INDIAN DANCE

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Genre Indian 'dance' is best identified by the genre term *nrtya*. However, because dance, dance-drama and theatre all share a common heritage in India, the term *natya* ('acting') is also often used to denote only 'dance.' If we think of a spectrum of forms, with pure movement at one end and pure narrative at the other, then 'dance' as *natya* would be at the movement end and 'theatre' at the narrative end, with 'dance-drama' forms somewhere in between.

Origins Many Indian dance and drama traditions share a common repertoire that derives from the *Natyasastra* ('*Treatise on Theatre*), possibly from the 1st or 2nd c. CE. This normative Sanskrit text, which provided the blueprint for early Indian plays written during the Gupta Empire, also governed the form and technique of classical dance and still guides their performance today. The text 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.

History The *Natyasastra* does not mention any dance form that is recognisable today. Over time, however, distinct dance forms developed in the various regions of India, with varying degrees of correspondence to the normative text. Despite common features, each of these traditions has a unique history, instrumental accompaniment and choreography. All of them, nonetheless, evolved through a centuries-long interchange with other (less 'classical') forms, and all have undergone considerable change since the colonial period.

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.

Regions Today we can identify seven major dance forms (although other, minor traditions exist), 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.

Revival Several of these dance forms (Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, Orissi and Kathak) 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.

Bharata Natyam The case of Bharata Natyam is perhaps the best-documented example of this revival. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Tamil and Telugu

elites in Madras (with support from British officials and scholars) set out to 'purify' the tradition of female temple dancers. Modeling this 'new' tradition on the ancient *Natyasastra*, allegedly erotic elements were expunged and a school established to teach the proper movements.   Performances were also taken out of temples and put on the urban stage in front of ticket-buying audiences, often as part of a festival of music and dance. Today, taking classes in Bharata Natyam and then performing for a few minutes in a 'debut' has become a rite of passage for many Indian girls, not only in south India, but all over the country and in the diaspora as well.

Folk   In contrast to the handful of classical dance traditions, India's folk dances number in the hundreds. Although many are similar, they are usually known only in their specific region, and for this reason, these dances play a role in the construction of local cultural identity. Like a local dialect or dress, they are a means by which local people can recognise themselves and be recognised by outsiders. To risk a generalisation, the choreography of most types of folk dance is dominated by circular movements and group cooperation. This is perhaps more true of women's dances, as seen in the Assamese spring harvest dance (*bihu*). Several male folk dances feature martial arts, such as battling with weapons, exemplified by the Tamil tradition of the 'stick-dance' (*kolattam*).

Reading

Reginald Massey, *India's Dances: Their History, Technique, and Repertoire (*Abhinav, 2004)

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

Janet O'Shea, *At Home in the World: Bharatanatyam on the Global Stage* (Wesleyan University, 2007)

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

Kapila Vatsayan, *Traditions of Indian Folk Dance* (Clarion Books, 1987)

Ragini Devi, *Dance Dialects of India* (Motilal Barnarsidass, 2002).

Discussion questions

The aesthetic system articulated in the *Natyasastra* is applicable not only to dance but to other art forms (such as 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).

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 play? And what role did 'modernity' play?

Folk dances in India are numerous but (for obvious reasons) not as well researched as 'classical' dances. A reasonably good list, however, is found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Indian_folk_dances. Select three of these (or other folk dances) and compare them with one of the classical dances. What differentiates the folk from the classical? Then analyse the labels of 'folk' and 'classical' as cultural signifiers. What terms are used within the regional languages for 'folk' dances? What terms are used for the 'classical' dances? What is the significance of using English terms ('folk' and 'classical')?