



ROLE OF EXPONENTS IN REVITALIZATION OF CLASSICAL DANCE IN INDIA

Chetana Desai, Ph. D.

Head and Associate Professor, MES's Abasaheb Garware College, Pune 411004, Maharashtra, India

Paper Received On: 25 JULY 2022

Peer Reviewed On: 31 JULY 2022

Published On: 1 AUGUST 2022

Abstract

India has a rich tradition of classical arts, such as music, dance, painting, architecture and many other. Performing arts like classical dance, classical music were spiritual in nature. These forms were considered as means of worshipping Gods. All these forms have a long cultural, spiritual and social history. Due to social, economic and political reasons these art forms faced many ups and downs in different periods. Revitalization of these art forms can be considered as a step towards nation building process. The present paper discusses the efforts taken by the revivalists in order to revive these arts especially the classical dance forms and the contributions of the revivalists in nation building process.



[Scholarly Research Journal's](http://www.srjis.com) is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

Introduction: Indian traditional art is a cultural heritage of our country its revival can be considered as one of the major acts in nation building process. Exponents of art have tried to revive it. We can call them pioneers of Indian art. The present paper discusses the efforts taken by the revivalists in adverse conditions and analyses their contributions to nation building process. This paper is divided in to two parts. First part tries to explain the early status of Indian classical dance in Indian tradition and the decline in its position in due course of period. The second part discusses the efforts taken by pioneers to revive this cultural heritage and how this act led to nation building process. Researcher has discussed the efforts of a few pioneers instead of considering any individual in order to understand the whole process.

Indian classical dance art had a religious importance and a definite role to play in society. In India dance has been considered something more than only a means of entertainment and has been used as a tool for many things. Such as a means of entertainment,
Copyright © 2022, Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science & English Language

communication and a way of worshipping Gods and Goddesses, to celebrate success, harvest, achievements, as a weapon or tool in reform movement etc. It creates a feeling of unity among the participants. It gives an artist a feeling of peace and satisfaction also. The Indian classical dance includes deep and enduring ideals of Indian philosophy and aesthetics.

The period of the 10th century to the 17th century witnessed the emergence of various regional dance styles in India. After the 17th century social, political and economic conditions were not in favour of the development of dance. Arts were affected due to political disturbances, still in such situation the artists continued to practice classical dance. There was a lack of social patronage to artists. In this period family traditions, called the sampradayas or gharanas, grew within styles and the artists preserved these styles in such critical conditions. These artists frequently contributed to its growth in spite of the lack of basic education or academic knowledge and unfamiliarity with the Sanskrit language. In the Muslim rule the tradition of temple dancing also started losing its importance and dance reached to the courts of these Mughal emperors. But the devotees of the art continued to practice it in the seclusion of their homes. During this period due to declining religious importance classical dance started to be looked down upon as a tool for just entertainment.

In the British rule the system of formal education was started. It did not consider the arts as a subject of curricula. The generations that went to the schools and colleges founded by the British in India in the 19th century, remained afar from the art traditions of the country. Apparently the art of dancing had almost ruined by the 20th century and what could be seen of it was only a diluted, almost degenerated form and came to be known as the 'nautch' in the North, and the 'sadir' in the south. It was like a shadow of a big reality.

The recent revival of interest in dance, developed as a symbol of national pride. And this brilliant indigenous art and culture started developing, which has proved helpful to the revival of Indian dancing that took place in 20th century.

Till now the declining status of dance and dance artists in society has been discussed but the situation has not remained same. Slowly but steadily it started changing due to the efforts of some people.

With the increasing awareness about Indian dance traditions in the thirties, some of the pioneers, visionaries like the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861 – 1941) in Bengal, theosophist Rukmini Devi (1904 – 1986) in Madras (Chennai, Eastern South India), Madame Menaka (1899 – 1947), a musician/dancer in Khandala (a hill station near Mumbai in Western India) and Uday Shankar (1900 – 1977) in Almora in the Himalayas founded

institutions for training in dance. Tried their best to rebuild it in other words they tried to rebuild the tradition that could increase the national pride among the Indians. Thus dance became institutionalized. These pioneers were the modernists of their time who knew that new approaches to the arts would bring national pride amongst Indians. By the time India became independent on 15 August 1947, the classical Indian dances were firmly established.

Rabindranath Tagore achieves the prime position among the revivalist. He did much for the revitalization of Indian dancing. Dance had been one of the major subjects at Shantiniketan. Rabindranath Tagore and his school at Shantiniketan gave a splendid motivation to the cultural renaissance in the arts, which led to the entry of Bengali Brahmins in performing arts. The arts have continued to flourish since then even if they have often been adapted to modern taste and commercialization. The world poet was a great patron of the Manipuri Dance and culture. He popularized the dance with its high peak almost all over the world. His contributions in creating India's first modern dance are widely recognized. Rather even more important is his contribution towards restoring Indian dance to a position of high art.

Some social changes have also taken place in society, which allowed women artists to give frequent public performances. With the Independence movement of the early 20th century, the arts were revived as banners for nationalism. During the Independence movement troupes of young artists including dance artists were formed, which gave performances with a view to bring about awakening among people. Young girl artists from the upper castes also joined these troupes. It helped dance to achieve its lost significance and glory in Indian society to some extent. In modern India almost all performing art forms are accessible to women artists. Dance also is not an exception.

Among the early pioneers who took Indian dancing from town and beyond the frontiers of the country were late Menaka, wife of Colonel Sir S. Sokhey, a scientist and director of the Haffkine Institute. She challenged the conception, which ranked dancing as the monopoly of Devadasis and acquired a thorough knowledge of the technique of Kathak. Her name must go down as the first Indian woman whose efforts to revive dance form and to encourage women to participate in it were indeed creditable.

Probably the finest female exponent of Bharata Natyam today is Bala Saraswati. She has acquired absolute mastery of the old technique. There was a tradition of Devadasi in her family. But now the name of her family is being taken with honour. Her grandmother was a musician of renowned, while Bala was a great dancer.

The entry of women like Rukmini Devi from the upper caste (Brahmin) changed the scenario (Kothari, 2007, pp. 166 – 167)ⁱ. The stigma attached to dance was not completely removed, but the change in attitude was noticeable. Rukmini Devi, a great Bharata Natyam dancer, had a very different upbringing. Born in a family of Brahmans, she came under the influence of Annie Beasant the Theosophist. She got married with late Dr. Arundale an English Theosophist. She performed Bharata Natyam with nimbleness and grace. She will always be remembered for her pioneering efforts for the Kalakshetra, her cultural center in Adiar.

Among those who have popularized Kathakali, Gopinath of Travancore must be placed in the front rank. He was amongst the first to lift Kathakali items from an entire ballet theme and to present them as solo items. He tried to make it easy form for presentation and much easier for the uninitiated city audience to appreciate. Recently he has begun to introduce his own inventions in to the old technique.

A list of pioneers would remain incomplete if the name of Uday Shankar would not have been included. In the late 1920s, Indian dance made a mark on the national and international fronts through the efforts of pioneers like Uday Shankar (Khokar, 1983, pp 101 – 105)ⁱⁱ. Uday Shankar was the eldest son of Barrister Syam Shankar of Jessore, which is now in Bangladesh. He belonged to a very cultured family. Pt. Ravi Shankar a famous Sitar player was his younger brother. Uday Shankar had learnt ballet dance from famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova. He opened a dance school in Almora, U.P. in 1938. This center was known as "Uday Shankar Indian Cultural Center." The center was closed during World War II but it reopened in Kolkata after the war in 1965. The school was however renamed "Uday Shankar Center for Dance." This brilliant dancer can be labelled as the renaissance dancer. He modernized the stylized temple dance of India and popularized the art form all over the West. His efforts helped Indian dancing in recapturing its hold in society. He has assured a prominent position in the history of the renaissance of Indian dancing. He grew to be an icon of Indian dance and not for classical traditions but called as the first 'Creative Contemporary dance Choreographer'. He is called the father of neo-classical or contemporary dance.

One more important name in this series is Pt. Rohini Bhate a renowned Kathak dancer in Pune. Rohini's distinctive Kathak style, which is known for its depth and texture as well as a thoroughly academic approach. Trained under gurus like Lachhu Maharaj of the Lucknow Gharana and Mohanrao Kalyanpurkar of the Jaipur Gharana, Rohini codified a

comprehensive curriculum for Kathak that drew from both these traditions. She was the founder-director of the Nrityabharati (1947) school for Kathak, Pune, where she trained numerous dancers and popularised Kathak among the middle-class families of Maharashtra over the six decades. With her efforts she made Pune City a major center for Kathak dance.

In such brief survey, it has been possible to mention only a few of the pioneers who have helped to revive the glory of Indian dancing. These pioneers worked to revive these arts that were being sidelined. Despite the diversity in their art forms they worked towards developing a strong Indian cultural identity and thus contributed to the nation building process.

Today all the classical dance forms exist in the form of a rich cultural heritage of our country. Today classical dance forms have almost reached the stage near perfection. The purity of style, a base of deep significant religious thought and the visual reflection of a cultured civilization, has survived in a significant proportion. Today Indian classical dancing still exists as one of the most subtle and exquisite of all arts.

References

- Chakraborty, K. (2000). *Women as Devadasis: Origin and Growth of the Devadasi Profession*. Delhi, Deep & Deep Publications.
- Khokar, M. (1983). *His Life, His Dance: A Portrait of Uday Shankar*. New Delhi: Himalayan Books.
- Kothari, S. (2007). *Bharata Natyam*. Mumbai: Marg Publications.
- Altekar, A.S. 1956. *The Position of Women In Hind Civilization*. Banaras: Motilal Banarasidas.
- Kadam, V. S. 1998. 'Dancing Women in Maharashtra'. In Feldhaus, Anne. (ed) *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Society*. New York: State University press.
- Dubois, Abbe J. A.1959. *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*. (English translation from French) by Beauchamp, Henry K. London: Oxford University press.
- Prasad, A. K. 1991. *Devadasi System In ancient India. (A Study Of Temple Dancing Girls Of South India)* New Delhi: H. K. Publishers and distributors.
- Raichoudhary, Manjulica.1966. 'Bharata Natyam Through Its Past'. In Mukhopadhyaya. (ed) *Anthology of Indian Dances and the Arts*. Calcutta: Nabaniharan.

ⁱ Kothari, S. (2007). *Bharata Natyam*. Mumbai: Marg Publications

ⁱⁱ Khokar, M. (1983). *His Life, His Dance: A Portrait of Uday Shankar*. New Delhi: Himalayan Books.