but we have no reliable information concerning Indian dance traditions before 1500 CE.

History What we surmise, then, is that the diversity of dance forms in India evolved as a result of interaction between traditions patronised at court and those performed in less sophisticated contexts. Although guided by normative texts, these dance traditions developed in different regions, resulting in distinct features of choreography and instrumental accompaniment.

Content One important common feature is content. All the major dance forms draw heavily on Hindu mythology, epics and sculpture. Siva's role as the 'king of dance' and Krishna's dance among the cowherds, for example, supply dance with rich symbolism. Overall, however, Krishna's story is the predominant source for classical dance forms.

Regional forms Today we can identify seven major dance forms, which have developed in six different regions: Bharata Natyam in Tamil Nadu; Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh; Mohiniyattam and Kathakali in Kerala, Orissi in Orissa; Kathak in the Hindi heartland; and Manipuri in the northeast state of Manipur. Several of these dance forms emerged out of traditions of female dancers attached to courts, temples and houses of wealthy patrons (the 'nautch' girls in colonial sources). With the disappearance of traditional patronage in the 18th and 19th centuries, these traditions also declined until they were revived (or reinvented) by new elites in the colonial metropolitan centres as symbols of a 'timeless' Indian tradition.

Music

Origins As with dance, the history of music in India is not well documented, until the pre-modern period. Again, we have references to music and fragmentary descriptions of musical instruments in early Sanskrit texts (*Natyasastra*, 1st-2nd c. CE; *Brihaddesi*, 8th-9th c. CE; *Sangitaratnakara*, 13th c. CE) and Tamil texts (*Cilappadikaram*, 5-6th c. CE; *Tevaram*, 7th c. CE). Musicians and instruments are also depicted in temple sculpture from about 500 CE onward.

History Whatever its earlier history, we know that Indian music was fundamentally affected by Persian and Turkish culture at the Muslim courts in north India from about 1200 CE onward. From this time, Indian music divides into two traditions: Hindustani in the north and Carnatic (Karnatic) in the south. The divergence solidified over the next few centuries with patronage from the Mughals in the north and Vijayanagar in the south. Both traditions reached their apogee in the 18th century.

Hindustani Hindustani music is usually traced to the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526 CE) and specifically to one figure. Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE) was a talented writer, who is credited with introducing instruments (*sitar* and *tabla*) and new genres of music. Most Hindustani musicians, however, trace their descent from Tansen, a vocalist and instrumentalist at the Mughal court of Akbar in the late 16th century. Modern practices, including the popular *khyal* vocal genre, date from the 18th century.

Carnatic The early history of Carnatic music is also shadowy. Purandara Dasa (1484-1564 CE) is considered the founder, but he is more legend than history. Modern Carnatic music derives from the Maratha court at Thanjavur in the 18th and 19th centuries, when three men composed the repertoire that defines the tradition today: Syama Sastry (1762-1827), Tyagaraja (1767-1847) and Muttuswami Dikshitar (1775-1835)

Comparison Lyrics in both northern and southern traditions draw on Hindu mythology and the two epics. Hindustani and Carnatic music are also both based on two key elements: *raga* ('colour', melody) and *tala* (rhythmic cycle). In the Carnatic tradition, however, the emphasis is on vocal music, and most compositions, even with instrumentation, are written to be sung. Further, while both traditions use scales to define a *raga*, Carnatic musicians employ semi-tones (*sruti*) that enable them to produce more *ragas*. Finally, while improvisation is integral to both schools, Hindustani musicians improvise to a greater extent.

Instruments The major instruments of the Hindustani tradition are the plucked strings (*sitar*, *sarod* and *tanpura*), the oboe-like *shanaï*, a six-hole flute and two drums (*tabla* and *pakhavaj*). In the southern tradition, the *sitar* is replaced by the *vina*, and the 6-hole flute by an 8-hole flute. The *tanpura* was popular in the south but has given way to the harmonium (*sruti* box), while the *shanaï* is replaced by the *nagasvaram*. More significantly, Carnatic music includes instruments not found in the north: a pot drum (*ghatam*), two different barrel drums (*mridangam* and *tavil*), a set of small tambourines (*kanjira*) and the violin.

Discussion questions

1. Analyse the historical and cultural influences that led to the formation of Hindusthani music. How did a musical tradition with roots in the Vedas become transformed by musical traditions from Muslim courts in Persia and central Asia? Discuss instruments, lyrics, melodies, performing styles and patronage. Describe also the cultural position of Hindusthani music in contemporary India.
2. The history of the violin in Carnatic music exemplifies the cross-cultural exchange that characterises Indian culture as a whole. Describe that history, explain the controversy surrounding it (indigenous origin vs foreign import) and then analyse that controversial history as representative of India culture.
3. Locate the position of dance-drama in the spectrum of Indian arts by an analysis of its formal elements: visual, kinetic, narrative, song, instrumental music. Compare this combination of elements with those in other art forms—dance, classical drama, painting, sculpture, literature, cinema, classical music concerts. How does the combination of these five elements contribute to the popularity of the dance-drama?
4. The aesthetic system articulated in the *Natyasastra* is applicable not only to dance but to painting, literature and drama. Analyse how this aesthetic system has such broad application in Indian culture. What exactly do the key terms (*rasa* and *bhava*) mean? Then compare this aesthetic system to one from another world civilisation (such as Greek, Chinese, Japanese, Persian, Roman, Egyptian or European).
5. Select one of the regional dance traditions and analyse its evolution into a ‘classical’ form. What role was played by the canonical text (*Natyasastra*)? Consider also the historical context of its development? Why were these dance forms transformed during the colonial and nationalist period? What role did the British authorities play? And what role did ‘modernity’ play?

Reading

Philip Zarrilli, *The Kathakali Complex: Actor, Performance & Structure*
(Abhinav, 1984)

Jonathan Katz (ed.), *The Traditional Indian Theory and Practice of Music and Dance* (Brill, 1992)

Farley Richmond, Farley, Darius Swann and Philip Zarrilli. *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (Hawaii, 1990)

Anuradha Kapur, *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods. The Ramlila at Ramnagar* (Seagull, 1990)

Martha Bush Ashton, *Yakshagana* (Abhinav, 2002)

Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India*
(California, 1991)

Amanda Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Post-colonial Politics of Music in South India* (Duke, 2006)

Daniel Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* (Chicago, 1990)

Richard Widdess, *Drupad: Tradition and Performance in Indian Music*
(Ashgate, 2004)